

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time February 1, 2009 B

A WEALTHY WOMAN BECOMES A PROPHET, A SOCIAL ACTIVIST AND A CANONIZED SAINT

In our first reading today, we heard these words: “I will raise for them a prophet like you from among their kin, and will put my words into his mouth” (Deut 18:18).

Two weeks ago in my column, I shared with you excerpts from the book called *What Your Money Means and How To Use It Well*.

Katharine Drexel was a wealthy woman who could have squandered her money on herself. Instead, she listened to the inner voice of God and became a wonderful and responsible steward of God’s material blessings. She also became a wonderful prophet who spoke out against the terrible injustices suffered by blacks and Native Americans. The following piece on Katharine Drexel was written by Jill Boughton in the January edition of *The Word Among Us*.

What is a prophet? A strident voice denouncing injustice? A wild-eyed visionary calling sinners to repentance? These images hardly fit Katharine Drexel, a refined, wealthy woman who disliked being in the public eye and felt strongly attracted to hidden prayer. And yet, like the biblical prophets of old, this self-effacing heiress became a voice in the wilderness and a countercultural witness to the gospel call to justice.

Long before the U.S. civil rights movement was born, Katharine worked to abolish the racial discrimination that many white Americans had accepted as normal. Many believed what the American School of Ethnology then presented as science: that the country’s three main races belonged to separately created species and that blacks and Native Americans might not even be fully human.

Catholics were not immune to insidious attitudes of this kind. Once, riding a train home from a mission trip, Katharine met a priest who expressed surprise that the religious congregation she had founded served the two supposedly “inferior” races. “Well, God help ye. It’s not so bad, I suppose with the Indians, but the other fellows can’t keep the faith.” She retorted indignantly, “They are not one bit worse than those our Lord and his apostles preached to.” All he could say was, “Well, poor things.”

On another occasion, Katharine and her sister wrote to a Catholic hospital, one of the charities their father’s will had designated as a beneficiary. They asked that his \$450,000 gift be used to set up a ward where African American patients could be treated free of charge. So ingrained was racism in American society that their request was refused without explanation.

A Prophet in the Making. Kate Drexel could have insulated herself against struggles and sufferings. Born in 1858, she was the middle daughter of a millionaire banker. She had everything: beautiful homes, a superb education, a loving family. But Kate’s parents were also devout Catholics who set a powerful example of generosity. They not only donated money to worthy causes but personally ministered to the needy who flocked to the door of their Philadelphia home.

Spiritually, too, Kate was rich. Along with concern for others, she developed a deep relationship with Jesus, centered on personal prayer and the Eucharist. Her desire to devote herself to prayer only intensified after her parents died, leaving her a huge inheritance. So at twenty-six, Kate was ready to enter a contemplative order. However, her spiritual adviser, Bishop James O’Connor, felt she could do more good by remaining in the world and being generous with her wealth.

As she waited, Katharine’s eyes were opened to the needs of Native Americans and to the injustices done to them. She pondered one American author’s assertion that “we have not a hundred miles between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans which has not been the scene of an Indian massacre.” From Bishop O’Connor, who oversaw a territory that included Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas, she learned how bitterly Native Americans continued to suffer.

Prophetic Words. All this was on Katharine’s mind as she toured Europe with her sisters in 1887. When they were granted a private audience with Pope Leo XIII, she asked him to send more priests to work among Native Americans. “Why not, my child, yourself become a missionary?” he countered. His words stayed with her.

Later that year, visiting the Indian reservations where the bishop and other missionaries ministered, Katharine was moved by the scope of the need. A Chippewa pointed to the cemetery and begged for schools: “It is the wish of those who now sleep out there, and it is even more our wish. . . Our houses are poor, our food is poor,

our clothes are poor, but you will find our hearts as warm for our children as any white hearts.” Responding to the needs, she financed missions, churches, and schools from the Great Lakes to the Mexican border. But she still felt that she should do more.

The plight of African Americans also touched Katharine’s heart. She was repelled by the prejudices that kept them from good housing, jobs, and education. It troubled her that black children received little or no schooling and that the church did not have the means to meet their needs. They get “only the leftovers—if there are any,” New Orleans Archbishop James Blenk sadly observed. Again, Katharine tried to fill the need through donations. And again, she felt that was not enough.

She longed for a broader kind of charitable giving—not just of her funds but of herself. And so, on her thirtieth birthday, she wrote Bishop O’Connor that she could no longer put off her desire for religious life. “The world cannot give me peace, so restless because my heart is not rested in God.”

The bishop not only withdrew his opposition: Two months later, he was urging Katharine to found a religious congregation dedicated to serving Native and African Americans. She was stunned. “The responsibility of such a call almost crushes me,” she wrote him back. She asked for prayers to “know God’s will and do it.”

“I Will Bring Jesus with Me.” Once Katharine felt more confident that God really had spoken to her through both the pope and Bishop O’Connor, she asked the Sisters of Mercy to help in her formation. Living with them was a radical change in her lifestyle, but she plunged in eagerly, delighting the sisters with her keen sense of humor.

Being a practical thinker, Katharine retained control of her trust fund—not for her own benefit but in order to keep giving (145 missions and more than 60 schools would be established as a result). By contrast, she was very frugal when it came to herself. She who had been able to buy frocks from Paris fashion designers now mended her clothing until little of the original fabric remained.

