

PRIVILEGED TO EDUCATE
Katharine Drexel and Catholic Social Teaching: An Embodied Pedagogy

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Abstract

Katharine Drexel was an important educator who taught profound lessons to the Roman Catholic Church and American society about the responsibility of privilege and the irresponsibility of prejudice. As a professed nun dedicated to the education of black and Native Americans, she taught both intentionally and by example. Religious educators, seeking to educate for peace and justice, often point to Katharine's life work as an example of the application of Catholic social teaching. This paper argues that Katharine's educational import in regards to Catholic social teaching goes much deeper than the concrete examples of her life's work. By studying Katharine's life, religious educators can illustrate the foundational attitude and habits necessary for the principle of social justice to take root. This will be articulated in terms of underlying emphases found in aspects of Katharine's story: emphasis on totality, on clarity of vision and purpose, on evangelization, on family ethical formation, on moral education, and on Eucharistic spirituality. A corresponding action for religious educators will be suggested.

Katharine Drexel was an important educator who taught profound lessons about the responsibility of privilege and the irresponsibility of prejudice. As a professed nun dedicated to the education of black and Native Americans, she taught both intentionally and by example. As the principles of Catholic social teaching were gradually being developed, Katharine lived and taught them instinctively. Her ability to teach by "being", to authentically inhabit her orientation to justice, provides valuable lessons for religious educators. By studying Katharine's life, religious educators can illustrate the foundational attitude and habits necessary for the principle of social justice to take root and become, as Katharine found, the only alternative for Christian living.

Katharine's Early Life

Katharine was born in 1858 in Philadelphia and lived among wealth and privilege as one of three daughters of Francis Anthony Drexel, who led the banking firm of Drexel & Co. Like other wealthy young women of the "Gilded Age", Katharine was educated at home by governesses and traveled extensively, becoming a debutante in 1879 (Duffy 1966, 15-7; Baldwin 2000, 3-32). Though the Drexel family moved comfortably in the moneyed world, they were distinguished by their philanthropic emphasis. Katharine's father was a generous contributor and board member of many charities. His wife Emma, Katharine's stepmother, dedicated herself to charitable work. At the time of her death Philadelphia's poor lined up for two hours to pass by her coffin (Lynch 1998, 9).

When Katharine's father died in 1885, she and her two sisters inherited approximately fourteen million dollars of their father's estate. They were to receive only the income from the estate, with their heirs to have access to the entire amount. With such a sizeable yearly income, Katharine and her sisters founded and supported various charities, as had their parents. In 1889,

Katharine decided to enter religious life, distancing herself even further from the priorities of the Gilded Age. Consistent with her charitable interests and in response to the constant need for financial support, she established an order dedicated to black and Native Americans. Unlike other religious sisters, she did not renounce her wealth, but retained control of its use, even as she imposed strict poverty upon herself (Lynch 1998, 21-25, 46-48).

Katharine's Missions

Katharine had become interested in the Native American missions during family trips to the western United States in 1880 and 1883 and soon after began making monetary donations. Because Catholic mission schools had gradually lost their government subsidies, due to a contentious power struggle between Catholic and Protestant mission interests, they had to depend entirely on such charitable contributions (Prucha 1979, 6-13, 41-49). Katharine purchased land, built and funded schools, maintained insurance payments, paid tuition for children and the salaries for priests and nuns, and enabled other religious orders to take on mission work (Oates 1995, 66; Butler 1997, 201-203; Coburn and Smith 1999, 110-112). Her efforts were in stark contrast to the lack of zeal shown by the American Catholic church towards the Native America Missions. Mary Oates notes that “at the turn of the century... while Mother Katharine was giving approximately \$100,000 annually to support Catholic Indian schools and missions, annual donations for that cause from the nation’s 12 million Catholics totaled under \$75,000” (1994, 211). In 1906, Fr. William Ketcham, director of the Indian Bureau, stated: “The tremendous burden that the 13 million Catholics of the United States impose constantly upon Mother Katharine Drexel cannot be other than a subject of amazement to any thinking person” (Prucha 1979, 52).

