

sacrifice will bear fruit not only for the deacon's family but for the parish too. The deacon should also be equipped to give, at any rate in co-operation with the parish priest, a (supplementary) course of instructions on marriage. In view of the emphasis we lay nowadays on preparation for marriage, the value of this assistance should not be under-estimated. Regarded from this point of view, the deacon's marriage will be thought of not as a concession on the part of the Church, but as an exalted task, and at the same time as the mobilization of fresh energies from those whom God has endowed with priestly qualities and dispositions, yet without calling them to celibacy. That this is and always has been the case, a glance at the Church's early history and at the eastern Church will show. The priest who offers sacrifice will willingly renounce marriage and family for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and of the flock entrusted to him. At the same time the bond between the sacraments of order (in the first degree) and of marriage, which is achieved in the person of the deacon, will be an abundant source of grace for the salvation of the deacon and his family as well as for that of the parish.

Did the letter quoted at the beginning of this article¹ claim too much? I believe it has been shown in this survey that the renewal of the diaconate would be able to bring new life and energy to the parish and to the Church. And while many who evinced an inclination for the priesthood (and really would have had a vocation to it!) may finally decide to become deacons, so we must hope that on the other hand numerous priests will come forward from the families of the deacons.

God give the Church courage for the experiment, and strength, no doubt after many preliminary ponderings, to renew the ecclesiastical offices and especially the diaconate!

¹ See *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* for October.



ST KATHARINE OF EGYPT

MARY SHARP

MUCH of our knowledge about Katharine springs from legend, but legends are nearly always based on truths, and if the facts available are doubtful and few, the stories about her tell something of her virtues, of her character,

and of the reasons for her death. St Katharine is not mentioned by contemporary writers, and different narrators are not even in agreement as to whether Maxentius or Maximinus was the tyrant who put her to death. She was not a popular saint until the eighth century in the east. Her story is contained in the so-called *Menologium Basilianum*, a collection of legends compiled for the use of the emperor Basil I who died in 886, and this story has been altered considerably since then.

Her veneration in the west did not start until after the outbreak of the crusades, and so it is not until the eleventh century that we hear of her in western literature; and yet by the beginning of the fourteenth century Venice had adopted her as the patroness of its colleges, there are over fifty churches in England dedicated to her, and the firework bearing her name is known by all. One of the first plays to be written in this country was about her and was written by a Norman from Paris university at the beginning of the twelfth century, who came to the famous school attached to Dunstable abbey. As her story became more widely known and was read in churches, her cult became so popular that at one time her feast day was proclaimed a public holiday. Joan of Arc claimed that St Katharine 'heartened her so that she rode on in spite of her wound'.

Legend says that she was the daughter of Costis, the pagan king of Egypt, and his queen Sabinella; one variant states that her father was a half-brother of the emperor Constantine and this is highly possible and may have contributed to her rapid rise in popularity in England. The legend goes on to say that from her birth she was most beautiful and that she early showed her gifts of scholarship. Her father built for her a high tower so that she could study the stars in the clear sky of Egypt and he gave her many books and mathematical instruments. Her parents died when Katharine was fourteen and she became queen. Her subjects naturally became disturbed when she showed no signs of marrying and urged her to take a consort to help with the governing and to lead them in war. The spokesman told her, in diplomatic terms, that she had four gifts: she was of the noblest blood in the world; she had a great inheritance; she had wisdom surpassing all others and a beauty of body unequalled by any; it was her duty to pass these gifts of God on to an heir so that her people should be happy and that she should be the joy of her people. Katharine's reply

was that if she must take a husband he must be of noble blood, so great that she would forget that it was she who had made him king, rich and handsome, and so benign that he would gladly forgive offences done to him.

Her counsellors left in sorrow for they knew not where to find such a man. But near the palace was a cave in which lived an old hermit and that very same night he had a vision and saw the Virgin Mary who told him to go the queen and tell her that her Son should be her king. Next day the hermit went to the palace and presented a picture of the Virgin and her child to the queen and when Katharine saw it she was so filled with its holy beauty that she forgot her books, her spheres and the stars; Plato and Socrates no longer satisfied her and she walked as in a dream.

That night she had a dream and saw herself on the top of a high mountain in the company of angels clothed in white with chaplets of white lilies. She fell on her face before them and was bidden to rise and they then led her by the hand to another band of angels more gloriously dressed, clothed in purple, with chaplets of red roses. She repeated her obeisance and was again told to rise and received the message that the king delighted to honour her; she was then led into an inner chamber of the heavenly palace and there sat a queen: 'Our most gracious sovereign lady, empress of heaven and mother of the king of blessedness'. The Virgin rose, took Katharine by the hand, and led her to her beloved Son, but he shook his head and said: 'She is not fair enough for me'. Katharine then awoke and again she heard his words: 'She is not fair enough for me'. Full of grief she asked the hermit what she should do to be worthy of the king, and when he found that she was a heathen he taught her the Christian faith and she was baptized a Christian. Again she had a vision and the Virgin appeared holding Jesus in her arms and Mary presented Katharine to him: 'Lord, she hath been baptized, and I myself have been godmother'. Jesus smiled on her and held out his hand and the betrothal was made. When Katharine saw that there was a ring on her finger her whole life was now spent in contemplating this meeting with her heavenly bridegroom.

