

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Katharine Drexel

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: March 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Katharine Drexel

American religious sister, foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, who served Native Americans and African Americans.

Feast day	March 3
Born	November 26, 1858, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States
Died	March 3, 1955, Cornwells Heights, Bensalem, Pennsylvania, United States
Canonized	October 1, 2000, by Pope John Paul II
Era	20th century
Patron saint of	racial justice, philanthropists

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Novena to Saint Katharine Drexel

Shrine of Saint Katharine Drexel, Cathedral of Philadelphia

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Katharine Drexel

Saint Katharine Drexel was a wealthy Philadelphia heiress who became a religious sister and gave her fortune and her life to Native Americans and African Americans in the United States. Foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, she opened dozens of schools and was behind the founding of Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, the first Catholic institution of higher learning for Black students in the country. She died on March 3, 1955, was canonized in 2000, and her feast day is March 3.

Who was Saint Katharine Drexel?

Catherine Mary Drexel, known as Katharine, was born on November 26, 1858, in Philadelphia. She was the second daughter of the banker Francis Anthony Drexel and of Hannah Langstroth, who died shortly after her birth. Her father remarried Emma Bouvier, who raised Katharine as her own daughter.

The family lived in great comfort, but the parents taught their daughters that their wealth was meant to be shared with the poor. Katharine received the sacrament of confirmation from Saint John Neumann, bishop of Philadelphia.

Katharine grew up in piety and in the habit of serving others. The family traveled a great deal, both in Europe and in the American West. On these journeys she discovered the poverty in which Native Americans lived on the reservations, and the plight of Black Americans, who still suffered serious discrimination despite the end of slavery.

Key dates in the life of Saint Katharine Drexel

- **November 26, 1858**: Birth in Philadelphia.

- **November 18, 1883**: In Venice, she hears the call "Freely you have received, freely give."
- **1885**: Death of her father; with her sisters she inherits an immense fortune.
- **January 1887**: Audience with Pope Leo XIII, who asks her why she does not become a missionary herself.
- **November 7, 1889**: She enters the novitiate of the Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh.
- **February 12, 1891**: Religious profession as the first Sister of the Blessed Sacrament.
- **1915**: Beginnings of Xavier University in New Orleans.
- **March 3, 1955**: Death at Cornwells Heights, near Philadelphia, at the age of ninety-six.
- **October 1, 2000**: Canonization by Saint John Paul II.

"Freely give"

After the death of her stepmother in January 1883, her father took his daughters to Italy. On November 18, 1883, in Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice, before an image of the Virgin Mary, Katharine said she heard the words: "Freely you have received, freely give." She recognized them as words of the Gospel of Matthew, dear to Saint Francis of Assisi, to whom she had a great devotion.

Her father died in 1885, leaving his three daughters an immense fortune. Katharine and her sisters traveled to Europe to recruit priests for the missions among Native Americans. In January 1887, in Rome, they were received by Pope Leo XIII. When Katharine begged him to send missionaries, he replied: "Why not, my child, become a missionary yourself?" The answer shook her deeply.

A calling to found a congregation

In September 1887, Katharine and her sisters visited the missions in Dakota, where she met the great Sioux chief Red Cloud. Back home, she began to fund the Indian missions systematically: in four years she had thirteen schools built.

Her spiritual director, Bishop James O'Connor of Omaha, had long discouraged her from entering religious life. In 1888, faced with her persistence, he invited her to found a missionary congregation herself to serve Native Americans and Black Americans. She accepted on March 19, 1889.

She made her novitiate with the Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh and, on February 12, 1891, took her vows as the first Sister of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People, as the congregation was then called. In 1892 the community settled at Saint Elizabeth's Convent in Cornwells Heights, Pennsylvania. She wrote the rule, which received a first approval from Saint Pius X in 1907, and she led the institute as superior general until 1937.

Some sixty schools

The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament opened their first boarding school at Saint Catherine's mission in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In all, Katharine Drexel and her congregation founded about sixty schools. The best known is Xavier University in New Orleans, whose origins go back to 1915, the first Catholic institution of higher learning for Black students in the United States. Katharine spent the fortune inherited from her father on these works.

