



**Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland**  
**Bishop Emeritus**  
**Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph**

**St. Catherine of Siena**

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Modern scholars tend to be very critical of medieval hagiographers. They perceive a constant overemphasis on the supernatural and the spectacular to the extent that their saint's humanity is all but obliterated. Their descriptions inspire awe rather than imitation. There were reasons for this, not least the competition between the desire of one city to boast that its patron was greater in every way than the saint revered in a neighboring town. With the growth of the empirical sciences in recent centuries our culture is no longer overly impressed by phenomena which can readily have a rational explanation. This does not mean that sanctity, mystery and miracles no longer exist: they should not be classified as endangered. Our creator God can never be limited by the limitations he may have placed on creation and the impact of his grace can achieve results which will always be beyond the understanding of our finite intellects.

Catherine of Siena, as you will soon discover, cannot be categorized. Superlatives fail to describe her. It is almost impossible to penetrate the secret of her holiness and her influence, immense in both church life and in political circles, was surely the result of her determination and ability to surrender to grace to such a radical extent that eventually she was, as it were, by God possessed. She was, of course, a mystic and we leave it at that because most of us know very little about mysticism, a word which has many definitions in the dictionary. Throughout her relatively short life Catherine grew into an extraordinary intimacy with God which, when it became public, both attracted faithful followers and repelled others who denounced her as a charlatan.

Before I give you an outline of her life it is important to place it in context. Saints are partly products of the era and the place in which they lived. In Catherine's case we have to zero in on the second half of the fourteenth century, a period punctuated by political and ecclesiastical turmoil and completely dominated by a mysterious and apparently incurable plague known as the Black Death. We should also know something about Siena and, for our purposes, to a lesser extent, something about Avignon and Rome .

Italy , as we know it today, did not exist in Catherine's time. The long narrow peninsula was home to a series of small and large city states which spent a great deal of their time at war with each other. Their fortunes varied. Sometimes they controlled huge tracts of land. When defeated they were forced to retreat to their heavily fortified hilltop towns. Siena was one of these cities. Always a place of strategic importance, the Etruscans and the Romans had fortifications here and the core of the modern city of Siena has preserved its medieval character. It is easy to recreate the community in which Catherine was born and spent most of her life. It is located on three hills which rise above the low-lying fields of Tuscany and its Cathedral or Duomo overshadows the town and can be seen from miles around in all directions. Work on the Cathedral began in the twelfth century. It was originally designed in Romanesque style but

when it was substantially completed two centuries later it had evolved into one of the finest examples of Italian Gothic architecture. Its façade and interior reflect an unforgettable composition of black and white marble. It was finished just about the time Catherine was born and she would have prayed there often.

Something else that almost coincided with Catherine's birth was the arrival of the Black Death in the city and surrounding provinces. It was the worst epidemic to strike Europe in eight centuries. It is believed to have originated in southern Russia around the Black Sea and was inadvertently imported into the ports of Europe by trading vessels which harbored the rats and fleas which carried the plague. It spread like wildfire and its victims died horribly within days. Nobody knew what caused it and nobody had a cure. When it had run its course over one third of Europe's population was dead. Catherine was born in 1347. In September of that year the Black Death reached Sicily, Southern Italy and, almost next door to Siena, the port of Livorno. Four months later it was ravaging Pisa and Venice. Siena was particularly hard hit. 65,000 of its population of 80,000 died in the plague.

It was into this milieu of wars and disease that Catherine first saw the light of day, the twenty-fourth child of Jacopo Benincasa and Lapa Piagenti and she was a twin. Her father was a wool dyer by trade, an occupation which apparently enabled him to support his large family. I do not know if any of Catherine's siblings died in the epidemic but such a great loss of life in their home city must have had a profound impact on the family. Biographers note that in her very early years Catherine was a bright joyful child who assiduously absorbed the deeply religious environment of her home. She must have been what we would call a precocious child because by the age of six she claimed she had her first vision of Christ and a year later announced to her stunned family that she had pledged her virginity to the Savior. She was roundly ridiculed by her family especially by her mother who had ideas of a suitable marriage in due time for her young daughter. Catherine responded to this notion by defiantly cutting off her hair to make herself less appealing to any young man in search of a wife. Her father, however, sensed something unique in his daughter's aspirations and he arranged for her to have her own small private room where she could devote herself to undisturbed prayer. Convinced that she would gradually get to know God intimately her teenage years were synonymous with intense prayer devoted to that end. She had little time for any semblance of a formal education and, extraordinary as it may seem, she remained functionally illiterate all her life. Her great masterpiece, *The Dialogue of Divine Providence*, basically a conversation between God and herself exploring her search for holiness, along with almost 400 of her surviving letters, were all dictated to and penned by her friends and followers.

The Dominicans had been founded about a century and a half before Catherine's time and they had a priory in Siena. As her teenage years ended she entrusted her spiritual life to their direction. Subsequently, a Dominican known as Raymond of Capua became her longtime Spiritual Director and in the face of the many antagonisms she encountered he became her protector and defender. After her death he wrote her first biography and became an elected Master General of the Dominicans and a Reformer within the Order. He was beatified by Pope Leo XIII in 1899.

Catherine became a tertiary member of the Dominicans and she is frequently depicted in art wearing the distinctive black and white Dominican habit. Keep in mind that Catherine was never a Dominican religious despite what the uniform may suggest. Tertiary members were always lay people who lived in their own homes and frequently engaged in apostolic work among the poor and the sick. To prepare for this life of service Catherine imposed a special

kind of novitiate upon herself. She spent three years, from the age of 19 to 22, in seclusion to facilitate her prayer life which was permeated with penances and severe austerities. Then, convinced that Christ had accepted her as his spouse in the mystical sense, she tells us that he instructed her to bring his love to others by reentering society to spend her days doing what were essentially the corporal works of mercy from nursing the sick and dying to burying the dead.

