

## Week 2

# The Only Son of God

*The Life and Witness of Mother Kate, Anglican Religious Sister*

**We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ  
The only Son of God**

*Begin the session with a period of quiet reflection and/or prayer.*

### A Bible Reading

**Hebrews 1 and 2 or Matthew 25. 31-46**

### Reflection by Dr. Greg Peters

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An audio version of this reflection is available in the Lent 2025 section of the Diocesan Website:

The story of Mother Kate, born on March 24, 1840, as Katherine Anne Egerton Warburton, begins with the activities of Fr. John Mason Neale. Born in 1818, Neale studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, was ordained a priest in 1842 and appointed Warden of Sackville College, an alms-house, in East Grinstead in 1846. The same year that he was appointed Warden, Neale was writing a book entitled *Annals of the Virgin Saints*, and

it is likely this foray into Christian history inspired him to found a women's religious community, though that did not come to fruition until nearly a decade later.

Neale's vision for the community was that it would be a nursing order, providing nursing care to the residents of farms and cottages within a twenty-mile radius of East Grinstead. The first woman was sent to nursing school in 1855 and the first sister was sent out to nurse on July 13, 1855. Initially these women received their religious formation directly from Fr. Neale but in due time a proper novitiate was instituted. Though the first sisters lived at Sackville College, that changed in the autumn of 1855 when they rented a cottage in Rotherfield, moving again in June 1856 to a small house in East Grinstead, located between the college and the local parish.

By now the sisters were following their own rule of life but one based on the Roman Catholic Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, which had been composed by St. Francis de Sales in the early seventeenth century. Neale had also consulted with the Anglican nuns at Clewer, founded just prior to the East Grinstead community.

The following year, in 1857, Neale's devout sister Elizabeth asked the community to take over her work with orphans in Brighton so that she could join the work being done by Fr. Charles Lowder in London's East End. So, another house was rented in East Grinstead and nine orphan girls moved into the house, under the oversight of two of the sisters.

The community continued to grow rapidly and in 1858 the sister's moved again, causing Neale to settle on the need for a permanent convent, whose foundation stone was eventually laid on August 7, 1865. It was also decided that with such a large number of sisters they would make their first foundation, in Soho. The sisters sent to lead the first foundation were Sister Mary, who became Mother Mary, and Sister Kate.

The community's primary work was among the poor, earning them great respect from the area's residents. In 1865 the work moved to Haggerston, another terribly poor area of London. In February of 1868 the community, numbering about eight or nine sisters, experienced a great trial when Mother Mary and five other sisters left for the Roman Catholic Church.

Though tempted to give up the work in Haggerston and move back to the mother house in East Grinstead, the sisters were persuaded to stay, moving to another house in the same area that they named St Saviour's Priory, which remains to this day. Over the next twenty years the community grew rapidly, and they made many new foundations.

Mother Kate was the daughter of a Church of England priest who had been influenced by the nascent Oxford Movement. He died when Mother Kate was only nine years old but his influence on her seems to have been profound. She joined the East Grinstead community as an eighteen-year-old and took life vows just days after turning twenty-one. She had originally considered joining the Community of the Holy Cross, a new religious order founded in 1857 by Elizabeth Neale, sister of Fr. Neale.

Kate's mother doubted that she could manage the kind of active life practiced the Holy Cross Community, so she contacted the Rev. Charles Gutch, chaplain to her niece, for advice. Because he thought Kate too "wild and unchastened" for that kind of life, he suggested she enter the new community at East Grinstead.

No sooner had Sister Kate made final profession than she was sent to Soho to begin the work there. The Constitutions of the Society of St. Margaret's defined their purpose: "the Sisters separate themselves for the work whereunto God calls them under the invocation of the Holy Name of Jesus, determining to do all things for the glory and the interests of that Name which is above every name... The sick, the poor, the orphan... shall be their constant care."

