

Who Followed the Lord” column this month, we read about St. Katherine. Relics of this great saint are housed in a monastery on Mt. Sinai. The Church treasures relics of her great members because relics remind us that human beings, born into a sinful world and into bodies that will die, can still perform great things in the name of God. It is that belief that leads us to regard the body with respect, and to see cremation as a less respectful way of dealing with it. Bodies are part of what God gave us; bodies have housed some wonderworkers and preachers and martyrs; the Bible tells us that our bodies will be raised, as will all of creation. For all these reasons the Church has encouraged burial of the body, as a sign of the same respect that was given to the body of Christ. We will die as He did; we will rise as He did, and our bodies will be part of our everlasting life with Him.

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WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED THE LORD

This month: The Martyr Katherine

There are many great debaters for the faith among the saints. We think of St. Paul talking to the Greek pagans during his year of travel and preaching the Gospel, and of the great orators like St. John Chrysostom who were known for their eloquence and their ability to answer any and all arguments from non-Christians convincingly.

But in the very early history of the Church is a woman who shared these same gifts for debate and persuasion. Her name is Katherine, and she is one of the greatest martyrs of the early Christian Church, known to both Eastern and Western Christians as a shining light of faith.

Katherine was unusual in that she was well-educated not only in Greek philosophy, but in medicine, logic and rhetoric. It was her mother who brought her to the faith, for her father had died when she was not yet a teenager. And like many Christians of the day, Katherine’s faith was a danger, for she lived in Alexandria at a time when persecutions of Christians were taking place on a wide scale and were severe.

Obviously a young woman of great courage, Katherine had the bravery to come before the Emperor Maxentius when he offered sacrifice to the pagan gods and ordered everyone in the realm to do the same. She came to persuade him that this was wrong, and to show him the way of true worship of the true God. (She was able to do this because she was a person of high birth and would therefore have had some access to the Emperor.) Maxentius could see that her wisdom and learning greatly surpassed those of most people, and was intrigued to find such gifts in a mere girl. He called fifty of the best-educated and wisest men in his court, and invited them to dispute with her about the faith. It is an extraordinary picture, that of this girl debating before the Emperor about the Christian faith, having not only the academic skill to do so but being given the chance to do so in such a male-dominated society as that of the Roman Empire.

However, Maxentius was not happy to see Katherine far surpass his chosen wise men with her brains and her faith. He ordered all the men executed, and had Katherine imprisoned, unable to convince her to give up her beliefs. It was in prison that Katherine had one of the kinds of experiences that often mark the lives of saints. She was able to bring several fellow-prisoners, including a former general of the Roman Army, Porphyrius, to the faith along with more than a hundred of his soldiers. It is rather like the experience of Paul and Silas who, while in jail, brought their jailor and all his family to the point of being baptized, as we read in the Book of Acts. How many of us could live so exemplary a Christian life, if we were imprisoned unjustly, that we would convert others instead of being full of self-pity or anger at our unfair fate and an unjust God?

In any case, Katherine did so. But her witness to the faith was not finished. Like many others in those early days of hatred of the new faith, she died under torture. It was a particularly painful death on a revolving wheel that stretched and scraped the body, and she was only eighteen, but Katherine withstood the pain without giving up her faith, and died honorably as a martyr for the Lord. To this day there is a kind of firework known as a “Katherine wheel” which recalls the manner of her death. It is not meant to be a gruesome symbol, but one that makes us aware again of what a person can do in the name of Christ.

Are women, then, called to study and defend and speak about the faith? Certainly they are; it is not a job only for priests or for men. Katherine’s example is so strong that she has handed her name down to countless Christian women for many centuries, and the Church has loved and honored her during all those years as well.