Soon afterwards the Roman emperor came to Alexandria, partly to stamp out Christianity. He ordered that all should prove their faith by offering a sacrifice to the gods. From far and near sheep and oxen were brought to sacrifice so that all could show

their allegiance to Caesar and to the gods. Katharine their queen was aware that after the shedding of the animals' blood would come that of her fellow Christians who refused to offer sacrifices to the gods. She decided to take the offensive and, gathering all the Christians round her, marched off to the temple of Serapis where the emperor was superintending the sacrifice, to plead for the Christians. Because of her rare beauty, the emperor granted her plea and arranged for the convening of an assembly at which fifty priests and philosophers should defend the gods and Katharine should speak for Christ and the Christians.

Katharine prepared herself by prayer and fasting and spoke of the one true Creator in terms they understood, that is as a sophist and as a philosopher. She seemed good at taking war into the enemies' camp; so strong was her argument that most of her opponents agreed that she was right and subjected themselves to instruction. The emperor was furious and ordered the new converts to be summarily killed, and Katharine was arrested and taken to the palace for his own lustful pleasures; but she was saved from this as he was called away on a military expedition. Before going he ordered that she should be tortured and then thrown into a dungeon to die of hunger. But the empress Faustina had been touched by her eloquence, patience, and sincerity and in a dream saw Katharine come to her and offer her a crown from Christ. The empress and the chief captain visited her in her dungeon and Katharine spoke to them of the crucifixion, and so well did she speak that they were converted, though she offered them nothing but an ignominious death saying that they would go to the Lord by the path of martyrdom in three days time if they were faithful to the end. Again the emperor was angry and ordered Porphyry and the empress to be killed, but reserved his judgment on Katharine as he was furiously angry that she was still alive and had had the opportunity to convert his wife and minister. He ordered four wheels spiked with blades to be made, and arranged so that they would turn in different directions. She was to be bound to them and so torn to pieces as they turned in differing directions. But God intervened and Katharine was untouched. At last she was taken outside Alexandria to be beheaded by the sword, but again God intervened and angels came and bore her body across the Red Sea to the top of Sinai.

After many years she was found, her clothes rotten with age,

but her body covered as in silken robes by her rich fair hair, an aureole round her forehead and a heavenly fragrance hanging about her tomb.

The chief basis of these legends is a few lines in the Greek menology or calendar collected for the emperor Basil. Some authorities think that the only dependable details are contained in Eusebius' history, which was written shortly after her death, though he does not mention her name. Unfortunately some think that this passage refers not to Katharine but to Dorothea who was also a native of Alexandria.

Another legend says that her body was found by Christians in Egypt about the eighth century during the Saracen occupation. They took the body to the top of Mt Sinai to the monastery built by St Helena and afterwards enlarged by the emperor Justinian. Falconius, Archbishop of San Severino, speaks of this as follows: 'As to what is said, that the body of the saint was conveyed by angels to Mt Sinai, the meaning is that it was carried by the monks of Sinai to their monastery, that they might devoutly enrich their dwelling with such a treasure; it is well known that the name of an angelic habit was often used for a monastic habit, and that monks, on account of their heavenly purity and functions, were anciently called "angels".' By the ninth century miracles of healing had occurred at her tomb; it is possibly this fact which gave rise to the legend of her life and martyrdom. A chapel of St Katharine was built near the mount of the burning bush and her relics enshrined there. Her remains, or most of them, are still kept in a small marble sarcophagus, carved with figures and small plants and leaves which stands in a chapel of the monastery church. Some relics were taken, in the eleventh century, by Simeon, a Sinai monk, to Rouen; he left them with Richard, duke of Normandy, when he went to receive the annual alms from him.

In the middle ages St Katharine was honoured as the patroness of studies and until the revolution in France her panegyric was preached every year before the university of Paris.

And so the question arises whether there had ever been an actual queen named Katharine to whom these things happened, or whether the story is composite and telescopes the lives of several women into one story. Medieval man derived spiritual sustenance from such a story and its veracity was irrelevant. The legend inspired many works of art, from the thirteenth century onwards,

which are today priceless, and the story has achieved its purpose if it has inspired such art and if it encourages modern Christians to show a like courage in face of persecution. Katharine is patron saint of Venice; of philosophy; science; eloquence; of places of education; against diseases of the tongue.



EXTRACTS FROM SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT¹

THESE *Sayings* are preserved in a collection of remarks made by saints and theologians which used to be widely read in religious communities. Presumably they were taken from sermons preached before congregations of religious. Anyone looking for profound mystical truths will be disappointed, but the fact that it was precisely these sayings that were collected is a proof that in earlier centuries Albert was regarded not only as a great teacher and scholar, but also as a man of profound human wisdom. In more recent times, the sayings of Albert have become more widely known owing to the *Albert Tablets* shown in certain European churches.

I—SAYINGS

There are twelve good things. The first is when in this life a man gives a penny for love of our Lord, that is more pleasing to God and more beneficial to the man than if, after his death, he gave as much gold and silver as would stretch from earth to heaven.

The second is, when a man bears a harsh word patiently for love of our Lord, that is more pleasing to God than if he beat his back with as much broom as grows in a whole field.

The third is, that you humiliate yourself before God and all creatures; that is more pleasing to God than if you went from one end of the earth to the other, leaving footmarks red with your blood.

The fourth is, that you constantly offer God contrition of soul

¹ These extracts are from a translation, eventually to be published by BLACKFRIARS, of *Albertus Magnus*, by H. C. Scheeben. The translator is Ruth Bethell.