

Upbeat Visits St. Katherine's Monastery
Katherine Valone
Upbeat
v. 1, n. 10, 1968

In the Middle East between the countries of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, lies the Sinai Peninsula. Shaped like an inverted triangle, this great wilderness extends about 230 miles north to south and about 150 miles wide. Sinai is bounded on its east and west coasts by the Red Sea. It is the great wilderness through which Moses led the Jews when they made their exodus from Egypt. Near the southern tip of the peninsula, towers a steep granite mountain known as Mount Sinai. From here Moses received the two tablets with the Ten Commandments from God Almighty. This imposing mountain stands 7,560 feet higher than the nearby plateau in which is nestled the sixth century monastery dedicated to St. Katherine of Alexandria.

Surrounded by the Horeb Mountain range, St. Katherine's is the second oldest monastery in all the Christian world. (The oldest monastery in the world is St. Savvas outside Jerusalem. It is just two years older.) Both monasteries are Greek Orthodox.

Many people wonder why this monastery is called St. Katherine's. It would have seemed more logical to call it the Prophet Moses, or perhaps the Prophet Elias since both of these great men of God walked these mountains. Why was it named after St. Katherine?

Beyond Mount Sinai which is also known as Jebel Musa and which means Mount of Moses in Arabic, stands an even higher granite mountain called Jebel Katherina. It stands 8,576 feet high and can be seen from the top of Mount Sinai. It is called Mt. St. Katherine because it is here that sacred tradition tells us the angels brought the martyred body of the eighteen year old maiden who died for her faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Who was this young girl that God loved so much that He dispatched His angels to triumphantly carry her tortured and lifeless body to the highest peak of the Horeb Mountains?

Of all the saints that Church commends to us, that saint which holds the greatest appeal for teenagers is Saint Katherine of Alexandria. Second only to the Theotokos in esteem among female saints, St. Katherine is a heroine worthy of the teenagers' love and emulation. When millions of young people can hold the Beetles and Monkeys in adulation and almost worship them, Christian Orthodox youth would do well to venerate an eighteen year-old girl whose whole life was dedicated to her Lord Jesus Christ.

True, adults, too, have a special place in their heart for St. Katherine. For example, philosophers admire her for her wisdom; poets and actors admire her for her ability to convince which she displayed when she converted the pagan philosophers of her age; and theologians imitate her great thirst for the Truth. Even mechanics consider her their saint for she caused the torture wheel of her pagan jailers to fall to pieces. But most important, St. Katherine is also the saint for young people who would lead a life of purity for the Lord.

Why is the saint so special, then, to the teenager today? When young people are surrounded by many temptations that the world around us offers, and when “situation” ethics make sinning acceptable in a society that distorts virtue and excuses sin, then St. Katherine rises up foremost in our minds as the saint who overcame all. One has only to study her life to see that she had more than her share of temptations. Yet, in every case temptation was turned into victory for Christ by this marvelous saint.

First of all, she had great beauty. Who can deny that our culture has made a cult of beauty today. The person who is not spiritually oriented puts a high premium on superficial good looks alone. Nowadays billions are spent by men and women cosmetics and other means to make themselves beautiful.

But St. Katherine’s beauty was not a cause for sin either on her part or on that of others around her. At twelve, when most girls in those days married, St. Katherine promised to live in chastity for Christ. How many of our young Orthodox people appreciate the virtue of chastity. Suggestive movies and television programs, sex-oriented advertisements, the going-steady mania, obscene pictures and books, are just some of the sin traps facing teenagers today. The Orthodox teenager has to resist these if they are to consider themselves Christian.

But that is more easily said than done. How can the teenager overcome tempting situations when they come at them from every avenue of life, constantly and with great force? St. Katherine offers the answer. And she offers the answer best by her example. She was victorious because she loved Christ first and above all else with all she had: her beauty, her astute mind, her noble birth, and her pure heart. And where some of us allow these very things to become obstacles in our ascent to God, she turned them to good use. She thirsted for knowledge of Christ. Her spiritual father, Bishop Peter of Alexandria, taught her the Scriptures. She studied the world’s great books in the library of Alexandria. St. Katherine knew what type of learning was important. The emphasis was not on the beauty of her face or form, but the beauty of her soul. Not the pleasures which could have been hers easily because of her noble birth and wealth, but the life which she dedicated to Christ. Could not the teenager beset by a million other concerns and less worthy activities learn from this lively and lovely teenager how to spend more time on the truly valuable aspects of life: the salvation of one’s soul and the knowledge of the Truth?

