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Mar. 3, St. Katharine Drexel, SBS, Founder

Gerelyn Hollingsworth | Mar. 3, 2010 NCR Today

Today is the feast of St. Katharine Drexel, [1] founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.

Katharine was born in Philadelphia in 1858 to Francis Drexel, financier and philanthropist, and his wife, Hannah Langstroth.

(Drexel & Co., the source of Francis Drexel's fortune, would eventually be part of Drexel Burnham Lambert. [2])

Hannah Langstroth Drexel died a month after Katharine's birth. In 1860, Katharine's father married Emma Bouvier.

Katharine and her sisters, [3] Louise and Elizabeth, were taught "that wealth was meant to be shared with those in need. Three afternoons a week Emma opened the doors of their home to serve the needs of the poor. When the girls were old enough, they assisted their mother."

Emma Drexel died of cancer in 1882. During the three years of her suffering, Katharine was her nurse. "Francis Drexel died suddenly in 1885. According to his will the three sisters inherited the income from his estate, not the principal during their lifetime. The principal would go to their children, but if no children survived them, the money was to be distributed to the charities he listed."

"In 1887 Katharine and her two sisters went to Rome and had a private audience with Pope Leo XIII. Kneeling at his feet, Katharine pleaded for a missionary priest to be sent to the Indians of the United States. The Pope responded: 'Why not, my child, yourself become a missionary?' Katharine told her sisters she did not know what the Pope meant and she was very frightened and sick."

(It was in that same year that another future saint, fifteen-year-old Thérèse Martin, knelt before Leo XIII and attempted to ask his permission to enter the Lisieux Carmel. The Pope said, "If God wills it, you will enter.")

In 1887 and 1888, [4]Katharine and her sisters visited Indian missions. (Note the Benedictine sister in the photograph.)

In 1891, Katharine Drexel founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament [5] "to work with the Black and Indian peoples".

Today, the Sisters are "Dedicated to the interracial apostolate in the USA and Haiti." [6]

Follow the links at the sides and tops of their web pages to see pictures of the Shrine where St. Katharine Drexel's remains are entombed and of the Sisters' ministries and services in Haiti and at other sites.

Click here [7] to see pencil stubs used by an heiress who took a vow of poverty and devoted her life and her fortune to the poor.

"For the last 18 years of her life she was rendered almost completely immobile because of a serious illness. During these years she gave herself to a life of adoration and contemplation as she had desired from early childhood. She died on March 3, 1955."

Katharine Drexel was canonized by Pope John Paul II [8] on October 1, 2000.

Some descendants of St. Katharine Drexel's stepmother, Emma Bouvier, attended the canonization.

A very happy feast day to the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, their Associates, their students, alumnae and alumni, and to all who venerate St. Katharine Drexel! [9]

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Links:
[1] http://www.katharinedrexel.org/SKDphotos.html
[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drexel_%26_Co.
[3] http://www.katharinedrexel.org/family.html
[4] http://www.katharinedrexel.org/apostolate.html
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