

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

My Nature is Fire

Catherine of Siena, a medieval saint and Doctor of the Church, was first and foremost an authentic human being who responded to the needs of the Church and the world around her. A lay third order Dominican, she lived in her own home amid an atmosphere of exuberant lay spirituality; of emotional preaching by the newly founded mendicants, the Franciscans and Dominicans; at a time when love and service of the neighbor were newly emerging as Christian values. Her *Letters*, her recorded Prayers, and her major testament, *The Dialogue*, reveal a woman motivated by a passionate relationship with God, pursuing ever deepening self-knowledge.

The foundation of Catherine's Trinitarian spirituality was Jesus' command to love God and neighbor as oneself. She sought a unity in her own person through her memory, understanding and will that would reflect both the oneness of the triune personhood of God, *Deità*, and the

harmony in which God, self and neighbor were one. To express the intensity of this oneness,

CATHERINE OF SIENA

A Prophetic Presence



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

Catherine chose the image of fire, a continuous flame burning in God and in herself.

"In your nature eternal Godhead, I shall come to know my nature," she prayed. "And what is my nature, boundless love? It is fire, because you are nothing but a fire of love," and "by the fire of love you created us" (*Prayers*, 12:104).

A Woman of the Church

Catherine's public ministry, directed to the needs of the Church and of society as a whole, coincided with a period of intense political upheaval for the Church. She used her prestige to support papal efforts to raise a crusade, to maintain peace in the Italian territories and to avert the formation and later, the expansion, of an anti-papal league in Tus-

cany. Catherine promoted the efforts of Gregory XI to return the seat of papal government to Rome, after seventy years of residence in Avignon. Later she would maintain the legitimacy of the election of Urban VI in 1378 when the election of a rival pontiff initiated the Great Schism that would continue well beyond her death. In becoming a public figure, Catherine's primary

interest was in saving souls, reconciling differences and "setting up a government of love" in the "city of God" rather than the city of this world. She was "not an arbitrator," a biographer wrote, "she was a friend of God" (Levasti, 96-97).

This observation remained true throughout Catherine's involvement in the public events of her lifetime. Her letters to the political leaders of her day were filled, not with political advice, but with spiritual encouragement to remain closely bound to Christ, to forsake evil, to defend the Church and to remain loyal to the Pope. They indicate her growing understanding of the problems involved in maintaining the stability of papal power, but her primary concern was the internal reform of the Church through the appointment of good leaders. She clearly stated the priorities of her mission when she wrote to Gregory, "I have no other desire in this life than to see God's honor, your peace, and the reform of holy Church, and to see the life of grace in everyone" (*Letters*, #88, 265).

This desire dictated Catherine's response to the political unrest of her day, a "hungry longing" for a peace which would reign when justice flowed both from a proper exercise of and a respect for authority. Her letters portray her at the fullest extent of her power: admonishing, correcting and advising. They give evidence of the courage of her conviction, the purity of her intention, and the methodology that was central to the reign of justice, peace, and the common good – the reform of the individual heart. Letters went out to all leaders involved, for the purpose of cementing and confirming the bonds of papal support. Letters to the Pope called him to a sense of responsibility and implored him to preserve the peace.

A Prophetic Presence

One does not become a public voice, a critic, a teacher, a prophet without intense spiritual development, for the call to be a prophet is ominous. We have only to think of Jonah and Elijah running away and hiding in fear. Catherine speaks of growing to a holy fear, centered on her own well being, safety and security, to a fear that is rooted only in the goodness and mercy of God. The result is an inner transformation, as she becomes "one with fire completely enveloped in it," experiencing "the effects of material fire" that not only gives heat and light, "but transforms everything into itself" (*I, Catherine*, #13, 84).

The mature Catherine, drawn into the center of the turmoil of the Church, combined the contemplation and active ministry of a Dominican vocation to become a prophet who dared to be used; a prophet who did not hesitate to speak the truthful word; a prophet who loved God and her neighbor with equal intensity. Her message was expressed in a Medieval imagery understood and valued by her contemporaries, a language rooted in commonly held Medieval concepts of the interactive nature of virtue and justice in the process of peacemaking. She spoke with conviction and acted with dignity, conscious of her power, its source, and her own responsibility to use it for the common good. She was aware of her unusual position and made no apologies for her gender, only for her boldness in addressing lofty personages.

