ST. CATHARINE OF ALEXANDRIA*.

BY THE EDITOR.

We have seen in a former article ("The Bride of Christ," published in The Open Court for August) that the tradition of the bride of Christ has its ultimate foundation in the myths of pre-Christian saviours; but we noted at the same time that according to the rigidly ascetic traditions of the early Church this marriage was to be a purely spiritual and symbolic one; and that the legend finally crystallized around the name of Catharine the pure one, in spite of the incongruity of the age in which the best known saint of this name was supposed to have lived. In the domain of myth as well as legend we move in an atmosphere that is above time and space, and so there is no inconsistency in the fact that St. Catharine of Alexandria lived at the end of the third century, more than two hundred years after the death of Jesus. This discrepancy only helped to denote the entire absence of carnal love which fact is further emphasized by representing the mystic marriage usually (though not always) as taking place between the Christ child and an adult virgin.

As to the historical facts of St. Catharine's life a critical investigation of ancient records yields no result. From a purely scientific standpoint St. Catharine of Alexandria is an unhistorical figurement, but for all that the legend is quite circumstantial in details.

Catharine is reported as being of royal parentage and as having received an unusually good education. She is revered by the Church as the patron of philosophy, science and learning, and some philosophical schools, as for instance the University of Paris, have selected her as their tutelary saint.

The legend further asserts that Emperor Maxentius, anxious to establish the truth of idolatry, arranged a public debate between

* We have tried to make the illustrations in this article and the preceding one on "The Bride of Christ" as complete a collection as possible of reproductions of valuable paintings which have for their subject St. Catharine or the Mystic Marriage; and we wish to acknowledge herewith our indebtedness for the very great assistance toward this end which has been rendered ungrudgingly by members of the staff of the Chicago Public Library.
her and the most prominent pagan sages, but she defeated them in every way so as to humiliate their authority. Incensed at her success the Emperor first tried to influence her by threats and flattery, but when he saw that nothing could move her, he ordered her to be tortured on a spiked wheel, and then to be beheaded. The date of her martyrdom has been fixed on November 25, 307.
The oldest reference to St. Catharine is made in the *Menologium Basilianum*, a collection of legends compiled for Emperor Basil II who died in 886. In this she is called Aikaterina, and the report runs as follows:

"The martyr Aikaterina was the daughter of a rich and noble prince of Alexandria. She was very beautiful, and being at the same time highly talented, she devoted herself to Greek literature as well as to the study of the languages of all nations, and so she became wise and learned. And it happened that the Greeks held a festival in honor of their idols; and seeing the slaughter of animals, she was so greatly moved that she went to the King Maximinus and expostulated with him in these words: 'Why hast thou left the living God to worship lifeless idols?' But the Emperor caused her to be thrown into prison, and to be punished severely. He then ordered fifty orators to be brought, and bade them to reason with Aikaterina, and confute her, threatening to burn them all if they should fail to overpower her. The orators, however, when they saw themselves vanquished, received baptism, and were burnt forthwith, while she was beheaded."

The report of the *Menologium* has been elaborated in other versions of which we have two in Greek, one by Simeon Metaphrastes (10th century), another by Athanasius. Upon the latter the Latin legend of St. Catharine is founded, from which again all later versions in Italian, French, and Old English have been derived. We must make special mention of the version made by Jean Mielot at the request of Philip the Good of Burgundy, because in addition to the incidents mentioned above it contains the story of the mystic marriage of St. Catharine to the Saviour which, however, is believed to have been derived from an older source.

Marius Sepet tells us of the marriage of King Costus with Queen Sabinella and the birth of their daughter, Catharine, who from a tender age was most carefully educated in all the arts and sciences. She distinguished herself in all virtues, especially in wisdom and moral purity. King Costus died, and Queen Sabinella retired to Mount Ararat where she was converted to Christianity by Ananias, a godly hermit. When she tried to induce her daughter to adopt the new faith she defended paganism with all the arguments of profane science, and her mother was unable to convince her.

Catharine had scarcely reached her eighteenth year when the grandees of the empire sought her hand in marriage and her mother was anxious to have her choose a good husband who would be a worthy leader and could protect the kingdom against all its enemies.
By Andrea del Sarto. 1486-1531. In the Cathedral at Pisa.
But Catharine refused all suitors and said: "Bring me a bridegroom who is as learned, as beautiful, as noble, as rich,—in short, is of equal rank with me, and I am ready to accept him for my husband." The story continues in the modernized version of M. Sepet as follows:

"One evening when mother and daughter lay sleeping together, the Queen of Heaven, the glorious Virgin Mary, appeared to them surrounded by a great host of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins, and many other saints, all of whom shone in radiant beauty. The Virgin Mary approached St. Catharine and said to her:

"'Look, my daughter! all these are kings, and indeed the greatest in the kingdom of my Son, the Emperor of Glory. I know that thou art still unwedded. If thou wouldst have any one of these for a bridegroom choose the one which best pleases thee and I will bring it about that thy desire shall be fulfilled!'

