

ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA (1347 - 1380)

“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’ ”

—Matthew 25:37-40 ¹

A Child's Vision. Life-changing experiences do not usually occur at the age of six. But such an experience apparently happened to little Catherine Benincasa as she walked along the streets of Siena, Italy, with her brother Stephen. Near the local church, Catherine had a vision of Christ, along with the apostles Peter, Paul, and John, and fell into a kind of trance. After this incident, she began to fast and pray, and to withdraw from society. Catherine retained this devout nature for her remaining 27 years.

Catherine was born on March 25, 1347, one of the youngest of 25 children ² born to Giacomo Benincasa, a tradesman, and his wife, Lapa di Piagenti di Puccio. Catherine's parents were not wealthy, but they were well respected and very religious. She is reported to have been wise and charming, even as a child. However, after her vision, she avoided the normal interests of girls her age, preferring to stay at home and devote herself to prayer.

Catherine refused to even consider marriage. When she reached the normal marrying age of 12, ³ her parents tried to introduce her to possible suitors, but she would only flee. She even refused to try to make herself look more attractive, except for a brief time when an older sister persuaded her to try it. Catherine later regretted giving in on this issue and regarded her capitulation as a terrible sin. Her parents took her to a Dominican confessor, hoping he would order her to obey her parents and consent to be married. Instead, he became convinced of her special calling and advised her to cut off her long hair, which of course she did. In desperation, her

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* translation.

² Catherine was a twin, but her twin sister died shortly after birth.

³ This is of course a very young age to be married in our culture, but in the 14th century people, on average, died at a much younger age than today.

parents decided that she should enter a convent, but Catherine refused this as well. They punished her by depriving her of her privacy and forcing her to cook and clean for the entire family. Perhaps they thought she would prefer marriage to such drudgery. But Catherine performed her duties joyfully, singing and praying to God as she worked. Seeing this, her parents finally relented and stopped trying to force her into a conventional mold.

Denial of Self. At age 15 or 16, she asked to join a religious order called the Dominican Tertiaries (that is, the Third Order of the Dominicans), which was for people who were living in the world, rather than trying to withdraw from it. Although most of its members were elderly women, they agreed to let Catherine join. Some say that the ladies were convinced in part because her face was so disfigured by acne (or possibly smallpox) that they decided there was little chance of her breaking her vow of chastity. But more likely they were won over by her obvious, deep commitment to Christ.

For the next three years, Catherine devoted herself to fasting and prayer, seldom leaving her room except to attend Mass, and living mostly on bread and water. She had visions of Christ during this time, and spent long hours in prayer, penance, and silent contemplation. Then, after three years, Catherine emerged from her solitude and accompanied other Tertiaries in their visits to hospitals, prisons, and poor people. When she inherited property upon the death of her parents, she gave it to the poor. She encouraged and inspired those around her, leading many to faith in Christ and to greater devotion to God. She urged everyone to practice Christian love, believing that only this could cure the world's ills.

Her piety and generosity must have been extraordinary, because her reputation quickly spread, and she began to receive visits from priests, nobles, and many others. Her friends included many of Siena's richest and most powerful families. She even exchanged letters with Pope Gregory XI ⁴—although she needed help from her educated friends to answer him, since she could not read or write.

Catherine is renowned for her asceticism. She seems to have been able to survive on very little food, and constantly denied herself the usual earthly pleasures. Yet she is more famous for her tremendous capacity for love and service to others. She courageously nursed victims of the Plague, ⁵ which was a dreaded, highly infectious disease, which was usually fatal during the time when she lived. Both

⁴ Pope, 1370-1378

⁵ The Plague entered Europe in 1347—the year Catherine was born—and devastated Italy from 1348 to 1365. The disease later spread to other parts of Europe. The Plague would kill 70,000 people in London in 1665; 100,000 people in Vienna in 1679; and 83,000 people in Prague in 1681.

Plague victims and condemned prisoners experienced her comforting presence until their final moments. On the other hand, people attributed many miraculous cures to her intervention, and even she agreed that she had been given the divine gift of healing.

Her charity and self-sacrifice inspired virtually all who met her. Raymond of Capua, her confessor and biographer, reports that she once carried about 100 pounds of food, oil, and wine to a poor widow and her children, even though Catherine was so sick herself that she could hardly get out of bed. Her own book, *The Dialogue*, tells of her earnest prayers for the soul of a woman who was persecuting her. Catherine prayed that God would save the woman's soul and visit any punishment due her upon Catherine instead. The woman repented shortly before she died and asked Catherine for forgiveness. This story is typical of this generous young lady, who reacted to sin with compassion and prayer, rather than judgment, and seldom let anything disturb the joy and peace she found in God.

Catherine also played the role of peacemaker, helping to mediate disputes between rival families in and near Siena. Other cities also sought her help in resolving conflicts. In the 1370's, her role as peacemaker led her to play an important part in ending the "Babylonian Captivity" of the Papacy.

