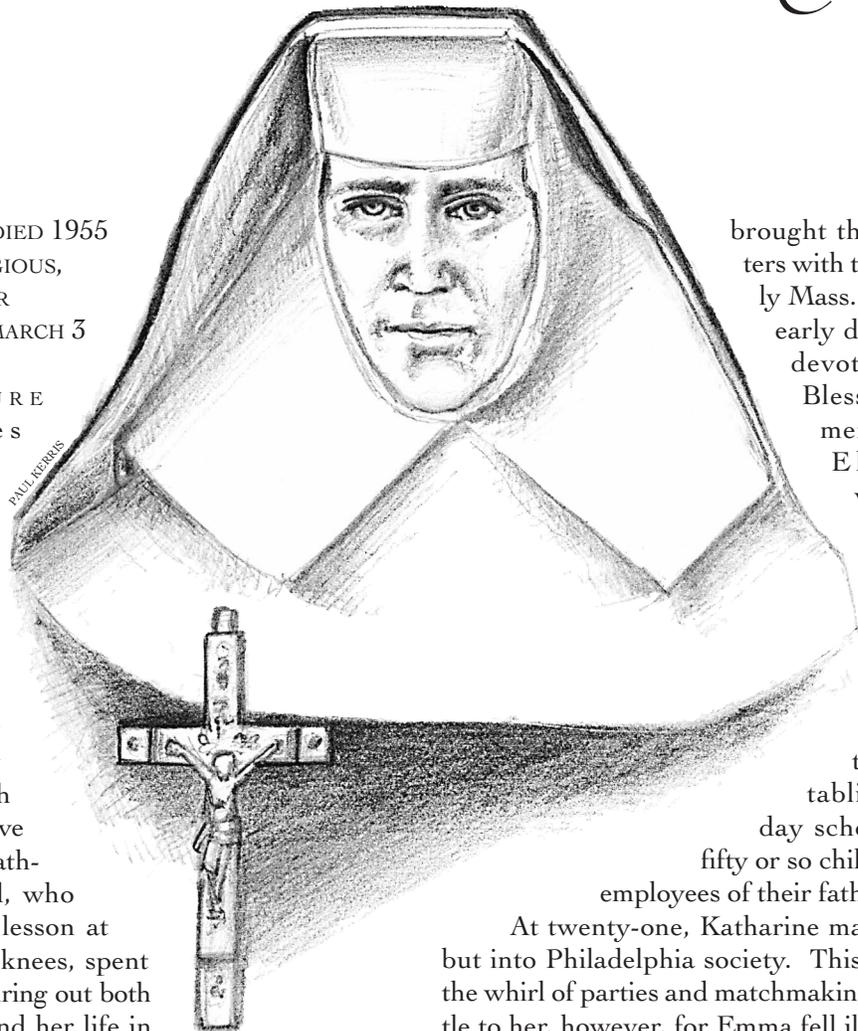


St. Katharine Drexel

BORN 1858; DIED 1955
VIRGIN, RELIGIOUS,
AND FOUNDER
FEAST DAY: MARCH 3

SCRIPTURE teaches that all possessions are gifts from God, and that there is an obligation in justice for the wealthy to share with those who have none. St. Katharine Drexel, who learned this lesson at her parents' knees, spent a lifetime pouring out both her wealth and her life in service to those in need.

Katharine was born to wealth, the second daughter of Francis Drexel, a Catholic banker in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where one of its universities bears the Drexel name, and his Quaker wife Hannah Langstroth. Although Hannah died just over a month after Katharine's birth, the child was blessed with a devoutly Catholic stepmother, Emma Bouvier, who loved her dearly. Francis and Emma taught Katharine and her sisters Elizabeth and Louise the virtue of charitable giving. They saw wealth not as a possession, but as God's gift to generously serve those in need. The sisters were given an excellent education and enjoyed the opportunities of travel, but also learned household management and basic household skills. The deeply religious parents made prayer in their home a priority and



brought their daughters with them to daily Mass. Katharine early developed a devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. When Elizabeth was fourteen and Katharine twelve, Emma encouraged them to establish a Sunday school for the fifty or so children of the employees of their father's farm.

At twenty-one, Katharine made her debut into Philadelphia society. This event and the whirl of parties and matchmaking meant little to her, however, for Emma fell ill from cancer. Katharine was among those who took tender care of her stepmother until her death three years later. Less than two years after Emma's death, Katharine's father also died. The Drexel sisters continued in the tradition of charitable giving of their parents, focusing initially on Catholic missions to Native Americans.

In her twenties Katharine began to be attracted to the life of a religious sister. She strongly felt the call of Jesus to radical poverty, but feared that she could not give up her life of luxury. During the best part of a decade, she hesitated about her path in life. The death of her parents, however, had so affected her that she fell seriously ill, and her sisters took her to a spa in Germany. Following her recovery, the three began recruiting priests and sisters for the missions they were helping to support. In Venice,



a statue of Mary seemed momentarily to come alive and call her to a life of service: “Freely have you received; freely give.” In a private audience with the Pope, whom she begged to send missionaries to Native Americans, she suggested that she herself become a missionary. And yet still she hesitated.

The following year the sisters visited one of the missions in the Dakotas. Katharine saw how much had to be done, and within four years of this visit she had financed thirteen mission schools in seven western states from her share of her inheritance. Knowing that this met merely a fraction of the need, she suggested that the U.S. bishops establish a yearly collection in each parish for African-American and Native American missions, a collection that is made annually to this day.

Finally, Katharine decided upon a religious life, and the same bishop to whom she had made the suggestion about parish collections proposed that she found a new religious order to serve Native Americans and African-Americans. At the age of thirty-one, Katharine entered the Sisters of Mercy for training. Within two years, she founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBS). For most of the rest of her long life, Katharine labored to establish schools to provide a high-quality education to Native Americans and African-Americans, and to nur-

ture these students as precious children of God. In 1915, she founded Xavier University in New Orleans to provide post-high school education to African-Americans. She endowed numerous churches, requiring however they not segregate African-Americans in the back of the church. Within fifty years, her order was established in thirteen states, operating schools, missions, and orphanages. The work did not go smoothly,

especially in southern states where opposition included government interference, vandalism, harassment, and an attempted bombing.

Katharine lived to the remarkably old age of ninety-seven. The woman who had feared her inability to live without luxury wore

her habits until they were nearly threads, and repaired her own shoes and handkerchiefs. The last twenty years of her life were marked by infirmity from multiple heart attacks. Having given the reins of administration to others, she spent her time in contemplative prayer.

For the greater part of her adult life, Katharine used the millions of the Drexel wealth only for those whom she had been called to serve. She could have enjoyed everything that this world offered, but she turned her back on it all, answering instead Jesus’ call: “[G]o, sell what you have, and give to the poor; and you will have treasure in Heaven; and come, follow me” (Mk 10:21).

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