Catherine lived in the years following the Gregorian reform as we live after Vatican II. Both reforms sparked a revitalized spirituality; both turned attention to Gospel values. Both emphasized individual conscience and individual holiness. Both reforms witnessed conflicts

between authority and freedom. Vatican II decreed that "conscience is the glory of the human person," calling us to be in touch with our inner voice, to be guided by our own inner light, while still respecting the need for law. Catherine, the mystic, is a model of individual

“Give us a voice, to cry out to you for mercy for the world and for the reform of holy Church. And listen to your own voice with which we cry to you!”

Prayer 10:80-81

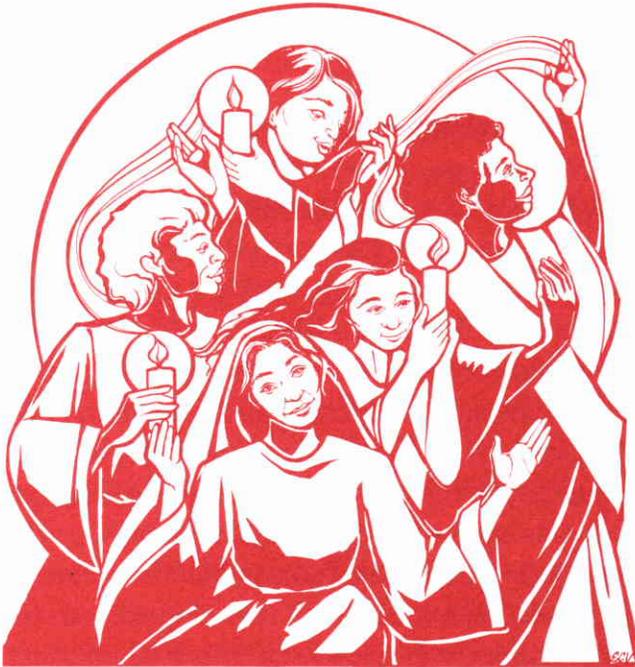
prophetic holiness and dedicated love of the Church, even in troubled times. She saw herself in a harmonious relationship: she was daughter, child, woman of the Church. Never was she indifferent to God’s work; never did her prayer for the Church falter. To her last breath she offered the example of her living, the word of her teaching, and the suffering of her body for God’s Church.

Why look to Catherine Today?

Catherine speaks to us of many things: of her own spiritual journey, of her role as spiritual guide, of her integration of contemplation and active ministry. A counselor, prophet, moral

reformer, peacemaker, reconciler, healer, an advisor to popes, she was most importantly an authentic human presence. She has much to say to women in the Church today, particularly in her ministry as a compassionate critic, a protagonist of highly developed virtue in those who would serve the Church, and an advocate of reform based on justice, peace and the common good. Wherever injustice was tolerated, Catherine was there to oppose it. Whenever the authenticity of the Church was threatened, Catherine advocated God's honor. Whenever there was a need for renewal and reform within or outside the Church, Catherine cried out for it. Catherine herself could not bring the Pope, the College of Cardinals, the people of her world to the virtue, the climate of justice and peace that she envisioned: and still she spoke her prophetic truth leaving the result to God.

Contemporary theologian Karl Rahner predicted that the future would witness an overflowing presence of what he called the *Mysticism of Daily Life*. This he described as living faithfully and with deep love, bearing the unsought burdens of everyday life in open and authentic self-knowledge, distinguishing good from evil, discerning where God is and is not in the present world, and working for justice by responding to what God sends in a stance of graceful communion with God and others. Catherine of Siena is a model of this way of life. Her faithful living out of her call to be a mystic voice in the upheavals of the Church and of the world affirmed what she first learned in mystical contemplation: that she was especially called to do God’s work in the world and to be an instrument of God’s glory in the Church.



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

This brochure was prepared by Catherine M. Meade, CSJ Regis College, Weston MA. She is author of *My Nature is Fire*, a reflection on the life and spirituality of Catherine of Siena, and a forthcoming study on Catherine, *Journey to Maturity*.

Catherine of Siena References:

The Prayers of Catherine of Siena, ed. & tr. by Suzanne Noffke, 1983.

The Dialogue, ed. & tr. by Suzanne Noffke, 1980.

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I, Catherine: Selected Writings of Saint Catherine of Siena. Ed. & tr. By Kenelm Foster and Mary John Ronayne, O.P., 1980.

Raymond of Capua's *Legenda*, tr. by Conleth Kearns, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, 1980.

Giuliana Cavalini, *Catherine of Siena*, 1998.

Mary Ann Fatula, *Catherine of Siena's Way*, 1990.

Arrigo Levasti, *My Servant, Catherine*, tr. by Dorothy White, 1954.

