St. Catherine of Siena

Born on the feast of the Annunciation in 1347, St. Catherine of Siena became a stalwart voice of the Church, a shining light in one of the darkest, most turbulent periods of Christian history. She gave her short 33 years of life in service to God during the chaos of the great Western Schism, of two duly elected popes, the bubonic plague, a papacy relocated to France, of great political upheaval and warring in her native Italy. Possessing God-inspired wisdom, she provided a sense of confidence and certainty that influenced popes, nobles and commoners alike.

Piety at a young age

At age 6, Catherine had a vision in which the Lord made the Sign of the Cross over her; from that time she was graced with unique gifts from God, and her spiritual journey was set. When she was 12, her parents urged her to start considering a suitable husband. But Catherine was already in love with and had given herself to Jesus. She avoided suitors and even cut off her hair to make herself less attractive.

In her early years, she sought out times of prayer, meditation and solitude; never a nun, she became a Third Order Dominican. In 1366, she received another vision in which Jesus put a ring on her finger, a ring that only she could see, a symbol binding her forever to Christ. Eventually she was called from her life of solitude and prayer to share her gifts of faith with others. Her holiness soon was well known not only in Siena but throughout Tuscany, and increasingly people looked to her for spiritual guidance.

Catherine had a special love for the Eucharist. In his book “Saint Catherine of Siena: Her Life and Times,” C.M. Antony describes this Eucharistic experience: “When Catherine advanced to receive holy Communion, her face was glowing with

a deep color, and bathed in tears and drops of sweat. After receiving Our Lord, she fell into an ecstasy of great length, and when she recovered the use of her faculties, was unable to speak all that day."

Later it was explained that "at the moment of Communion her senses had been rapt away entirely from material things which she interiorly perceived to be, together with all intellectual and natural pleasures; 'nothing but emptiness and dust.' That she had then implored her Divine Spouse that she might henceforth only please and possess him; that he would take away her will, and gave her his. This he had done immediately; promising her that from that moment no exterior event should trouble her heart, change her intention or disturb her peace." Complete abandonment to the Eucharist sustained Catherine in all things.

Public life

When nearly 20, Catherine was called to intercede in the 14th-century crises brewing in Italy, in the Church and especially in the papacy. In 1309, Pope Clement V (r. 1305-14) decided to move from Rome to Avignon, France, where the Holy See remained for nearly 70 years. Not only were all the Avignon popes French, but so, too, were most of the College of Cardinals. This situation was not well received by many Catholics outside of France. Also, the papal absence from Rome contributed to the political and religious disorder throughout Italy, a situation prompting the popes to remain in France.

In Rome there was infighting among the nobility. Likewise in many papal states there were also conflicts between middle-class workers and their employers. In some instances, these groups hired mercenaries to attack others; the mercenaries worked for the highest bidder and, when not employed, assaulted people living in the countryside. Pope Gregory XI (r. 1371-78) tried to govern from France by sending legates, but these emissaries often aggravated the situation. Some

Italians sided with the pope, and others were against him. The crisis in Florence was especially severe, and the pope eventually placed Florence under an interdict. Catherine used her influence to limit the hostility and was asked by the antipope resistance in Florence to intercede with the pope on their behalf.

It was then, in 1375, that Catherine received the holy stigmata. These marks of Christ's suffering were not visible to others until her death: "But at her request, Our Lord made the marks visible only to herself, and … the marks became quite pronounced after her death, as verified by her incorrupt hands and feet" ("The Incorruptibles," Joan Carroll Cruz).

Influence on the papacy

In 1376, Catherine went to Avignon and sought the attention of Pope Gregory XI. The Florentines now turned away from her; she was on her own trying to convince the Holy Father to bring peace to the papal states and, most importantly, to move the papacy back to Rome. While Catherine regarded the pope as the Vicar of Christ, she did not hesitate to point out his shortcomings. In a letter encouraging Gregory XI to return the papacy to Rome, she wrote: "The wolf is carrying away your sheep, and there is no one found to help them … the hungry sheep await your coming to hold and possess the place of your predecessor and champion, Apostle Paul. For you as Vicar of Christ should rest in your own place. Come, then, come and delay no more; and comfort you, and fear not for anything that might happen, since God will be with you" ("Saint Catherine of Siena, As Seen in Her Letters," Vida D. Scudder).

Gregory saw several obstacles to such a move. His cardinals did not support the action; the pope feared an assassination attempt on the journey, and the chaos that was taking place not only in Rome but throughout Italy remained a serious concern. Catherine's direct approach to the pope was not common practice, and only her well-known holiness made such an

approach acceptable.

Pope Gregory, in 1377, and much because of Catherine's influence, returned to Rome. Among his first acts was to dispatch Catherine to Florence in an effort to bring peace among all the warring factions. This mission of peace was not successful until Urban VI, an Italian, was elected pope in 1378. Unfortunately the end of one crisis was followed by another.

Defending the pope

The cardinals who elected Urban quickly regretted their decision. They found they had selected a zealous reformer, an overbearing man who eliminated the niceties that the cardinals had grown accustomed to. The cardinals left Rome and gathered at Anagni, Italy, where they asked Urban to resign, claiming they had chosen him under threats from the Roman populace to select an Italian pope. The duly-elected Urban refused, and the cardinals elected another pope, Clement VII, who returned to Avignon. The Church now had two popes. Catherine called the cardinals "incarnate demons" and supported Urban, whom she considered the legitimate pope. Urban summoned Catherine to Rome and asked her to help him find a way out of this dilemma, this schism. For the next year she prayed and fasted continuously while seeking a harmonious solution. But God had other plans; on April 29, 1380, she died of a stroke. Catherine had given her life to God and to the holy Catholic Church.

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Honoring Catherine of Siena

The Church has conferred numerous honors on St. Catherine of Siena. Canonized in 1461 by Pope Pius II (r. 1458-64), the bull of canonization reads: “She assisted the unfortunate and the oppressed, counseled sinners and attracted them to penance by the mildness of her discourse; she gave counsel with joy. … She calmed disputes, appeased a great number of violent hatreds and terminated many bloody enmities. … Two Roman pontiffs esteemed her so highly that they charged her with several negotiations, and granted her a great number of spiritual favors.” Catherine is one of only four women named Doctor of the Church; her book “The Dialogue” is a spiritual classic. She is the co-patron of Rome, patroness of Italy and co-patron of Europe, plus there are thousands of Catholic Churches that bear her name.