

THE STORY OF A NUN



How much good can a lady do in one lifetime? Kate Drexel built 57 schools and gave away \$12 million

by Glenn D. Kittler

KATE DREXEL was one of the most beautiful women in Philadelphia. Auburn-haired, blue-eyed, slim and vivacious, she loved to give parties and to go to them. With her two sisters, she reigned over Philadelphia's blueblood social set. She was one of the richest women on the globe, over which she traveled freely and in luxury.

Yet the time came when, willingly, she gave up her whole way of life.

Her sacrifice made headlines. When she was still in her teens, Kate's father, a prominent Philadelphia

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banker, had set up a 15-million-dollar trust fund for his three daughters. They were to live on the fund's interest, with the principal going to their heirs. Francis Anthony Drexel specified that if any of his daughters died without heirs, her share of the fund's earnings should go to her sisters. In the end, most of the earnings, totaling over 12 million, went to Kate—and she gave it all away.

In 1889, at the age of 31, Katharine Mary Drexel entered a convent to become a missionary nun.

Philadelphia and the social world were stunned. Kate's father had been one of the financial wizards of his day; her stepmother was a Bouvier—the blueblood clan to which Jacqueline Kennedy belongs. It was unheard of for a woman like Kate Drexel to renounce everything for which so many of her fellow beings yearned.

And she had kept her intentions a well-guarded secret. Though all through her youth she had confided in her diary: "I am having convent thoughts again," on the surface she was gay and outgoing. An excellent horsewoman, she also adored clothes. Even at the age of 12, about to make her first communion, she instructed the seamstress, "Put a lot of ruffles and frills on it, like Mama's." And she was so excited about the party to follow the event that an aunt reproached her with: "You seem more concerned about the party than you do about the sacrament, Katharine."

Only one person knew of Kate's inner yearnings. James O'Connor, then the pastor of St. Dominic's Church at Holmesburg, Pa., where the Drexels had a summer home, had been her only confidant. A wise man, the priest knew that many Catholics experience a similar interest in the religious life during their impressionable youth, that a number enter convents or monasteries for a time to determine whether or not they

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St. Kate Drexel

have true vocations. But because of her youth, Father O'Connor decided against influencing Kate. In another area, however, he influenced her deeply.

He was made the Bishop of the Nebraska Territory, which included the Dakotas and parts of Missouri, Wyoming and Montana. The summer of 1873, when Kate was 15, her father took his family out west to visit their former pastor. This was Indian country, where thousands of Pawnees and Sioux struggled for existence on arid reservations. For the first time, Kate saw hunger, poverty, rampant disease. She was horrified. She had just been given her own bank account; the first check she wrote in her life was a \$100 donation to Bishop O'Connor's missions.

Kate could not get the Indians out of her mind. In the next few years, she made two more trips to Indian country, each time bringing food, clothes and medicine, each time leaving sizable checks. She was in constant touch with the Bishop about Indian affairs. Occasionally, in her letters, she spoke of wanting to enter a cloistered convent, but Bishop

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O'Connor repeatedly urged her to wait and pray.

Meanwhile, the three Drexel sisters, now entering womanhood, became aware of conditions in the South, where the plight of Negroes after the Civil War was worse in many ways than it had been before. Soon their money began to go to missionaries in this area too.

In 1886, in an attempt to get over the shock of losing both their father and stepmother within 2 years, Kate and her sisters, Elizabeth and Louise, traveled to Rome. On this trip, Pope Leo XIII became the second person to know of her religious intentions. Naively, she shattered the Vatican's severe protocol by drawing him aside for a private conversation.

Could he suggest, she asked, an order of missionary nuns to whom she could give her millions.

The Pope was surprised. "Why do you wish to give away your money?"

"Because I want to become a nun myself," Kate told him. "A cloistered nun. I know I'll have to take a vow of poverty and surrender my share of the trust fund. I'd like to make sure it goes to a good cause."

"There is one way you can make sure," said the Pope. "Become a missionary nun yourself."

At first, the idea staggered Kate. Her vision had been of a secluded life, one of silence and prayer. But she could not deny the wisdom of taking her fortune with her into a religious congregation that did the kind of work that had so interested her. This way, she would not only be giving her money to the missions, she would be giving herself as well.