Within two years, Katharine was leading a group of women in a new congregation whose name—Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People—reflected her dual passions and prophetic insight. Besides the usual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, she promised to be “the mother and servant” of the two groups who had suffered so much at the hands of white Americans. Daily Communion and reservation of the Blessed Sacrament were central to each convent—privileges rarely given at the time. Katharine had sought this, seeing the Eucharist as the ultimate

bond among Indians, blacks, and whites. “I will bring Jesus with me,” she promised.

By the time they moved into their Bensalem, Pennsylvania motherhouse in 1892, the sister had opened a boarding school for African American children. In June 1894, they began staffing a school for Native Americans in Santa Fe, New Mexico—the first of many far-flung projects that Mother Katharine would oversee in the next forty-one years.

She opened a trade school for African American girls in Virginia and scrubbed dilapidated buildings for mission in Harlem, Cleveland, and Chicago. She trained sisters as teachers and sent them to Indian reservations throughout the West. She even supplied a novice mistress for a new order of Sioux women.

The secondary school she opened in New Orleans eventually became Xavier University, the first American Catholic College for blacks, as well as being co-ed and governed by women. It was also the first college to have an integrated faculty, though white students could not legally be admitted until the Supreme Court ruled against racial segregation in 1954.

Grace under Fire. Just like the prophets of old, Katharine encountered hostility at every turn. In 1891, tragedy was narrowly averted when it was discovered that dynamite had been planted on the grounds of the new motherhouse the night before the cornerstone ceremony.

In 1905, citizens of Nashville, Tennessee, took legal means to prevent Mother Katharine from purchasing property that would bring African American students into their neighborhoods; they signed petitions, ran newspaper ads, and even tried to pass a law restricting black high school students to schools that taught only industrial arts. The sisters persisted and opened their school anyway. They also prevailed in 1913, when opponents tried to block their Georgia missions by proposing a law forbidding whites from teaching in black schools and vice versa.

Nowhere was such opposition overcome more dramatically than in Beaumont, Texas. In spring 1922, the Ku Klux Klan posted threats on the church door of a mission Mother Katharine had established there, then assaulted an elderly parishioner. Racial tension was running high when Katharine arrived for a visit. The next day, the situation was defused when a violent storm broke out during a Klan gathering, and one of the group’s leaders was struck by lightning.

The Long Road to Justice. Whatever the opposition, Katharine pressed on. She told her sisters: “Have a cordial respect for others in heart and mind; if there is any prejudice in the mind we must uproot it, or it will pull us down.”

Often, she worked behind the scenes, buying properties through third parties to avoid publicity. But she spoke out when necessary. In New York City, for example, she met with the head of a press association to object to racial stereotyping in the headlines. "You don't say 'white man slays two,' but if it is a Negro, it is always mentioned."

As Katharine crisscrossed the country, she encountered many needs and more than a few setbacks. Schools set aside for Native Americans enrolled mostly children with only a small fraction of Indian ancestry. Churches she helped build in the South reserved pews for African Americans, as she specified, but those pews remained empty. Blacks were embarrassed by their shabby clothes, and white parishioners did nothing to make them feel welcome.

After one of her last trips, Mother Katharine gathered her sisters to report her disappointments and hopes. She shared her vision for a future when purebred red, black, and white races would melt away. Since integration wasn't a realistic immediate goal, she founded excellent schools and churches where African Americans could worship and learn. And she celebrated small steps toward justice: a Pennsylvania school where blacks and Native Americans studied together; combined catechetical classes for black and white children in Virginia; blacks and whites worshipping together at the 1938 Eucharistic Congress in New Orleans.

Invited to Love. A heart attack forced Katharine to relinquish leadership in 1935. She lived twenty more years—never just marking time but savoring the quiet life with Jesus that had so drawn her as a young woman.

Meanwhile, her prophetic vision of justice was moving forward. She must have exulted when, less than a year before her death on March 3, 1955, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against racial segregation in schools and other public facilities. And wouldn't she have been delighted that among those canonized with her in October 2000 was a former slave born in Sudan, Josephine Bakhita!

When a reporter asked why Mother Katharine had become a saint, a Navajo answered simply, "When nobody else did, she loved us." Such love for the oppressed is the mark of a true prophet. (End of article)

It has been said that the role of the prophet is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Katharine Drexel truly brought comfort, kindness and justice to the afflicted and oppressed. And her strong words also afflicted the comfortable and the smug who did not want to see African Americans and Native Americans as their equals and as their brothers and sisters.

It has also been said that the pain and joy of the prophet is seeing the sunrise before the rest of us. Katharine saw what Martin Luther King would see fifty years later and what the rest of us are only waking up to now: that all people are created equal and have the same dignity and worth. Thank you, Lord, for Katharine Drexel who heard your call and responded to it with immense generosity.

FOCA Campaign Results. About 4,200 cards were signed and will be sent to our political representatives. Hundreds of people took home postcards and many of you said that you intend to write your own letter. A big thank you to Barbara Warwick and Cindy Iezzi- for coordinating this very successful postcard campaign. All of us believe God can change hearts. Let us continue to pray that God will change the heart of our President and all prochoice politicians on this issue.

Some people said that if the Church had done something like this prior to the election, we would not have had to deal with a pro-choice President. I disagree. This year, the economy decided the election. When the economy is going well, people are free to look at other important issues. Four years ago, social issues played a big part in the election. Not this year.

God works in strange ways. The election of a prochoice President should help all pro-life citizens to work all the harder to protect the lives of children waiting to be born. Let us also pray that the new President holds good on his campaign promise to eliminate the conditions that cause many women to have an abortion. Finally, let us pray for women who are in the process of healing their lives from wounds inflicted by abortion.

Have a blessed week,