Strength from the Eucharist

She taught that detachment from earthly things lets the kingdom of God dwell within us, and she drew her strength from the Eucharist: near the tabernacle, she wrote, the soul finds strength, consolation and peaceful acceptance. In 1935 a heart attack left her seriously weakened. For the last eighteen years of her life, almost immobile, she devoted herself entirely to prayer. She died on

March 3, 1955, at ninety-six. Her last words are said to have been a prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking to be like a feather carried wherever his breath would take her.

Beatification and canonization

Her cause was opened in 1964 by Cardinal John Krol, archbishop of Philadelphia. Declared Venerable in 1987, she was beatified by Saint John Paul II on November 20, 1988, after the recognition of a healing that took place in 1974. The same pope canonized her on October 1, 2000, making her the second American-born saint, after Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton.

Why is Saint Katharine Drexel the patron saint of racial justice and philanthropists?

Katharine Drexel received much and gave everything: her fortune, her freedom and her life. Long before many others, she saw the injustice done to Native Americans and Black Americans, and she answered with education, faith and faithful presence. Her life shows that wealth can become an instrument of charity.

That is why American Catholics invoke her for racial justice and reconciliation, for educators, for Indigenous peoples, and for those who have received much and want to give generously.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Katharine Drexel in art

As a twentieth-century saint, Katharine Drexel is known above all from photographs. She is shown in the black habit and veil of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Devotional images frequently surround her with Native

American and African American children, recalling the schools she founded. The Eucharist, shown as a monstrance or a tabernacle, can also appear as a sign of the devotion that gave her congregation its name.

Where to pray to Saint Katharine Drexel

- **Philadelphia**: the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul, where her tomb was moved in 2017 from Saint Elizabeth's Convent in Bensalem. Since 2019 it has been the archdiocesan shrine dedicated to her.
- **Philadelphia**: the church of Saint John the Evangelist, the city's former cathedral, where she made her first Communion.
- **New Orleans**: Xavier University of Louisiana, her best-known work.
- **Santa Fe, New Mexico**: Saint Catherine's mission, the first boarding school of her congregation.

To pray with her, read the prayer to Saint Katharine Drexel or follow the novena to Saint Katharine Drexel.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Katharine Drexel for Justice and Generosity

There is no single traditional prayer to Saint Katharine Drexel in universal use, although many American parishes and schools that bear her name have their own. Saintspedia offers here an original prayer inspired by her life and words: the heiress who gave away her fortune, the foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, the friend of Native Americans and African Americans.

"Freely you have received, freely give"

Katharine Drexel heard these words of the Gospel in Venice in 1883 and made them the program of her life. Heir to an immense fortune, she spent it on schools and missions for Native Americans and Black Americans across the United States. She drew her strength from the Blessed Sacrament, writing that near the tabernacle the soul finds strength, consolation and peace.

Prayer to Saint Katharine Drexel for Justice and Generosity

Saint Katharine Drexel, you who received everything and gave everything, teach me to share what God has entrusted to me: my time, my possessions and my talents.

You who saw the injustice done to Native Americans and Black Americans, open my eyes to the discrimination of my own time, and give me the courage to work for justice and for the dignity of every person.

You who founded so many schools, pray for teachers, for students and for all who are denied an education.

You who found your strength before the tabernacle, draw me to Jesus present in the Eucharist, and teach me to adore him.

You who spent your last years in illness and prayer, support the sick and the elderly, and remind them that their prayer bears fruit.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Saint Katharine Drexel, pray for us. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Katharine Drexel's feast day is March 3. You can pray to her:

- for racial justice and reconciliation in your country;
- for Native American and other Indigenous communities;
- for a school, a teacher or an educational project;
- before making an important gift or deciding how to use your money;

- during a time of Eucharistic adoration;
- for an elderly or sick person who can no longer be active.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Katharine Drexel, and read the life of Saint Katharine Drexel.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Katharine Drexel

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and words of Saint Katharine Drexel. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on her feast day, March 3, begin on February 23 (February 24 in leap years). You can also pray it at any time of the year, for justice and reconciliation, for a school or for a decision about how to use what you have received.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. If you can, pray before the Blessed Sacrament, as Katharine loved to do. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life. If you miss a day, simply continue the next day.

This novena suits a parish, a school or a family as well as personal prayer. Many Catholic schools in the United States bear Katharine Drexel's name: a class or staff can pray one day each morning, choosing together how to live the daily act.

