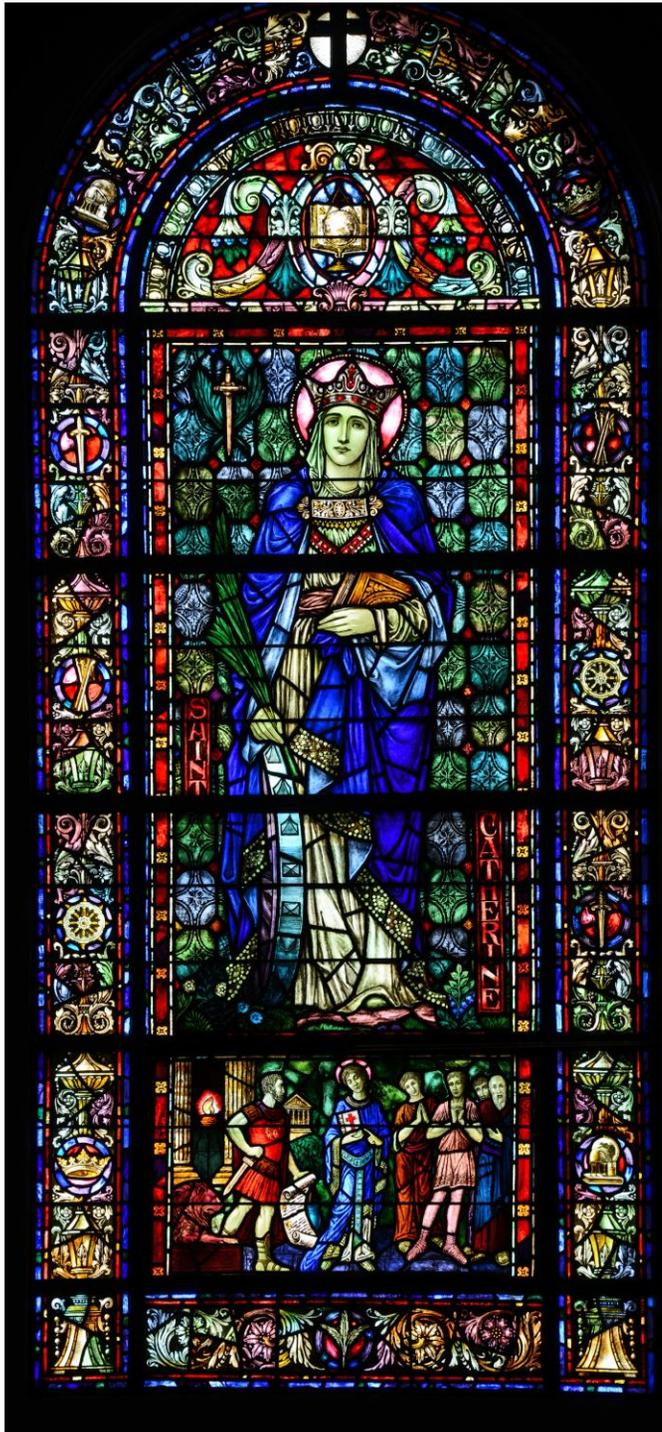


CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA early 4th century

The presence of Catherine in the chapel's program, years before Holy Cross was a co-educational institution, testifies to her unusual importance. Although her existence is historically unverifiable, Catherine was one of the most popular saints in the later part of the middle ages and the Renaissance. She was seen to have had a special relationship with Christ, often described as a mystical marriage. By the thirteenth century, at least, her story was elaborated in a variety of dramatic renderings. She was born a nobleman's daughter (some accounts name a King Costus) and was instructed in the liberal arts in one of the most culturally sophisticated cities in the Roman Empire.

During a persecution by a pagan emperor, often identified as Maximinus (305-313), ruler of the eastern part of the empire, citizens were ordered to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Catherine refused, rebuking the emperor for his idolatry and arguing with his counselors over points of philosophy and faith. In most of the stories, her great beauty as well as learning becomes a point of contention. Maximinus not only quakes before her wisdom, but is ravished by her beauty and determines that she will become his wife. Catherine clearly states that she will have no husband other than her mystical spouse, Christ. In anger over his failure to convert her by reason, or to win her to him through marriage, Maximinus' love turns to hatred, and he orders her tortured on a spiked wheel. Following standard confrontational narratives for saints' lives, Catherine's righteousness is vindicated when an angel descends to destroy the wheel before it can harm her. Finally she is beheaded, and a voice from heaven speaks, "Come, My beloved, My spouse, Behold the door of heaven is open to thee" (*Golden Legend*). Her body was believed to have been transported to Mount Sinai, the site since Constantine's time of a renowned monastery.

Christian philosophers honor her as their patroness, and in the Renaissance she was often set as a female counterpart to St. Jerome as the patroness of rhetoricians and lawyers. It may have been her power as well as her eloquence and steadfast determination to refuse earthly marriage that drew Jesuit attention to her as a model. In the lunette above her head the Renaissance crest contains a symbol of an open book, emphasizing her scholarship.



The narrative scene also emphasizes her confounding of false doctrine, for she "spoke of (Christ's) testimonies before kings." Catherine points to the Sacred Scriptures in her hands as a Roman official approaches her with an unrolled scroll, presumably the Roman law concerning public sacrifice.

There are fragments of Roman architecture in the background, columns and a statue of a lion guarding the doorway of a Roman temple. A flame burns on a tripod between the pillars of the temple. These elements mark the scene as characteristically pagan and instantly recognizable for anyone familiar with the works of Livy or Virgil, standard reading for a large number of Holy Cross students in the 1920s, and certainly part of the classical education of the Jesuits. The group of people standing behind Catherine may well be the pagan scholars who, after their debate with Catherine, were so persuaded by her argument that they converted. Maximinus then had them executed (either for incompetence or apostasy).



The surrounding borders again depict Catherine's symbols of the wheel, martyr's palm, writing implements, executioner's sword, and crown. The crown in this instance has a double meaning, reflecting not only her crown of martyrdom but her noble birth. In addition, her position as patron of learning is seen in the image of the chemistry flasks and globe.

