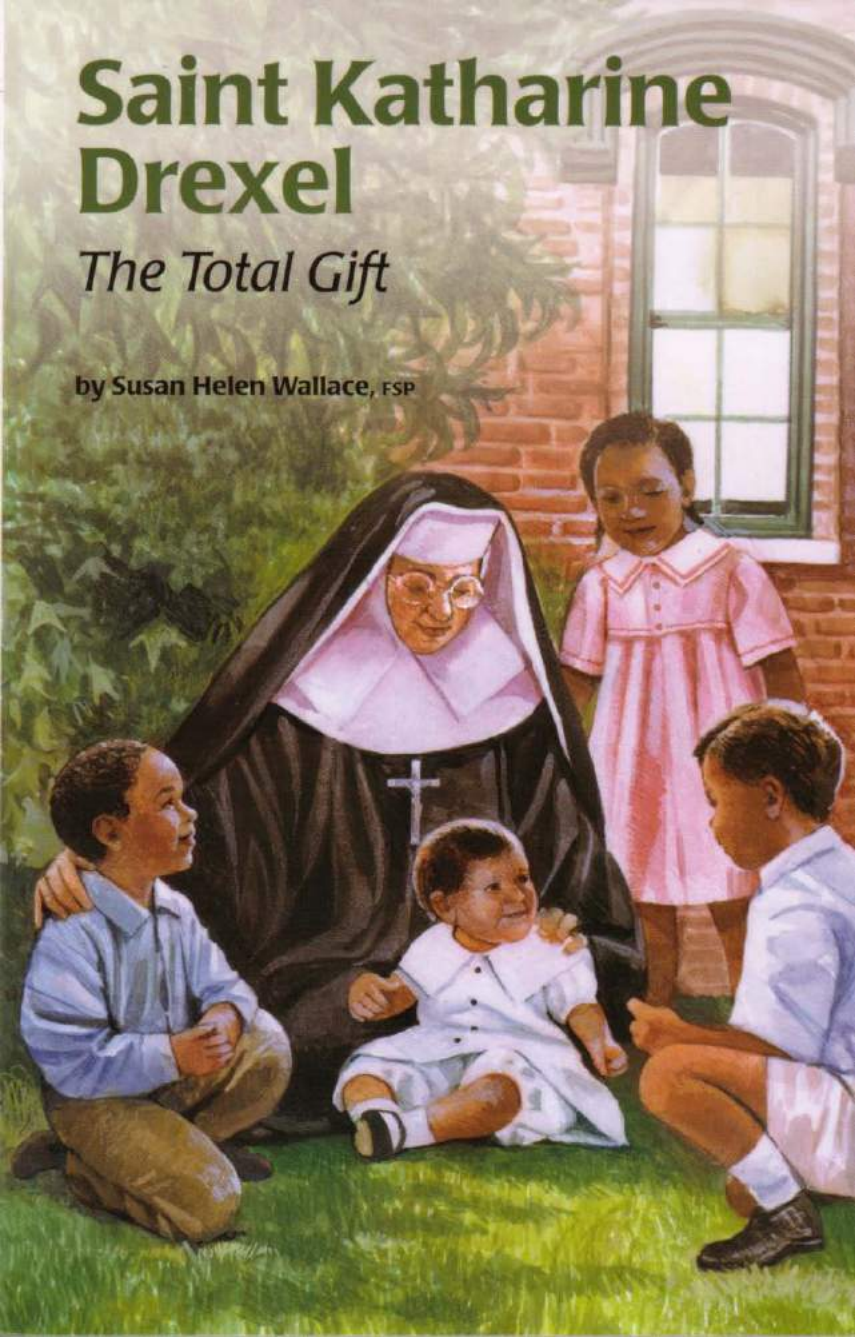


Saint Katharine Drexel

The Total Gift

by Susan Helen Wallace, FSP



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HANNAH'S GIFT

Francis Drexel and Hannah Langstroth knew that they were meant for each other. Francis studied Hannah's face, looking for the least expression of encouragement. "I don't know how else to say it," he stumbled, "but will you marry me?" Before Hannah could say a word, Francis continued: "We're good for each other. And especially," he added softly, "you're good for me, Hannah." The young woman smiled and answered simply, "Yes, Francis!"

