

THE CANONIZATION OF KATHARINE DREXEL

Pope John Paul II praises the new saint for her boundless compassion and generosity toward blacks and Native American Indians.

BY TRENT ANGERS



A crowd of about 100,000 people jam St. Peter's Square and weather the wind and rain as Katharine Drexel and 122 others – from Africa, Europe and Asia – are declared saints in a formal ceremony on October 1, 2000.

As a gentle rain fell on the crowd of 100,000 people gathered in St. Peter's Square in Vatican City, Pope John Paul II declared Katharine Drexel a saint, praising her for her profound compassion and spirit of generosity toward America's downtrodden minorities in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

“Katharine Drexel is an excellent example of that practical charity and generous solidarity with the less fortunate which has long been the distinguishing mark of American Catholics,” the Pope stated, as most of the huge crowd peered out from under their umbrellas.



Mother Katharine works at her desk at the motherhouse of her order in Bensalem, Penn.

Noting that Katherine Drexel was born into a wealthy family in Philadelphia, the Pope pointed out that she learned from her parents that one's material possessions are meant to be shared with the less fortunate.

“As a young woman, she was deeply distressed by the poverty and hopeless conditions endured by many Native Americans and Afro-Americans. She began to devote her fortune to missionary and educational work among the poorest members of society,” the Pope related. He explained that Katherine went even further in her commitment to the poor when she founded a religious order called the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People.

“With great courage and confidence in God's grace, she chose to give not just her fortune but her whole life totally to the Lord,” the pontiff related. “To her religious community, she taught a spirituality based on prayerful union with the Eucharistic Lord and zealous service to the poor and the victims of racial discrimination.”

Affixed to St. Peter's Basilica overlooking St. Peter's Square was a huge portrait of Mother Katharine in her black and white nun's habit, flanked by an Indian child and a black child.

Mother Katharine's apostolate helped to bring about a growing awareness of the need to combat all forms of racism through education and social services, the Pope said.

“May her example help young people in particular to appreciate that no greater treasure can be found in this world than in following Christ with an undivided heart and in using generously the gifts we have received for the service of others and for the building of a more just and fraternal world,” Pope John Paul concluded.

In addition to Katharine Drexel, the Pope declared 122 others to be saints during the three-hour ceremony that took place on October 1, 2000. He commented in some detail on four of those being canonized, with Mother Katharine representing the Americas, Sister Josephine Bakhita representing Africa, Maria Josefa of the Heart of Jesus representing Europe, and Augustine Zhao Rong representing Asia. Among the Asian and European inductees were 120 martyrs who died for their faith in China over a span of several centuries.

Though it rained during much of the canonization ceremony, few people abandoned their seats, as evidenced by the constantly present sea of umbrellas that were opened then closed, opened then closed, as the rain fell intermittently. Enthusiastic applause and cheering could be heard from contingents from different nations as the Pope spoke of the heroic acts and admirable virtues of those being declared saints from their respective countries.



U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican Lindy Boggs and Xavier University president Norman Francis speak at a news conference in Rome about Katharine Drexel, the founder of Xavier in New Orleans.

Some 200 priests fanned out into the square to give communion to those in attendance, though the supply of hosts was insufficient for the tens of thousands who were attempting to receive communion.

Among the two dozen or so who received communion directly from Pope John Paul were Amy Wall and Robert Gutherman, both from Pennsylvania. These two are beneficiaries of the miracles which led to the declaration of sainthood for Katharine Drexel. Miss Wall, now age 8, was born deaf and miraculously began to

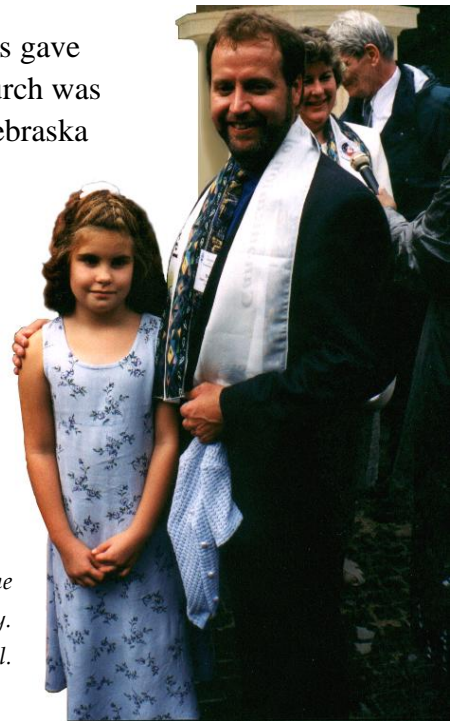
hear at age 2, some time after her family, together with Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, prayed for the gift of hearing through the intercession of Katharine Drexel. Mr. Gutherman, now age 40, miraculously regained his hearing in 1974 after two of the bones in the ear canal necessary for hearing were destroyed by a severe infection, then grew back – an occurrence that is not possible by natural law.

(In the Catholic faith, for a person to be declared a saint two miracles must occur and must be attributed to his/her intercession. A miracle is defined as “an extraordinary event that cannot be explained according to the laws of human science and is attributed to a divine intervention through the mediation of (the candidate for sainthood) who has been invoked by the faithful.”)

Adding to the spirit of celebration in Rome, the day prior to the canonization ceremony the Xavier University Choir of New Orleans gave a concert in Santa Maria Sopra Minerva Basilica. The majestic church was filled to overflowing with people from Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Nebraska and other states where Katharine Drexel founded schools and missions. (Xavier University was founded by Mother Katharine in the early part of the Twentieth Century, primarily to train teachers who would teach children in the schools she established around the United States.)

The basilica was selected as the setting for the concert because it is said to have been Mother Katharine’s favorite place to pray and attend Mass while on periodic visits to Rome to meet with Vatican officials.

Amy Wall and Robert Gutherman, the beneficiaries of the miracles required for the canonization of Katharine Drexel, relax at the Vatican following the ceremony. Behind Gutherman is Miss Wall’s mother, Connie Wall.



Prior to the concert a news conference was held by U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican Lindy Boggs of New Orleans and Xavier University President Norman Francis. They praised the work of Mother Katharine, with Ms. Boggs referring to her as “a strong woman’s advocate with a mind of her own” and Dr. Francis describing her as “a civil rights leader to whom the church owes a debt of gratitude.”

Dr. Francis referred to her as a model of humility who did not use her wealth in a self-serving manner. He related that when Xavier University was being dedicated, rather than take a front-row seat at the ceremonies, she observed the event from a window in the nearby convent. She didn’t even ask to be identified, but rather requested that others be recognized for their contributions to the building of the university.

She also set a good example concerning the subject of sharing, Dr. Francis pointed out.

“She and her family gave away substantial amounts of money to large numbers of less fortunate people. All she ever asked in return was, ‘Just pass it on. Don’t thank me, just pass it on. Help others as you have been helped,’” Dr. Francis related.



Franciscan priests (right) were allies of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in their efforts to evangelize, educate and support the Navajo and other Western tribes. Mother Katharine is the nun standing nearest to the priests.

Mother Katharine (right) visits with Navajo Indians at St. Michael Indian School in St. Michaels, Ariz.

