News

Arts and Media



Artist Patricia Brintle writes an icon of St. Kateri Tekakwitha for St. James Cathedral in Seattle. In May, the archdiocese asked her to create the icon of St. Kateri, which she completed over the summer and sent to Seattle in September. After being blessed on Oct. 19, 2025, the icon has been touring local Native American Catholic communities before being placed in its permanent home on a wall of the cathedral. (OSV News/Courtesy of Patricia Brintle)

Andrew Foster

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Seattle — November 24, 2025

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While visiting St. Francis Xavier Church in the New York borough of Manhattan, Corinna Laughlin, the director of liturgy for St. James Cathedral in Seattle, saw a series of 12 icons hung along a wall, including one of St. Kateri Tekakwitha.

Members of the Archdiocese of Seattle and St. James Cathedral were already planning to mount an icon of St. Kateri in the cathedral, and through Laughlin's discovery, they unexpectedly found their artist on the other side of the country.

The artist, Patricia Brintle, grew up in Saint-Michel-de-l'Attalaye, Haiti, eventually moving to New York in 1964 to marry her fiancé, who had moved there for work.

She began drawing and painting as a young child and developed a distinct style using bold colors on often ethnic and religious art, frequently of the Virgin Mary.

"I have a devotion to the Virgin Mary," she said. "When I think of the Virgin Mary, I think of her as (living) in every woman."

Some of her religious artwork has been shown at the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, Italy, and she's been commissioned to create a portrait of Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman for the Passionist Monastery in Queens, New York, and an icon of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for St. Thomas More Parish in St. Paul, Minnesota.

"It is my belief that when you put an icon in a church, the icon speaks to everybody who walks in that church," Brintle said. "Through that image, people can have different feelings. Sometimes they feel happy, sometimes they feel consoled. The icon is there as an intercessor to God. I believe that it helps the person who is praying to pray better."

This past May, the archdiocese asked her to create the icon of St. Kateri, which she completed over the summer and sent to Seattle in September.

Laughlin said the idea to honor St. Kateri in the cathedral was proposed by Native American communities of the archdiocese several years ago. After learning more about the situation regarding Catholic boarding schools' treatment of Native American students, members of the archdiocese's Native American Advisory Board met with individuals from the cathedral's racial solidarity team to discuss what happened and listen to stories of those impacted.

"From that emerged the idea of, ‘What could we do to really recognize the gifts and the contributions of Native Catholics?'" Laughlin told Northwest Catholic, the news outlet of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

One idea, she explained, was to "have a permanent place for St. Kateri in the cathedral because (she) really represents the whole archdiocese."

After being blessed on Oct. 19, the icon has been touring local Native American Catholic communities before being placed in its permanent home on a wall of the cathedral.

Along with honoring local Native American Catholics, the addition of the icon represents the culture and history of the area.

"For Native Catholics to be able to recognize themselves in the iconography of the cathedral is important, but also the sense that she's not a saint just for Native

Catholics. She's for everyone," Laughlin said. "She's the patron of ecology — that's so important to people in the Pacific Northwest.

And then, there's the local connection, Laughlin noted.

That connection came less than two decades ago and a few miles away from the cathedral at the Seattle Children's Hospital.

In 2006, doctors at the hospital were expecting 6-year-old Jake Finkbonner's imminent death when strep A bacteria started attacking his face after he received a cut on his lip during a basketball game.

Jake was a member of St. Joseph Parish in Ferndale at the time and is a descendent of the Lummi people on the Lummi Reservation.

St. Kateri was just Blessed Kateri, still seeking a second official miracle that would elevate her to sainthood.

Sr. Kateri Mitchell, executive director of the Tekakwitha Conference at the time, came to the hospital and prayed for Jake, placing a relic of Blessed Kateri on his leg.

The next morning, doctors were stunned to tell his family that the flesh-eating bacteria had stopped. The boy survived, and doctors reconstructed his face. He is now a parishioner of St. Joachim Parish on the Lummi Reservation.

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Five years later, the Catholic Church declared his healing a miracle, and St. Kateri was canonized on Oct. 21, 2012.

The 4-foot-tall icon attempts to represent the local connection along with St. Kateri's New York roots.

The nature behind St. Kateri, particularly the pine trees, represents the local environment.
She's adorned in a traditional Salish cedar hat, and a Mohawk skirt, leggings and moccasins.
At her feet, among a group of lilies, sits a turtle. As part of the Turtle Clan of the Mohawk people, St. Kateri was known as the "Lily of the Mohawks."

The icon also contains a canoe, two eagles and two salmon, a nod to both the Pacific Northwest and Native American communities.

Having written several icons now, Brintle has developed her own process.

Before beginning, she conducts extensive research on the saint and the miracles attributed to them.

"I get myself familiar so that the saint becomes a friend rather than anything else, and I can imagine myself in the place where the saint lived," she said.

Then, before she begins to work, Brintle prays.

"Every time I come into my studio, I start with a prayer. I pray over my brushes. I pray over my paint. And, in the case of a saint, I pray to the saint," she said. "I ask the saint to guide me to select the colors that the saint would want, to put the saint in a setting where the saint would want to be, and I ask the saint to speak to my heart, tell my heart what you want my hands to do."

In this case, Brintle even flew out to Washington to see the cathedral and visit St. Paul Parish in Swinomish. Native American elders brought her to the reservation — a first for Brintle

"That was quite an experience," she said. "That was amazing. I can't even put it into words. I was now walking on ground that the ancestors of the people who lived on the reservation over 10,000 years ago were walking. That touched me, that touched me a lot."

In addition to the trip, Brintle, Laughlin and several Native American elders held countless Zoom meetings, drafting different designs and making sure the icon included every element they desired.

Laughlin requested that Brintle refrain from sending picture updates along the way, so that she and everyone else would be surprised when the icon came in the mail.

"My hope and my prayer is that people, especially those who participated in the process, will feel that immediate sense that they are in the cathedral too, that they are represented there," Laughlin said, "but also that others will resonate with the image because it has more depth of meaning than it would have without that process and that input from so many voices."