

Catherine of Alexandria

- A story for our time -

By Mary Beth Lamb

In 1926 charter members of Kappa Gamma Pi, the National Catholic College Graduate Honor Society, selected Catherine of Alexandria as patron saint of the organization because of her intellect, integrity and faith. This biography was researched and written by Kappa Mary Beth Lamb, a graduate of St. Mary College, Leavenworth, Kansas. *Originally printed, February 1996, KAPPA GAMMA PI NEWS.*



*Photograph of 14th century di
Vannuccio tempera on panel from
the Collection of The Frick Art Mu-
seum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
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Because if there's one thing drives the Devil up a tree, it's hearing of a woman who's smarter than he.
Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz
from the 11th villancico, Oaxaca, 1691
Catherine of Alexandria's Feast Day

The story of Catherine of Alexandria portrays a young woman (18) in Egypt in the early 4th century, required to offer sacrifice to the Roman gods, protesting to the Emperor Maxentius that he cease his idolatry and persecution of Christians, and turn instead to the one true God. Intrigued by her argument's passion and persuasiveness as well as her physical beauty, the Emperor sets up a trial in which to trap her, bringing in 50 of Alexandria's most respected philosophers and rhetoricians to debate with her. Yet they confess themselves no match for her words and many are convinced by her teaching to convert. In fury, the Emperor sentences them to death by burning. He offers Catherine the opportunity to become his consort,

but on her refusal, he sends her to prison to be flogged and starved to death.

In the meantime, the Emperor has to leave Alexandria to take care of business in other parts of his realm. His wife arranges to visit Catherine with the aid of the chief guard. Some stories says she is drawn by the music of the angels who comes to visit Catherine and tend to her wounds; some say she is just curious to see this intelligent and powerful speaker for herself. At any rate, upon hearing her speak, she, the chief guard and 200 of his soldiers become converts as well.

When the Emperor returns, he is furious to find Catherine alive, assuming that someone had come in to feed her. Again, he asks that she relent to his desires, again she refuses. His wife, now the good Christian, protests and tries to convert him herself. He responds by having his soldiers take her away to rip out her breasts with iron forks and finally behead her. The chief guard tries to give her a proper Christian burial, at which point his conversion is discovered. As Christians, he and his soldiers are executed.

An inventor offers the Emperor a uniquely tortuous instrument of death, a set of wheels spiked with knives that would slice Catherine's body to bits from various angles simultaneously. Yet when she is bound to this device, angels miraculously

release her. The spikes fly off, kill non-Christian onlookers and the wheel is destroyed. At this point, Maxentius has her beheaded. Milk rather than blood flows from her neck. Angels carry her body to Mount Sinai, where pilgrims have trekked since the 10th century.

Catherine's story offers a perspective on her early childhood, in which her intelligence and virtue are featured. She was taught by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, and mastered the seven liberal arts. In some stories, she refuses to marry the Emperor's son, claiming that she will marry only one as virtuous, noble, rich and intelligent as she. Catherine and her mother are led to the hut of a hermit who, in a vision or a dream, introduces her to Mary and her child Jesus. Jesus turns away from Catherine at first, saying that he will marry only one as virtuous, noble, rich and intelligent as he. The hermit suggests that she be baptized, after which Jesus agrees to marry her and offers her a ring.

Scholars, on checking into the historicity of the details of these stories, have found that not a single fact could be established. In 1969, banking on the probability that she never existed, Rome suppressed her feast day, November 25. Some suggested that her story was a Christian appropriation/inversion of the story of the Alexandrian Neoplatonic philosopher, Hypatia, who taught astronomy and commented on Plato and Aristotle. Hypatia died in 415 at the hands of fanatic monks who dragged her into a church and dismembered her. Other scholars have found an historical kernel of her story in an account by the historian Eusebius, in which Maxentius is said to have desired and murdered a Christian woman who refused his advances (there is no mention of her wisdom and learning in this account). Still others see her story as conflated with the story of St. Dorothy.

Catherine's story has been around at least since the 8th century, for she is named in icons representing her found in Naples and Rome that date from this time period. Earliest textual evidence is from the 10th century; her story appears in the *Menologium* of Basil II. There is also evidence of pilgrimage to her tomb on Mount Sinai from this time (renowned for the healing oils which exuded from the site).

