

Saint of the Month for April 2014

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint Catherine of Siena, Virgin and Doctor of the Church **Tuesday, April 29**

I think you would have been impressed if you met Saint Catherine- I certainly would have been. She was determined, full of purpose, and clearly in a deep relationship with God.

Catherine was born Caterina Benincasa in Siena, Italy on the Feast of the Annunciation, 1347; she was the 24th of 25 children (Wow!). Her father was a well-to-do dyer, and they lived in a large house (as you would imagine). She seems to have been very merry as a child, and also prayed frequently.

At about six years of age she had a mystical vision in which she is said to have beheld Jesus seated in glory with Saints Peter, Paul, and John. This very moving experience convinced her to devote herself to God. Her mother pushed her to do what other girls of her age did, but to no avail- Catherine wanted prayer and solitude.

At twelve years of age her parents urged her to take more care in her personal appearance, which she did for a time, having her hair done and wearing more fashionable clothes, but she changed her mind. Her parents wanted her to get married despite Catherine's declaration that she would never do so, and when they persisted in the search for a husband she cut off her golden-brown hair, her chief beauty. The family reacted by persecutions, but finally relented when it became clear they did not change her plans. Catherine adopted a very austere life, and, after some difficulty, was admitted as a Dominican tertiary (a man or woman member of a monastic third order who takes simple vows and may remain outside a convent or monastery) in 1365.

Catherine had heavenly visions and consolations for some years, but also fierce trials and temptations. In 1366 on Shrove Tuesday (the day before Ash Wednesday) she had a vision of Jesus and Mary in which she became betrothed to Jesus and was given a ring visible to her alone. It was soon revealed to her that she must go out into the world and work for the salvation of others.

The first work was to care for very ill people in a hospital, but she was treated with ingratitude. Eventually such people were won over by her devotion.

She had further mystical experiences, and others gathered around her as disciples, convinced that she was a holy person. Not everyone in Siena thought well of her- she was regarded as anything from saint to fanatic to heretic. Because of this clamor she was summoned to Florence to appear before the Dominican superiors, but if any charges were made they were shown to be without merit, and she was exonerated. In Florence she met Raymund of Capua, who was newly appointed to a post in Siena; he became her spiritual director and also kind of a disciple, too. This relationship lasted until her death, and he was her first biographer.

Catherine's return to Siena was about the time that the city was struck by a horrible plague, and she spent much energy in comforting the dying. She also visited prisoners waiting for execution, and urged them to make their peace with God. She became known as a healer of feuds, at a time when enemies were not hard to find. (There was no Italy then- what became the unified country much later was a set of powerful city-states that were often at war with each other; they included Florence, Pisa, Siena, and Venice.) Catherine was anxious to stop Christendom from engaging in self-destruction, and so was moved to support a new crusade endorsed by Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378). These efforts brought her into contact with the Pope.

In 1375 she made a visit to Pisa, where she had a vision of five blood-red rays coming from a crucifix and causing her great pain- she had received the stigmata, like Francis of Assisi and others. She alone could see these wounds while alive, but upon death they became visible to all.

Catherine continued to work to end these city-state wars, which were complex affairs with foreign allies and plots and general messes; her efforts were not all successful.

She also spent much energy to get the Pope to return from Avignon, in southern France, to Rome. For very complex reasons, including very real danger from people in Rome, a previous Pope left Rome and he and his successors spent about 75 years in France. The curia came to be dominated by French cardinals, and many outside of France were unhappy with this state of affairs.

At a meeting with the current Pope, Gregory XI, Catherine told him that he should "fulfill what you have promised," a vow to return to Rome which he had never disclosed to a human being. Catherine had the ability to read thoughts sometimes, an ability which must have been disconcerting to say the least!

She returned to Siena, where she wrote her mystical work, in four parts, now known as the **Dialogue of Saint Catherine** in English, or just the **Dialogo** in Italian; the full name in Italian is **Il libro della divina dottrina**.

Within two years of the end of the Avignon residency of the Pope there arose a great schism: Urban VI (1378-1389) was chosen to be Pope in Rome and a rival was installed in Avignon. (As you may recall, the church had two (and for a time, three) people claiming to be the Pope- in Avignon, in Rome, and in Pisa.) Catherine worked hard to defend Urban VI's title, and wrote letters to leaders of various European countries. She also wrote to Urban VI to not give up, and to be less harsh, which attitude was alienating even his supporters. The Pope asked her to come to Rome so that he might benefit from her advice, but she soon suffered a seizure and then a stroke, and died on April 29, 1380 at thirty-three years of age.

Her surviving works include the **Dialogue** and about 400 letters. She was canonized in 1461, and proclaimed the patroness of Italy in 1939. In 1970 Pope Paul VI proclaimed her a Doctor of the Church (the first woman and first lay person to be so named).

The celebration is given the rank of Obligatory Memorial. (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); **Butler's Lives of the Saints, 2nd Edition** (Ave Maria

Press); **Magnificat**, April 2014; **Catholic Dictionary, Revised** (Our Sunday Visitor); **Encyclopædia Britannica**, 15th Edition.)

Collect from the Mass of Saint Catherine of Siena:

O God, who set Saint Catherine of Siena on fire with divine love
in her contemplation of the Lord's Passion
and her service of your Church,
grant, through her intercession,
that your people,
participating in the mystery of Christ,
may ever exult in the revelation of his glory.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

We certainly don't all have mystical experiences like Saint Catherine, but her overriding goal of doing the will of God should be our goal, too. She was courageous in following what she believed in, and accomplished much in 33 years by the grace of God and personal dedication. I think we can ask her help in keeping a focus on God and for courage when our proper beliefs are unpopular. Saint Catherine of Siena, pray for us!