Her evident holiness and disinterest in worldly affairs attracted others and soon she was surrounded by rich and poor anxious to seek her counsel and to follow her example. As the numbers grew so did her influence. She gradually began to widen her horizons and play a role in society. She deplored the series of civil administrations in Siena which spent so much time in their warmongering that they neglected the people. She attacked greed and corruption in high places and, while she loved the Church as the Lord's creation, she had no hesitancy in calling to task those bishops and priests who were living lives not in accord with their sacred calling. These criticisms touched some raw nerves. She was denounced and was called to Florence to answer to a special Tribunal. She prevailed and was able to resume her life of service to those who were spiritually adrift as well as those who were the victims of physical poverty.

By now there was no going back. Though still in her twenties her reputation for holiness and fortitude expanded beyond Siena. She was not shy in adding her voice to a call for a Crusade against the Turks but, closer to home, it was her work in encouraging Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome from Avignon that is best remembered. It is highly likely that the Pope had already decided to return to the Eternal City but Catherine gave him the courage to do so. She stiffened his backbone and convinced him that it was the right thing to do.

Why was the Pope's return to Rome so important? The most mundane reason was the survival of the Papal States. We are familiar with the tiny city state of Vatican City as the place where the Pope resides and from which he shepherds the Church. It was not always so. In medieval Europe the Papal States covered a large section of the Italian Peninsula. They constituted a major power with armies, navies and a vast civil service. As well as being Christ's vicar on earth in the spiritual sense the Pope was also a temporal ruler and the dual responsibilities did not always or easily mesh. It led to corruption in the election of Popes and in the nepotism practiced by the successful candidates not to mention the harm done to the apostolic mission of the Church. The period known as the Avignon Papacy began in 1308 and lasted exactly 70 years. For reasons far too complicated to enumerate here a succession of Popes maintained their residences and their curiae in Avignon in the southeast corner of present day France on the left bank of the Rhone River. The proximity to French influence resulted in French Popes elected by French Cardinals and the era is derisively referred to by the Italians as "the Babylonian Captivity." Each Pope in turn expressed an interest in returning to Rome but the constant state of civil war up and down the Italian peninsula made the move impossible. The most important reason demanding a papal return was the welfare of the Church, not the Papal States. Catherine and many others understood this and that was why she confronted Gregory XI and assisted his return. Quite simply, the Pope should be where Peter had been martyred. Although there is an old ecclesiastical adage "ubi Petrus, ibi ecclesia" ("where Peter is, there is the Church") in the Catholic consciousness, then as now, there was no demand to have the Holy Father anywhere else other than Rome.

After Gregory was reestablished in the Eternal City, in no small measure because of Catherine's insistence, she returned to Siena to renew her life of prayer and charity among her many followers for whom she was a constant inspiration. All her laborious work came to naught when the Pope died unexpectedly and the Cardinals in Rome, now far removed from

the influence of the French, hurried to elect his successor. They selected the Archbishop of Bari, the last pope chosen from outside the College of Cardinals and he took the name of Urban VI. Although it was a canonical election some of the Cardinals regretted their decision and subsequently held a second election and an antipope, Clement VII, was chosen and he withdrew from Rome to Avignon. In fact, this turn of events was worse than the 70 years of the Avignon papacies as now we had two popes, each with his own set of Cardinal supporters, one in Rome and one in Avignon. It would only get worse because some years later there were three living claimants to the papal throne. Known in history as the Western Schism, it lasted from 1378 to 1417 and was only brought to an end by the Council of Constance. Catherine did not live to experience the chaos which enveloped her beloved Church. When the first antipope was elected she moved to Rome to support Urban as the legitimate successor of Peter and she offered God her life for the unity of the Church. Her health ailing and visibly openly distressed by the divisions within the Church, she spent day after day in St. Peter's in constant prayer. She suffered terribly, lost the use of her legs, had a stroke and died on April 29, 1380, now her feast day. She was 33 years old.

Catherine was a remarkable woman and it is difficult to assess her contribution to the welfare of the Church at a time of chaos, corruption and crisis. God gave us a most unlikely saint to play a pivotal role in the troubled history of the Church in her time. Once again God surprised us and once again he forces us to acknowledge the power of grace. The writers Chantal van der Plancke and Andre Knockaert have penned a book entitled "15 Days of Prayer with Saint Catherine of Siena." I like the way they summed up her life with these words:

*This young, bold, and devoted woman lived her life under the triple handicap of being illiterate, lay, and a woman, in a time when not one of these characteristics was valued. She exploded the stereotypes of the times, she went where no one, let alone a woman, had ever gone before. She was adamantly against self-love and saw it as the root of all bad governments-both lay and religious.*

Over the centuries the Church has come to appreciate the importance of her life within its historical context and her continuing importance in this day and age as an intercessor for Christians living in times no less troubled than the 14<sup>th</sup> century. During life she sought total conformity with the will of Christ and in death her body revealed the marks of the stigmata symbolizing a significant identification with the sufferings of the Savior.

She was canonized by Pope Pius II, also from Siena, in 1461, made patron of Italy in 1939 along with St. Francis of Assisi and was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970. She was the first lay person to receive this signal honor and, along with St. Teresa of Avila, was one of the first two women to achieve the distinction of becoming part of what was until then an all male membership. Pope John Paul II was an admirer of her holiness to such an extent that, along with St. Bridget of Sweden and St. Benedicta of the Cross, otherwise known to us as Edith Stein, he named Catherine co-patron of all of Europe. More than ever today, we need her prayers, we need her spirit, we need her courage. Once again, our God has used the weak ones of the world to confound the wise.