As Kappa patroness, Catherine continues to be influential

Whether or not Catherine of Alexandria existed, her story was influential and popular. She spoke to the Christian imagination, and as Kappa patroness, she continues to speak to us today. Her passion (the story of her martyrdom) was included

In James of Voragine's *Golden Legend*, compiled around 1270, one of the most popular books in medieval literature, which provided materials for authors and preachers for centuries. On the anniversary of the saint's death, these and other legendaries were often read aloud (the word *legend* refers to this act of reading, having no implication of *fictional*, as in present usage). The Brit, John Capgrave (1443), and the German, Peter Grieninger (1453), wrote versions of her life which are counted among the richest in the genre, representing the climax of her tradition. In the many versions that circulated by word and pen, Catherine's trial by 50 sages offered a favorite vehicle for Christian apologetics, often centering on the doctrine of the Trinity. Her suffering at the hands of a pagan emperor became the vehicle for diatribe against Islamic peoples during the times of the Crusades (Maxentius was often depicted in European stereotypes of Islamic peoples).

Catherine: inspiration for other saints, writers and visionaries

In parts of medieval France, Catherine's feast day served as a Holy Day of Obligation. She was one of the voices who inspired Joan of Arc (c. 1412-31), offering guidance in dress and comportment while Joan advised and led royalty, military and the Church. Catherine was one of the most venerated saints of medieval Britain. Her marriage with Christ became a model for other women visionaries like Catherine of Siena (1347-80). But her influence went beyond that of the medieval world.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (1651-95), a nun of New Spain noted for her intelligence, skill in disputation and artistic talent (writer of plays, songs and poetry) wrote several villancicos for St. Catherine's feast day – these were lyrics for song and dance, commissioned by the Cathedral for use during the celebration of matins as a popular devotion. In Sor Juana's famous *Reply to Sor Filotea*, a letter to the Bishop of Puebla defending her intellectual vocation, she cites Catherine as one of the many precedents that greatly assisted her: *I see that Egyptian Catherine, lecturing and winning over to her view all the wisdom of the sages of Egypt.*

Themes from her story may have also influenced many 19th century American Gothic women writers; at least, they often appear in their novels. Just as Catherine's debate with the sages, the queen and the guard, and their subsequent conversions was often used in medieval Europe for contemporary apologetics, the lengthy disputes between Protestants and Catholic women, in which the Catholics usually end by converting the Protestants, seem used for a similar purpose. As only one example, Anna Dorsey's (1815-90) *The Sister of Charity* (1848) describes a shipwrecked nun and visiting priest at a southern plantation, converting everyone, including the local minister and slaves, using 21 pages to justify the conversion of just one character! These Catholic novelists, in their stories, illustrate their own knowledge of Catholic teaching and use it for the purposes of bringing non-Catholics into the faith, as well as to offer support and inspiration to Catholics who read their books. Catherine's story may not have had a direct influence on these novels, but the similarities are striking (mass conversions through the brilliance of a woman's arguments using these arguments as a channel for explicating Catholic doctrine).

What is a true story? A story that can be established as historically factual? A story that resonates with human experience? A story that calls forth the best in its audience? Whether or not Catherine existed, her story is true in the last two senses, and therefore should not be consigned to the trash bin of fakes. Of course, there are issues that we may wish to take up with the story, and should examine in the context of the various times in which it was told: its attitude to be conquered by argument; its ambiguous depiction of women's bodies as either objects of male lust (the Emperor's), as pure if virginal, or as maternally nourishing/healing (the motif of the Emperor's wife's breasts being ripped off seems to coincide in some way with the motif of the milk flowing from Catherine's neck, and even further, the holy oils that have healing properties flowing from her tomb). And yet, her story also speaks of woman's intelligence, faithfulness, her skills in evangelization and public speaking, and ability to stand her ground in the face of institutional pressures to do otherwise. Catherine's story has historically inspired and sustained women in leadership, scholarship and courage. Whether or not Rome celebrates

her feast, we should celebrate it, to remind ourselves of those qualities in her life to which we can all aspire.

*No more questions now 'cause all I can say is that Catherine will live forever
and a day.*

Sor Juana

Traditionally, Catherine was noted as the patron saint of mechanics, engineers, scholars and Christian philosophers. Usually represented with a book, a crown and a wheel to signify her martyrdom, she is honored in stained glass, sculpture and numerous paintings and tapestries that are part of museum and church collections throughout the world.

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