

St. Catherine of Genoa
(Italy) 1447-1510

Around 1473, now living in continence with her husband, they devoted themselves to the care of the sick in the hospital of Pammatone.

*Unweariedly cared for the sick and sad,
not only in the hospital but throughout Genoa*

*In 1479, she and her husband went to live in the hospital itself,
of which eleven years later she was appointed matron.*

She proved as capable administrator as she was a devoted nurse, especially during the plague of 1493, when 4/5 of those who remained in the city died.

Caterinetta Fiesca Adorni was born in 1447 in Genoa, to James Fiesca and Francesca di Negro. She was their fifth and last child. Her father had been Viceroy of Naples and her grandfather's brother was Pope Innocent IV. Another Fiesca relative was Pope Adrian V. Her mother's family was also of the aristocratic class.

Catherine she desired to pursue religious life and requested to enter the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, a house of Augustinian Canonesses of the Lateran at the age of 13. Her elder sister Limbania was already a member. Due to her youth, she was denied membership. Subsequently her father died and her brother, Giacomo Fiesca, arranged marriage to unite the Fiesca family with the son of the powerful Ghibelline family, two principal families in Genoa. Under obedience, at the age of sixteen, Catherine consented and married Giuliano (Julian) Adorni on January 13, 1463.



Catherine, as she is now known, was intelligent, sensible and deeply religious with an intense temperament without humor or wit. Her husband, on the other hand, was inordinately pleasure-loving, undisciplined, hot-tempered and a spendthrift. He was, on his own admission, unfaithful to her.

For the first five years of their marriage they lived in a fine house in Piazza Sant' Agnete. Catherine rarely left home except for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. She refused to adopt Giuliano's worldly ways. With the encouragement of her family, she adopted a social life commensurate with her status but never entered into sin.

In 1474 she visited the church of St. Bernard prayed that she might become ill and confined to bed for three months. She longed to leave the worldly way. Her sister encouraged her to confess to the nun's confessor at the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie. While in the confessional, *"her heart was wounded by a dart of God's immense love, and she has a clear vision of her own wretchedness and faults and the most high goodness of God. She fell to the ground, all but swooning"*, and from her heart cried, "No more of the world for me! No more sin!" She abruptly left the confessional pondering this revelation, conscious of her own wretchedness and of God's great mercy. She returned to confession, after a time, on the feast of the Annunciation (March 25) and now entered into a life of prayer and penance. She received the

Blessed Sacrament with fervor and became a daily communicant, which was a rare practice at the time. Every day she spent six hours in prayer and mortified her affections and will.

Guided by the Ladies of Mercy, she devoted herself to the care of the sick poor. “In her plain dress she would go through the street and byways of Genoa, looking for poor people who were ill, and when she found them she tended them and washed and mended their filthy rags. Often she visited the hospital of St. Lazarus, which harbored incurable so diseased as to be horrible to the sight and smell, many of them embittered. In Catherine they aroused not disgust but charity; she met their insults with unfailing gentleness.”¹

For twenty-three years, beginning in the third year after her conversion, she fasted completely throughout Lent and Advent, except that at long intervals she drank a glass of water mixed with salt and vinegar to remind herself of the drink offered to Our Lord on the cross, and during these fasts she enjoyed exceptional health and vigor. For twenty-five years she had no spiritual director except Our Lord Himself. Then, when she fell ill, for the last ten years of her life, Father Cattaneo Marabotto, who worked in the hospital served as her confessor. In the *Spiritual Dialogue*, St. Catherine of Genoa shared that God spoke as follows: “In My infinite and every-active love, I continually go forth in search of souls, in order to guide them to life eternal; and, illuminating them with my light, I move the free-will of men in many and diverse ways...”²

Also soon after her conversion, her husband’s spending habits brought them almost to ruin. This and her prayers brought about his conversion and he became a third order Franciscan. Together they moved to a smaller home and he joined her in caring for the sick in the hospital of Pammatone and throughout Genoa. Catherine was 28 years old. Six years later, in 1479, they moved into the hospital and eleven years after that, at the age of 43, in 1490 Catherine was appointed Matron of the hospital. In 1497 she nursed her husband through his last illness becoming a widow at the age of 50. The next year she fell ill and during the last ten years of her life she suffered much. She died on September 15, 1510 at the age of sixty-three. The process for her canonization was instituted by the directors of the hospital in Genoa where she had worked.

