

CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA

Theme: Catherine of Alexandria

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Summary: Catherine of Alexandria, who lived in the 4th century, was a virgin and a martyr. In the 13th century Jacobus de Voragine wrote and compiled a biography about her, which is an excellent guide to understand medieval depictions.

According to him, Catherine, who came from a royal family, learnt the Liberal Arts. Her main virtues were wisdom, eloquence, chastity, and strength of spirit. When she was very young, she was informed of emperor's plans¹. He had ordered all citizens to adore pagan idols, threatening those Christians who did not comply with that obligation. Catherine, who was really upset because of the emperor's attitude, faced up to him and strongly recommended him not to believe in false divinities but only in the one true God. The saint, by using scientific arguments, tried to prove the existence of God. The emperor, after having noticed that the intelligence of Catherine was higher than his, decided to postpone the discussion until the end of the pagan festivities.

Then he locked her up in the royal palace. He also asked some wise men on grammar and rhetoric if they could refute the saint. However, Catherine was visited by an angel who announced her future victory over the philosophers. Thus, although the wise men tried to get her to have doubts about Christ's Incarnation, she finally won the debate. The fifty philosophers said to the emperor that they would convert to Christianity if he could not refute the saint's opinion. The emperor, who was furious, ordered to burn them at the stake. They were frightened with the idea of dying without baptism, but Catherine made the sign of the cross on their bodies just before being burned. In that way, fire did not damage their bodies.

Afterwards the emperor asked Catherine to become the *First Lady*, but she refused him bragging about her virginity. Thus she was firstly martyred with scorpions and iron chains, then locked up in a dungeon, and finally punished with a severe fasting.

Later, the emperor went on a trip. While he was absent, the empress and the soldier Porphyry visited the prisoner and noticed that the dungeon was full of light and the saint was being assisted by angels. After this event, the empress, Porphyry, and two hundred soldiers converted to Christianity. In the following days Christ made Saint Catherine be fed with heavenly food carried on by a dove.

After his return, the emperor decided to punish those who had fed the saint. But Catherine stated that the heavenly-beings were the only ones responsible for that

¹ According to Jacobus de Voragine, there are doubts about the name of the emperor who martyred Saint Catherine, since in 310 (date of her birth) there were three emperors ruling simultaneously: Constaninus, Maximinus and Maxentius. Maximinus governed in the Easter part of the empire.

action. With the aim of damaging her virginity and terrifying Christians, the emperor made her be martyred with a gearwheel. Catherine prayed to God, the wheels were broken, and the pieces killed hundreds of pagans who were watching the martyrdom.

The empress tried to face her husband, but he made her head and breasts be cut. Porphyry buried the empress. Once the emperor had news of the burial, he ordered to cut Porphyry's and all the converted soldier's throats and to expose their mutilated bodies in front of dogs.

Once again, the emperor tried to get Catherine to deny her religion and to accept the imperial throne. But she refused the offering and was decapitated. From her wounds flew milk instead of blood. Her body was moved to Mount Sinai by angels.

Besides the legend compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, the mystic marriage of Catherine and Christ was also very popular throughout the end of the Middle Ages and during Modern Times (for more details see the section *typology and related themes*).

Attributes and types of representation: Saint Catherine was depicted either as an isolated figure or taking part of a narrative cycle.

As an isolated figure, she was depicted as a royal princess, that is to say, crowned and dressed according to either Roman women or contemporary upper class women. She carried one or some of the following attributes: the emperor's crowned bust under her feet (because he was fought by the saint), the broken gearwheel and the palm (symbols of martyrdom), the sword (symbol of decapitation), the book, the globe and other mathematician instruments (symbol of science, knowledge, and erudition), and the ring (symbol of her mystic marriage). The wheel, which was her most common attribute, could be simple or double, plain or serrated, complete or broken, little or big. The wheel could even be part of the decoration of her clothes.

