

# From heiress to saint: The radical life of St. Katharine Drexel



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St. Katharine Drexel was born in 1858 to a wealthy family in Philadelphia. Five weeks after her birth, her mother died. She and her two sisters were reared by their father, Frank, a successful international banker, and stepmother Emma — whom Katharine always considered her mother. Both were devout Catholics and loving parents. The family was generous with the poor — three times a week they opened their lavish home to the needy, offering them food, clothing, medicine, and other necessities.

From the earliest ages, the Drexel children were taught to pursue personal holiness through daily Mass, meditation, the rosary, and other devotions as well as by acts of penance and sacrifice. Katharine kept notes on her efforts to grow in virtue. In 1878, she wrote: “I am resolved during this year to try to overcome impatience and give attention to lessons. I, Katie, put these resolutions at the feet of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph hoping that they will find acceptance there. May Jesus, Mary, and Joseph help me to bear much fruit in the year 1878.”

When she was in her 20s, Katharine lost both of her parents and inherited a portion of the family's vast wealth. At this time, she became aware of the plight of the Native Americans, many of whom suffered from dire poverty and a lack of education. She would devote the remainder of her life to assisting them.

In two private audiences with Pope Leo XIII, she begged him to send more missionaries to the Native Americans. During one of these meetings, the Holy Father suggested to an astonished Katharine that she herself become such a missionary.

Although Katharine enjoyed an opulent lifestyle, she became disillusioned with the things of the world. She wrote a longtime friend, Bishop James O'Connor, of her desire to enter religious life:

"Like the little girl who wept when she found that her doll was stuffed with sawdust and her drum was hollow, I, too, have made a horrifying discovery and my discovery, like hers, is true. I have ripped both the doll and the drum open and the fact lies plainly and in all its glaring reality before me: All, all, all (there is no exception) is passing away and will pass away."

The bishop thought Katharine could do more for the Church in her position in society and worried she might have difficulty in renouncing her wealth. She responded: "The question alone important, the solution of which depends upon how I have spent my life, is the state of my soul at the moment of death. Infinite misery or infinite happiness! There is no half and half, either one or the other."

The bishop eventually relented and advised her to found a community to work among Native Americans and African Americans, declaring: "God has put in your heart a great love for the Indian and the Negroes." In 1891, joined by 13 others, she founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.

Mother Drexel went to work opening mission churches and boarding schools for Black and Native American children throughout the U.S.

At times, prejudice and racism hindered her work. She would often buy buildings to create schools through third parties — otherwise, when sellers learned Mother Drexel was buying them to educate Black or native children, they wouldn't sell to her.

Once, when members of the Nashville, Tennessee, city council wondered if Blacks were capable of higher education, she responded: "I cannot share these views with regard to the education of the race. I feel that if among our colored people we find individuals gifted with capabilities, with those sterling qualities which constitute character, our holy mother the Church who fosters and develops the intellect only that it may give God more glory and be of benefit to others, should also concede to the Negro the privilege of higher education."

In 1915, Katharine founded a teachers' college in Louisiana, which would eventually become Xavier University of New Orleans and one of the first American colleges to admit Black students.

Throughout her life, Mother Drexel's chief motivation in addition to her missionary outreach was to help more souls know and love Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. She believed devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was key to the success to her community's missionary work.

She died in 1955 at the age of 96 and was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 2000. Her community's motherhouse for decades was located in Bensalem, Pennsylvania, a Philadelphia suburb, which included a shrine — elements of which included Mother Drexel's remains and a museum dedicated to her memory. However, due to a lack of vocations, the motherhouse closed and the property sold at the end of 2017. The **St. Katharine Drexel Shrine** is now part of the Cathedral Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul in Philadelphia.

