

The Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine of Alexandria

The Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine of Alexandria was painted by Antonio Allegri da Correggio (1489-1539) in 1518 and is documented as part of the collection of Barbara Sanseverino before passing into the collection of Cardinal Odoardo Farnese. In 1734, it was transferred to Naples by Carlo III, King of Naples and Sicily as part of his inheritance from his mother, Elizabeth Farnese, the last representative of the Farnese dynasty.

The picture is conserved in the Museum of the Palazzo di Capo di Monte in Naples. A further copy of the picture is in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The Sposalizio Mistico di Santa Catherina is a subject which was painted several times by Correggio. Traditionally, it was regarded as a symbol of the mystical union between Christ and those who had embraced the religious life.

The copy acquired by the parish is a cut-down copy of the original (24 x 28 cm) in Naples and came from the Convent of Mercy in Newry Co. Down.

St. Catherine was born in Alexandria in Egypt in 286 A.D. Her father was Constus, governor of Alexandria. Following a vision of Our Lady and the Christ child, she converted to Christianity. She was a noted scholar, philosopher and exponent of NeoPlatonism. She was martyred in the persecution of Maxentius (289-313 AD) firstly on the wheel and subsequently by decapitation.

The Emperor Justinian founded the monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai in her honour in 548. She is the patron saint of lawyers, judges, and jurists; librarians, archivists, theologians, and preachers; nurses, and those facing sudden death. Painted in 1621 by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591-1666), nicknamed Il Guercino because of his squint, on commission from Bartolomeo Fabri (1582-1646), a prominent nobleman from Cento, as a pendant for another picture, The Taking of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (currently in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge). Both subjects had been painted twenty years earlier by Caravaggio whose work much influenced Guercino.