"But St. Catharine answered that she did not wish to marry any one of them. Thereupon Jesus Christ himself, the Emperor of Glory, appeared unto her in the presence of his gentle mother and a countless host of angels. Mary, the Blessed Virgin, said to Catharine, 'Wouldst thou choose this one for thy Bridegroom?'

"And when Catharine beheld his beauty, power, and wisdom, she fervently replied, 'Yea! Him do I desire whosoever he may be,—him and none other.' But Sabinella, her mother, looked at her with astonishment and said, 'How darest thou select for thy bridegroom one whom so many kings obey? Be content to choose one of the other nobles for thy husband, for all are great and mighty princes.'

"But the daughter sighed and answered, 'Dear mother mine! blame me not that I should wish this one for my husband, for I see none here who far surpass myself in all things excepting him alone. Oh, go at once and seek out the Empress, his mother, that she may soften his heart and that he may accept me as his bride, for if I may not be his handmaiden, I will never marry another.'

"The mother went at once to that lady and offered her daughter to her as bride for her son, the Emperor. The Queen of Heaven and of the angels then spoke to her well-beloved Son, 'Dearest Son, desirest thou this maiden for thy bride?' But he answered, 'No, my Mother, I desire her not. Rather remove her from thee, for she is not a Christian. I am the King of Christians, and must never have a pagan bride. But if she will be baptized, I give her my word
that I shall betroth her soon afterwards by giving her a ring as to my spouse.'

"After this miraculous vision had vanished, Queen Sabinella and her daughter awoke and told each other what they had seen as an actual occurrence. But from this time on Catharine wept constantly and said that she would nevermore find rest until she had received the Emperor of Glory as her husband. Impatient to be

baptized she urgently besought her mother to take her at once without delay to the godly hermit, and her request was complied with.

"When they had come together to the hermitage the mother told Ananias privately the vision as related above. The pious hermit, suddenly enlightened by our Lord Jesus Christ, called Catharine and her mother and said to them. 'The Emperor whom you have seen was our Saviour Jesus Christ and the Queen was his mother,
the glorious Virgin Mary. The hosts which you saw with them were their companions, the angels and saints of Paradise.

"The godly hermit added that if Catharine wished for her bridegroom this Heavenly King whom she saw in her vision, she must needs become a Christian."

The story tells how Catharine became a pious Christian and received baptism at the hands of Ananias, after which follows an account of the mystic marriage.
“Once, when St. Catharine was praying fervently in her chamber, Jesus Christ, the King of Glory, appeared before her, clad in fine apparel and accompanied by a great throng of angels and saints. As testimony that he accepted St. Catharine for his bride he placed a real ring upon her finger and promised to perform great things for her if she would remain faithful in her love, and when our Lord Jesus Christ had disappeared she knew at once that vision was to be understood in a spiritual sense. She was completely converted to a great divine love and reverent tenderness toward Jesus Christ, her spouse. From this time forth she often received great tasks of consolation from him, and in order that she might take comfort in him more fully she consecrated all her time and all her study and meditations to prayer and the reading and contemplation of Holy Scripture. As formerly she had studied most zealously and had become learned in vast numbers of volumes of profane science, now, after her conversion she applied herself to the books of Holy Scripture, especially to the writings of the Evangelists, giving to these her attention above all else. She said to herself: ‘Alas, sinner that I am, how long have I wasted my time in the darkness of profane books! Oh Catharine, here is the Gospel of thy spouse. Put all thy heart upon its teachings as faithfully and constantly as thou canst in order that thou mayest attain the light of truth.’

‘Reflecting day by day within her own heart, and questioning also day by day the servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom she loved to speak of him, she became a wonderful teacher of truth. Some say that the ring with which Jesus Christ had wedded her was received and preserved in the City of Alexandria, of Egypt, after the death and passion of Madame St. Catharine.’

We have not been able to compare this modernized version with Marius Sepet’s manuscript, but we would be interested to know whether the original contains mention of St. Catharine taking cognizance at once that “the vision was to be understood in a spiritual sense.” In apparent contradiction to it are other passages which insist on the reality of both the vision and the marriage, in token of which a real ring is left on her finger. According to the ascetic atmosphere of Christian mythology the spirituality of this marriage relation is a matter of course and so the narrator of the legend impresses his audience with the belief that St. Catharine is not merely the bride of Christ in the sense that any nun may be so considered, but in the special and true meaning of the word.

In some versions of the legend it is claimed that when St.
Catharine was tortured on the wheel no blood came from her wounds, but milk, which is characteristic of her as the representation of absolute purity, because according to the Old Testament notion blood is regarded as impure.