Day 1: Raised to share

In the Drexel household, wealth was not meant to close people in on themselves. Katharine's parents taught her that possessions are meant to be shared with the poor. Generosity is learned first at home.

Prayer: Lord, bless the families who teach their children to share, and make mine attentive to the poor.

Today: Make a gift, even a small one, to a charity that helps people in need.

Day 2: Freely received

In Venice, Katharine heard: "Freely you have received, freely give." Before we can give, we must recognize that everything we have is a gift. Gratitude opens our hands.

Prayer: Father, thank you for all you have given me. Awaken in me the desire to give in return.

Today: Write down three gifts you have received from God and thank him for them.

Day 3: Opening our eyes

On her travels, Katharine saw the poverty of Native Americans on the reservations and the discrimination suffered by Black Americans. She did not look away. Charity begins with the courage to see.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to those who are forgotten, and do not let me remain indifferent.

Today: Learn more about a situation of injustice you know little about.

Day 4: "Why not you?"

Katharine asked Pope Leo XIII to send missionaries. He answered: "Why not, my child, become a missionary yourself?" God often calls us to become the answer we are waiting for.

Prayer: Lord, if you are calling me to act myself, give me the strength to say yes.

Today: Do yourself something you have been waiting for others to do.

Day 5: Founding in order to serve

Encouraged by her bishop, Katharine founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to serve Native Americans and Black Americans. She gave her life along with her fortune. The gift of self goes further than the gift of things.

Prayer: Jesus, I give you not only what I have, but who I am.

Today: Give some time to a lonely person or someone in need.

Day 6: Education, a path to dignity

Some sixty schools, and Xavier University in New Orleans: Katharine believed that education gives people back their dignity and their future. Teaching is a work of mercy.

Prayer: Lord, bless teachers and students, and open the doors of education to those who are shut out.

Today: Help a child or young person with their studies, or support a school.

Day 7: Strength from the tabernacle

Near the tabernacle, Katharine wrote, the soul finds strength, consolation and peace. All her activity flowed from adoration. Without prayer, action runs dry. The very name of her congregation, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, says where her heart was.

Prayer: Jesus, present in the Eucharist, draw me close to you and be the source of everything I do.

Today: Spend some time in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament.

Day 8: Prayer in stillness

For the last eighteen years of her life, almost immobile after a heart attack, Katharine devoted herself to prayer. Her work continued, carried by her offering. Nothing is wasted when we pray.

Prayer: Lord, support the sick and the elderly, and help them discover how fruitful their prayer is.

Today: Visit or call an elderly or sick person.

Day 9: A feather on the breath of the Spirit

Her last words, it is said, were a prayer to the Holy Spirit: she asked to be like a feather, carried wherever his breath might take her. Her whole life had been an openness to the Spirit.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, at the end of this novena I entrust my intention to you. Through the intercession of Saint Katharine Drexel, make me responsive to your breath, and make me an instrument of justice and peace. Amen.

Today: Pray for reconciliation between the peoples and communities of your country.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Katharine Drexel, you who gave your fortune and your life in the service of Native Americans and African Americans, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for justice and reconciliation, for educators and students, for Indigenous peoples and for all who are rejected. Obtain for us a generous heart, a faith nourished by the Eucharist and a joyful openness to the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

To go further, read the life of Saint Katharine Drexel and the prayer to Saint Katharine Drexel.

PILGRIMAGE

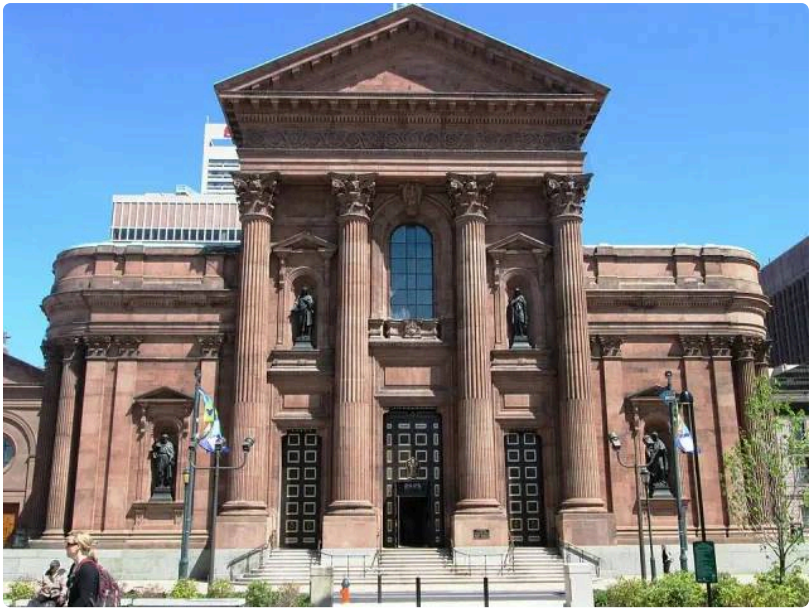
Shrine of Saint Katharine Drexel, Cathedral of Philadelphia