Advisor of Popes. During the Middle Ages, Kings coveted Papal favor in any dispute, for the Church had a great deal of political and spiritual influence. In 1309, France succeeded in "capturing" the Papacy by having it moved from Rome to Avignon, France. The period of the Popes' residence in Avignon, from 1309 to 1377, is known as the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy. The shifting of the Papacy to French soil ensured that France would have heavy influence in all papal decision-making.

Beginning in the pontificate of Urban V,⁶ Catherine urged the Popes to return to Rome. She probably did this, at least in part, because the Babylonian Captivity was corrupting Church leaders and alienating Italy. 150 years before Luther's Reformation, Catherine was outspoken in her criticism of the Church's ills, such as the sexual immorality, greed, and indifference of priests and bishops. Believing that Avignon had aggravated this sickness which was afflicting the Church, Catherine tried to persuade the Popes that returning to Rome would begin the cure. Pope Urban V, although a Frenchman, agreed. He dreamed of restoring the Papacy to Italy, and even visited Rome for three years (1367-1370). But he found the impoverished city depressing, and did not trust the Italians, so in the end he returned to Avignon, where he died. Urban V was succeeded by Pope Gregory XI.

⁶ Pope, 1362-1370

In 1370, Catherine had a vision which commanded her to heal the wounds of the faithful around her. In about 1376, she got her chance. The previous year, 1375, Florence had led a revolt of Italian cities against the despotic Frenchmen whom Urban V had appointed to govern the Papal States. Pope Gregory responded to the revolt with force, and a brutal war ensued. Gregory kept Rome loyal by promising to return the papacy to that once-great city.

In about 1376, the Florentine city leaders asked Catherine to help mediate peace between the city and the Pope. She of course agreed, and soon traveled to Avignon, where she tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Gregory to make peace. (Peace would come under Gregory's successor, Pope Urban VI.⁷) She also took advantage of the opportunity to again condemn the immorality she saw in Avignon, and to entreat Pope Gregory to return the Papacy to Rome. One story says she was helped in her efforts by the revelation, during one of her prayers, of a secret vow that Gregory had made to God—a vow to return one day to Rome. The Pope hesitated because of opposition from the French king and cardinals, but Catherine's insistence that this was the will of God—and perhaps her knowledge of his secret vow—helped convince Gregory to make the move.

When the French learned of Pope Gregory's decision, they tried to change his mind by discrediting Catherine. At their insistence, she was put on trial for heresy and other crimes, accused of being a witch and a fraud. However, the three bishops entrusted with her fate found the charges to be baseless and declared her innocent. In 1376, Pope Gregory left Avignon, arriving in Rome in January, 1377. Gregory died the following year, but the next Pope, Urban VI, remained in Rome.

Catherine's final years were spent trying to help Urban VI, whose tyrannical ways offended many within the Church. Urban's harshness, in combination with the French anger at the departure of the Papacy from Avignon, prompted a group of Church leaders to elect an alternate Pope, Clement VII, who resided at Avignon. (This split in the Papacy is called “The Great Schism,”⁸ and lasted from 1378 to 1417.) Urban requested Catherine's help. She responded by moving to Rome and

⁷ Pope, 1378-1389

⁸ France, Spain, Scotland, and the Kingdom of Naples (southern Italy) recognized the French Pope, Clement VII, as Pope. England, Flanders (Belgium), Germany, Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, and Portugal remained loyal to Urban VI. The Schism became even worse in 1409 when the Council of Pisa appointed yet another Pope, hoping the other two would defer to his authority. They did not, and for several years three Popes claimed to lead the Church. This chaotic situation prompted the convening of the Council of Constance (1414-1417), which was the largest church council in history, with almost 5,000 participants. The Council of Constance accepted the resignation of one Pope and deposed the other two. Then, in 1417, the Council appointed a single Pope to replace them, ending the Schism.

writing letters⁹ to European leaders asking them to support Urban, the “true” Pope. She also helped to mend Urban’s fractured relationship with the local Roman government, allowing him and successive Popes to live securely in Rome.

Sainthood. Unfortunately, Catherine's strength by this time was failing, no doubt due in part to her extreme asceticism. On April 21, 1380, she suffered a severe stroke which left her paralyzed. Eight days later, on April 29, 1380, she died. Her biographer claims that her dead body exhibited the “Stigmata”—the wounds of the crucified Christ on her hands, feet, and side. Pope Pius II¹⁰ canonized Catherine as a saint in 1461, and in 1970 Pope Paul VI¹¹ conferred on her the honorary title of “Doctor of the Church.”¹² She and St. Teresa of Avila, so recognized the same year, were the first women to receive this honor.

⁹ More than 300 of the letters Catherine wrote during her lifetime have survived.

¹⁰ Pope, 1458 - 1464

¹¹ Pope, 1963 - 1978

¹² A *doctor ecclesiae* is a canonized saint who is recognized by the Roman Catholic Church for his or her religious scholarship. The Catholic Church currently recognizes 33 Doctors of the Church.

Sources:

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