

Mother Katherine, an activist for civil rights, was born in 1858, when debate over slavery was pushing the country toward civil war.

Her father, Francis Anthony Drexel, was a banker and a business partner of J.P. Morgan and the Drexels lived a life of wealth and privilege.

Still, three days a week, Katherine's stepmother used to open the door of their Rittenhouse Square town house and distribute food, clothing, and money to the needy.

When Katherine was in her early 20s, her stepmother died and her father followed her soon after, leaving an estate of \$15 million U.S.—roughly equivalent to \$250 million today—the largest fortune that had ever been recorded in Philadelphia.

The three Drexel daughters soon attracted both fortune hunters and legitimate fundraisers. Two priests from the Dakotas travelled to see them, reporting that the federal government was withdrawing its funding of Indian schools, and Katherine immediately wrote them a cheque.

One year later, the matter was still on her mind. In a private audience, Katherine asked the Pope to send more missionaries to help the Indians. He asked: "Why, my child, don't you become a missionary?"

From the time she was 14, she had considered devoting herself to a life of service. While her younger sister was already married and she herself had plenty of suitors, Katherine felt a great pull to religious life.

In 1889, when she was 30, Katherine decided to become a nun. The front page of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* voiced the city's disbelief: "Miss Drexel Enters a Catholic Convent—Gives up Seven Million."

Katherine was to take her vows as seriously as the poorest nuns: sewing her shoelaces back together rather than buying new ones and wearing pencils down to their nub.

And when she took those vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, she added a fourth: "to be the mother and servant of the Indian and Negro races."

She started her own religious order, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and soon after sent a group of nuns to open her first American Indian school in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Eventually she established 145 missions, 112 schools for American Indians and 50 for blacks.

"She never talked social justice. She lived social justice," said Sister Ruth, a member of the order. "She was the Mother Teresa of her day."

by DAVID O'REILLY

20 YEARS AGO...

The big news

A lovely morning in April 1980, a great commotion shook Kahnawaké. In no time everybody knew the good news: "Kateri Tekakwitha would be beatified on June 24." All the Canadian newspapers spread this good news and the rectory of Kahnawaké became so much alive. A real beehive. Fr Lajoie, Fr Béchar, Mrs Françoise Champagne, Sr Kaye received all kinds of calls. They requested the Oblate Fathers of N-D. du Cap, experts in pilgrimages, to share their know-how. Kateri was a Mohawk virgin, but all the Indians of America claimed belonging to her family, as proud as they were to see their little sister rise to so high a rank. From Vancouver to New Mexico, from Texas to Ontario, came the same questions: how can we get to Rome and how can we obtain passports? Till the departure time, on June 20th, everyone worked overtime to be ready in time. Only when the bus left Kahnawaké for Mirabel did they start breathing normally. A huge Boeing of Air Alitalia would take them to Rome – 64 pilgrims from Kahnawaké and 45 from Saint Regis.



Kateri's tomb.

Fr Henri Béchar, the vice-postulator of the time, had foreseen this declaration, what invited him to erect Kateri's tomb right in the church. A beautiful marble tomb – gift of the Daughters of Isabella. Bishop Coderre of Longueuil came to Kahnawaké to seal Kateri's remains, put them inside the tomb and bless the monument on Nov. 1st 1972.

Kateri with three others introduced as "Blessed to the World."

The Church has declared to the world that Kateri Tekakwitha is blessed, that she lived a life on earth of exemplary holiness and that she is now a member in heaven of the Communion of Saints who continually intercede with the merciful Father on our behalf.

Her beatification should remind us that we are all called to a life of holiness, for in Baptism God has chosen each one of us "to be holy and spotless and to live through love in his presence" (Eph 1:4). Holiness of life – union with Christ through prayer and works of charity – is not something reserved to a select few among the members of the Church. It is the vocation of everyone.

My brothers and sisters, may you be inspired and encouraged by the life of Blessed Kateri. Look to her for an example of fidelity; see in her a model of purity and love; turn to her in prayer for assistance. May God bless you as he blessed her. May God bless all the North American Indians of Canada and the United States.