While there was only minimal financial support for a Catholic presence in the Native American mission, there was even less support given to the African American communities. Blacks endured segregated churches and/or communion lines and designated remote seating, with no apparent disapprobation from the clergy. Some bishops tried to establish schools for black children and to encourage religious orders to get involved, but there was, in general, a thinly veiled racist attitude among the Catholic hierarchy that led them to deem evangelization of African Americans a useless enterprise (Davis 1990, 116-128).

In 1884 the bishops voted to establish an annual national collection on the first Sunday of Lent to Black and Native Americans. This collection did not ignite adequate interest for evangelization of African Americans among Catholics as was hoped. The collection totals actually decreased yearly (Davis 1990, 132-134; Oates 1995, 62). Oates notes that, “by the turn of the century, more donations were being made in one day at a single Protestant missionary meeting for work among African Americans than Catholics nationally were giving for the same cause annually” (Oates 1995, 58). Yet the Drexel family stood out in their generosity, with Katharine’s sister Louise becoming especially devoted to the support of schools and churches for African Americans. Katharine established a school in Philadelphia and sent money to churches and schools in North Carolina, Savannah, Pittsburgh and Chicago (Lynch 1998, 38-39; Oates 1995, 66; Davis 1990, 135-136). In 1891, Augustus Tolton, the first black priest in the United States wrote to Katharine as she began her order, “One thing I do know and that is it took the Catholic church 100 years here in America to show up such a person as yourself...” (quoted in Davis, 1998, 33).

Katharine's Lessons

As Katharine charted a course for her new religious community and guided its educational ministry, she was cognizant of the racism embedded within the church. Her educational initiatives included not only the black and Native Americans who lacked access to schooling, but also the many priests and bishops who encouraged or ignored racist attitudes. Although thousands of appeals for money or sisters came to her, Katharine would only agree to help when she could ascertain that the motives and attitudes of the bishops or priests were sound. Katharine's donations came with a contractual stipulation called a Recapture Clause, which protected her funds from the whims of a diocese (ASBS August 23, 1913). Her donations were also dependent upon certain behaviors. She required churches to reserve whole aisles for African Americans, not rope off a few back pews. For instance, she once wrote, "the White people of Durham say they would rather receive no donation for the building of their church if given under the condition of reserving an aisle for the Colored. The Bishop said he is going to insist on the aisle for the Colored there" (quoted in Hurd 2002, 163). The Bishop knew he would not get his money, unless he insisted on what Katharine saw as self-evidently right behavior.

Though Katharine evangelized and fought racism through her support, establishment and administration of schools, her educative influence was also seen in the philosophy of education she promoted within her schools. For instance, while the public or common schools strove to assimilate Native Americans by expunging native culture (Prucha 1979, ix), Katharine's schools tried to be part of the community. Her sisters attended festivals at neighboring pueblos, nursed the sick and cared for those in prisons. Unlike the government schools, which fired teachers who used Spanish to teach the children, the sisters worked to learn the language. Katharine hired Native American adults at the schools and encouraged Indian families to visit, stay for supper, and camp on the grounds. The curriculum combined academic courses and industrial training, with an eye to acquiring skills helpful to life on the reservation (Lynch 1998, 84-94; Butler 1997, 210-212; Hurd 2002, 127-130). Katharine clearly saw education as a tool for promoting equality. She decried white encroachment of Native American property, and in an awkward sounding phrase for today's world, wanted to help the "full-bloods....to educate them so that they may not be cheated out of their land by the teeming population of whites" (quoted in Duffy 1966, 232).

Katharine also viewed education as the means of leadership development. Her decision to establish her first college in New Orleans, Xavier Academy, in 1915, was directly related to this goal. Xavier was the first and only Catholic college for African Americans in the United States, and it made a huge impact on education in Louisiana. Katharine established twenty-four rural schools throughout the state and staffed them with Xavier graduates. Mary Oates notes that by 1966, forty percent of the teachers and seventy-three percent of principals in black public schools in New Orleans were graduates of Xavier, with many more teaching throughout the state (Oates 1994, 213).

