

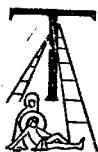
THE LIFE OF ST KATHERINE

Adapted from 'The Golden Legend of Blessed James of Voragine, O.P.

BY

ANTHONY ROSS, O.P.

[The original account of St Katherine of Alexandria has disappeared under a mass of medieval additions. As B. James's version will serve to show, the additions are not only beautiful but have a theological importance and a historical value as documents illustrating the history of medieval spirituality. Those who are not concerned about historical values will find the legend worth reading for the doctrine it contains, and there is no reason to doubt the existence of the saint or the main outlines of her character.]



HERE was once a heathen king and queen who ruled well, although they worshipped idols. They had one daughter, Katherine, so beautiful that the people never ceased to wonder, and more clever than any child of her age. So learned and wise was she that her father set aside a tower in his palace where she might gather books around her and study as she liked. He sent for the seven wisest men in the land to teach her, but before long she was the teacher and they her pupils. When the princess was fourteen years old her father died, and left her to be queen of that land. Soon the Parliament of the country met, and as the young queen sat crowned, with her mother beside her, a lord rose up and kneeling at her feet said:

'Most high and mighty princess, I am commanded by the queen your mother, and by the lords and commons of this land, to beg your highness that some noble knight may be found to marry you; one who will rule and defend your kingdom as your father did until now'.

The young queen Katherine was troubled by his speech, for she had vowed to remain a virgin all her days, and would rather die than break her vow. But she answered quietly:

'My good lord, I understand your request, and thank my mother, the lords and all my subjects for the care they have for my happiness and the good of my kingdom. But considering the wisdom of my mother and my lords, and the loyalty of the commons of this land, I trust we shall be in no danger. We have no need of a stranger to rule us and our kingdom, but with your good help we hope to govern and keep this kingdom in justice and peace as in the time of my father. I pray you then to leave this question'.

Hearing this her mother and all the Parliament were startled, and at a loss for words, seeing that she was determined not to marry. An old duke, her uncle, rose at last. He said that her answer brought sorrow to them all and would grieve them still more if she would not think again about the question. Because of her four great gifts, which God had given her beyond all other creatures, she ought certainly to marry and to have children who would be a comfort and joy to all the kingdom.

'What are these great gifts?' the queen asked.

'Madam', said the duke, 'you come of the most noble blood in the world. You are a great heiress, the greatest among women. In wisdom and learning there is no one to equal you, nor is anyone like you in bodily beauty. All these things must surely incline you to agree to our request.'

Queen Katherine looked at him sadly. 'Well, uncle, since God and nature have been so good to me I am more bound to please and to love God, thanking him humbly for his gifts. But as you are so anxious for me to marry, I will describe the kind of man whom I will take for lord and husband. If you can find such a man I will marry him with all my heart. He that shall be lord of my heart must have these four gifts which you have described, and beyond all measure; so much so that all creatures shall have need of him, and he have need of none. He that shall be my lord must be so noble of blood that all men shall worship him. He must be so great a lord that I can never say that I made him king. He must be rich beyond all men; so beautiful that the angels have joy in seeing him, so pure that his mother is a virgin, and so meek and kind that he can forgive any offence given him. That is the man I want for husband, and if you can find him I will be his wife with all my heart, if he will have me. If you cannot find such a man, I will never marry. This is my final answer.'

There was sorrow and dismay among the lords when they heard this, and saw that her mind was settled. Her mother spoke to her with an angry voice, saying:

'Is this your great wisdom which is so much talked of? What woman ever dreamed of such a husband? The husband you imagine never was and never will be. So, daughter, stop this foolishness and do as your ancestors did before you'.

The young queen Katherine sighed heavily. 'Mother, my reason tells me that there must be someone better than I can ever describe or imagine, and unless he finds me by his grace, I shall never be happy. For I think there is a way which we have all lost. We wander in darkness, and until the light of grace comes we cannot see the true way. But when grace comes, it shall clear away the dark clouds

of our ignorance, and show me clearly him whom my heart loveth. Even if he does not wish me to find him, yet reason tells me to keep whole what I can. Do not trouble me more, for I will keep all the love of my heart for him whom I have described.'