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Mary O'Driscoll, ed., *Catherine of Siena, Selected Spiritual Writings*, 1993.

Patricia Vinje, *Praying with Catherine of Siena*, 1990.

The feast day for Catherine of Siena is celebrated on April 29. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

In 2001, **FutureChurch** developed the original **Celebrating Women Witnesses** projects in creative partnership with Call To Action. Since that time hundreds of educational and prayer programs have been held in schools and churches throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, Latin America, Malaysia and Africa. Currently FutureChurch is solely responsible for administering this very popular project. A specially designed **Teacher's Edition** is also available from FutureChurch which includes lesson plans and special projects geared to junior and senior high school students.

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Prayer Service Honoring St. Catherine Of Siena

Before you begin, have the incense pot, incense and matches ready. Invite everyone to turn to those around them and introduce themselves. When all have finished, begin.

Opening Song: *We Are Called* [David Haas ©1988, GIA Publications, Inc.]

Greeting

Presider: In the name of God the Source of All Love, and of the Christ our Bridge to life Anew, and of the Spirit Dwelling in us.

All: Amen

Presider: Grace and peace to you from God whose love is everlasting and from our brother Jesus Christ.

All: And also with you.

Opening Prayer

Presider: Let us pray. God of Truth and Holiness, you give us All life and love. Grant us the wisdom to listen to Your truth and the courage to act upon what we hear. Give us All that we need to be the disciples you call us to be. We ask this in the name of your son and our brother, Jesus the Christ.

All: Amen

Liturgy of the Word:

Reading: 1 Peter 1:13-24 *(May be broken up into three sections, with three different voices):* 1. Obedience, vs.13-16; 2. Reverence for the Precious Blood, vs.17-21; 3. Mutual Love, vs.22-24. *(If reading is broken up into parts, the Psalms below might be placed in between the parts. Preaching would then immediately follow the end of the reading.)*

Psalm Response: Psalm 63: My Soul is Thirsting [Michael Joncas ©1987, GIA Publications, Inc.] or Psalm 19: Lord, You Have the Words [David Haas ©1983, GIA Productions, Inc.]

Reflection/Preaching: (A 10-15 minute reflection on the reading or the occasion)
(See The Doctors of the Church by Bernard McGinn © 1999, Crossroad Publishing Co. for more insight into the image of Christ as the Bridge and the importance of the Precious Blood in Catherine's work.)

Ritual Action:

Psalm 141: *Incense Psalm* [Michael Joncas ©1987 GIA Productions Inc.]
Light coals, out of sight of assembly, during preaching.) At beginning of Psalm, one person puts small amount of incense on coal and processes through assembly possibly up center aisle or in circle around group if crowd size permits. At end of Psalm, bowl or pot should be placed in a central location. At Awe pray. At during Prayer of Faithful, someone places another small

amount of incense in pot. (May be one or more designated people, or people invited from the assembly as they feel moved to do so.)

Prayer of the Faithful: *Sung response:* Oh, God hear us, hear our prayer.

[General Intercessions by Bob Hurd and Craig Kingsbury ©1984 OCP] (*Melody may be played quietly under each petition.*)

Reader: That we may be open to God's truth and obedient to its message, we pray...[R]

Reader: That we may fill the world with the healing power of humble, constant, holy prayer, we pray...[R]

Reader: That we may trust in the everlasting love of God for All humanity, we pray...[R]

Reader: That we, like Catherine, may be peacemakers in a broken church, we pray...[R]

Reader:[Prepared prayers that pertain more directly to the particular assembly.], we pray..[R]

[invite those assembled to add their prayers aloud. End each with: we pray...[r] (and incense)

Closing prayer:

Presider: Let us pray. We bless you, O God and praise your Holy Name. Just as you gave strength to Catherine, give us All that we need to speak your truth, even in the face of those who would deny you. Make us voices of unity and love. We ask this and All things in the name of Your Son, Jesus the Christ who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

All: Amen

Presider: May God bless us All, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Presider: Now, let us go from here to be signs of God's abiding love for us, and bearers of the Truth of that love.

All: Thanks be to God.

Closing song: *Now We Remain* [David Haas ©1983, GIA Publications, Inc.]

or *A Praise to You, O Christ, Our Savior* [Bernadette Farrell © 1986, Bernadette Farrell]

[Note that all music can be found in Gather Comprehensive © 1994, GIA Publications, Inc.]

This prayer service was prepared by Laurel Jurecki who has a Master's degree in Liturgy and is a Pastoral Minister in Cleveland, Ohio

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