



# ST. CATHERINE *of* SIENA

## *The Mystic*

### EPISODE OUTLINE — PART I

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- I. INTRODUCTION
  - A. Fascinating Catherine: uneducated; counselor to popes and kings;  
Doctor of the Church
  - B. Mystical power vs. worldly definition of power
  
- II. LIFE AND TIMES
  - A. Her vision as a young girl
  - B. Vow of virginity and living as a recluse
  - C. Mantellate/Order of Dominicans
  - D. Motif in writings: blood
  
- III. AVIGNON
  - A. Papacy in exile in Avignon
  - B. Convinced Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome from Avignon
  - C. Supported Urban VI, Gregory's successor
  
- IV. CATHERINE'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD
  - A. Named Doctor of the Church
  - B. God is beauty, truth, and love itself
  - C. God is "crazy in love" with the world



ON FIRE *with* TRUTH

## THE LIFE & TEACHING *of* ST. CATHERINE *of* SIENA

Catherine of Siena is the only lay woman ever proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. For most of her life, except when she was away on a mission of one kind or another, she stayed at home with her family in Siena. Born on March 25, 1347, she died at the age of 33 on April 29, 1380. One of the closest friends of Catherine most affected by her death was a young Sienese poet, Neri dei Pagliaresi. A single stanza from the elegy he wrote at the time of her death offers a vivid, intimate portrait of his much-missed friend:

Tell me, who will save me now from an evil end?

Who will preserve me from delusions?

Who will guide me when I try to climb?

Who will console me now in my distress?

Who will ask me now: “Are you not well?”

Who will persuade me that I shall not be damned?<sup>1</sup>



### ST. CATHERINE’S “LIVING VOICE”

What Catherine of Siena was clearly able to communicate, again and again to the many friends and associates who surrounded her during her short life, was an extraordinary sense of their own human dignity and worth. This was due, in part, to the profundity of her message—to the grace of the Gospel itself. But it was also related to the remarkable instinct she possessed for delivering a word of encouragement—a straightforward,

## QUOTES ON Love

*“The eternal Father said:  
'The soul cannot live with-  
out love. She always wants  
to love something because  
love is the stuff she is made  
of, and through love I cre-  
ated her.'” (Dialogue 51)*

*“And the eternal Father  
said, 'If anyone should ask  
Me what this soul is, I  
would say: She is another  
Me, made so by the union of  
love.'” (Dialogue 96)*

illuminating word—just when it was needed. A measure of the strength of Catherine’s personality and character is that, even today, a clear impression of her spirit still survives in her writings and survives, in particular, in the many letters she wrote or dictated: “I Catherine, servant and slave of God’s servants, am writing to *encourage* you....”<sup>2</sup> Catherine writes, at times, with the warmth and loving audacity of a girl-child; at other times, with all the power and passion of an Old Testament prophet: “Let it not seem hard to you if I pierce you with the words which the love of your salvation has made me write; rather would I pierce you with my living voice, did God permit it.”<sup>3</sup>

Catherine of Siena was a young lay woman without an official role or title within the Church, and yet she did not hesitate to write or dictate letters to all kinds of people: cardinals, monks, family members, nuns, hermits, widows, priests, a mercenary soldier, a king, a tyrant, a queen, a prostitute, a lawyer, a poet, and—amazing to recall—two Roman Pontiffs, Gregory XI and Urban VI. Reading her work today, we cannot help but wonder what it must have been like to meet her in person. Blessed Raymond of Capua, her great friend and spiritual director, the man who knew her perhaps better than anyone else, tells us that even though Catherine’s writings are indeed remarkable, they must take “second place” to what he calls “her living words as they came from her lips during her lifetime.”<sup>4</sup> He writes: “For the Lord had endowed her with a most ready tongue, a charisma of utterance adapted to every circumstance, so that her words burnt like a torch and none who ever heard her could escape being touched.”<sup>4</sup> And there was something else as well about Catherine which, Raymond admits, can hardly be put into words. He writes:

My heart overflows as I recall it, and compels me to record here this mysterious attraction which was part of her. It made itself felt, not only by her spoken word, but by the very fact of one being present where she was. By it she drew the souls of men to the things of God, and made them take delight in God himself. She drove out despondency from the hearts of any who shared her company, and banished dejection of spirit and all



feelings of depression, bringing in instead a peace of soul so deep that those who experienced it did not know themselves.<sup>6</sup>



