

Saint Catherine of Alexandria

born c. 292, Famagosta, Cyprus

died c. 310 Alexandria, Egypt

Catherine was eighteen years old, beautiful, brilliant, and immensely rich when the Roman emperor Maxentius came to town demanding sacrifices to his pagan gods. Catherine protested, and Maxentius recognized that he was not equipped to argue with her. He ordered fifty of his most learned philosophers to debate Catherine, promising them great rewards if they could get her to abandon her faith. At first the scholars were indignant at being asked to debate a young woman, but Catherine's arguments won them over. When all fifty embraced Christianity, the emperor ordered them burned alive.

Maxentius had Catherine thrown into a dungeon without food or water, then went off on a trip. During his absence his wife Faustina and her attendant Porphyrius visited Catherine in prison. She converted them both, and Porphyrius then converted two hundred soldiers. When the emperor returned and Faustina tried to defend Catherine, he ordered them all executed, then offered to make Catherine his new empress. When she refused, he designed a spiked wheel that was supposed to tear her to pieces, but when Catherine was bound to the wheel, a fire fell from heaven and destroyed it. (Hence the firework known as the Catherine's wheel.) Maxentius then ordered Catherine beheaded. It is said that when the axe fell, milk poured from her body instead of blood. Angels carried her to Mount Sinai, where the emperor Justinian later built a monastery to contain her relics. It still stands as the oldest continually occupied monastery in the world. Catherine is always represented with a wheel. She is a patron of scholars, notaries, and students and a protector of nursing infants and those suffering from migraine headaches, and she was one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers.

The Genius of Catherine of Alexandria:

Although most of her story is now dismissed as legend, Catherine's wisdom, self-control, and bravery made her one of the most venerated saints of the Middle Ages.

Reflection:

"Anyone who is so 'progressive' as not to remain in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever remains in the teaching has the Father and the Son."

2 John 9

Gallick, Sarah The Big Book of Woman Saints p. 355