According to Roig (1950), the saint could also be represented near the dove that had helped her fight the wise men. According to Hall (1987), occasionally Catherine could hold a book with the inscription "*Ego me Christo sponsam tradidi*" ("*I offered myself as Christ's wife*").

Moreover Catherine can be depicted among the *Fourteen Intercessors* (Agacio, Blase, Christopher, Ciriaco, Dionysius, Erasmus, Eustace, Gil, George, Pantaleon, Vito, Barbara, Marguerite, and Catherine), as a result of the strong devotion that emerged from a Dominican monastery in Regensburg and that was spread by the mendicant orders in the German Late Middle Ages.

Let's see now the narrative cycle of Catherine. Almost all the events of the biography compiled by Jacobus de Voragine in the 13th century were depicted during the Middle Ages (for more information see section *Summary*). On the other hand, the mystic marriage of Saint Catherine and Jesus Child appeared in works of art after the 14th century, being very popular at the end of the Middle Ages and during Modern Times².

² The exact date for the first depiction of the *Mystic Marriage* depends on the scholar's opinion. But there are some examples dated on the 14th century, such as the *Altarpiece of Saint Catherine*,

Réau (1955-1959) gave an explanation about the origin of that mystic marriage, although his explanation does not seem convincing to us. He linked its origin to the limitations and iconographical errors of medieval artists. According to him, Catherine was firstly depicted with a globe, afterwards artists mistook the globe for a wheel, and finally they mistook the wheel for a ring, something that encouraged the emergence of the legend about Saint Catherine and the Child Jesus' mystic marriage.

Depending on the scholars, the mystic marriage took place in a different way. Réau (1955-1959) stated that it had been a hermit who had introduced Jesus Child to Catherine assessing that he was the most perfect groom. Hall (1987), following partially Réau, stated that a hermit had offered an image of the Virgin with the Child to Catherine, afterwards the saint prayed in front of the image, and finally the Child looked at her and put a ring in her finger. By contrast, according to Coulson (1964) the conversion of the saint had been rewarded with the mystic marriage, being the Virgin Mary who had put a golden ring in Catherine's finger. Close to Coulson, Metford (1983) believed that the Virgin Mary had appeared to Catherine in a desert near Alexandria offering her Child as groom.

Primary sources: According to Duchet-Suchaux (1996) the historicity of Catherine is unlikely, since there are no references to her among the written sources of Early Christians.

However, her legendary biography spread rapidly from the 9th century onwards, being the text of Jacobus de Voragine (13th century) the most important one for iconography. Metford (1983) stated that J. Voragine was inspired by Eusebius of Caesarea's writings (4th century), since he mentioned in his *Ecclesiastical History* a woman who resisted the sexual advances of the Roman emperor Maximinus. Hall (1987) believed that the first biography of Catherine was written in the 9th century but inspired in Hypatia, a pagan philosopher from Alexandria, who had been probably killed in 415 by a group of religious fanatics. Leonardi (2000) thought that the oldest primary source was the *Passio*, firstly written in Greek (6th - 7th century) and then translated into Latin (9th century). By contrast, Réau (1955-1959) considered that the most ancient source was the *Greek Martyrology* of the emperor Basil (end of 10th century). Anyway, all these primary sources must have been known, taken into account, and compiled by Jacobus de Voragine.

Besides Voragine's *Golden Legend*, there were other interesting hagiographical texts, such as the *Conversio*, a text close to female mystics which included the mystic marriage of Catherine and the Child Jesus.³

- Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* (or *Church History*), 4th century. The reference to the woman from Alexandria is included in Book VIII, chapter 14, paragraph 15, available on line <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250108.htm> [last access on 4 October 2010]:

Saint Lorenzo and Saint Prudencio, Cardinal Chapels, Tarazona Cathedral (Zaragoza), ca. 1392-1404.

³ One of the most common poetic figures in hagiographical literature is the description of the female saints as "brides of Christ". This metaphor, used to express the spiritual union between God and the saints, could have encourage the *Mystic Marriage* legend.