Catherine was beatified on 6 April 1675, Rome, Papal States by Pope Clement X. She was canonized on June 16, 1737, Rome, Papal States by Pope Clement XII. The 4th edition of the *Roman Martyrology* (1956) approved by Pope Benedict XV (1922) records on September 15th as the feast day of St. Catherine and states: “At Genoa, St. Catherine, a widow, famous for her contempt of the world and her love for God.”³

The following is from the *original* Reverend Alban Butler's *Lives of Saints* (1883) republished in 2020 by Loreto Publications:⁴

Catharine or Catterinetta Fieschi Adorno, was born at Genoa, in 1447. Her father, James Fieschi, died viceroy of Naples under Renatus of Anjou, king of Sicily.¹ From the first dawn of her reason, she appeared to be a child of spiritual benedictions. By a singular privilege of divine grace, and the attention of virtuous parents, she seemed from the cradle entirely exempt from forwardness, and little passions of anger or like vices, with which infancy itself is often stained. It was something still more admirable and more edifying in her, to see a tender child, to join with

¹The family of the Fieschi was for many ages one of the most illustrious in Italy. Its chiefs were counts of Lavagna in the territory of Genoa. They were for some ages perpetual vicars of the empire in Italy, and afterward enjoyed very extraordinary privileges in the republic of Genoa, and among others that of coining money. This house gave to the commonwealth its greatest generals during its long wars, both in the East and against the Venetians; and to the Church many cardinals and two popes, Innocent IV and Adrian V. The family of Fieschi suffered much by the miscarriage of the conspiracy formed by count John Louis Fieschi against the Dorias, then masters of the commonwealth, in 1517. The plot only failed by the death of count Fieschi, who was drowned by falling into the seas, as he was going out of one galley into another.

the most perfect simplicity of heart, and obedience to her parents and others, a serious love of prayer, the most heroic practices of self-denial, and the most tender devotion, particularly towards the sacred passion of Christ. That at twelve years of age she was favored by God with extraordinary supernatural comforts and illustrations of the Holy Ghost in prayer, we are assured by her own testimony. Experience teaches, that by humble obedience and fervent love of prayer, the most tender age is capable of making great advancement in the paths of divine love and interior solid virtue; and that the Holy Ghost delights wonderfully to communicate Himself to those who so early open their hearts entirely to Him. But whilst He attracts them after the sweet odor of His ointments, He prepares them for the most severe trials, which furnish them with occasions for the exercise of the most heroic virtues, and perfect the crucifixion of inordinate attachments in their hearts. This conduct of divine providence St. Catharine experienced.

At thirteen years of age she earnestly desired to consecrate herself to the divine service in a religious state, thinking a contemplative life the most secure for her, and it best suited her inclinations. But she was overruled by obedience to her parents, and by the advice of those from whom she hoped to learn what the divine will required of her. Three years after, she was married by her father to Julian Adorno, a gay young nobleman of Genoa. Her husband, drunk with youth, and giddy with ambition, brought her on long series of grievous afflictions, which she suffered during ten years, and which, by the good use she made of them, exceedingly contributed to her more perfect sanctification. His brutish humor afforded a perpetual trial to her patience; his dilapidation of his own patrimony, and of the great fortune she has brought him, perfected the disengagement of her heart from the world, and his profligate life was to her a subject of continual tears to God for his conversion. This, her prayers, patience, and example at length effected, and he died a penitent in the third Order of St. Francis. Catharine had a cousin named Tommasa Fieschi, who being left a widow about the same time, made her religious profession in an austere nunnery of the order of St. Dominic, and died prioress in 1534.