In the heart of Philadelphia, the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul houses the tomb of Saint Katharine Drexel, the city's own daughter who became the apostle to Native Americans and African Americans. Since 2019 it has been the diocesan shrine dedicated to the saint, who was confirmed in Philadelphia's former cathedral.

History of the Place

The Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul was built from 1846 to 1864 to replace the old cathedral, the Church of Saint John the Evangelist, where Katharine Drexel made her First Communion. It was built at a time of strong anti-Catholic sentiment: a riot had broken out in Philadelphia in 1844, and one tradition holds that the windows were placed high enough to be out of reach of flying projectiles. It has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1971.

After her death in 1955, Katharine Drexel was buried at Saint Elizabeth Convent in Bensalem, the motherhouse of her congregation, which became a national shrine. In 2017 the convent was sold, and the saint's tomb was moved to the Cathedral of Philadelphia. In February 2019, the cathedral basilica was designated a diocesan shrine dedicated to Saint Katharine Drexel.



The Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia.

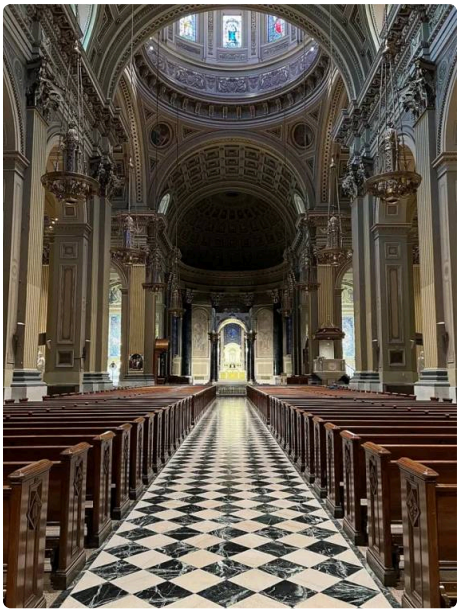
What You Can See There

The cathedral is the largest Catholic church in Pennsylvania. Its style is inspired by the Basilica of Saints Ambrose and Charles at the Corso in Rome. Built of brownstone, it is crowned by a great copper dome with a green patina, nearly 210 feet high including its cross. Inside, the decoration is largely the work of the painter Constantino Brumidi. The building can hold about fifteen hundred people.

The tomb of Saint Katharine Drexel is venerated there by pilgrims, who come to entrust their intentions to her.

Praying on the Spot

Before your visit, you might reread the life of Saint Katharine Drexel. At her tomb, entrust to God someone who is a victim of discrimination, an educational project or a gift you hope to make. Say the prayer to Saint Katharine Drexel. If the Blessed Sacrament is exposed or the tabernacle is accessible, take some time for adoration, as she loved to do. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The nave and dome of the Cathedral of Philadelphia.

Other Places Associated with Saint Katharine Drexel

- **Philadelphia**: the Church of Saint John the Evangelist, where she made her First Communion and was confirmed.
- **Bensalem** (Pennsylvania): the former Saint Elizabeth Convent in Cornwells Heights, motherhouse of her congregation.
- **New Orleans**: Xavier University.

- **Santa Fe** (New Mexico): the Mission of Saint Catherine.
- **Venice**: Saint Mark's Basilica, where she heard the call to give freely.

Practical Information

The Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul is in downtown Philadelphia. March 3, the saint's feast day, is an especially good time for a pilgrimage. Check with the cathedral about Mass times, tours and access to the tomb before you come.

Credits and sources

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