With these words she rose and went to her palace, leaving her mother and the lords of parliament in great distress. All her heart was on fire with love of the husband she had thought of. She wondered continually how she could find him, for he had kindled in her a burning love which nothing was ever to quench; but she could not think how she might find him, not knowing how close he was to her heart.

At this same time there was, in the desert of Egypt, a hermit called Adrian who had served our Lord there for thirty years. One day as he walked up and down in front of his cell, thinking about the things of God, there appeared a lady of so great beauty and majesty that he fell down before her in astonishment. The lady called to him:

'Brother Adrian, fear nothing; I am here to do you good'. She raised him gently, and added:

'Adrian, you must go to the city of Alexandria with a message from me to Queen Katherine. Tell her that the lady whose son she has chosen for her husband, sends her greeting, and says that her son desires her beauty. I command her to come at once with you to this place, where she shall be new-clothed; then she shall see him and have him for her husband everlastingly'.

'Ah! blessed lady', said Adrian, trembling, how shall I take your message? I do not know the city, nor the way to it. And if I did, who am I to take a message to the queen? Her servants would not let me in, and if I got in, she would think I was a lying rogue and throw me into prison.'

'Do not be afraid, Adrian', said the blessed lady. 'What my son has begun in her must be finished, for she is a chosen vessel of special grace. You will have no difficulty, for the angel of the lord will lead you there and bring you back safely'.

Adrian obeyed, and everything happened as the lady had promised. He walked through the palace unhindered until he came to Queen Katherine's private study. As soon as Katherine heard his message she rose and followed the old man through the palace and city, forgetting all her royal state, into the desert. As they walked she asked many deep questions, and he taught her the Christian faith. The old man became worried as they went on, for he had lost his way completely. He thought to himself:

'Alas! I fear I am deceived. This must be an illusion. Now blessed lady Mary, help me and save this maiden who left all she had for love of you'.

Katherine noticed his distress and asked him what was wrong.

'I am worried for your sake', he said, 'for I cannot find my cell.'

'Do not be afraid', Katherine told him. 'The good lady who sent you to me will not leave us to die in the wilderness. What is that wonderful monastery which I see in the distance?'

Adrian rubbed his eyes, and saw the most glorious monastery he had ever seen.

'Blessed be God', he cried, 'who has given you such perfect faith; for there is the place where you shall receive greater joy than ever any woman had, except our blessed Lady, Christ's own Mother, the queen of all queens.'

They hurried on together, and as they came near the place there met them a glorious company dressed in white, with crowns of lilies on their heads, all of such beauty and brightness that Katherine and the old man could not look at them but fell to the ground in fear and wonder. Then one of the brightest of the company spoke:

'Rise, Katherine, our dear sister'.

He led her in to the next gate, where a still more glorious company waited, clothed in purple, with crowns of red roses on their heads. They encouraged her, saying:

'Fear nothing, dear sister, for no one was ever more welcome to our Lord than you, or more welcome to us all; for you will receive our dress and wear our crown with such honour that all the saints will rejoice in you. Come, for the Lord waits for you'.

Katherine went on swiftly with them, so full of joy that she could not speak. When she came into the church she heard a song of marvellous sweetness, sweeter than any the heart could imagine. There she saw a queen standing in majesty, with a multitude of angels and saints whose beauty and glory no pen can describe. The company of martyrs and virgins with Katherine fell on their faces before the queen, saying:

'Most sovereign lady, queen of heaven, empress of the world, mother of almighty God whom all heaven and earth obey, we present to you our dear sister whose name is written in the Book of Life, beseeching your grace to take her as your daughter, that the work which our blessed Lord has begun in her may be accomplished'.

Our blessed Lady replied: 'Bring my beloved daughter'. Hearing her speak, Katherine was filled with such joy that she lay like one dead. But the saints lifted her up and brought her to our Lady, who said:

'My dear daughter, you are welcome, for you are specially chosen by my Son. Do you remember how you described a husband to your Parliament, when you had a great conflict to defend your chastity?'

