



From Philadelphia Princess to American Saint: The Katharine Drexel Story

She was the 19th century equivalent of an American princess, born into the privileged family of a wealthy Philadelphia banker and philanthropist. She could have lived her life in the lap of luxury, oblivious to the suffering of others.

But instead, throughout the 1890's and the first half of this century – long before taking up the cause of racial equality came into vogue – St. Katharine Drexel was at the forefront of efforts to improve the lives of others. During these decades shadowed by the segregation and degradation forced on Blacks – combined with the dispossession, relocation and betrayal of Native Americans – the name of St. Katharine Drexel shone out as a beacon of hope.

St. Katharine was at the forefront of efforts to educate African-Americans and Native Americans with an eye toward helping them to develop their own leadership and self-determination. Her schools were always open to all faiths; and the nuns who followed her lived among the poor they served.

Katharine Drexel was born in 1858 to wealthy Philadelphia banker and philanthropist Francis Drexel and his wife Hannah, who died a mere five weeks after giving birth. Her father remarried two years later. It was from her parents – revered for their own generosity and charity to the less fortunate – that St. Katharine learned early the lesson of stewardship and responsibility to the poor.

Early on, St. Katharine indicated her intent to establish a bureau to distribute her wealth to Indians and Black missions, and to enter a cloistered religious order. But instead, during a trip to Rome with her family, she accepted the challenge of Pope Leo XIII and established a brand new order – the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament – which went on to found and staff schools and centers in the inner cities of the North and East, the Indian reservations of the west and across the Deep South.

Despite the many obstacles placed in their path, including strong opposition from whites, by 1942 the Sisters were operating black Catholic schools, convents and mission centers in some 13 states. So extensive was her influence in the Black, rural areas of New Iberia, St. Martinville and other Acadiana parishes that she is often referred to as the "Patron Saint of South Louisiana."

St. Katharine's presence was also felt in urban New Orleans, where the Sisters not only opened a Catholic high school and several elementary schools, but also established Xavier University of Louisiana – which was to become the capstone of her educational system.

Originally a coeducational secondary school, Xavier evolved into a teacher's college and by 1925 had achieved full university status. A College of Pharmacy – now one of only two pharmaceutical schools in the state – was added two years later. That same College of Pharmacy at Xavier has educated and trained one-fourth of the Black pharmacists currently practicing throughout the United States.

The stresses and strains of building a nationwide network of schools for black and Indian children were hard on St. Katharine. The never-ending work and awesome responsibilities that she shouldered for more than a half-century finally took their toll in 1935 when she suffered a near-fatal heart attack. For 20 years she was confined to the infirmary at the Motherhouse in Bensalem, Pa., where she is said to have spent most of her remaining waking hours in prayer and meditation.

St. Katharine Drexel died on March 3, 1955. She was officially canonized a saint of the Roman Catholic Church in October of 2000 by Pope John Paul II. She is only the fifth American to have been canonized and only the second American-born Saint. She is now in the select company of Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini, Rose Philippine Duchesne, Bishop John Neumann and Mother Elizabeth Seton.

"(Katharine) Drexel is an excellent example of that practical charity and generous solidarity with the less fortunate that has long been the distinguishing mark of American Catholics," the Pontiff said during a rain-soaked canonization ceremony that drew tens of thousands to the Vatican, noting that her life brought about "a growing awareness of the need to combat all forms of racism through education and social services."

It is estimated that St. Katharine – who during her lifetime shared the annual income from her father's trust fund with her two sisters – gave away more than \$20 million. "She and her family gave away substantial amounts of money to large numbers of less fortunate people," points out Xavier University President Emeritus Dr. Norman C. Francis, himself a 1952 alumnus. "All she ever asked in return was 'Just pass it on. Don't thank me, just pass it on'."

In a special effort to honor its founder, Xavier University has built the Saint Katharine Drexel Chapel, designed by world-renown architect Cesar Pelli, who recently completed design of the new St. Thomas Moore chapel at Yale University.