But there was a problem, and she waited to discuss it with Bishop O'Connor the following year. As a nun, she would be subject to a vow of obedience, which meant she would have to go wherever her superiors decided, do whatever they assigned. Her money, after her vow of poverty, would be out of her control.

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She told the Bishop about her conversation with the Pope and her decision to become a missionary sister. She added that she wanted to work among the Indians.

“But there’s no assurance that the congregation I join would definitely assign me to the Indians, is there?”

“No, there isn’t,” the Bishop said.

“Do you know of any congregation that works only among the Indians?”

“No, I don’t,” said the Bishop. He studied her for a moment, then suggested, “Why don’t you start one?”

Kate laughed. “I wouldn’t know how.”

“I would,” the Bishop said. “I’ve been waiting and praying for years for you to ask me.”

Of the 1000 religious societies for women in the Catholic Church, less than a handful have been started by wealthy women. Most often they evolved when a small group of women of modest—if any—means gathered to serve some local need—an orphanage, the sick, the aged, the poor, a school, perhaps. Usually, these women worked for several years before they thought of taking vows and establishing themselves as a community of nuns. Ordinarily, they had trouble getting church approval of their project; they had worse trouble attracting recruits so that they could grow; and almost invariably their first years as nuns were plagued by poverty and hardships.

Katharine Mary Drexel was about to become an exception to the rule. Her personal wealth assured her congregation’s financial security. Her family’s position as leading American Catholics cleared the path for church approval. The tremendous publicity that followed the newsbreak about her decision brought on recruits long before she was able to accept them. Despite these advantages, however, there were to be no shortcuts for Kate Drexel.

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Before she could become the head of a new congregation of nuns, she had to learn how to become a nun herself. Toward this end, she went, in May, 1889, to the convent of the Sisters of Mercy, in Pittsburgh, to spend two years in training.

A woman who all her life had given orders to servants would now herself be scrubbing floors and waiting on tables. A woman who had worn the finest gowns in the world would now wear a simple black, full-length dress and a veil; there would not even be a mirror for her to see if she had the veil on straight. A woman whose whims had determined her daily life would now be out of bed at five-thirty in the morning for meditation. Until nine at night she would be kept constantly busy with housework, studies and spiritual exercises. The whole day through she would be subject to the same discipline, the same criticism, the same reprimands as any other woman following the same path.

This stern regimen was aimed at cultivating the virtue of humility. The novice tried to become utterly selfless, seeking no personal comfort, no personal recognition, no personal reward, living in piety and purity, owning nothing and desiring nothing, submitting without question to the congregation's rules and superiors, loving all, serving God in all things.

For two years, Kate Drexel underwent this rigorous, leveling convent training. Although she retained control of her fortune, it was no longer hers but was committed to the missions. Therefore, she was allowed two exceptions to the convent rules.

She could receive and send more than the specified one letter a week, provided the correspondence dealt with mission affairs. Her mail was censored, not as a measure of control but as a further exercise in humility. Also, she could receive visitors, provided they were missionaries who either sought her financial aid or

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hoped to have her nuns work with them when she set up her congregation. The newspaper reporters who tried to see her were turned away.

In 1891, Kate was ready to begin her work. Because of her concern for the poor of the West and the South, she decided to call her congregation the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People. Eleven women were waiting to join her, an unusual number for a new congregation and undoubtedly the result of the publicity Kate had received. She settled them in the Drexel summer home at Holmesburg, where they took their own convent training.

Bishops in the West and South swamped the new congregation with requests for help. In both areas, the Blessed Sacrament Sisters, under Kate's leadership, were determined to do the best they could. So began a 60-year saga that made Kate Drexel the outstanding woman of her time in American education.

West or south, the basic needs were facilities and personnel. When Kate lacked the personnel, she provided the funds to build facilities where nuns of other teaching orders could go to work. She also gave money to maintain hospitals and orphanages, stipulating they were to be open to all races and creeds, with no proselytizing.

A Southern obstacle was the local law in many areas which forbade a white person to teach in a Negro school. The result had been that there was usually no Negro school at all. Up and down Southern backroads Kate traveled, hunting out adult Negroes with even a modicum of education. She would then build one-room schoolhouses for them, pay them and supply them for years. The number of such schools she supported is estimated in the hundreds.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth Drexel bought property at Belmead, Va. There she

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built an industrial school for Negro boys—a first chance for the boys to learn a trade. A few years later, after Elizabeth's death, Kate opened a similar trade school for girls nearby.