Katharine's Relevance

Katharine Drexel died on March 3, 1955. On December 1 of that same year, Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white person, often seen as the symbolic beginning of the civil rights movement in the United States. It is ironic that one of the most influential and ardent opponents of discrimination would die at the very brink of her country's awareness of the common citizenship shared by all. But perhaps even more ironically for Katharine was the dawning awareness of her church. In 1958, the American Catholic bishops finally spoke out together against racial discrimination in the United States (Davis 1998, 39). In 1991, the US

bishops published “A Century of Social Teaching,” outlining the basic principles of Catholic social teaching as articulated since Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (USCCB.org). Katharine Drexel is not mentioned in the bishops’ document, though she spent close to a century teaching American Catholics about the necessity of just living.

Indeed, though Katharine is not mentioned in the delineation of Catholic social teaching, religious educators seeking to educate for peace and justice can point to her life as embodiment of its principles. Her belief in the life and dignity of the human person and human equality drove her to see that black and Native Americans had an essential right to education as a means for human flourishing. Her schools honored the history and reality of the children and families she educated. Katharine fought for the right to participate in community, especially within her own church, which gave up their segregated seating arrangements reluctantly. She emphasized the teaching of realistic skills and the development of lay leaders who would serve their communities. Katharine’s teachers embraced solidarity with those they served, seeking to learn their language and customs. Beyond all of this was Katharine’s constant option to support and serve those with least access to resources and public respect, using her own wealth as a means of contributing to the common good.

Yet Katharine gives to the church something even more vital than examples of the principles of Catholic social teaching. She teaches how to reach the principles, hold them, understand them, and live them. Katharine completely embodied the essence of Catholic social teaching because she cultivated an understanding of its principles in her heart. Her embodied pedagogy is her greatest lesson. This foundational attitude is best articulated in terms of underlying themes or emphasis:

Totality: The generosity of Katharine’s life, both in monetary contributions and gift of self can be disconcerting and feel unapproachable and inimitable. Yet her accomplishments are due to the completeness of her commitment to eradicating injustice. Katharine was fully “in” the fight, physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. She gathered and studied information, discussed and prayed about each plan of action, and toured and talked to the people involved and affected by her projects. It is this whole-heartedness that action on behalf of social justice requires. This can be developed in many ways and in many life contexts. Religious educators can assist this development by helping people to identify where their commitment, priorities, and energies lie and by encouraging routine evaluation of the use of monetary and physical resources.

Clarity of vision and purpose. Throughout the years, Katharine moved with steadiness and surety, a remarkable feat considering most of the country and a large portion of her church considered her actions at best, unnecessary, and at worst, downright dangerous to American society. Katharine shows the importance of knowing well one’s context. Without such realistic appraisal, efforts for social justice can be ineffective, unfeasible, and ultimately draining for those involved. Katharine moved forward, conscious of the slowness of her church, yet not defeated by it. She pushed for communities to accept her schools and settled where she could, not willing to enter every skirmish. Her clarity of vision and purpose protected her energies and allowed for some progress. Religious educators can foster social progress today by encouraging a grounded awareness of the issues involved in any situation. Religious educators are also uniquely situated to foster desire *and* ability to dialogue about these issues with courtesy and compassion.

Evangelization. Katharine always understood her work in the largest context—that of eternity. She may have been overly driven by the Catholic/Protestant conflicts of the day, but

her desire to educate was always associated with her need to build and nurture the Body of Christ in this world for the next. Katharine perfectly foreshadowed the words of *Guadium et Spes*, “the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age” (39). Yet, Katharine did not allow her work for social justice to become merely social work, a temptation that many good-hearted advocates for justice often encounter, but one that misses the depth of Catholic social teaching. Religious educators can ensure a sense of evangelization by grounding their formational efforts in the documents and by encouraging study and prayerful attention to their claims.

Ethical formation in families. The most influential experience of Katharine’s life was the example of generosity and service given by her parents. Though Katharine’s advantages could have insulated her from the poor of Philadelphia, she instead watched her mother receive them into her home and use family resources to better their lives. The critical nature of this example has ramifications for how we religiously educate families today. Julie Hanlon Rubio notes that the modern family has become increasingly inward looking, and that often our religious language regarding the family supports its insular nature. Yet when Catholic social teaching is included in family religious education, the family is also seen as having an outer reaching, social vocation that seeks to serve and better our world (2010, 37-59). This is certainly the experience of Katharine and it helped her to grow in compassion and desire to serve.

