

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
NOVEMBER 27, 2022**

“THE STORY OF ST. CATHERINE---NOVEMBER 25TH”

In its hundreds of years of existence, the Roman Empire had some strange emperors. One of the strangest was back in the first century A.D., right at the time the books of the New Testament were being written. His name was Caligula---a rare bird, indeed. Several of the emperors took pride in being thought of as gods. Caligula went a step further in pride---he proclaimed that his beloved horse was also a god and should be worshipped as such. In addition to being full of pride, Emperor Caligula was also full of fear. He was always scared of something even though he ruled the world. If there was just the slightest rumble of thunder over the city of Rome, Caligula would panic---he would quickly run and hide under his bed until the thunder passed!
(Tiberius, Gregorio Maranon, Dorell, Sloan, & Pearce, 1956, p. 188)

Yes, some people (like Caligula!) live lives of fear. And some people don't! An example is a fearless person who also lived during the years of the Roman Empire but over 200 years later than the cowardly Emperor Caligula. I am speaking of St. Catherine whom we just commemorated 2 days ago on November 25th (some calendars give the date as November 24th). Back in our old church before it was destroyed by fire almost exactly 5 years ago, we had 10 large icons of Saints on the two side walls. They were all destroyed in the fire. Over the years they were up, we all got more acquainted with those Saints because of seeing their icons all the time. We venerated those 10 through their icons, learned about them, asked for their prayers, and came to love them. One of those 10 was St. Catherine. When, probably in phase 3 of our ongoing iconography work, we have new icons of individual Saints, I think it would be good to again have one of her.....Let me tell you her story today, just 2 days after the date of her birthday into heaven.

She lived around 300 A.D. in the city of Alexandria, Egypt. Alexandria was one of the 2 or 3 largest cities in the Roman Empire, and it was the intellectual center of the empire. There lived the great philosophers, scientists, doctors, mathematicians, etc. There were geniuses galore in this city! And it was the intellectual capital of the pagan religion.

There lived there a young woman genius named Catherine. She was a devout Christian of enormous intelligence. She studied much, she studied everything. She knew the Bible and the teachings of the Church very well;

she also knew the pagan beliefs very well in order to oppose them. She was very advanced in mathematics, astronomy, science in general, philosophy, etc. She was an eloquent and very persuasive speaker. And unlike old Emperor Caligula she was very brave. She lived close to Christ and without fear.

Some geniuses are eccentric, odd, and unpleasant to be around. One brainy fellow that was known for being that way was a philosopher professor in the early 1900s in Scotland—John McTaggart. He was like Caligula in having much fear. His fear was a strange one---fear of having any open space behind his back. So when he walked down the halls of the class buildings, he would walk sideways with his back always up against the wall! And he had a nasty personality. When he lectured he would sometimes ask the students if they had any questions. When they asked one he would sarcastically tell them it was a very stupid question! Very smart, but not very nice and not very popular. (Lytton Strachey, Michael Holroyd, Penguin, p. 170)

Like McTaggart, Catherine was very intelligent. But unlike him, she was also very likable. She had a charming personality and was quite popular in Alexandria. And she became very well known because she evangelized for Christ on the streets of the city. Her charm, speaking ability, and intelligence drew crowds. This was when our Church was still illegal in the Empire, but she bravely spoke in public anyway. Crowds gathered; many people were convinced and became catechumens and eventually entered the Faith by Holy Baptism.

And all that got Catherine in trouble. It was around that time that the worst persecutions by the Roman authorities of Christianity took place. The Church was growing (historians think it was about 10% of the population by this time). And the authorities decided it was time to really crack down. So there were waves of persecution of the believers. And the authorities in Alexandria decided Catherine had to be stopped---but to just arrest and kill her might cause unrest as she was so popular. So they came up with a plan....

They would challenge her to be in a debate with a few pagan scholars---a debate over which was the true faith---Christianity or paganism. They figured their scholars could beat Catherine in the debate: that would destroy her missionary work and hinder the growth of the Church. Catherine knew she was entering into a highly dangerous situation, but she was fearless. Catherine happily agreed and the outdoor debate was scheduled.

A large crowd gathered and the two sides went back and forth, each arguing for the truth of what they believed. The pagan scholars were very intelligent and good speakers. But Catherine was soon seen by the crowd as

being the winner----after all, she had the Holy Spirit helping her! The authorities, in order to prevent an embarrassing result, had to go to their Plan B.

The debate was abruptly shut down and Catherine was arrested. She was told she could either deny Christ by worshipping an idol.....and then she would be released. Or she could refuse to do so and then she would be killed. She refused to submit and so a series of tortures began to force her to deny Christ and worship the false gods. She refused to do that and stayed faithful to Christ no matter how horrible the pain of the tortures. Finally, the authorities gave up on changing her mind and she was executed in a dramatic way by being impaled on a large wheel with iron spikes (you may remember that wheel was depicted on the icon we had before the fire). Her death for Jesus Christ and her entrance into the joys of heaven took place on November 25th, 305 A.D.

That day, St. Catherine lost her earthly life, but she won eternal salvation. And even though the debate was cut off, everyone knew she really won. And many a soul came to the true God that day due to both the debate and especially her brave death. And not too many years later, the Roman Empire left the old pagan religion behind and became a Christian empire.

We Christians have never forgotten Catherine. We love her, we venerate her, we ask her to pray for us, we name our daughters for her. She is now at the throne of God worshipping the Lord. And praying to Him. We should ask her to pray for us---God will let her hear our requests for her prayers. Ask her to help you to be holy and brave like she was.

And, in closing, we need some Catherines today. Christianity is not illegal (at least not in our country) like it was back in 305 A.D. But it is obvious that our society is more and more turning away from Christian beliefs-and this turning away seems to be speeding up. We need some modern Catherines to rise up by God's power to help bring people to faith in Jesus Christ. May God send us some!