As important as these schools were, Kate realized that it would be by taking places in business and the professions that Negroes could best improve their status in America. At a conference of educators at the University of Notre Dame, Kate criticized Catholic colleges for not giving more scholarships to Negroes, but she knew that the best solution would be to provide a special college for Negroes as quickly as possible.

At the time, teaching nuns were qualified to work only in primary schools. Kate sent the best of her congregation to the Catholic University in Washington, D. C., for the higher degrees that would qualify them to teach in high schools and colleges. She then purchased the buildings of the defunct Southern University, in New Orleans, changed its name to Xavier Academy and opened a coeducational high school for Negroes, many of them coming from the country schools she supported. When the first graduating class was ready for college, so were the better-trained nuns; Xavier added a junior college, then a full college. In 1925, this became Xavier University, today one of the finest schools in the country.

From the start, Kate was known for her personal drive. Years of handling her father's estate had equipped her with knowledge and insight in dealing with the numerous decisions that now faced her as Mother General of her congregation. Added to this, her great love of America's unwanted, red or black, supplied the burning zeal to help them in every way she could. In her efforts to lead them both to dignity and to God, she worked day and night.

Despite the fortune she freely spent on her work, Kate Drexel was

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extremely frugal. To save on stationery costs, she often answered a letter on the blank side of the paper it was written on. When she bought property for a new school, she saw to it that the trees on the land were used in the construction. She preferred building near water so there would be free clay for bricks.

She became an expert with blueprints, paring away whatever she considered superfluous in the plans for a new structure. When she built her congregation's present motherhouse at Cornwells Heights, Pa., she not only supervised the design but the construction as well.

Inspecting her scattered mission schools involved a great deal of travel. Always she went by coach, and when she was unable to stay at a convent she stayed at cheap hotels. Having taken a vow of poverty, she would not allow herself any personal comfort or luxury.

Yet she could be touchingly extravagant with others. Once, visiting a western mission convent, she observed that the sisters lived in a primitive, depressingly rundown house. When Kate got back to Philadelphia she sent the sisters a supply of wallpaper, knowing their spirits would be brightened if their house was.

With herself, however, she made no concessions. Church law required that members of religious congregations hold elections of their superiors every 12 years. Four times Kate was re-elected, the limit under the law unless Rome granted special permission. Kate's nuns, then numbering over 350, pleaded with her to seek permission, but she refused.

"We must not seek special privileges," she said. "Anyway, it is time someone else governed the congregation so you can get used to it. I am not going to live forever."

She lived a long time—97 years—and to the end she remained an active woman. In 1941, at 83, she cel-

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celebrated her golden anniversary as a nun and received scores of congratulatory letters from the American hierarchy, plus a four-page letter from Pope Pius XII. She answered all the letters in her own handwriting.

In 1945, Louise Drexel Morrell died childless, which gave Kate the full earnings of the trust fund. Although because of her age she had refused positions of authority in her congregation, she could not relinquish the family fortune. This meant that at 87 she continued to be deeply involved in the business affairs of the Drexel estate and the expanding missionary crusade.

Her father's will had stated that if all three of his daughters died without children, the \$15-million principal of the trust fund should be divided among a number of religious institutions, both Protestant and Catholic, in the Philadelphia area. Because Kate had founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament after her father's death, the congregation was not a beneficiary in the will. It had been, then, solely with her own share of the fund's earnings that Kate Drexel had created an empire of good works that still thrives.

In a period of some 60 years, she gave away \$12 million. In doing so, she built 45 elementary schools, 12 high schools, a university and countless country schools; she supported orphanages, hospitals and homes for the aged; she increased her congregation from its original 11 teaching nuns to over 500 at the time of her death in 1955. Today the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament continue to do Kate's work in 27 dioceses of the U. S.

Among the many honors that came to her during her lifetime was the 1953 citation as "Philadelphia's Most Distinguished Lady." But Katharine Mary Drexel was more than that. In her desire to serve God by helping the poor and the unwanted, in her willingness to give her for-

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tune and herself to this cause, she likewise served her country and became one of the most distinguished women in the history of the land. †



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