## ST. CATHERINE IN CONTEXT: LIFE AND TIMES

Catherine was an exuberant child, fond of play and adventure. However at an early age, she felt drawn to devote herself entirely to Christ. At the age of eighteen, she joined a lay Dominican group of women called the *Mantellate*. This choice for a Dominican way of life—a Dominican association—is worth noting. Catherine’s childhood and adolescence was spent in close proximity to the hugely impressive Dominican church in Siena, and this early contact with preaching Dominicans would come, in time, to exercise a profound influence on the development of her own spirituality.



## A CONTEMPLATIVE IN THE WORLD

As a member of the *Mantellate*, Catherine resolved to pursue a life of prayer and contemplation, choosing for the next three years to remain at home in her parents’ house, but living as a recluse. One of the great and saving truths about God’s nature that came home forcibly to Catherine during this time was the astonishing fact that God had loved us first, a love that was unconditional. “I loved you without being loved by you, even before you existed.”<sup>7</sup> Catherine wanted very much to respond to God with something of the same generous, unconditional love, but how was such a thing to be achieved? The answer, she discovered, was in choosing to love her neighbors as she had been loved by God, serving the needs of both friends and enemies with a devoted, unconditional love—“loving them without being loved by them in return.”<sup>8</sup>

For the next three years after her reclusive period, Catherine spent a considerable part of the day out in the streets of Siena, caring for the sick



## QUOTES ON God's Mercy

*"Even if all the sins that could possibly be committed were gathered together in one person, it would be like a drop of vinegar in the sea" [of God's mercy].*

*"You are a fire always burning but never consuming; You are a fire consuming in your heat all the soul's selfish love; You are a fire lifting all chill and giving light."*  
[Dialogue 167]

and the needy, the poor, and the afflicted—attending to Christ in his hidden disguise with the same undistracted energy she had devoted to the task of solitude. At first, however, Catherine was not wholly convinced about this call to a new life of active service, fearing that the contact she enjoyed with God in contemplative solitude might somehow be lost. But Christ answered Catherine's fears with these great words of reassurance:

I have no intention whatever of parting you from myself, but rather of making sure to bind you to me all the closer by the bond of your love for your neighbor. Remember that I have laid down two commandments of love: love of me and love of your neighbor... On two feet you must walk my way, on two wings you must fly to heaven.<sup>9</sup>

With Catherine's attention powerfully redirected by this apostolic imperative, much of her time was spent, according to Blessed Raymond, "in the give and take of social intercourse." But people questioned her motives. "They said of her: 'Why is that one gadding about so much? She's a woman. Why doesn't she stay in her cell if it's God she wants to serve?'"<sup>10</sup> Even Raymond may have reproached Catherine for her boundless apostolic energy and for the kind of company she kept as a result. In any case, Catherine felt it necessary to reveal to him what she called her "secret," telling him how, lifted up in an ecstasy like Saint Paul on one occasion, she saw "the secret things of God, things which it is not given to any pilgrim here below to utter."<sup>11</sup>

During the ecstasy, Catherine's first thought was that she had attained to heaven and would remain there in bliss forever. But her "Eternal Spouse" said to her: "You must go back; the salvation of many souls demands it. It demands, too, a radical change in the way of life that has been yours up to this. Your cell (the room in her house at Siena) will no longer be your dwelling place.... You will even have to leave your own city. But I will be with you always."<sup>12</sup> After this time, Catherine's only consolation in life, her only joy, was in seeking out the lost. She said to Raymond: "Father, now that I have let you into my secret I

know it will keep you from ever taking part with those who denounce me for that openness of spirit with which I freely welcome all the souls who come my way.”<sup>13</sup>




## THE CHURCH OF HER TIME

As her fame for holiness increased, Catherine found herself drawn into some of the most pressing affairs of the Church and also into the murky drama of Italian politics. During the years 1375-78, for example, there was the fierce conflict between Florence and the Holy See. Then directly afterwards, threatening the very survival of the papacy, came the Great Western Schism (see sidebar). Although these particular dramas obviously belong to a time and place utterly remote from the specific dramas of our own century, certain aspects of the world into which Catherine was born bear a striking resemblance to the situation in which we find ourselves today.