“[...]One only of those who were seized for adulterous purposes by the tyrant, a most distinguished and illustrious Christian woman in Alexandria, conquered the passionate and intemperate soul of Maximinus by most heroic firmness. Honorable on account of wealth and family and education, she esteemed all of these inferior to chastity. He urged her many times, but although she was ready to die, he could not put her to death, for his desire was stronger than his anger[...].”

- VORAGINE, Jacobus (ca. 1230-1298): *Golden Legend* [Translated into English by CAXTON, William (1483) available on <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/>]. The legend of Sainte Katherine is compiled in volume 7, available on: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume7.htm#Katherine>

Other sources, non written sources: The spreading of the iconography of Saint Catherine was possible not only due to the impact of the written primary sources but also due to the knowledge of her relics. In the Eastern Church, the interest on her relics arose early, since they were believed to have been moved to the monastery in Mount Sinai by angels. In the 9th century, after the *inventio* or discovering of the relics in Sinai, the monastery was put under the protection of the saint and her worship replaced the old interest on Moses and the burning bush. Later, in the 11th century, Simon, a monk from Sinai, travelled to Rouen (France) in order to beg for the annual alms to the Duke of Normandy, carrying with him part of the relics (the crane and the hand) and encouraging the spreading of her worship in Western Europe. From the 11th century onwards Catherine’s worship became very popular in France. During the 12th century it spread all over Europe thanks to the Crusaders. Since then she became popular not only in France, but also in Italy and Germany, where she was later included among the *Fourteen Intercessors*.

Geographical and Chronological Framework: taking into account her eastern origin, the earliest examples of Catherine’s iconography have been found in Byzantine art, more specifically in the *Martyrology* of Basil (end of 10th century – 11th century).

The arrival of her relics to Western Europe not only encouraged the diffusion of her iconography, the oldest examples dating back to the 12th century, but also the diffusion of her legend, being the most popular text the *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine in the 13th century⁴.

Nevertheless, in Western art the culmination of her popularity took place in the 14th and 15th century. It was during that time when the iconography of Catherine as an isolated figure with a gearwheel and the *Mystic Marriage* became really popular. The interest on her did not end in medieval times. In fact, the mystic marriage, the conversion, the dispute against the wise men, the martyrdom with the gearwheel, the decapitation, the transfer of the relics to Sinai Mountain, etc., all these stories continued to be depicted in Modern Times.

Artistic media and techniques: if we had to choose one artistic media that was widely used for Catherine images, it would be painting (wall painting, panel

⁴ If the biography of Catherine was depicted in Western Art before the writing of the *Golden Legend*, Jacobus de Voragine must have known previous legends of Catherine and he just compiled and rewrote all of them.

painting, illustration of manuscripts, oil on canvas, etc.). However lots of sculptures of Catherine were also carved in the Middle Ages, specially wooden sculptures.

Precedents, transformation and projection: as we have mentioned in the section *Primary Sources*, the legend of Saint Catherine could have been inspired in Hypatia, a female philosopher from Alexandria.

In the Middle Ages, from the 10th -11th centuries onwards in the East and from the 12th century onwards in the West, her iconography was spread, either as an isolated figure or taking part of a narrative cycle (for more information see sections *summary* and *attributes and types of representation*).

An innovation arose in the 14th and 15th century, the introduction of the mystic marriage, probably the most famous part of her biography in Modern Times. However, other stories of the saint also continued to be depicted in Modern Times, being iconographically similar to those of the Middle Ages.

Typology and related themes: the legend of Catherine of Alexandria (4th century) has some points in common with the legend of Catherine of Siena (14th century). Both saints, in spite of the chronological gap, share more than only the name. According to Jacobus de Voragine, Catherine of Siena, when she was eleven years old, wanted to imitate the Virgin Mary and for that reason made a chastity pledge and asked Mary if her son Jesus could become her groom. The chastity and the marriage with Jesus were common to Catherine of Alexandria.