St. Katherine was not just a sweet timid girl. Hers was not a victory through retreat. She had tremendous courage. In spite of the danger of death and suffering horrible tortures, she maintained her “cool.” The Emperor Maximianus was angry with her because she would not sacrifice the purity of her body for his pleasures. Emperor or not, powerful or not, St. Katherine answered him with a firm “No!” Teenagers can show that same courage, too, that one needs in order to say no to all those things which they know will separate them from God. Whether it be swearing, or cheating on exams, or drinking, or taking drugs, a healthy and firm “No!” would be a good start in imitating the life of this wonderful saint.

Another aspect of her courage was shown, too. The emperor's philosophers were converted because she was both informed about the Orthodox faith and had the courage to speak up for it. The emperor had these philosophers killed when he saw this, but these philosophers went to their death in Christ thanks to St. Katherine. She was quite a missionary!

How often do teenagers feel ashamed to talk about Christ and their faith to others, but feel no qualms about using His name in vain.

St. Katherine's boldness was not used to defy the authority of the emperor but the evil which he would perpetrate. She would serve as a good reminder to those who have the gumption to parade and demonstrate, that maybe more praying and less parading would change the world for the better. This great saint faced every situation on her knees first. She did not preach disloyalty to the emperor but rather loyalty to Christ. Her knees were used for the glory of God. At one time when she was put in a cold, damp dungeon for eleven days without food she was visited by very important guests. The emperor's wife, Augusta, and his general, Porfyr, came to see her from curiosity. They found the saint on her knees. Instead of a weak and broken spirit, they found a joyful young girl who preached Christ even to them in spite of these unbelievable conditions. What an inspiration she is to us who think we suffer when the least things happen to us! Can you guess the results? Both Augusta and Porfyr were convinced of the salvation that only Christ offers and were baptized. In fact, the general preached to his soldiers and many of them accepted Christ.

You many think, well what of it? In the end they all died. Finally, even St. Katherine was strapped to a wheel so that her bones would be broken. But a miracle occurred. The wheel fell broken instead. When God had convinced all who were receptive to His great power and of his love for the saint, it was time for her to receive her reward. She was beheaded. But this was not the end of the saint. It was only the beginning.

On the highest mountain peak of the Horeb mountain range in the Sinai Peninsula stands the lofty, Jebel Katherine or Mt. St. Katherine. It was here near Mt. Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments that, the Church teaches, the angels carried the martyred body of this blessed young saint, an eighteen year-old princess who died in the year 311 A.D. This Mount is about two hundred miles southeast of Alexandria. Here her relics remained until the year 545 A.D. The great monastery of St. Katherine was built by Justinian and stands to this very day.

How wonderful it would be if each teenager could venerate her crowned relics which give off a sweet fragrance such as one has never smelled before.

But if we cannot all see her relics, we can recall her life. Better yet, we can all make a sincere effort to emulate her example. One thought of her in times of trial and temptation would help overcome any temptation. Her prayers of intercession on the teenager's behalf would make them victorious. Her life and actions teach every teenager to see the beauty of the souls and not just outer beauty; to esteem purity for Christ's sake and not the short-lived pleasures of sexual promiscuity; to keep ones self holy for ones mate and

not be an 'easy' date; to show the kind of courage that is rooted in our Orthodox faith and not the false courage that comes from following the crowd no matter where it goes; to realize that "belonging" means nothing good if one does not first belong to Christ; to know that all the crowns this life has to offer: beauty, money, fame, pleasure, power, are far inferior to the crown of life itself that belongs to every teenager who overcomes this world just as St. Katherine did.

She, more than any other saint, not only teaches the teenager by her example, as well as by her words and thoughts, all they need to know to survive in the world today, but to live victoriously. What is more, the teenager who beholds St. Katherine's face and prays for her intercession is the Orthodox Christian who will not only progress to sainthood, but will inspire the souls around them to come to Christ, our Lord and Savior.