

**St. Catherine of Siena
(Italy) 1347-1380**

Doctor of the Church

Her mission: to serve the poor and sick

Lay woman, 3rd Order Dominican

Stigmatic & Mystic

Catherine Benincasa was a lay woman, third order Dominican, virgin and Doctor of the Church. She was born in 1347 in Siena, Italy, to Lapa and James Benincasa. Her parents were a pious couple and her mother favored Catherine of all the children. At a young age, Catherine made a private vow of her virginity to God.

At the age of twelve her parents wanted to prepare for her a marriage engagement to which Catherine severely objected. To distract her from her prayer life, she was assigned housework and other employments. She developed an interior prayer life able to commune with God in the interior of her soul regardless of whether at work or in solitude. Her sisters also tried to distract her with genteel dresses and worldly vanities.



Catherine liberally assisted the poor, served the sick and comforted the afflicted and prisoners. She observed several mortifications and ate sparingly. This all occurred prior to fifteen years of age.

When she was either eighteen in 1365, or twenty years old, she received the habit of the third order Dominicans. For three years she remained in a cell practicing prayer and mortifications and did not speak to anyone but God and her confessor. During a mystical vision she was told to reenter public life and to help the sick and poor.

When visiting the poor, miraculously the amount of corn, oil and other necessities multiplied in her hands. She cared for a very difficult woman diagnosed with leprosy with only sweetness and humility. She cared for a woman with infectious cancer wounds with great care. She obtained the conversion of both these women. She obtained the conversion of many sinners through continual tears, prayers, fasts and other austerities. When a pestilence broke out in Italy in 1374, she cared for the infected and obtained from God the cure of several.

When the Florentines were in conflict with the Holy See, which at that time was in Avignon, France, Catherine was asked to mediate the conflict. After traveling to and speaking with the chief magistrates of Florence, she traveled to Avignon where she was received by His Holiness Pope Gregory XI. Catherine encouraged Pope Gregory XI to fulfill a vow he had secretly made to return to Rome. She entreated him with several letters and eventually he did return to Rome.

She then resumed her activities of serving and often curing the sick, converting sinners and reconciling the most obstinate to the Church. Catherine continued to write Pope Gregory XI and exhorted him to bring peace to Italy. He, in turn, asked her again to intercede with the obstinate and disobedient Florentines. After successful negotiations and reconciliation, Catherine returned to Siena and resumed her pious practices and charitable works. She fasted once from

Ash Wednesday until Ascension Thursday, receiving only the Holy Eucharist during that whole time (2-3 months).

As a mystic, she was said to have been offered to choose between two crowns, one of gold and the other of thorns. She chose the one of thorns so as to be united with and conformed to Jesus' passion. Her suffering would resume in 1378 following the death of Pope Gregory XI when the Church went into schism. Rome elected Pope Urban VI, and several cardinals subsequently chose Clement VII. She wrote many letters to: Joan, queen of Sicily, the king of France, the king of Hungary, to name a few, in an attempt to unify the Church.

While still trying to reunite the Church under His Holiness Pope Urban VI, she died on April 29, 1380 in Rome at the age of thirty-three. She was buried in the church of the Minerva. Her body remains under the altar. Her skull was moved to the Dominican church in Siena. St. Catherine was canonized by His Holiness Pope Pius II in 1461. According to Butler's Lives of Saints, His Holiness Pope Urban VIII made her feast day April 30. However, it is currently (2022) celebrated on April 29th.

St. Catherine of Siena is one of the six patron saints of Europe, together with Benedict of Nursia, Cyril and Methodius, Bridget of Sweden and Edith Stein. (Memorial - April 29)

*Be who God meant you to be
and you will set the world on fire."*

*"Our Lord had taught her to build in her soul a private closet,
strongly vaulted with the Divine Providence, and to keep herself always close and retired there;
He assured her that by this means she should find peace and perpetual repose in her soul,
which no storm or tribulation could disturb or interrupt."*

From the Divine Office translated by Mary Ryan for the Order of St. Benedict, Inc. (1964):²

Catherine, a virgin of Siena, born of devout parents, was granted the habit of St. Dominic worn by the Sisters of Penance. Her abstinence was most strict and her whole life was one of marvelous austerity. When she was staying at Pisa on the Lord's day, refreshed by the Bread of heaven and rapt in ecstasy, she saw the crucified Lord coming with a great light, and from the marks of His wounds five rays coming down to the same places in her body. Aware of the mystery, she implored the Lord that the wounds would not be visible, and the color of the rays immediately changed from that of blood to brightness, in the form of pure light touching her hands and feet and heart. But such was the pain she suffered, even though the signs of the bleeding wounds could not be seen, that she believed she would soon have died if God had not lessened it. Her learning was infused, not acquired. She went to Pope Gregory XI at Avignon and showed him that she knew by divine means of the vow he had made to return to the City, a vow known to God alone, and she was the cause of the Pope's going to occupy in person his See in Rome. In about the thirty-third year of her age, she went to her Bridegroom, and Pius II enrolled her among the holy virgins.