For a start, the time span of Catherine’s life was marked by enormous change and upheaval, both within the Church and in society in general. An old world was disappearing fast, the world of the Middle Ages, and what the future might bring was by no means clear. Catherine’s contemporaries witnessed the damage caused by wars and by countless natural disasters, but witnessed also the truly terrifying horror of the Black Death (the bubonic plague). The plague succeeded in decimating almost two-thirds of Europe’s population. At the same time, a different kind of plague was at work within the Church, a plague of unbelievable corruption. Catherine felt constrained, as a result, to acknowledge that the Church she loved so deeply had become “a garden overgrown with putrid flowers,”<sup>14</sup> a bride whose “face is disfigured with leprosy.”<sup>15</sup>

Not least among the scandals in the Church at that time was that the pope, instead of living close to his own flock in the diocese of Rome, was residing at Avignon in France. Catherine knew that this long, drawn-out absence on the part of the Bishop of Rome was causing untold harm to the Church and to society at large. She wrote to Pope Gregory XI and





traveled to Avignon to implore him to return to Rome. Her letters to the pope, appealing to him to return to the See of Rome, are memorable for the note of childlike warmth and intimacy with which she addresses him, not hesitating now and again to call him “Daddy” (*babbo*). But the letters are also notable for the peremptory tone adopted by Catherine, speaking to the pope on occasion more as a prophet than a girl-child:

Up, father, courageously! I tell you, you have no need to fear. But if you don’t do as you should, you may well have reason to be afraid. It is your duty to come. So come! Come trustingly, without any fear at all.<sup>16</sup>

And again:

Let us go quickly, my dear *babbo*, and fearlessly! If God is for you, no one will be against you. God himself will move you; God himself will be your guide, your helmsman, and your sailor.<sup>17</sup>

This last letter was written in the summer of 1376. A mere six months later, much to Catherine’s delight, the pope returned to Rome. Centuries later, Pope Benedict XVI, commenting on the contribution made to the Church by people like Catherine, remarked: “How could we imagine the government of the Church without this contribution, which sometimes becomes very visible, such as when Saint Hildegard criticized the bishops, or when Saint Bridget offered recommendations and Saint Catherine of Siena obtained the return of the popes to Rome?”<sup>18</sup> The nature of Catherine’s contribution to the Church on this occasion, her inspired intervention, belongs to what Pope Benedict calls the “charismatic sector” within the Church—as distinct from “the ministerial sector.”<sup>19</sup> It is in fact a necessary form of contribution, one which, in Pope Benedict’s opinion, is “always a crucial factor without which the Church cannot survive.”<sup>20</sup>

One of the ironies of Catherine’s life is that the return of the pope to Rome helped precipitate the tragedy of the Great Western Schism in ways that could never have been foreseen or imagined. To Catherine’s



enormous distress, after the death of Pope Gregory and very soon after the election of a new pope, Urban VI, the Church found itself divided into two warring factions with two claimants to the Chair of Peter. No event in ecclesial life could have wounded Catherine more deeply. It was a tragedy that marked the few remaining years of her life.

That said, Catherine never for a moment lost her confidence in Christ's power to protect his Church, even from the worst of enemies—in this case, a group of self-serving cardinals who had sided with the antipope Clement VII. In a letter to His Holiness, Pope Urban VI, she wrote: "There is nothing—no difficulty, no sort of trouble—that can overcome you.... The blows of wretched, wicked, self-centered people will not harm your soul's will. Nor will they topple holy Church, the bride; she cannot fail, because she is founded on the living Rock, Christ gentle Jesus."<sup>21</sup> Although utterly exhausted and near death, Catherine spent the last weeks of her life praying in Saint Peter's Basilica for Church reform and for Church unity. She died on April 29, 1380, invoking over and over again the mercy of Christ's saving blood.

Catherine of Siena's short life, viewed now in retrospect, appears to be an extraordinary mixture of success and failure. Her role in securing the return of the pope to Rome was, for a young woman of that period, quite a remarkable achievement, as was the impact she had on so many of her contemporaries. Nevertheless, Catherine was by no means successful in all her endeavors. For example, her plan for a "papal council" of holy men advising the pope came to nothing. Also, quite a few of her attempts to bring peace between warring factions in Italy betrayed more innocent naiveté than political astuteness. Given these facts, it's clear that Catherine's legacy should not be looked for in the social or political sphere, but rather in that passionate and lucid body of teaching that has come down to us in her writings, in her letters, in her prayers, and in her "book," now popularly known as *The Dialogue*. Full ecclesial recognition of the importance of these writings came on October 4, 1970, when Pope Paul VI declared Catherine to be a Doctor of the Church, giving her the highest status possible among the Church's most celebrated authors and theologians.