Philadelphia, known as the City of Brotherly Love, was a perfect place for raising a family. Hannah and Francis were married there at Assumption Church on September 28, 1854. Francis was Catholic. His bride was a Baptist Quaker. God and faith were important to them both. The couple's first child, Elizabeth, was born on August 27, 1855. Three years slipped by. Soon Mr. and Mrs. Drexel were happily awaiting the birth of their second child.

Three-year-old Elizabeth was excited too. "Mama, will I have a sister or a brother? May I name the baby?" Elizabeth let her favorite names run through her mind. "When will our new baby get here?" she insisted. She finally received some answers on November 26, 1858, the day her sister was born. "Katharine is a nice name," Elizabeth solemnly approved. Her big eyes widened as she asked, "May I hug the baby?"

"Not yet," Mr. Drexel replied kindly, "she's too little."

Days turned into weeks. And Mrs. Drexel still felt weak and sick. She gazed anxiously at the baby in her arms. "Oh, Katie," she whispered, "I want so much to be part of your growing up." Hannah smiled at the thought of her girls. A simple prayer formed in her mind: *Lord, please let me live!* She repeated the words over and over. They seemed to calm her.

But Hannah's prayer would be answered in a different way. She died just five weeks after Katharine's birth. Her husband wept when he was alone, but he tried to be brave. Elizabeth tiptoed through the big house, wondering what was wrong. Her Papa seemed so quiet and worried. *Where's Mama?* Elizabeth wondered. *I will ask Mama*

what the problem is. But the little girl couldn't find her. Finally, Mr. Drexel lifted his daughter onto his lap. His kind eyes were shining with tears.

"What's the matter, Papa?" the little girl asked. "Did you fall and hurt yourself?" Even as he smiled, he wept.

"Something very sad happened to our family today," Mr. Drexel began. "You know that your Mama has been sick, don't you?" Elizabeth nodded her head. "Well, today Mama has gone to heaven to be with Jesus."

"How long will she be gone, Papa?"

"A very long time," her father whispered as he hugged his daughter. "A very long time. But someday we will be with her again."

Mr. Drexel could not have known it at the time, but Hannah had left everyone a gift that would surely have amazed even her. Her second daughter, the baby she loved to hold, was to become a saint of the Catholic Church.



Francis Drexel came home from work every evening with the pressures of the office

crowding his mind. He welcomed the eager embraces of his two little girls as Elizabeth, affectionately called Lizzie, filled him in on the events of the day. Mr. Drexel tried his best to be both mother and father to his daughters, but he realized that they needed a mother.

Then Mr. Drexel met Emma Bouvier and her family. In many ways, Emma reminded him of Hannah. The couple dated, and Emma spent time with the children. A year and four months after Hannah's death, Emma and Francis were married on April 10, 1860. They left for a honeymoon to Europe, and Uncle Anthony Drexel and his wife took care of Katharine and Elizabeth. When Francis and Emma Drexel returned home, the girls were anxiously waiting. "Isn't she pretty?" Lizzie whispered. "I hope she likes us!" Katharine giggled in reply. The couple rushed up to the children and hugged and kissed them. Emma felt she truly could be a mother to the little girls, and she would be.

When Katharine was old enough to understand whom her real mother was, she loved and cherished Hannah's memory. Many years later, when Katharine—then Mother Katharine—was sixty-five years old,

something unusual happened. An employee of the Drexel Company brought her a small box that had been found in an unused company safe. It was believed that the box had belonged to her father and uncle. No one at the Drexel Company knew the combination, and the box was securely locked. Nitroglycerine was finally used to blow it open. Among the treasures inside were keepsakes that had belonged to Hannah. Mother Katharine fingered the small objects lovingly: a gold thimble, gold lorgnette (reading glasses on a stick), jewels and cards with Hannah's name and address. The nun touched the objects reverently. She decided that the gold and jeweled treasures would be used to make a chalice and sacred vessels for priests to use at Mass.

After ill health had forced Mother Katharine to retire from her years of activity for God, she spent long hours daily in the convent chapel. As she thought about her family, she prayed lovingly for her birth mother. Her father and Emma were buried in the family crypt at Torresdale, Pennsylvania. Would it be possible to have the remains of her birth mother, Hannah, moved there? She asked Philadelphia's archbishop, Cardinal Dougherty, for permission. He gra-

ciously granted it and the remains of Hannah Drexel were reverently moved from the Cemetery of the Brethren in Germantown, Pennsylvania, to the Drexel crypt. Mother Katharine was overjoyed.