Thus, the Soho-based sisters immediately threw themselves into any work that would help alleviate the pain and suffering of their neighbours and give them an opportunity to bring people to or back to the church. Their house was located near "a low square of alms-houses" and their side door opened onto "a dirty court black with November mud, illuminated by a gin-palace and reeking of cat's meat." The newly established convent was "a picture... redolent of holy poverty." A few months into their work they already were teaching more than a hundred children and running guilds for boy and girls. When a smallpox epidemic broke out sisters nursed the sick and the dying at great risk to themselves.

When the sister's moved in 1865 to Haggerston, an area "of unparalleled dreariness," "of crushed down desolate poverty," they continued the same kinds of work, living at the same levels of poverty themselves. One of their first works in Haggerston was to create a Society of St. Michael and All Angels for reforming the morals of young girls; the best and most dependable girls were made "Bandmistresses," with a group of younger girls under their care.

The Society was met with great success. In late autumn 1870 there was a terrible smallpox outbreak. The community, numbering about ten sisters, led by Mother Kate, were heroic. In her own "Memories," Mother Kate recalls a visit to a shoemaker whose four children all had the disease. Two had already died but were still in the same bed with the two who were sick. The sisters ensured that the bodies were removed to the mortuary and acquired clean bedding.

In another case, the mother of a young boy died so he came to the Priory asking for assistance. Because others were too afraid to enter an infected space, the sisters dragged the infected mattress, bedding and clothes down to the yard themselves and burned them. By early the next year, the epidemic was finally stamped out, thanks in large part to the work of the sisters, who, throughout the whole episode, had never relaxed their monastic disciplines, a testament to the indomitable spirit of Mother Kate, who looked back on that season of ministry as a "most terrible and wonderful time."

After the smallpox epidemic, "as far as the Priory went its effects remained, not only in the large number of new friends gained among the poor people, but also in a growing circle of kind and good friends beyond Haggerston, who from that time rallied round the Sisters, and began to take an interest in their work and in different ways to assist it." The community grew naturally thereafter, expanding their works when the opportunities presented themselves. We know that in 1871 the Priory had six professed sisters with another six novices and helpers. Though they had cultivated a number of benefactors, the community itself remained very poor.

Many gifts to the community were passed along to their poor neighbours. Despite this they embarked on building proper spaces for themselves, beginning with a Chapel, which was dedicated in 1875. They also constructed a Misson-Room that became the centre of their charitable activities. Not only did the community continue its work with children but in the 1870s they also started a workroom for the elderly. These aged women mended and patched clothes and darned socks for six pence a day. This amount helped to stave off the day when they would have to go into "The House." It was an early form of retirement assistance before the advent of pensions.

On September 23, 1923, the sixty-fifth anniversary of her reception into the Society of St Margaret, Mother Kate chose to resign as superior of the community, dying less than a month later. Mother Kate's legacy lives on in the Priory, which continues to this day. Today's sisters, like their forebears, continue "to respond to some of the needs that arise amongst the marginalised in East London." The legacy of Mother Kate lives on in them.

But the life of Mother Kate challenges us all to ask ourselves, Do I live my life in such a way that I am of great spiritual and material assistance to others? Am I willing to forgo the comforts of this life to meet the needs of others? Simply put, Mother Kate's example confronts us with the question, Would we lose our life, in imitation of Jesus, for others? In answering, let us follow the good and godly example of Mother Kate, sister of the Society, daughter of the Diocese of Chichester.

## Podcast

A short podcast of Bishop Martin in conversation with others will be available on the Diocesan Website from Ash Wednesday.

This may help your individual reflection or group discussion on this theme.

It will be available on the Diocesan Website a week before Ash Wednesday

## Questions for reflection and discussion

- Reflect on the remarkable story of Mother Kate. What is your response to the story which perhaps you were not aware of before?
- Jesus constantly explains that in the Kingdom of God the poor, the weak, the sick, those who are without, are the most important. Is the church today realising this command of Jesus in its everyday life?
- Do I live my life in such a way that I am of great spiritual and material assistance to others? Am I willing to forgo the comforts of this life to meet the needs of others?
- Would we lose our life, in imitation of Jesus, for others?

A Time of Prayer can follow.

## Some Hymn Suggestions

Lord Jesus Christ

Jesus is Lord! Creation's voice proclaims it

Jesus good above all other