The Roman Breviary for November 25, the day of our saint, contains the account of St. Catharine's life, as approved by the Church, and reads in the English version as follows:

"This Katharine was a noble maiden of Alexandria, who from her earliest years joined the study of the liberal arts with fervent faith, and in a short while came to such a height of holiness and learning, that when she was eighteen years of age, she prevailed over the chiefest wits. When she saw many diversely tormented and haled to death by command of Maximin, because they professed the Christian religion, she went boldly unto him and rebuked him for his savage cruelty, bringing forward likewise most sage reasons why the faith of Christ should be needful for salvation.

"Maximin marveled at her wisdom, and bade keep her, while he gathered together the most learned men from all quarters and offered them a great reward if they would confute Katharine and
bring her from believing in Christ to worship idols. But the event fell contrariwise, for many of the philosophers who came to dispute with her were overcome by the force and skill of her reasoning, so that the love of Christ Jesus was kindled in them, and they were content even to die for his sake. Then did Maximin strive to beguile Katharine with fair words and promises, and when he found it was lost pains, he caused her to be hided, and bruised with lead-laden whips, and so cast into prison, and neither meat nor drink given to her for a space of eleven days.

"At that time Maximin's wife and Porphyry the Captain of his host, went to the prison to see the damsels and at her preaching believed in Jesus Christ, and were afterwards crowned with martyrdom. Then was Katharine brought out of ward, and a wheel was set, wherein were fastened many and sharp blades, so that her virgin body might thereby be most direfully cut and torn in pieces, but in a little while, as Katharine prayed, this machine was broken in pieces, at the which marvel many believed in Christ. But Maximin was hardened in his godlessness and cruelty, and commanded to behead Katharine. She bravely offered her neck to the stroke and passed away hence to receive the twain crowns of maidenhood and martyrdom, upon the 25th day of November. Her body was marvelously laid by Angels upon Mount Sinai in Arabia."

Note here that in the Breviary the pagan prince is called Maximin, while in the legend he is identified with Maxentius, who was beaten by Constantine in the battle of Saxon Rubra, and after his defeat was drowned in the Tiber. In this way the legend of St. Catharine had become closely affiliated with the final victory of Christianity.

According to Mielot St. Catharine addresses Christ in a prayer before her execution, and he answers her from out of a cloud with these words: "Come thou, my much beloved, come my bride! The gate of heaven is open to thee. The dwelling of eternal peace is prepared for thee and awaits thy coming. The glorious hosts of virgins descend with great rejoicing to thee with a crown of victory. Come therefore and be assured that I will graciously grant thee all those favors which thou askest. Yea I promise to extend all help, assistance and comfort which thou askest me also to those who in pious faith revere thy passion and will call on thee in danger and extremity. I promise to them all these benefits and the grace of heaven."

According to the legend Mt. Sinai became the burial place of St. Catharine's body, and Marius Sepet claims that the beginning
of the public worship of St. Catharine dates from the discovery of her tomb on Mt. Sinai in the eighth century.

He says:

"The worship of Catharine spread very rapidly among the

Christians of the Orient and in the whole Greek Church, whence it penetrated into the Occident and was received also in the Latin Church. This happened before the crusades, for the French Na-
tional Library contains two manuscripts of the old Latin legend
dating from the time of the first crusade. The crusades by en-
couraging and facilitating pilgrimages to the holy places of the
Orient, have undoubtedly contributed much to the spread of the
fame and the worship of St. Catharine, whose relics rest in a mon-
astery on Mt. Sinai."

It is impossible to tell how old the legend of the mystic marriage
may be, but it seems sure that as soon as it appeared on record it
spread with great rapidity and became very soon afterwards well-
nigh the most popular of all legends. Its popularity kept at its
height between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, and we may
not go astray if we assume that the currency of the unwritten tales
prepared the rapid acceptance of the legend when it first made its
appearance in literary shape.

In ecclesiastical art St. Catharine is represented with a spoked
wheel which in consequence of this is called St. Catharine's wheel.
Frequently she carries in her hand a palm branch or books, both
in token of the eminent position which she holds on account of her
great learning. The most celebrated illustrations of her life are
frescoes by Avanzi and Altichieri in the church of St. George at
Padua, completed in 1377, and by Masaccio in the church of St.
Clement at Rome made in the fifteenth century.

Not only are there many altarpieces in the churches of Cath-
olics (and even some in Protestant countries) which have come
down from pre-Reformation times, but our art galleries also contain many valuable pictures of St. Catharine including representations of her mystic marriage. All of them bear witness to the
tenderness with which the idea was cherished at that time all over Catholic Christendom.

The Art Gallery of Cologne possesses perhaps the richest collection of St. Catharines. Among them is a triptych, an altarpiece
consisting of a center with two wings, which contains a series of
does of the life of St. Catharine by an unknown
painter commonly designated as the Master of the St. George

Legends. We see that even in this subject the artist remains faith-
ful to his favorite topic, for he introduces the motive of the dragon
fight into the Catharine legend.

[TO BE CONCLUDED.]