

# St Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

## Patroness of Europe

A letter to the Dominican Order, published April 2000 to celebrate the naming of St Catherine of Siena as one of the Patrons of Europe.

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During the Mass for the opening of the Second Synod for Europe, to my surprise and delight the Pope proclaimed St Catherine of Siena co patroness of Europe, together with St Teresa Benedict of the Cross and St Bridget of Sweden. Catherine was a prodigious letter writer to her brethren and sisters, and so it is appropriate to honour her in a brief letter to the Order.

Catherine's Europe was, like our world today, marked by violence and an uncertain future: the papacy had fled to Avignon, splitting the Church and dividing countries, cities and religious orders, including our own; cities were being decimated by the bubonic plague, known as the Black Death; there was a decline of vitality in the Church, a loss of a sense of purpose and a crisis of religious life.

Catherine refused to resign herself in the face of this suffering and division. In the words of Pope John Paul II, she dived 'into the thick of the ecclesiastical and social issues of her time'.<sup>1</sup> She addressed political and religious rulers, either in person or through letters, and clearly told them their faults and their Christian duty. She did not hesitate even to tell the Pope that he must be brave and go back to Rome. She went to the prisons and cared for the poor and the sick. She was consumed by an urgency to bring God's love and mercy to everyone.

Above all, Catherine struggled for peace. She was convinced that 'not by the sword or by war or by violence' could good be achieved, but 'through peace and through constant humble prayer'.<sup>2</sup> Yet she never sacrificed truth or justice for a cheap or easy peace. She reminded the rulers of Bologna that to seek peace without justice was like smearing ointment on a wound that needed to be cauterized.<sup>3</sup> She knew that to be a peacemaker was to follow the steps of Christ, who made peace between God and humanity. And thus the peacemaker must sometimes face Christ's own fate, and suffer rejection. The peacemaker is 'another Christ crucified'. Our own world is also torn by violence: ethnic and tribal violence in Africa and the Balkans; the threat of nuclear war; violence in our cities and families. Catherine invites us to have the courage to be peacemakers, even if this means that we must suffer persecution and rejection ourselves.

Peace, for Catherine, meant, above all, peace in the Church, the healing of the Great Schism. Here we see both her intense love of the Church, which for her was 'no other than Christ himself',<sup>4</sup> and her courage and freedom. She so loved the Church that she did not hesitate to denounce the failings of the clergy and bishops in their pursuit of wealth and position, and called for the Church to be the mystery of Christ in the world, the humble servant of all. She even dared to tell God what to do, when she prayed:

You know how and you are able and it is your will,  
so I plead with you to have mercy on the world,  
and to restore the warmth of charity and peace  
and unity to holy Church. It is my will that you  
do not delay any longer.<sup>5</sup>

The Church in our time also suffers from divisions, caused by misunderstanding, intolerance and a loss of 'the warmth of charity and peace'. Today the love of the Church is often assumed to mean an uncritical silence. One must not 'rock the boat'! But Catherine could never be silent. She wrote to some cardinals, 'Be silent no longer. Cry out with a hundred thousands voices. I see that the world is destroyed through silence. Christ's spouse is pallid, her colour has been drained from her.'<sup>6</sup> May St Catherine teach us her deep love of the Body of Christ, and the wisdom and courage to speak

truthfully and openly with words that unite rather than divide, which illuminate rather than obscure, and which heal rather than wound.

Catherine's relationships with her friends, and especially her Dominican brothers and sisters, was marked by the same combination of love and boldness of speech ('parrhesia', e.g. Acts 4:31, 2 Cor 7:4). She regarded each friend as a gift from God, to be loved 'very closely, with a particular love'.<sup>7</sup> She believed that their mutual friendship was an opportunity 'to bring each other to birth in the gentle presence of God',<sup>8</sup> and a proclamation of 'the glory and praise of God's name to others'. But this love did not prevent her from speaking very frankly to her friends, and telling her brethren exactly what they should do, including her beloved Raymond of Capua, who became Master of the Order in the year of her death. There can be no love without truth, nor truth without love. This is how she prayed for her friends:

Eternal God,  
I pray to you for all those you have given me  
to love with a special love  
and with special concern.  
Let them be illuminated with your light.  
Let all imperfection be taken from them,  
so that in truth they may work in your garden,  
where you have assigned them.<sup>9</sup>

If the Dominican Family is to become, in Catherine's words, 'a very spacious, gladsome and fragrant, a most delightful garden',<sup>10</sup> then we must learn both her capacity for mutual friendship and for truthfulness. Our friendship as men and women, religious and lay people, is a great gift for the Order and for the Church, but it often is marred by wounds of which we hardly dare to speak. If we are to work together as preachers of the gospel, then we must speak to each other with Catherine's frankness and trust, so that 'in truth they may work in your garden'.

Catherine was a passionate woman with big desires: for union with God, for the spread of the gospel and for the good of the whole human family. Desire expands our hearts. She told God: 'you make the heart big, not stingy so big that it has room in its loving charity for everyone'.<sup>11</sup> God said to Catherine, 'I who am infinite God want you to serve me with what is infinite, and you have nothing infinite except your soul's desire.'<sup>12</sup>

How can we grow as men and women who are touched by Catherine's passion for God? How can we be liberated from smallness of heart and contentment with little satisfactions? Perhaps it is through discovering, as did Catherine, that God is present in the very centre of our being and identity. The passion for God is not a taste to be acquired, like a love of football. It is there in the core of my being, waiting to be discovered. Our world is marked by a deep hunger for identity. For many people today the urgent question is: 'Who am I?' This was Catherine's question.

The contemporary search for self knowledge is often a narcissistic preoccupation with self, an introverted concentration on one's own well being and fulfilment. But for Catherine, when I finally see myself as I am, I do not discover a little nugget of lonely selfhood. In what Catherine called 'the cell of self knowledge' I discover myself being loved into existence. She described herself as 'dwelling in the cell of selfknowledge in order to know better God's goodness towards her'.<sup>13</sup> If I dare to make that journey towards self knowledge, then I shall discover how small, flawed and finite I am, but I shall also see that I am utterly loved and valued. God told Catherine: 'It was with providence that I created you, and when I contemplated my creature in myself, I fell in love with the beauty of my creation.'<sup>14</sup>

So Catherine offers a liberating answer to the contemporary quest for identity. It takes us far away from a false identity based on status or wealth or power. For at the heart of our being is the God whose love sustains us in being. This is the place of contemplative prayer, where one meets the God who delights in loving and forgiving, and whose own goodness we taste. Here we discover the secret of Catherine's peace and her dynamism, her confidence and her humility. This is what made this young woman, with little formal education, a great preacher. This is what gave her the freedom to speak and to listen. This is what gave her the courage to dive in and address the great issues of her time. With the help of her prayers we may do likewise.

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1 Apostolic Letter, L'Osservatore Romano, no. 40 (1611), English edition.

2 D. 15.

3 L. 268.

4 L. 171.

5 O.24.

6 L. 16.

7 D. 41.

8 L. 292.

9 9 O. 21.

10 D. 158.

11 O. 21.

12 D. 92.

13 D. 1.

14 D. 135.