

Memorial of St. Katharine Drexel

Homily of Bishop Barres

St. Agnes Cathedral

March 3, 2021



I was once at a dinner in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania celebrating the Ordination of some newly ordained young priests.

A priest in his 50s Fr. Pat, a charismatic priest and fine homilist with a great sense of humor, was chosen as the after-dinner speaker.

Before Fr. Pat got up to speak, an older gentleman gave a long laudatory biography of Fr. Pat which ended with strong applause.

Fr. Pat went up to the podium and with his self-deprecating sense of humor began his remarks with these words: “I want to thank you for those very kind words. My father would have appreciated them and my mother would have believed them.”

The mother of the sons of Zebedee in the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 20 had a similar attitude with a driving ambition for the destinies of her two sons.

She did not ask Jesus for a favor or a job or a contact for her two sons.

Her plans were much more ambitious than that: “Command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your kingdom.”

This mother did not hold back. She had great ambitions for her sons but this ambition revealed a very flawed understanding of Jesus and his teaching.

There is a powerful lesson for us in this conversation between the ambitious mother, her sons and Jesus.

Discerning our destinies at any stage of life is best done in humility, a spirit of trust and faith, and a realization that a holy destiny involves a full embrace of the Cross and the Chalice of Jesus Christ.

The young Katharine Drexel (1858-1955), whose Memorial we celebrate today, had every privilege imaginable growing up but despite these privileges and the enormous wealth of the Drexel family, she captured the spirit of Matthew 20 and discerned her destiny with bold humility, faith, trust in God and a desire to be configured to the Cross of Christ in such a way that she would help others to carry their Crosses to holiness and eternal life.

This beautiful Philadelphia Debutante had style, charm, manners, education and talent. Katharine came from one of the wealthiest families in the history of the United States.

She might very well remind us of her fellow Philadelphian Grace Kelly, the great 20th century film actress and Princess of Monaco.

What could possibly motivate a rich, beautiful and talented young woman like Katharine Drexel to embrace the spirit of Matthew 20 and vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as a prophetic woman religious?

Once as a young woman, she visited Pope Leo XIII in Rome with her family. She asked the great Social Justice Pope somewhat assertively to assist the missions to African Americans and Native Americans in the United States.

Pope Leo's wise and challenging reply was: "What about you...What about you?!"¹

This question disturbed Katharine but helped lead her to her vocation as a woman religious who dedicated her life and her family fortune to serve African and Native Americans and establish schools and universities.

¹ See Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, September 26, 2020. See the Addendum below for further prayer and reflection.

As we ask St. Katharine Drexel's intercession today, we give thanks for the missionary spirit of countless women religious in the history of the United States. We pray for the souls of women religious and we pray for the women religious working creatively and prophetically in the Vineyard today.

The Holy Spirit asks every young person and every one of us at every stage of life the same question Pope Leo XIII asked St. Katharine Drexel: "What about you?"

What about the direction of your life? Have you really given your entire life to God or are you holding something back? What are you being called to do to advance the mission of the Church and become a saint?

Saints inspire young people and people of all ages to be generous, to dream and to act. The lives of saints are eloquent commentaries on the Gospel.

Saints inspire life directions. Saints inspire young people and all of us to be saints in our own place, culture and moment of history.

Saints inspire us to have a burning desire for Heaven and Eternal life, a burning desire that lights our path and destiny on Earth.²

I think today of the many young people on Long Island who have grown up in immense wealth and privilege.

We ask for them the intercession of St. Katharine Drexel that they may understand what really counts and what really lasts in life and that they may generously lay down their lives and invest them completely for God and the Kingdom in the complete and inspiring way that St. Katharine Drexel did.

St. Katharine Drexel, pray for us!

² Cf. Bishop John Barres' "Saints that Inspire Young People" in the December 2018 issue of the *Long Island Catholic*, 3-5.