Katherine, kneeling humbly before her, said: 'O most blessed

Lady, I remember how I chose that Lord whom I did not know, but now by his mercy and your grace my eyes are opened and my ignorance cleared away. Now I see the way of truth, and I humbly beseech you that I may have him whom my heart loves, without whom I cannot live.'

'My dear daughter', our Lady answered, 'it shall be as you wish, but there is one thing which you must receive before you come to the presence of my Son. You must be clothed with the sacrament of baptism. Come, everything is ready.'

Then our blessed Lady called Adrian and said that as he was a priest it was his office to baptize Katherine. So he baptised her and our Lady herself was her godmother. After the baptism our Lady told Katherine that now she had all that was needed by the wife of a heavenly husband. And our Lady led her to the entrance of the choir, where she saw our Saviour Jesus Christ with a host of angels. Our Lady said to her Son:

'All honour, joy and glory be to you, king of bliss, my Lord, my God, and my Son. I have brought to your blessed presence your servant Katherine, who for love of you has refused all earthly things, and has come at my bidding, hoping and trusting to receive what I promised her'.

Our blessed Lord lifted his mother, and said: 'Mother, what pleases you pleases me, your desire is mine, and I desire that she be married to me. Katherine, come here'.

As soon as she heard him say her name so great sweetness filled her soul that she was ravished out of herself, but our Lord gave her new strength above nature, and said to her:

'Come, my bride, and give me your hand'.

There our Lord joined her to himself in spiritual marriage, promising to keep her through all her life in this world, and after this life to bring her to reign eternally in his bliss. In token of this he put a ring on her finger, commanding her to keep it in remembrance of him. 'Fear nothing, my dear bride', he said. 'I will not leave you, but will always comfort and strengthen you.'

Then the new bride answered: 'O blessed Lord, I thank you with all my heart for your great mercies. Make me worthy to be thy servant and to please you whom I love above all things'.

Our Lord then said to Katherine: 'The time has come when I must return to the place from which I came. Whatever you desire I am ready to give you. When I am gone you must stay here with Adrian ten days until you know perfectly my laws and my will. When you go home you will find your mother dead, but do not be afraid for no one has missed you all this time. I have set someone

in your place until you come back, whom all think is you. Farewell, my dear bride'.

Katherine cried out sorrowfully: 'Ah! my Lord God, all the joy of my soul, keep me ever in mind!'

With that our Lord blessed her and vanished from her sight. And she fell down in a trance which lasted a whole hour. When she came to she saw nothing but an old cell, and Adrian weeping bitterly by her side. Monastery, palace, and royal company had all vanished. She wept and mourned until she noticed the ring on her finger, and then she was filled with joy again and kissed it a thousand times. Adrian taught her all she had to know. After the ten days were passed she returned to her palace, where she governed her kingdom in justice and holiness with great charity, converting many people to the Christian faith, and always having Jesus Christ in her mind. She was then eighteen years of age.

The emperor of Rome was the overlord of her kingdom, and one day he came to the city of Alexandria and began to force men to sacrifice to idols. Hearing of this the queen went with some of her servants and met the emperor at the gate of the temple. She spoke bravely to him, telling him that it was not fitting that a man of his dignity and wisdom should worship idols.

'This temple and these idols', she said, 'are as dust in the wind. Look rather at the heavens and the earth, at the sun, moon and stars, all the planets that have been since the world began and shall be as long as it shall please God. See how they move from east to west and never weary. When you know all the wonder of these things, ask then who is mightiest of all, the maker of all; and when you know him who is maker and ruler of all things, to whom nothing is equal, then worship and glorify him, for he is God of gods, and Lord of lords.'

The emperor was greatly put out by what she said, and could not answer her, so at last he said that when he had finished the sacrifice he would give her an answer. He commanded that she should be led to his palace and kept until his return, marvelling greatly at her wisdom and beauty. After the sacrifice he came to the palace, and said to her:

'If what you say is true then the whole world is in error, except you. But you are one frail woman, and should not be believed'.