The following is from *the original* Reverend Alban Butler's *Lives of Saints* (1883) republished in 2020 by Loreto Publications:³

Title: St. Catharine of Sienna - Virgin and Doctor of the Church.

St. Catharine was born at Sienna, in 1347. Her father, James Benincasa, by trade a dyer, was a virtuous man; and though blessed with temporal prosperity, always chiefly solicitous to leave to his children a solid inheritance of virtue, by his example, and by deeply instilling into them lessons of piety. Her mother, Lapa, had a particular affection for this daughter above her other children; and the accomplishments of mind and body with which she was adorned made her the darling and delight of all that knew her, and procured her the name of Euphrosyna. She was favored by God with extraordinary graces as soon as she was capable of knowing Him. She

withdrew very young to a solitude a little out of the town, to imitate the lives of the fathers of the desert. Returning after some time to her father's house, she continued to be guided by the same spirit. In her childhood she consecrated her virginity to God by a private vow. Her love of mortification and prayer, and her sentiments of virtue, were such as are not usually found in so tender an age. But God was pleased to put her resolution to a great trial, At twelve years of age, her parents thought of engaging her in a married state. Catharine found them deaf to her entreaties that she might live single; and therefore redoubled her prayers, watching, and austerities, knowing her protection must be from God alone. Her parents, regarding her inclination to solitude as unsuitable to the life for which they designed her, endeavored to divert her from it, and began to thwart her devotions, depriving her in this view of the little chamber or cell they had until then allowed her. They loaded her with the most distracting employments, and laid on her all the drudgery of the house, as if she had been a person hired into the family for that purpose. The hardest labor, humiliations, contempt, and the insults of her sisters, were to the saint a subject of joy; and such was her ardent love of crosses, that she embraced them in all shapes with a holy eagerness, and received all railleries with an admirable sweetness and heroic patience. If any thing grieved her, it was the loss of her dear solitude. But the Holy Ghost, that interior faithful master, to whom she listened, taught her to make herself another solitude in her heart; where, amidst all her occupations, she considered herself always as alone with God; to whose presence she kept herself no less attentive than if she had no exterior employment to distract her. In that admirable Treatise of God's Providence, which she wrote, she saith, "That our Lord had taught her to build in her soul a private closet, strongly vaulted with the divine providence, and to keep herself always close and retired there; he assured her that by this means she should find peace and perpetual repose in her soul, which no storm or tribulation could disturb or interrupt." Her sisters and other friends persuaded her to join with them in the diversions of the world, alleging that virtue is not an enemy to neatness in dress, or to cheerfulness; under which soft names they endeavored to recommend the dangerous liberties of worldly pastimes and vanities. Catharine was accordingly prevailed upon by her sister to dress in a manner something more genteel, but she soon repented of her compliance, and wept for it during the remainder of her life, as the greatest infidelity she had ever been guilty of to her heavenly spouse. The death of her eldest sister, Bonaventura, soon after confirmed her in those sentiments. Her father, edified at her patience and virtue, at length approved and seconded her devotion and all her pious desires. She liberally assisted the poor, served the sick, and comforted the afflicted and prisoners. Her chief subsistence was on boiled herbs, without either sauce or bread. Which last she seldom tasted. She wore a very rough haircloth, and a large iron girdle armed with sharp points, lay on the ground, and watched much. Humility, obedience, and a denial of her own will, even in her penitential austerities, gave them their true value. She began this course of life when under fifteen years of age. She was moreover visited with many painful distempers, which she underwent with incredible patience; she had also suffered much from the use of hot baths prescribed her by physicians. Amidst her pains, it was her constant prayer that they might serve for the expiation of her offences, and the purifying of her heart. She long desired, and in 1365, but eighteenth years of her age, (but two years later, according to some writers,) she received the habit of the third order of St. Dominic, in a nunnery contiguous to the Dominican's convent. From that time her cell became her paradise, prayer her element, and her mortifications had no longer any restraint. For three years she never spoke to any one but to God and her confessor. Her days and nights were employed in the delightful exercises of contemplation; the fruits whereof were supernatural lights, a most ardent love of God, and zeal for the conversion of sinners. The old serpent, seeing her angelical life, set all his engines at work to assault her virtue. He first filled her imagination with the most filthy representations, and assailed her heart with the basest and most humbling temptations. Afterwards, he spread in her soul such a cloud and darkness that it was the severest trial imaginable. She saw herself a hundred times on the brink of the precipice, but was always supported by an invisible hand. Her arms were fervent prayer, humility, resignation, and confidence in God. By these she persevered victorious, and was at last delivered from those trials which had only served to purify her heart. Our Savior, visiting her after this bitter conflict, she said to him: "Where wast Thou, my divine spouse, while I lay in such an abandoned, frightful condition." "I was with thee," He seemed to reply. "What!" said she, "amidst the filthy