## THE GREAT WESTERN SCHISM

While St. Catherine was successful in convincing Pope Gregory XI to leave Avignon and return to Rome, the unity of the Church under one pope only lasted a short time.

Gregory XI died less than two years after returning to Rome, and the College of Cardinals elected Pope Urban VI in April 1378. For six months, there was not a single objection to the election of Urban VI, even among the French church.

However, Pope Urban did not get along well with the cardinals that had elected him, often acting in a haughty and suspicious way. There are historical reports that he also blatantly criticized these cardinals, sometimes without cause. Many of the cardinals, comfortable with the power and support of the French government, wanted to move the papacy back to Avignon. Urban VI strongly opposed leaving Rome, and this added to the tension.

Catherine tirelessly supported Pope Urban, as she believed he was the legitimately elected successor to the Chair of Peter. She even lived in Rome at the pope's request for the rest of her short life. However, in her truthful and courageous way, she encouraged Urban VI to work more harmoniously with the cardinals that had elected him.

The Schism began when the same 13 cardinals, unhappy with the temperament and actions of Urban VI, met in September 1378 and elected a new pope. Ignoring Urban VI's legitimacy, they installed Robert of Geneva, who took the name of Clement VII. Again, Catherine was openly critical of the cardinals in



their revolt against Urban VI, whom they had previously elected. Some months later, Clement VII was driven out of Italy and took up residence in Avignon. The Schism was now firmly established and would last for 40 years.

Clement VII was well connected with the key European royal families and was politically skilled and influential. The Church was divided and the faithful generally followed the opinion of their countries and secular rulers in choosing between the two popes.

The rival popes excommunicated each other and created new groups of cardinals to lobby on their behalf throughout the Christian world. St. Catherine passed away in 1380, followed by Urban's death in 1389. In Rome, Boniface IX succeeded Urban VI and in Avignon, Benedict XIII succeeded Clement VII after his death.

In the early 15th century, the King of France lost faith in Benedict and released his people from obedience to him. He also set up a blockade of Avignon to cut him off from his supporters. Benedict refused to submit, but was deposed in 1417.

In 1414, the Council of Constance was formed and prioritized unity within the Church above all else. In 1417, a united conclave representing all the nations and coming directly out of the Council, elected Martin V, who was installed in Rome. The Great Western Schism was finally ended.

However, the Schism did have repercussions. Some scholars believe that the division in the Church greatly harmed the papacy and helped fuel the Protestant Reformation.





## QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What evidence do we have that God loved us first, and loves us unconditionally? (CCC 270, 315, 545; Ps 145:8-19; Jn 3:16-17; Luke 15:3-7)
2. How should we love God? (Deut 6:4-7; Matt 22:37-40; John 13:34; CCC 1822-23, 1878, 2093; I John 4:19-21)

3. In what ways did St. Catherine follow the commandment to “love one another” during her life on earth? What are the characteristics of this type of love? (CCC 1825, 2443-44, 2447; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

4. St. Catherine talked and wrote much about the blood of Christ; in fact, she repeated the word “blood” over and over at her death. What is significant about blood in the Old Covenant? How does blood relate to the New Covenant? (Gen 15:7-12, 17-18; Ex 24:3-8; Lev 17:11; Heb 9:12-14, 22; Lk 22:19-20; CCC 613, 1365)

## QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. In looking back over St. Catherine's life, it is interesting that her time was very balanced between contemplative prayer and service. Jesus sent her on mission through prayer, and it seemed she did not go where he did not lead her. How would you characterize the balance of prayer and action in your life? Does prayer precede your works of mercy? How can you be sure that you are doing the works that God wants you to do and not those that, in your own ego, you believe are necessary?
2. St. Catherine experienced continual encounters with Christ. When and how have you encountered Christ in your life? How did that change your attitude and behavior? What mission is Christ asking of you now and in the near future?