

**NOVEMBER 27, 2011 HOMILY
AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

“ST. KATHERINE THE GREAT MARTYR”

My son, Nicholas, and his wife Barbara, got married a little over a year ago and went to Mexico for their honeymoon. The area they stayed was where the Mayan civilization thrived hundreds of years ago and they visited the ruins of the temples of the Maya people. Nicholas brought me back a book giving the history of the Mayas and it was a good read. In that book I learned about sports in the Mayan civilization. Their main sport was very popular. Historians and archaeologists can't figure out all the details about but it was a team sport that was somewhat like a combination of lacrosse, soccer, and rugby but rougher than any of them. This sport was played very hard. There was a reason why the teams played so hard. At least some times, probably for the biggest games, there was a big reason to play hard. The team that won would be rewarded with great prizes and wealth for their victory. The team that lost would be escorted back out onto the floor of the stadium and their heads would be cut off before the cheering crowd. (In The Mayas, Michael D. Coe, Thames & Hudson, 2005, pp. 186 & 188)

I know that a lot of you are big sports fans and you are probably already contemplating if such customs could improve the quality of sports in our city. But the reason I told you that story isn't for us all to think about what would happen to the Indians, Browns, and Cavaliers if such practices ever became common again. The reason is to set the stage for a story I will tell you today, a true story, about a different kind of contest. It wasn't an athletic contest, but a debate. And in this case, it was the winner (not the loser, as for the Mayans) who was punished with death.

As you know, about a year ago we hung 10 large icons of Saints on the side wall of our church's nave. And every few months, instead of a regular homily on the assigned scripture readings, I use the homily time to explain one of these Saints. In this way, as we look at their icons and know who they are, we are better able to venerate and emulate them. Today is one of those Sundays and I am going to speak about St. Katherine the Great Martyr, one of the Saints on these 10 new icons. Her Saint Day was just two days ago, on November 25.

St. Katherine lived in Alexandria, Egypt around 300 A.D., when Egypt was part of the Roman Empire. Alexandria, the largest city in Egypt then and one of the largest in the world, was considered the intellectual capital of civilization. In ancient times, many of the greatest philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians hailed from there. But perhaps smarter than any of the famous geniuses was a young Alexandrian woman named Katherine. This young woman was a very devout Christian, she was single, and she was brilliant. She had studied much and read much and was very knowledgeable about science, literature, philosophy, the pagan religion of the day, and especially the Bible and the teachings of the Orthodox Christian Church. And she was an eloquent speaker as well.

Now some geniuses are eccentric. You know the stereotype of the absent-minded professor. Some geniuses are very smart, but are rather unpleasant people. There was a famous and very intelligent philosopher in Scotland in the 1800s named McTaggart. Dr. McTaggart was brilliant but strange. He had a fear of open spaces, even small open spaces. And so when he walked down the university halls in Scotland from one classroom to another, he always sidled down the hall with his back to the wall so he wouldn't have to worry about any open space behind him! In the

classroom he would occasionally ask if anyone had any questions after his lecture. If they did, he would immediately harshly criticize the student for asking a stupid question. McTaggart was smart, but not popular! (in Lytton Strachey, Michael Holroyd, Penguin, p. 170)

Katherine was very smart, but also very likeable. She had a charming personality and was liked by all who came to know her. Her winning personality, her intelligence, and her speaking ability caused her to bring many people to abandon paganism and embrace Jesus Christ as she talked to people about the Lord in Alexandria. To talk about Christ, to be a Christian, was illegal---but Katherine was brave and defied the law.

The Church in the Roman Empire around 300 A.D. was growing. And the Roman persecution of the Church was getting stronger, because the Romans were worried. Historians think that by 300 A.D., Christians now made up about 10% of the empire's population. That was big enough that the authorities decided it was time to crush Christianity before it got any bigger and took over altogether. So in the years around 300, Katherine's time, the persecution of the Church became worse than ever before.

And in the midst of this crackdown on Christianity, Katherine was evangelizing in Alexandria and bringing in converts to Jesus Christ. And so the Roman authorities decided to stop her. And they tried to do so in such a way that would put a bit of "the kibosh" on the growing Church in Egypt. Their idea was to show publicly that Katherine wasn't so smart after all, and that the pagan beliefs were superior to Christian beliefs. Such a humiliation of Katherine would stop her evangelism and would slow down the growth in numbers of Christians in general.

And so the government set up a public debate outdoors in Alexandria. The smartest of the pagan scholars and philosophers were on one side---and Katherine all by herself on the other side. It was promised that it would be a free and fair debate with no legal ramifications for anyone. And a crowd gathered---probably some Christians but mostly pagan.

And as the debate went on it became evident that Katherine was winning. She could answer all the pagan scholars' arguments and questions and they couldn't answer hers. Her knowledge, her logic, her wisdom was superior to theirs. With eloquence she made a strong argument that there was only one God and that Jesus Christ was His Son. As she advanced to victory the crowd swung to her side---after all, who wouldn't sympathize with a smart young woman over a bunch of elderly not quite as bright philosophers?

And as the crowd cheered her more and more, the authorities who had put on the debate began to fret and worry. The point of the debate had been to humiliate Katherine and Christianity---and just the opposite was happening. So the authorities stepped in and stopped the debate, breaking the promise of a free and open meeting. Katherine was arrested. And then the tortures began. If they couldn't beat Katherine with words, then they would try to break her faith in Christ by pain. But it didn't work---she was so brave and so helped by God that she withstood all their tortures and refused to deny Christ and worship the idols. When even torture couldn't beat her, they gave up and had her put to death. Most icons of Katherine show her standing by a spiked spoked wheel. That's because that's how the Roman officials killed her. She was impaled on the spikes imbedded in the wood of a large spoked wheel. And then somehow the wheel was twirled so rapidly that she soon died. Katherine's martyrdom took place on November 25, 305 A.D.

But she was still the winner. The combination of how well she argued for the truth in the debate and her bravery under torture caused many a pagan to begin to seriously look into Christianity. If this Jesus Christ could so inspire Katherine, then He was worth checking out. It all backfired on the pagan leaders---what they did to Katherine just led to more and more new

Christians in Egypt. And not many years later, the whole Roman Empire turned Christian.

Because of her faith, her wisdom, and her bravery, Katherine became very famous and her name is still carried by many today----many who may not realize where their name originated. There are now many variations on that holy name—Katherine (or Catherine), Cathy, Katie, Kathleen, Katrina, Ekaterina, etc., etc. All those names came from that brave Egyptian girl's name.

May we ask St. Katherine, who now stands before the throne of God praying, to pray for us that we might be holy and brave like she was.

And to close with a challenge---God's Church needs people who are intelligent to dedicate themselves to be like St. Katherine. We need people who will dedicate themselves to knowing the truth thoroughly, who are able to explain the truth of God eloquently to others so as to lead others to Jesus Christ.

Our Orthodox Church certainly isn't illegal like it was under the Romans in 305 A.D. But society is bit by bit, more and more, turning away from traditional Christianity. We need modern Katherines (they can be male, too!) who can, even if society as a whole rejects Christ, help rescue many whose hearts can be turned towards God. May God send us some Katherines!

