

17. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

“Love transforms one into what one loves.”

Born in the City-State of Siena, part of the Papal States of Rome (modern Italy), Catherine was the daughter of wool-dyer, the 23rd of 25 kids. As a young girl, Catherine often went to a cave near her home in Siena to meditate, fast, and pray. At about age 7, she claimed to have seen a vision of Jesus with Peter, Paul, and John the evangelist; then she announced to her parents her determination to live a religious life. Convinced of her devotion, they gave her a small room in the basement of their home that acted as a hermitage.

“You know...that to join two things together there must be nothing between them or there cannot be a perfect fusion. Now realize that this is how God wants our soul to be, without any selfish love of ourselves or of others in between, just as God loves us without anything in between.”

In the year of her birth a flea full of the *bacillus Yersinia pestis* entering the Italian port of Messina, brought a tidal wave of disease called the "Black Death." In just three years, 1348 to 1350, more than one-third of Europe died. Baby Catherine survived the onslaught and, in adulthood, saved many plague victims through her compassionate nursing.

Catherine was not satisfied living a contemplative life; she wanted to help the poor and sick. But she did not want to be an ordinary nun. Catherine joined the Dominican Order of Penance (later known as the Dominican Third Order) in 1363. This "third way" was an organization of religious lay people who lived at home and directed their own activities in sacrificial service.

“The soul cannot live without love. She always wants to love something because love is the stuff she is made of, and through love I created her.”

From ages 16 to 19, Catherine continued living a secluded life at home and attracted many followers, who were drawn by her feisty personality and exemplary sanctity. During this time, she learned to read and became familiar with the church fathers, like Gregory the Great and Augustine, as well as popular preachers of the day. At the end of this three-year seclusion, Catherine experienced what she later described as "spiritual marriage" to Christ. In this vision, Jesus placed a ring on her finger, and her soul attained mystical union with God. She called this state an "inner cell in her soul" that sustained her all her life as she traveled and ministered.

“Bathe in the blood of Christ crucified. See that you don't look for or want anything but the crucified, as a true bride ransomed by the blood of Christ crucified-for that is my wish. You see very well that you are a bride and that he has espoused you-you and everyone else-and not with a ring of silver but with a ring of his own flesh.”

Catherine began an active ministry to the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned of Siena. When a wave of the plague struck her hometown in 1374, most people fled, but she and her followers stayed to nurse the ill and bury the dead. When the crisis abated, she embarked on a letter-writing ministry to convert sinners and reform the church and society.

Like many reformers of the day, she was disturbed by the rampant corruption of the church, and she believed the source of the problem was that the papacy had moved to Avignon, France. As a result, the popes became increasingly captive to French politics and lifestyle, which were decadent and corrupt.

In a series of letters, Catherine exhorted the pope to address the problems of the church and charged him to return to Rome:

"Respond to the Holy Spirit who is calling you! I tell you: Come! Come! Come! Don't wait for time because time isn't waiting for you."

One year later, in 1377, after Catherine had visited with him in Avignon, Gregory XI finally returned to Rome. It was the great moment of her public life.

In her 383 extant letters and *The Dialogue*, which she referred to as "my book", she describes her mystical experiences of encountering Jesus. At the heart of Catherine's teaching was the image of a bleeding Christ, the Redeemer—ablaze with fiery charity, eager sacrifice, and unqualified forgiveness. And it was not the cross or nails that held Christ to the tree, she says; those were not strong enough to hold the God-Man. It was love that held him there.

"O You who are mad about Your creature! true God and true Man, You have left Yourself wholly to us, as food, so that we will not fall through weariness during our pilgrimage in this life, but will be fortified by You, celestial nourishment."

Catherine died in Rome at the age of 33. Recent historians believe that her extreme fasting and penances led to a form of *anorexia nervosa* which played a part in her ailing health and eventual death. In 1970 the Roman Catholic Church declared her a doctor of the church, an honor bestowed on only 31 others (and only one other woman).

"Be a vase, which thou fillest at the source and at the source dost drink from. Although thou hadst drawn thy love from God, who is the Source of living water, didst thou not drink it continually in Him thy vase would remain empty."

"It is not the hour to seek one's self for one's self, nor to flee pains in order to possess consolations; nay, it is the hour to lose one's self."

(In a letter to the Pope) "...I have no other desire in this life save to see the honor of God, your peace, and the reformation of Holy Church, and to see the life of grace in every creature that hath reason in itself. Do not be satisfied with little things, because God wants great things!"

"This (painful thing) happens to me with the permission of God, according to His providence, as in all things that befall me, all tribulation that He sends me He wills only one single thing: my sanctification."

"All the way to heaven is heaven, because Jesus said, "I am the way.""