

## St Catherine of Alexandria – November 25<sup>th</sup>



According to the legends, St Catherine was the daughter of the Roman Governor of Alexandria. She was beautiful and learned, and converted to Christianity. When she was eighteen she protested to Maxentius, Emperor of the Western Roman Empire, about his worship of idols and persecution of Christians. Maxentius first engaged her in debate, sending fifty top philosophers to dispute with her, but she demolished their arguments. Many of them were converted and martyred. Catherine was imprisoned. In prison she saw a vision of Christ, and was fed by a

dove. In prison she continued to convert all who visited her, including the Emperor's wife, and so Maxentius ordered her death. His original choice was breaking on the wheel, but the wheel itself broke instead, and so he finally ordered her to be beheaded. Maxentius himself did not come to a good end: a war broke out with Constantine, the ruler of the Eastern Empire. On the night before the final battle Constantine received a vision telling him to conquer in the sign of the cross. Constantine was victorious and Maxentius drowned in the Tiber as he tried to flee,

The story had a great appeal in the Middle Ages, and Catherine was widely venerated, especially in France, where her cult was given further status when Joan of Arc claimed that she spoke to her. In art she is, with Mary Magdalene, one of the most widely portrayed saints. This is a nice pairing: Mary symbolising the heart and emotions and Catherine the head and the intellect.

Catherine is the patron saint of many groups, including young women, wheelwrights, attorneys and philosophers.

Catherine is usually shown with a wheel, and everyone knows her name from the Catherine Wheels we see on November the 5<sup>th</sup>. She is also still associated with learning: with Jesus and Sir Isaac Wolfson she shares the distinction of being one of only three people having a college at both Oxford and Cambridge named after her.