

The Smartest Person in the Room

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



The Church remembers the Great Martyr Catherine, who lived in the fourth century. As residents of Alexandria, Egypt, her wealthy pagan parents had access to all the city's great institutions of learning. They gave their daughter the kind of education such a place could provide, and Catherine was well-versed in public speaking, sciences, languages, and philosophy. She was a brilliant student, and also a well-mannered and lovely young woman.

With all these desirable attributes, the young Catherine still had a big problem. There was no shortage of men who wanted to marry her, but there was a definite lack of men who could measure up to her. She told her mother, with a strong note of complaint, that all the men she knew were boring and shallow, and that she feared she might never find one who could be her equal. Catherine knew the loneliness often felt by the child who is perceived by others to be the brightest in the class, with nobody to challenge her in argument or conversation. She also must have felt the boredom of inevitably being the smartest person in the room—any room. And if some envied her wealth and beauty, that envy could isolate her even more.

Catherine's mother was worried. As a secretly-practicing Christian, she decided the best person to help and advise her daughter was a holy elder. This man instructed Catherine in the faith, guiding her prodigious intelligence toward a relationship with Christ. After much prayer and fasting, Catherine had a vision of Christ and His mother. She saw the Lord's beauty and brilliance, so much greater than her own. She wanted to dedicate herself to Him, happily giving up the idea of finding a human partner.

But it was not to be that easy. In another vision, Christ would not even look at her, declaring her unworthy or unready. It was quite a new experience for the sought-after, bored beauty. Yet there was already a new element of humility developing in Catherine, for on the advice of the elder she continued to study, pray and fast, and finally received baptism. She had a third vision of Christ and His mother receiving her joyfully and placing a ring on her finger. When she awoke the ring was still there.

Catherine would later confront the pagan Emperor Maximian, publicly challenging his gory sacrifice to the gods by saying that the true God loves life and true wisdom, not senseless bloody slaughter. Seeking to put the outspoken female in her place, he called together fifty philosophers to persuade her that her beliefs were mistaken. But instead she convinced several of them to become believers.

Once again, Catherine had been the smartest person in the room. But this time, her intelligence didn't bring her boredom and loneliness. It brought her the chance to witness with power and readied her, the "God-summoned bride", to die as a martyr for the Bridegroom she had learned to love so much.

Troparion - Tone 5

Let us praise Catherine the radiant bride of Christ,
guardian of Sinai, our helper and supporter.
By the power of the Spirit,
she silenced the arrogance of the ungodly.
Crowned as a martyr, she now implores great mercy for all.