He began to argue further with her, but finding that he was losing the argument he sent for famous scholars and philosophers to come and dispute with her, promising them rich rewards if they could change her mind. Fifty of the wisest men in the world were brought hastily to Alexandria. They were full of scorn when they found that they had been brought from so many far countries because of one

young girl. When Katherine heard how many of them she had to face she prayed to our Lord for strength, and an angel came and assured her that she would not be overcome. Then she and the fifty masters were brought before the emperor, to whom Katherine said:

'What trial is this, setting fifty great masters against one girl, promising them great rewards if they win, but promising none to me? God will be with me, and he will be my reward, as he is of all who fight for him'.

They began to argue that it was impossible for God to become man, or to suffer death, but Katherine used the words of their own poets and philosophers to defeat them, until at last they were all silent, and did not know what more to say. They dared say nothing against our Lord, and at last one of them told the emperor that unless he could bring some better defence of the gods they used to worship they would all become Christians. The emperor, mad with rage and vexation, ordered them to be burnt. The holy virgin Katherine strengthened them in the faith. They were afraid to die without having been baptized, but she told them: 'Do not be afraid, for the shedding of your blood shall be counted as your baptism. Strengthen yourselves with the sign of the cross and you shall be crowned in heaven'.

They did as she told them, and died bravely. The emperor tried again to persuade Katherine to yield to him, but she constantly refused. To break her spirit he ordered her to be stripped naked, whipped with scorpions, and cast into prison to lie in darkness with no food for twelve days. Meanwhile he went away from the city on certain business. The empress, who had grown to love Katherine deeply, went to the prison at night with Porphyry, the captain of the royal guards. Katherine taught them the joy of heaven and converted them and two hundred soldiers. All the time she was in prison a white dove came to her with food, sent by our Lord. And Christ himself appeared to her in prison with a great company of angels and virgins, and said to her: 'Be constant, for I am with thee'.

On the emperor's return she was again brought before him. Seeing her so radiant when he expected to find her wasted by hunger, he supposed someone had fed her secretly in prison, and commanded the prison guards to be tortured. He begged her again to change her mind, offering to divorce his wife and make her empress instead.

'Whom should I prefer', Katherine answered, 'the king who is powerful, eternal and glorious? or the one who is sick, mortal and unclean?'

'Choose', retorted the emperor, 'to offer sacrifice and live, or to suffer torments and die'.

'Waste no more time', she said, 'for I desire to offer God my flesh and blood as he offered his for me. He is my God, my father and my

friend, and the only husband I will ever have'.

A clever craftsman then offered to make four wheels of iron, set with sharp blades, and arranged so that the wheels should turn in opposite directions, in such a way that anything between them should be cut into little pieces. It was decided that Katherine should be cut to pieces in these wheels, so that other Christians might be terrified and deny their faith. But Katherine prayed our Lord to break these wheels for the sake of the people who were standing by. And as soon as she was set between the wheels they fell apart. Then the empress began to scold the emperor for his cruelty, and seeing that she too was now a Christian he had her head cut off. And because Porphyry took her body and gave it Christian burial he also was killed. Calling Katherine to him the emperor said: 'You have made the empress a victim of your magic, but still if you repent and do sacrifice I will make you ruler of my palace. If not, you will lose your head'. 'Do what you say', said Katherine. 'I am ready to suffer'.

As she was brought to the place of execution she lifted her eyes to heaven and prayed: 'O Jesus Christ, hope and help of all who believe in thee! Grant that whosoever shall remember my passion at his death or in any other trouble, and ask my help, shall have by thy mercy an answer to his prayer'.

And a voice was heard from heaven: 'Come unto me, my love and my bride. See, the gates of heaven are opened for you. To all who honour your passion I promise the comfort of heaven in their need'.

Then she was beheaded, and angels carried her body to Mount Sinai, where it was buried, and where a church and monastery were afterwards built in honour of the holy virgin Saint Katherine.