

Being faithful to Christ often involves speaking truth to power. Today is the memorial of Saint Catherine of Alexandria who was martyred by the Emperor Maxentius. Her relics are venerated on Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments. “Pope John Paul II made a pilgrimage to the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai in Egypt on February 26, 2000.”ⁱ Two years later he restored her name to the church calendar for saints.

Catherine was born, raised, and schooled in Alexandria, Egypt. In the 4th century, it was a central city for the spread of Christianity and also a center for learning in the ancient world. In its heyday, Alexandria boasted of the world’s largest library. After having a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mother with her child Jesus, Catherine converted to Christianity. Tradition tells us she was the highly educated daughter of a noble pagan family. Works of art depict Catherine as a virgin who chose a spiritual marriage to Christ.ⁱⁱ

Like Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenager and activist who has challenged world leaders to take immediate action against climate change in our own time, an 18-year old Catherine of Alexandria challenged the powerful emperor to end his brutal persecution of the church 1700 years ago. The emperor arranged a debate between Catherine and a number of pagan philosophers. As many as 50 philosophers were pitted against the bold teenager. One by one they converted to Christianity. Jesus tells us, “Remember, you are not to prepare your defense beforehand, for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking that all your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute” (Luke 21:14-15).

The emperor was not pleased. He tortured Catherine and threw her into the dungeon. He left on a trip and Catherine continued to profess her faith. “While he was gone, his wife the empress went to visit Catherine; she was curious about this wise young woman. Before long, Catherine had used her great learning to persuade the empress to follow the way of Christ—along with two hundred of the emperor’s best soldiers!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Mired in sin, the emperor did not convert but wished to make the teenager his mistress. Dedicated to Christ through her solemn vow of virginity, Catherine would have nothing of the emperor’s advances. “Enraged by Catherine’s boldness and resolve, the emperor resolved to break her will through torture on a spiked wheel.”^{iv} Catherine touched the wheel and it shattered. So, the obstinate emperor had her beheaded. Emperor Maxentius later died in a historic battle against Emperor Constantine in October of 312. The following year, with the Edict of Milan, the Emperor Constantine put an end to the age of persecution of the church.

Catherine of Alexandria was venerated in Germany and Hungary along with others known as the Holy Helpers especially during the Black Plague from 1346-1349 which was more deadly than the coronavirus. Two centuries later, Catherine appeared to Joan of Arc to guide and counsel her. Saint Catherine along with Saint Margaret are said to have instructed Joan in the virtues she would need to persevere against the persecutions of her own time.^v

Few of us if any will face world leaders bent on persecuting the church. But amidst our own struggles, it can be helpful to read and reflect on the Book of Revelation written to strengthen the faith of those living in difficult and uncertain times. “Who will not fear you, Lord, or glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All the nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (Rev 15:4).

ⁱ communio.stblogs.org/index.php/tag/st-catherine-of-alexandria/

ⁱⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-catherine-of-alexandria-398

ⁱⁱⁱ teachingcatholickids.com/st-catherine-of-alexandria/

^{iv} catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-catherine-of-alexandria-398

^v saint-joan-of-arc.com/voices.htm