

Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

The Door of Hope: The Story of Katharine Drexel (by Katherine Burton)

The story of St. Katharine Drexel concludes the “Women of Faith and Courage” set in our Portraits series. Kateri Tekakwitha was a natural contemplative who chose a life of solitude, prayer, and penance, consecrating her entire being to God. Margaret Haughery embraced an active lay vocation, serving the needy in many capacities, both when she herself was poor, and when she became a business success. Our last subject, St. Katharine Drexel, had at first leaned toward Kateri’s choice. What she wound up with was a total, vowed consecration, but lived out with both intense prayer as well as intense social action.

In order to keep its audience from boredom, a biography written for young people will necessarily emphasize the exterior actions of its subject, only glancing briefly at the interior—the thoughts, prayers, inspirations and agonies that truly make a person who she (or he) is. But Katharine Drexel’s spiritual life and struggles are what fueled her actions. Without these, we only see a woman of great physical energy, great wealth and a heart for America’s oppressed minorities. Yet only by examining her spiritual journey can we truly understand St. Katharine Drexel.

The Door of Hope gives the impression that after her audience with Pope Leo XIII, Katharine sallied forth with a clear goal in mind—to found a new religious missionary order to serve racial minorities. In fact, she left that audience with the pope in total perplexity, even misery. She didn’t like Leo’s solution (that Katharine herself found a missionary order), since her own inclination was to enter a cloister. This made Katharine’s five-year discernment process even more tortuous than it already was. She alternately submitted to and argued against her spiritual director (Bishop O’Connor of Nebraska) who had long opposed Katharine doing anything but continue as a wealthy laywoman who served solely by financially backing the Indian missions, leaving the work itself to priests and religious orders. It’s possible that his interest in dissuading her was somewhat selfish: there was no telling what would have become of Katharine’s wealth should she have joined an existing order and lived under obedience to its superiors. But it’s also true that Bishop O’Connor’s challenges helped Katharine clarify her goals and desires. These five years of waiting gave her time to mature and grow into the role of foundress. Her sometimes contentious correspondence with Bishop O’Connor helped her develop both greater self-knowledge and the strength of will to eventually defy not just her director’s wishes, but many prejudices of her day as she carried out her mission to African Americans and Indians.

Sustaining Katharine through a long, adventurous, and arduous life was a two-pronged spirituality which was the animating heart and soul of her mission. Prong one might be given the fancy theological title *kenosis*, but St. Katharine didn’t use this term and likely did not know it. She, and the rest of us, know it by more familiar terms: abandonment, humility, and dying to self. Coming from a place of great wealth and societal position, Katharine practiced extreme self-denial, in order to “decrease” so that Christ might “increase” (cf. John 3:30). Even while controlling and dispersing that wealth, she remained so personally detached from it that she wrote with pencils until they were 2-inch stubs (a pile of these is on display at her shrine), and personally mended and patched her own shoes until there was little left of the originals. The

mission students who observed her visits could not believe that Mother Katharine was the legendary “rich nun,” because she would share in “all the dirtiest jobs.”¹

While the soul is being emptied of ego and attachment to the world, it must be refilled with something better. With Christ, of course, and that is the second prong of Katharine’s spiritual way. Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament was her Everything. In addition to daily Mass and Communion, her sisters were required to spend at least half an hour daily before the tabernacle in addition to brief visits there before beginning, and at the end, of each day’s work. Katharine herself, whenever travel did not impede her, also practiced nocturnal adoration, rising from bed to spend an hour or more each night with her Eucharistic Lord. She frequently reminded her sisters that their love for the Native and African American children they served must emanate from their love of the “Divine Prisoner of the Tabernacle”:

*“He in the Blessed Sacrament follows you with His loving eyes when you leave the chapel for your charges and in them He watches the interior glance of your souls’ eyes lifted behind the little gold Tabernacle door—to see whether it begs sanctification for your labor for Him who is so full of eager desire to unite your labors to His so as to make them His very own.”*²

Jesus Christ “emptied Himself” (Phil. 2:7), letting go of Divine privilege to become one of us. St. Katharine Drexel emptied herself of earthly privilege to become more like Him, and filled herself with His love. This was the Love that made her work with oppressed minorities thrive, truly a jewel in the crown of American history.

¹ Hughes, Cheryl, *Katharine Drexel—the Riches to Rags Story of an American Catholic Saint*, p. 194

² *Ibid.*, p. 204