Our saint seeing herself freed from the servitude of the world, and in a condition now to pursue the native bent of her inclination to live altogether to herself and God, deliberated some time in what manner she might best execute her holy desire. At length, in order to join the active life with the contemplative, and to have the happiness of ministering to Christ in His most distressed and suffering members, she determined to devote herself to the service of the sick in the great hospital of the city. Of this house she lived many years the mother superior, attending assiduously upon the patients with incredible tenderness, performing for them the meanest offices, and dressing herself their most loathsome ulcers. So heroic is this charity, that with regard to the institutions set apart for the relief of the poor, and attendance on the sick, Voltaire forgets his usual censorious malignant disposition in regard to religious institutions, to give them due praise. He declares that nothing can be nobler than the sacrifice which the fair sex made of beauty and youth, and oftentimes of high birth, to employ their time at the hospitals in relieving those miserable objects, the sight of which alone is humbling to our pride, and shocking to our delicacy. In overcoming this repugnance of certain patients, it cost our saint much difficulty in the beginning till by perseverance she had gained a complete victory over herself.

Her charity could not be confined to the bounds of her own hospital; she extended her care and solicitude to all lepers and other distressed sick persons over the whole city, and she employed proper persons, with indefatigable industry, to discover, visit and relieve such objects. Her fasts and other austerities were incredible, and it was her constant study to deny her senses every superfluous gratification, and still more vigorously to humble her heart, and overcome her own will in everything. Even whilst she lived in the world with her husband, it was a rule with her never to excuse herself when blamed by others, but always to be readily included sincerely to accuse and condemn herself. She made it her constant earnest request to God, that his pure heart, and in her whole conduct, by the extinction of all inordinate self-love, and in this sense she took for her device that petition of Our Lord's prayer: Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. The necessity of the spirit of universal mortification and perfect humility to prepare the way for pure love of God to be, infused into the soul, is the chief lesson which she inculcates in the two principal treatises which she wrote, the first entitled, [*Treatise*] *On Purgatory*, and the second called, A [*Spiritual*] *Dialogue*. In this latter work she paints strongly the powerful effect of divine

love in a soul, and the wonderful sweetness and joy which frequently accompany it.² St. Catharine having suffered the martyrdom of a tedious and painful illness, in which, for a considerable time, she was scarce able to take any nourishment, though she received every day the holy communion, expired in great peace and tranquility, and her soul went to be united to the center of her love on the 14th day of September, 1510, she being sixty-two years old. The author of her life relates certain miracles by which God was pleased to testify her sanctity to men. Her body was taken up eighteen months after her death, and found without the least sign of putrefaction. From that time it was exposed aloft in a marble monument in the church of the hospital, as the body of a saint; and she was honored with the title blessed, which pope Benedict XIV changed into that of saint, styling her in the martyrology St. Catharine Fieschi (in Latin Flisca) Adorno.³ See her life compiled by Marabotti, her confessor, published in 1551; also her works. And the comments of Sticker the Bollandist, ad 15 Sept. T. 5, p. 123. For the justification of her doctrine and the commendation of her sanctity, see Parpera, the Oratorian's book entitled B. Catharina Genuensis Illustrata. Printed at Genoa, A.D. 1682.

References:

- 1) H.D.I. St. Catherine of Genoa. *Treatise on Purgatory*. Accessed 13 May 2023. <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/treatise-on-purgatory-9820>
- 2) St. Catherine of Genoa. *Spiritual Dialogue*. Accessed 13 May 2023. <https://ia-petabox.archive.org/details/spiritual-dialogue-by-saint-catherine-of-genoa>
- 3) Canon J.B. O'Connell (1961). *The Roman Martyrology*. Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 201.
- 4) Reverend Alban Butler (1883). *The Lives of the Saints* as republished by Loreto Publications: Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 2020. Book Five, Volume VIII & IX - August and September, 658-662.

Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses (www.ciciams.org / www.nacn-usa.org): *to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients, bring salvation to souls*. May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka

²These treatises are not written for the common class of readers.

³Bened. XIV De Canoniz. Sanct. 1. 3, c. 3, p. 20.