

St. Catherine of Siena

By Laura Tra

St. Catherine of Siena radically changed the course of many lives by her holiness and devotion to Jesus. She had mystical visions throughout her entire life, and, during a time of great conflict, she wrote letters to the most powerful people in the world, helping to resolve some of the greatest issues in the history of the church. She was born in Siena to Jacopo and Lapa Benincasa. The Benincasas were cloth dyers by trade, and they had many children. Lapa gave birth to twenty-two children before Catherine, though less than half of them survived childhood. Catherine and her twin sister Giovanna came into the world on March 25, 1347, though Giovanna died soon after birth. Little did Lapa Benincasa know as she held her little Catherine, what great things her daughter would do for the world.

Even as a child, Catherine Benincasa was very holy. She loved God with her whole youthful heart. While her many siblings were playing, Catherine would amuse herself by walking up and down the stairs of her Siena home, pausing on each step to kneel and pray a Hail Mary. At age six she could see guardian angels as clearly as the people they protected. Once, as she was walking home with her older brother Stefano, they turned towards the sunset above the church of St. Dominic. Stefano saw the dazzling sunset, but what Catherine saw was infinitely more beautiful. In the sky above the church, Jesus, shining like the sun, sat on a golden throne, surrounded by saints. As Catherine looked on in awe, Jesus raised his hand and blessed her. Catherine vowed that she would give herself only to this great King and swore never to marry. However, her parents were quite unaware of this promise. In those times, it was the custom for the father to find suitable matches for their young daughters. When Catherine was still in her early teens, her delighted parents came to her with news. They had found her a husband! He was tall, handsome, and not at all what Catherine wanted. She told her parents as politely as she could that she already had a heavenly fiancé. Her parents grew angry. How could their sweet little daughter not want to marry this dashing young man? They decided that the best course of action would be to knock some sense into her. They gave her hard chores that occupied her from dawn to dusk. If only she would marry, she wouldn't have to work so hard.... Catherine would not give in. She cut her hair and stopped eating in protest. If she were less beautiful, then no one would want to marry her, and she could go on loving Jesus in peace. Finally, her parents gave in. She could keep her vow of celibacy. They even gave her a small

room all to herself, where she spent nearly all of her time, praying devotedly. Through all of her youth, Catherine remained faithful to her dear Jesus.

Soon Catherine joined the Dominican Third Order, but she did not leave for a convent. Rather, she stayed secluded in her tiny room. Her fellow Dominican sisters taught her how to read. Catherine prayed unceasingly, only leaving her room to go to church and to give her family's belongings to the poor. She seldom asked permission to do these acts of charity, so she received much criticism. After Catherine had lived three years in this way, Jesus appeared to her and gave her a gold ring, visible only to Catherine, symbolizing their spiritual marriage. Catherine quite enjoyed remaining in her little room, free to pray without distraction, but God had other plans for her. Jesus told Catherine that it was time to reenter the world.

Catherine immediately obeyed. She began visiting the nearby hospital, where she cared for the sick and dying like they were her own children. In a way, they were her children, for they were children of her heavenly spouse. Catherine loved clean and tidy spaces. The hospitals of those times were far from her ideal, as they were dirty and dark, but Catherine couldn't care less. She was doing God's will! That knowledge filled her with strength. When she was not working in the hospital, Catherine would go out and preach. This was unusual, as at that time nearly all preachers were men. Many were touched by her holiness and obedience to the will of God, and she grew quite the crowd of followers.

Catherine was one of the most influential women in the world. Pope Gregory XI was living in Avignon, France. This was improper, as the pope was meant to reside in Rome, where important decisions could be made. Catherine managed to convince him to move back to Rome. After Pope Gregory's death, Pope Urban VI was elected into papacy. He soon recognized Catherine's wisdom and invited her to come to Rome and serve as his personal advisor. She set off at once to the great city. After Urban's election, some cardinals claimed that their votes had been untrue, and they chose a second pope, causing a schism that split the church neatly in two. Catherine sided with Urban and sent letters to the supporters of the anti-pope, asking always for unity. Though she could not write, Catherine dictated over 400 letters advocating for peace. She wrote to kings, queens, princes, the pope— anyone who could help rectify this dire situation. Catherine did not end the schism, but her involvement did much in the way of uniting the people of the church. She was very influential, especially for a woman. Females in those days were not

usually so outspoken. In fact, she did more than most men in the way of holiness and preaching. Around one third of her letters were to women, such as Queen Joanne of Naples. When Catherine was not in Rome, she wrote letters back home to Pope Urban. Most would address the pope as “His Holiness,” but Catherine called him simply “Daddy.” The Catholic cardinals asked Catherine for her opinion on all sorts of matters, and Pope Urban always did as she suggested. Catherine died at 33, surrounded by her close friends and spiritual children. After her death, the wedding band, which had been presented to her by her heavenly love, appeared on her finger for all to see, along with the holy marks of the stigmata. In 1430, her body was found incorrupt. Catherine was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1461, and was made a Doctor of the Church in 1970. The influence of her letters and advice held the church together at a time when it was falling apart.

St. Catherine of Siena lived an extremely holy and influential life. From her childhood visions, to her private life within her tiny room, to her time as an advisor to the pope, she maintained a constant devotion to God. She helped the pope guide the church through the Great Schism. Because of her holiness, many souls were saved. If not for her diplomacy, the Great Schism might still divide the Catholic Church to this day. Her willingness to serve the Lord is still changing lives to this day.

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