

St. Katherine was born during the latter part of the third century in Alexandria in Egypt. Being of royal lineage, she was immersed in the great cultural tradition of Alexandria and was exposed to learning at an early age. Tall, beautiful, cultured, and erudite, Katherine was held in high esteem for her mastery of the arts and sciences of her time. Innately intelligent and inquisitive, she acquainted herself with the writings of the philosophers, poets, physicians, and scientists of the Hellenes. In fact, in recognition of her superb learning, the Church gave her the title “the Wise.”

Through the influence of her pious mother Katherine became a Christian in her youth. Her love of learning led her to the study of the sacred Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers. She became a devoted follower of the Lord Christ, an exemplary doer of God’s word, and an ardent defender of the Orthodox faith. Wise, modest, and pure Katherine gave her heart to Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church and the Savior of the world.

On November 25, 305, while still in the prime of her youth, Katherine was martyred in the city of her birth during the reign of the impious Roman Emperor Maxentius, who had begun anew a violent series of persecutions against Christians. When the Emperor had come to Alexandria he had an encounter with Katherine. He marveled at her loveliness and wisdom but was dreadfully dismayed by her defense of Christians. Because she was of imperial stock, he did not wish to harm her outrightly but hoped to humiliate her to submission. He ordered that she defend her faith in open debate with the renowned pagan orators and philosophers of Alexandria, hoping that she would be made a spectacle and thereby retreat to her pagan roots. Instead Katherine routed the rhetoricians.

The Emperor was moved to wrath and ordered that Katherine be stripped of her imperial garb, flogged, and tortured. But neither the threats nor the tortures were able to sunder Katherine from Christ. Having failed to entice her, the cruel Emperor ordered her decapitation.

The holy relics of St. Katherine were later brought to the Monastery of Mt. Sinai, founded in the fourth century in a remote location in the Sinai Peninsula on the site of the Burning Bush at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 3). Eventually, centuries after acquiring her relics, the Monastery took the name of St. Katherine.

The Icon of St. Katherine

Because of her royal lineage, St. Katherine is depicted invariably in imperial garments holding a martyr’s cross. She is often shown seated at a desk upon which is an open book. Other books and a celestial sphere are at her feet, indicating her extensive knowledge and wisdom. She is also portrayed with her left hand resting on a wheel, the symbol of progress but in her case the emblem of her martyrdom.

The Apolytikion (Hymn) of St. Katherine

Let us extol the all-lauded Bride of Christ, the holy Katherine, the guardian of Sinai, who is our helper and support. For, she silenced utterly the subtleties of the impious by the power of the Holy Spirit. And now, crowned a Martyr, she asks great mercy for us all.

Τὴν πανεύφημον νύμφην Χριστοῦ υμνήσωμεν, Αἰκατερίναν τὴν θείαν καὶ πολιοῦχον Σινά, τὴν βοήθειαν ἡμῶν καὶ ἀντίληψιν, ὅτι ἐφίμωσε λαμπρῶς, τοὺς κομπσοὺς τῶν ἀσεβῶν, τοῦ Πνεύματος τῆ μαχαίρα, καὶ νῦν ὡς Μάρτυς στεφθεῖσα, αἰτεῖται πάσι τὸ μέγα ἔλεος.