Following the text of Voragine, Catherine of Siena later became part of the Dominican order, since she lived an ascetic and poor life. In fact she fasted regularly and assisted poor and ill people. This characteristic was different from Catherine of Alexandria who had led a royal life.

However Catherine of Siena was thought to be very wise and to have had a dispute against two theologians, connecting that story with the debate between Catherine of Alexandria and the pagan philosophers.

Thus, when Catherine of Siena is depicted as an isolated figure is easy to see the differences between the two *Catherines*. The one from Siena has her own attributes: the iris, the cross, the heart, the rosary, the stigma. Some attributes are common to both saints, such as the book, the crown (Catherine of Siena wears a thorn crown while Catherine of Alexandria wears a royal crown), and the figure under the feet (Catherine of Siena stands over the devil while Catherine of Alexandria stands over the emperor). But the most evident difference is the clothes: Catherine of Siena dresses with Dominican clothes (white tunic and black mantle) while Catherine of Alexandria dresses with royal clothes.

Without a doubt, the most confusing iconography is the *Mystic Marriage*. Catherine of Alexandria marries Jesus Child (who usually is placed in the lap of the Virgin Mary) while Catherine of Siena marries Jesus Christ as an adult. But this difference was not always evident. In fact, according to Hall (1987), some biographers of Catherine of Siena stated that she had married Jesus Child while others stated that she had married Christ as an adult. But even if Catherine of Siena could be depicted marrying Jesus Child, it will be possible to differentiate between the two saints, since Catherine of Siena dresses with Dominican clothes while Catherine of Alexandria wears rich royal clothes.

Images:

- *Altarpiece of Saint Catherine* (surrounding Catherine, in the central part of the altarpiece, the wise men burnt at the stake, the saint in front of the emperor, the decapitation and the martyrdom with gearwheel have been depicted), Castello (Lérida), panel painting, 14th century, today in the Museo Nacional de Arte de Cataluña, Barcelona (Spain).
- Pedro de Zuera, *Altarpiece of the Coronation of the Virgin Mary and other Martyr Saints* (among them Saint Catherine with the gearwheel, at the bottom), tempera painting, second quarter of 15th century, Museo Diocesano de Huesca (Spain).
- Juan Hispalense, *Martyrdom of Saint Catherine* (with the gearwheel), panel painting, 15th century, Prado Museum, Madrid (Spain).
- Master of the altarpiece of Our Saviour, *Mystic marriage of Catherine of Alexandria*, panel painting, 1430, Alte Pinakothek in Munich (Germany).
- Master of Velilla, *Altarpiece of the Virgin with the Child, Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Barbara*, detail of the central panel where the Virgin appears between Saint Catherine and Saint Barbara (Catherine gets married to the Child while the gearwheel breaks), tempera painting, second third of the 15th century, Saint John the Baptist Church, Velilla de Jiloca in Zaragoza (Spain).
- *Decapitation of Saint Catherine*, probably coming from of the altarpiece of the Church of Our Lady in Regensburg, panel painting, ca. 1480, today in the sculpture collection of the Bodemuseum in Berlin, number of inventory 423, (Germany).
- Hans Memling, *Mystic marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, oil on panel, 15th century, Metropolitan Museum in New York (USA).
- Italian- Greek anonymous author, *Virgin of the Burning Bush and Burial of Saint Catherine* (at the top the transportation by air of Saint Catherine's dead body and at the bottom the symbolic apparition of the Virgin Mary in the burning bush), oil on panel, 15th century, Royal Chapel in Granada (Spain).
- Fernando Gallego, *Triptych of Saint Catherine* (Catherine as an isolated figure is placed between her decapitation and her martyrdom with gearwheel), panel painting, ca. 1503, Cloister of the Old Cathedral in Salamanca (Spain).
- Fernando Yáñez de la Almedina, *Saint Catherine*, oil on panel, 1505-1510, Prado Museum, Madrid (Spain)
- Flemish anonymous author, *Triptych of Saint Catherine's Mystic Marriage*, oil on panel, ca. 1520, Prado Museum, Madrid (Spain).

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