

SERMON ON ST. CATHERINE THE GREAT MARTYR (Feast Day November 25th)
(For Sunday 24/11/2019)

On November 25th, the Church commemorates St. Catherine the Great Martyr, who is one of the best known saints in the entire Christian world, East and West. In some countries of Europe, she is honored as the “Guardian of Letters,” because of the great education she had received.

Her life is well known. She was born in the year 282 A.D. in Alexandria, Egypt to an aristocratic family. The city was renowned for its schools, and she received a very broad education, which was the envy of others. Her physical and intellectual attributes made her a much sought after bride for would be suitors. As for her own feelings, she preferred to live her Christian baptism as a “Bride of Christ.” In an era where persecution of Christians was widespread, she openly declared her faith and devotion to Christ. Maximinus, the governor of Egypt called upon all philosophers of the country to silence her with the strength of their philosophical rhetoric. Young Catherine, however, also drew from the wise men of antiquity (scholars, poets and philosophers) and demonstrated the futility and falsehood of the idols. In so doing, she showed that the only true God is Jesus Christ, “*through whom all things were made.*” As a consequence, the Saint was tortured horribly. Even in this, her faith became even more manifest. Crowds of people were drawn to Christ as a result of witnessing her endurance. Even the wife of Maximinus came to Christ, as well as the commander of the Alexandrian garrison Porphyrius and 200 soldiers. This enraged Maximinus, who ordered the death of his wife and all who were with her. Seeing what was happening with the people, Maximinus ordered St. Catherine to be beheaded, delivering her blessed soul to Christ in the year 305.

After her martyrdom, God glorified her in a unique way. Angels received the relic of St. Catherine and brought it to the summit of Mount Sinai. Later, in the 6th century, monks of the Sinai monastery saw a light on the mountain. This light guided them to the relic of the Saint, which they then brought to the monastery. This monastery then came to be known as St. Catherine’s Holy Monastery of Sinai.

When we study the Life of St. Catherine, which is offered here only briefly (the full account is many pages long), we can observe the following: Among the believers in Christ in those early years were people of all classes and occupations. Both simple fishermen and the highly educated could be found in the Church, coming from everywhere, including the largest cities of the Roman Empire. This has been true all throughout history, and continues to the present day. Scholars and teachers of Philosophy have said that only Christ can satisfy the yearnings of the human soul and set the foundations for a healthy society. It is here, that justice and peaceful coexistence among all people can prevail. Consequently, the claim that Christianity is for uneducated simpletons, made by people who are against Christ and His Church, is unfounded. They claim that faith is incompatible with science and civilization. Such declarations are false, as we have seen. The truth which the Son of God, Jesus Christ, has revealed is eternal, unalterable, and invincible. This is what the infallible word of the Lord Himself declares: “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away*” (Matthew 24:35). All of the arguments that the pagan philosophers of Alexandria made in the face of St. Catherine crumbled before this young woman’s superior education, and most importantly, her in depth knowledge of the Gospel.

Every Christian has the responsibility to know the Holy Scriptures in a profound way, together with what the Church teaches. In this way, they can enlighten and help others. St. Peter urges us towards this end: “*always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you*” (1 Peter 3:15). Unfortunately, it has happened that Christians with a poor

knowledge of the Gospel were carried away by heretics and other enemies of Christ. These sad people lost their Orthodox faith and cut themselves off from the Holy Orthodox Church.

Let us all imitate St. Catherine, who with the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, took the time and care to learn the Holy Scriptures and the truth of our faith, taking them to her heart. In doing so, she declared this truth openly and publically, defending them in the face of horrible torture and martyrdom.

May “*the most renowned bride of Christ, Catherine, who with the sword of the Spirit silenced the elite of the impious ones*” (from the Feast Day Dismissal hymn-*Apolytikion*) inspire and strengthen us all, in our effort to imitate her example. Amen.