Moral education: Horell (2011) notes that attaining an understanding of the core concepts of justice, now understood as distributive, commutative, and social, can help people recognize the moral dimensions of a situation. During Katharine’s lifetime, these concepts were still being developed, yet her moral sensitivity enabled her to name the wrong of depriving black and Native Americans of the right to education, the right to their own land, and the right to participate skillfully in their community. The commitments nurtured by Katharine’s upbringing show that moral formation can create people attuned to injustice, just as much as knowledge of the concepts of justice can engender the ability to be morally aware. It also shows that moral stands must sometimes be articulated in opposition to aspects of the institutional church. What is most noteworthy about Katharine’s moral life, however, is her consistent movement from awareness to sustained moral action. Though she lived a courageous moral life, Katharine’s story also reveals that she did not do so alone. She was fortunate to experience the support of her family, friends, and then, her religious community to help her sustain her work. Her moral environment supported her work even as she enabled such moral communities to develop. Due to its vital nature, religious educators need to include moral formation as a constitutive aspect of religious education. However, Katharine’s life serves as a reminder that moral formation is less effective if it is done in an individualist fashion. Religious educators should emphasize creating communities that will support the movement of conscience towards action.

Eucharistic spirituality. As foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, Katharine staked her claim on the importance of the Eucharist to sustain her life’s work. She could be free with herself and her possessions because of the nourishment it provided. However, though she longed for the contemplative life, her experience of Eucharist compelled her outward, towards the Body of Christ in the world, and it formed her and her sisters for mission. Work for social justice requires sustained action on behalf of others. Katharine’s spirituality shows how this can be accomplished. It reflects a developed understanding of the corporate dimension of the Eucharist, of its unitive function. This is the more historically accurate understanding of the Eucharist and it corrects the overemphasis on the union of the individual soul with Christ that

dominated Eucharistic theology in recent centuries (Mazza 1999, 195). Religious educators can counter an overly individualistic understanding of the Eucharist by fostering a fuller, thicker sense of the community's identification as the Body of Christ. Acceptance of social principles prioritizing the common good only makes sense if one recognizes that one's well-being is intrinsically tied up with one's neighbor.

Katharine's Vision

In one of Katharine's numerous retreat notes she wrote, "If it is the right thing, it must be done" (ASBS, n.d.). Katharine had a clear vision of what the right thing was: providing Catholic education for black and Native Americans, to give them a fair chance at citizenship in the United States, and a sure hope of citizenship in heaven. Because her vision was not shared by most Catholics, including the leadership of the institutional church, Katharine willed an educational system into existence with the force of her deep faith and steadfast focus and brought it to life by dispersing over twenty million dollars of her family's money. In the process, Katharine taught her church about the preferential option for the poor before the phrase was coined. Her hope was always that her example would ignite the church and there were very good bishops, priests, religious and lay teachers and philanthropists who contributed to her efforts. But many others resented her work. As auxiliary Bishop Harold R. Perry noted in his testimony for her cause for sainthood, "It is true that Mother Katharine and the Sisters had to accept some reprimands and occasionally some abuses from whites who thought that they had gone just a little bit too far as nuns" (quoted in Baldwin 2000, 164).

To the wealthy community, Katharine definitely went a bit too far, for she gave all her money away and rejected the usual destiny of the rich young girl. When other millionaires' daughters were deciding about day dresses for the season in Newport, Katharine was deciding on contractors for her school in Arizona. Her faith freed her from the usual expectation of wealth, and her wealth freed her to operate with independence and authority as no woman religious had done before.

The students in her schools benefited from her going "too far" on their behalf. Katharine noticed them and provided them with the schools that other American Catholics were offered as a matter of course. The schools gave them instruction and preparation for active citizenship, but, more importantly, gave them dignity and pride in their own identity.

Katharine's example teaches that religious educators can never go far enough. Education for peace and justice is a broad and deep endeavor, touching on all areas of personal and communal life. It is not an overlay of content, but a comprehensive education of the heart oriented to the simple truth of Katharine's vision: "If there is any prejudice in the mind we must uproot it, or it will pull us down" (Quoted in Oates 1994, 212).

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