

St. Katharine Drexel: A Brief Biography

The Beginning

Katharine Mary Drexel was born in Philadelphia, PA on November 26, 1858, the second child of Francis Anthony and Hannah Langstroth Drexel. Her birth was a difficult one, however, for both mother and baby, and a month after Katharine's birth, her mother succumbed to a fever and died. Two years later, her father, a well-known banker and philanthropist, married Emma Bouvier.

Emma was a devout Catholic and personally supervised the construction of a private oratory in the Drexel home. It was beautifully furnished with an altar, crucifix, many paintings and an impressive statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The family's daily gathering for prayer had a profound effect on Katharine and her sisters.

Another strong influence on Katharine was her parents' devotion to helping those less fortunate. Although millionaires, her parents were careful to instill in their children the idea that wealth was meant to be shared with others, especially the poor. Three days each week, Francis and Emma opened the doors to their home to those who were in need of money for food, clothing, shelter or those seeking counseling or knowledgeable advice.

As a young girl, Katharine traveled widely and was well-educated in the family's private home school. She especially enjoyed her stepmother's Sunday night sessions on the lives of the saints. It was in these sessions that Katharine developed a devotion to St. Francis of Assisi. As St. Francis had given his inheritance to help the poor, so would she do the same one day.

While Katharine had begun to discern her religious vocation early in her teens, she began to consider it much more seriously after nursing her stepmother through a long and painful fight with cancer. She wrote often to her spiritual director, Bishop O'Connor of Omaha, NE who advised her to "wait and pray." A short time after the death of her mother, Katharine and her sisters took a trip to Europe, during which she had an audience with Pope Leo XIII. Having heard and read much about the plight of the Native Americans in Wyoming and the Dakotas, Katharine asked Pope Leo XIII if he could help send more priests to serve as missionaries. His answer marked a defining moment in her life: "Why not, my child, become a missionary yourself?"

In May of 1889, Katharine entered the novitiate at the convent of the Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh. She made her final vows on February 12, 1891 and later founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. From this time on until her death in 1955, Katharine dedicated her life and her fortune of 20 million dollars to improving the lives of Native American and Black people in the United States.

The South Dakota Connection

In 1922, Fr. Sylvester Eisenmann, a Benedictine priest, traveled to the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament motherhouse in Pennsylvania to plead for assistance. Fr. Eisenmann served as pastor in Marty, SD, a small and very poor town which served as a meeting place for the Yankton Sioux tribe. Fr. Eisenmann was not seeking financial aid, however; what he needed was teacher for the small school in Marty.

Upon hearing his sad story, Mother Katharine Drexel was moved to tears because she felt she could not spare any of the sisters to go and teach at the school. Fr. Eisenmann asked if he might gather the sisters and relate to them what it was like to work with the young Sioux children who were eager to learn, but had no teachers. Mother Drexel granted his request and although there were several sisters who were eager to help at the mission if they could be spared, she held fast in her refusal to allow any of the sisters to go. Fr. Eisenmann made one final plea—he asked Mother Drexel to think and pray about his request for one more day before giving him a final answer. She agreed.

Fr. John Sparrow, a priest from Villanova College, also happened to be staying at the motherhouse and had heard Fr. Eisenmann's talk and had seen the sisters' enthusiastic response. He went to Mother Drexel and asked her to reconsider. He also offered a Mass the next morning for that intention.

When Fr. Eisenmann met with Mother Drexel the next afternoon, he was delighted to hear that she had changed her mind. She assured him that within two months time, three Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament would arrive at the small school in Marty to teach.

True to her word, Mother Drexel soon arrived at the St. Paul Mission in Marty with three of the sisters. It was a small but clean wooden house where twenty young Yankton Sioux children came to learn. Fr. Eisenmann called them his "bronzed angels."

Within a few months, Fr. Eisenmann had plans for an elementary school and a high school built from materials he had salvaged. These were inexpensive but solid structures which housed enthusiastic students.

When Mother Drexel returned to the St. Paul Mission two years later, she was delighted to find that the school and mission had flourished. There were now 180 boarding students and more than 20 day students filling every nook and cranny of the building. She was also pleased to find that the principal of the school was a former student of St. Michael's (St. Michael's was a country home owned by the Drexel family which later became a school.)

Within a few brief years, there were more than four hundred Native American children at St. Paul's Mission. The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament had provided 23 sisters to teach at the mission. Upon returning to the motherhouse after one of her visits to Marty, Mother Drexel thanked God for giving Fr. Eisenmann the opportunity to speak to the sisters and ask for their assistance. The result was one of the most productive of all missionary efforts among Native Americans and Mother Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament were proud to have played an important role in its success.

Mother Katharine Drexel Canonized

The process of canonization of Mother Katharine Drexel was begun in December 1964, when John Cardinal Krol officially introduced her cause in Rome.

In February 1974, 14-year-old Robert Gutherman contracted an ear infection that destroyed the three bones in his right ear, causing deafness in that ear. His family began praying to Mother Katharine Drexel for relief of his pain. By September of that year, several months after surgery, doctors examined Gutherman and found that the bones had regenerated and that his hearing was restored. This was the first of the two necessary miracles for canonization to be attributed to Mother Drexel.

After her beatification on November 20, 1988, one more miracle was still needed to advance Blessed Mother Katharine Drexel's cause in Rome. In August 1993, young Amy Wall was diagnosed with incurable nerve deafness and was enrolled in the Katzenbach School for the Deaf in Trenton, NJ. In November of that year, Wall's family began praying for the intercession of Blessed Mother Katharine Drexel. By March, Wall's teacher noticed that she was responding to noise. A medical examination was ordered and revealed that Amy indeed had been cured and now had perfect hearing.

On October 1, 2000, after investigation of these two miracles by several boards, approximately 70,000 people from around the world gathered in St. Peter's Square to witness the canonization of Blessed Mother Drexel and 3 other individuals. Robert Gutherman, Amy Wall and Wall's mother Connie all sat near the papal altar during Mass and received Holy Communion from the Holy Father.

In his address to the crowd, Pope John Paul II hailed Katharine Drexel as a compassionate woman who expanded on her parents' teachings on sharing wealth. "She began to devote her fortune to missionary and educational work among the poorest members of society. Later, she understood that more was needed. With great courage and confidence in God's grace, she chose to give not just her fortune but her whole life totally to the Lord."

Excerpts taken from the following websites: www.katharinedrexel.org and www.phillyburbs.com.drexel/news.