

Katharine Drexel

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Katharine Drexel gave up a tremendous fortune – and a life of privilege – to minister to the disenfranchised. Today, as Americans obsess over million-dollar game shows, Powerball and the stock market, comments one Catholic newspaper, Drexel reminds us that money is not life's ultimate prize.

Katharine Drexel (1858-1955), whose father was a business partner of J.P. Morgan, learned from an early age the importance of helping others. Her parents opened their house to the poor and were known for their philanthropy.

After traveling with her family and seeing the plight of Native Americans and African Americans, Drexel wanted to help. Giving money wasn't enough. She became a missionary and started her own order of nuns: the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Drexel gave away an estimated \$20 million to build schools (including Xavier University in New Orleans), buy supplies and train staff. The name of her order is testament to Drexel's faith in the love and sacrifice symbolized by the Eucharist.

Drexel's work was extraordinary. Most Americans in the late 1800s had little empathy for groups outside the societal mainstream. They thought women like her belonged at home, preserving the social order that had given them so much. Drexel overcame numerous obstacles, from prejudice to ignorance, to found 100 schools and missions.



“Let us open wide our hearts. It is joy which invites us. Press forward and fear nothing.”

Katharine Drexel

“What makes [Katharine Drexel] a saint and not just a philanthropist is the fact that she gave herself as well as her wealth. As a rich Philadelphia debutante, and later as founder of a religious order, she found creative ways ‘to use the world and not become its slave,’ as St. Augustine phrases it. Few of us can imitate her philanthropy, but everyone can learn from her fidelity to the Gospel.”

Catechist, March 1999

“She pays for everything, even for horses and saddles and Mass wine.”

The Rev. Anselm Weber, a friar at Katharine's mission in Arizona in the 1890s

“Katharine Drexel took it upon herself to start a legacy that has changed my life. She gave me the opportunity to educate as well as take my life to another level. Moreover, [she] inspired people to give without ever looking for a reward. Learning the lesson of being selfless is priceless and something that so many people miss. ... Women – a group within America that was fighting for their rights and not just for mine – blazed a trail toward the future. They provided shelter to strangers while they withstood the storm of social judgment. ... These faith-filled women loved me before I was born. They loved me and people like me so much that they built a university for us to better our lives.”

Essay by Stephon Guidry '07, Xavier University

“I know I shall have to give an account for faith, education, fortune, sacraments. Point out one saint in heaven who has had more aids than I have.”

Katharine Drexel

Katharine was canonized in 2000. Her feast day is March 3.



Kate at the age of 7

“Prayer was like breathing. There was no compulsion, no obligation. It was natural to pray.”

Katharine Drexel, recalling her childhood

“When she founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament ‘for Indians and Colored People’ (terms of the time), she vowed ‘to be the mother and servant of the Indian and Negro races..’ The words sound quaint and maternalistic today; but in the context of late 19th century America, awash in stereotypes of American Indians, African Americans and others deemed ‘different,’ they conveyed a respect that was far ahead of its time, even after nearly 1,900 years of Christianity.”

Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament



“Saints have always said the same thing: Pray, be humble, accept the cross, love and forgive. But it is good to hear these things in the American idiom from one who, for instance, had her ears pierced as a teenager, who resolved to have ‘no cake, no preserves,’ who wore a watch, was interviewed by the press, traveled by train and could concern herself with the proper size of pipe for a new mission. These are obvious reminders that holiness can be lived in today’s culture as well as in that of Jerusalem or Rome.”

The Franciscans

“She was somebody who could do anything or be anything, and she gave it all up to work with minorities.”

Joseph F. Skye, first Native American graduate of Xavier University

“The religious [person] needs strength. Near the tabernacle the soul finds strength, consolation and resignation. The religious needs virtue. Jesus is the model of virtues in the Blessed Sacrament. The religious needs hope. In the blessed sacrament we possess the most precious pledge of our hope.”

Katharine Drexel

“The patient and humble endurance of the cross, whatever nature it may be, is the highest work we have to do.”

Katharine Drexel

“We do Katharine Drexel a disservice if we view her only in terms of her money. She had a real social policy to go with it. She was working for the advancement of integration, and she made that so clearly a mission of the Church, not just a social policy. When Rome is determining who should be recognized as a saint, it looks not only at sanctity but at heroic sanctity. It’s going that extra mile, and that is certainly evident in her life. It’s just magnificent to have her recognized by the Church. It’s such a tribute to all progressive thinkers in issues of social justice.”

The Rev. Paschal Baumann, archivist, Belmont Abbey, NC

Questions for contemplation

1. How diverse is your circle of friends? Your community? How can you, in your everyday life, further understanding among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds?
2. Kate Drexel lived at a time when many types of inequality were accepted as a way of life. Why and how did that change? Do you see arrangements in your life or in society that seem all right today but in time might be perceived as unjust?

More information

Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament: www.katharinedrexel.org
Xavier University: www.xula.edu