ADDENDUM TO THE HOMILY FOR PRAYER AND REFLECTION

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO CUBA, TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AND VISIT TO THE UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS
(19-28 SEPTEMBER 2015)

**HOLY MASS
WITH BISHOPS, CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS OF PENNSYLVANIA**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

*Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, Philadelphia
Saturday, 26 September 2015*

[Multimedia]

This morning I learned something about the history of this beautiful Cathedral: the story behind its high walls and windows. I would like to think, though, that the history of the Church in this city and state is really a story not about building walls, but about breaking them down. It is a story about generation after generation of committed Catholics going out to the peripheries, and building communities of worship, education, charity and service to the larger society.

That story is seen in the many shrines which dot this city, and the many parish churches whose towers and steeples speak of God's presence in the midst of our communities. It is seen in the efforts of all those dedicated priests, religious and laity who for over two centuries have ministered to the spiritual needs of the poor, the immigrant, the sick and those in prison. And it is seen in the hundreds of schools where religious brothers and sisters trained children to read and write, to love God and neighbor, and to contribute as good citizens to the life of American society. All of this is a great legacy which you have received, and which you have been called to enrich and pass on.

Most of you know the story of Saint Katharine Drexel, one of the great saints raised up by this local Church. When she spoke to Pope Leo XIII of the needs of the missions, the Pope – he was a very wise Pope! – asked her pointedly: “What about

you? What are you going to do?”. Those words changed Katharine’s life, because they reminded her that, in the end, every Christian man and woman, by virtue of baptism, has received a mission. Each one of us has to respond, as best we can, to the Lord’s call to build up his Body, the Church.

“What about you?” I would like to dwell on two aspects of these words in the context of our specific mission to transmit the joy of the Gospel and to build up the Church, whether as priests, deacons, or men and women who belong to institutes of consecrated life.

First, those words – “What about you?” – were addressed to a young person, a young woman with high ideals, and they changed her life. They made her think of the immense work that had to be done, and to realize that she was being called to do her part. How many young people in our parishes and schools have the same high ideals, generosity of spirit, and love for Christ and the Church! I ask you: Do we challenge them? Do we make space for them and help them to do their part? To find ways of sharing their enthusiasm and gifts with our communities, above all in works of mercy and concern for others? Do we share our own joy and enthusiasm in serving the Lord?

One of the great challenges facing the Church in this generation is to foster in all the faithful a sense of personal responsibility for the Church’s mission, and to enable them to fulfill that responsibility as missionary disciples, as a leaven of the Gospel in our world. This will require creativity in adapting to changed situations, carrying forward the legacy of the past not primarily by maintaining our structures and institutions, which have served us well, but above all by being open to the possibilities which the Spirit opens up to us and communicating the joy of the Gospel, daily and in every season of our life.

“What about you?” It is significant that these words of the elderly Pope were also addressed to a lay woman. We know that the future of the Church in a rapidly changing society will call, and even now calls, for a much more active engagement on the part of the laity. The Church in the United States has always devoted immense effort to the work of catechesis and education. Our challenge today is to build on those solid foundations and to foster a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility in planning for the future of our parishes and institutions. This does not mean relinquishing the spiritual authority with which we have been entrusted; rather, it means discerning and employing wisely the manifold gifts which the Spirit pours out upon the Church. In a particular way, it means valuing the immense

contribution which women, lay and religious, have made and continue to make, in the life of our communities.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for the way in which each of you has answered Jesus' question which inspired your own vocation: "What about you?". I encourage you to be renewed in the joy and wonder of that first encounter with Jesus, and to draw from that joy renewed fidelity and strength. I look forward to being with you in these days and I ask you to bring my affectionate greetings to those who could not be with us, especially the many elderly priests and men and women religious who join us in spirit.

During these days of the World Meeting of Families, I would ask you in a particular way to reflect on our ministry to families, to couples preparing for marriage, and to our young people. I know how much is being done in the local Churches to respond to the needs of families and to support them in their journey of faith. I ask you to pray fervently for them, and for the deliberations of the forthcoming Synod on the Family.

Now, with gratitude for all we have received, and with confident assurance in all our needs, we turn to Mary, our Blessed Mother. With a mother's love, may she intercede for the growth of the Church in America in prophetic witness to the power of her Son's Cross to bring joy, hope and strength into our world. I pray for each of you, and I ask you, please, to pray for me.