abominations with which my soul was infested!" He answered: "They were displeasing and most painful to thee. This conflict, therefore, was thy merit, and the victory over them was owing to My presence." Her ghostly enemy also solicited her to pride, omitting neither violence nor stratagem to seduce her into this vice, but invincible humility was a buckler to cover her from all his fiery darts. God recompensed her charity to the poor by many miracles, often multiplying provisions in her hands, and enabling her to carry loads of corn, oil, and other necessities to the poor, which her natural strength could not otherwise have borne. The greatest miracle seemed her patience in bearing the murmurs, and even the reproaches, of these ungrateful and importunate people. Catharine dressed and served an old woman named Tocca, infected to that degree with a leprosy that the magistrates had ordered her to be removed out of the city and separated from all others. This poor wretch, nevertheless, made no other return to the tender charity of the saint, but continual bitter complaints and reproaches, which, instead of wearing out her constancy, only moved the saint to show her still greater marks of sweetness and humility. Another, whose infectious cancer the saint for a long time sucked and dressed, published against her the most infamous calumnies in which she was seconded by a sister of the convent. Catharine bore in silence the violent persecution they brought upon her and continued her affectionate services till, by her patience and prayers, she had obtained of God the conversion of both these enemies, which was followed by a retraction of their slander.

The ardent charity of this holy virgin made her indefatigable in laboring for the conversion of sinners, offering for that end continual tears, prayers, fasts, and other austerities, and thinking nothing difficult or above her strength. All her discourses, actions, and her very silence powerfully induced men to the love of virtue, so that no one, according to Pope Pius II, even approached her who went not away better. Nannes, a powerful turbulent citizen, being brought to our saint to be reclaimed, all she could say to him to bring him to a right sense of his duty was of no effect, upon which she made a sudden pause in her discourse, to offer up her prayers for him: they were heard that very instant, and an entire change was wrought in the man, to which his tears and other tokens bore evidence. He accordingly reconciled himself to all his enemies, and embraced a most penitential life. When he afterwards fell into many temporal calamities, the saint rejoiced at his spiritual advantage under them, saying, God purged his heart from the poison with which it was infected by its inveterate attachment to creatures. Nannes gave to the saint a stately house which he possessed within two miles of the city. This, by the Pope's authority, she converted into a nunnery. We omit the miraculous conversion of James Tholomei and his sisters, of Nicholas Tuldo, and many others, particularly of two famous assassins going to die with blasphemies in their mouths, and in transports of rage and despair, who were suddenly converted in their last moments, on the saints, praying for them, confessed their crimes to a priest with great signs of repentance, and appeared thoroughly resigned to the punishment about to be inflicted on them. A pestilence laying waste the country in 1374, Catharine devoted herself to serve the infected, and obtained of God the cure of several amongst others, of two holy Dominicans, Raymund of Capua, and Bartholomew of Sienna. The most hardened sinners could not withstand the force of her exhortations to a change of life. Thousands flocked from places at a distance in the country to hear or only to see her, and were brought over by her words or example to the true dispositions of sincere repentance. She undertook a journey to Monte Pulciano to consecrate to God two of her nieces, who there took the religious veil of Saint Dominic, and another journey to Pisa, by order of her superiors, at the earnest suit of the citizens. She there restored health to many in body, but to a far greater number in soul. Raymund of Capua and two other Dominicans were commissioned by Pope Gregory XI, then residing at Avignon, to hear the confessions at Sienna, of those who were induced by the saint to enter upon a change of life. These priests were occupied, day and night in hearing the confessions of many who had never confessed before, besides those of other who had acquitted themselves but superficially of that duty. While she was at Pisa, in 1375, the people of Florence and Perugia, with a great part of Tuscany, and even of the Ecclesiastical State, entered into a league against the Holy See. The news of this disturbance was delivered to Catharine by Raymund of Capua, and her heart was pierced with the most bitter sorrow on account of those evils which she had foretold three years before they came to their height. The two furious factions of the Guelphs and Ghibellines, who had so disturbed and divided the state of Florence, then a powerful commonwealth, united at last

against the Pope, to strip the Holy See of the lands it possessed in Italy. The disturbance was begun in June, 1373, and a numerous army was set on foot. The word *Libertas*, written on the banner of the league, was signal. Perugia, Bologna, Viterbo, Ancona, and other strongholds, soon declared for them. The inhabitants of Arezzo, Lucca, Sienna, and other places, were kept within the bounds of duty by the prayers, letters, and exhortations of St. Catharine, and generously contemned the threats of the Florentines. Pope Gregory XI, residing at Avignon, wrote to the city of Florence, but without success. He therefore sent the cardinal Robert of Geneva, his legate, with an army, and laid the diocese of Florence under an interdict. Internal divisions, murders, and all other domestic miseries amongst the Florentines, joined with the conspiracy of the neighboring states, concurred to open their eyes, and made them sue for pardon. The magistrates sent to Sienna to beg St. Catharine would become their mediatrix. She could not resist their pressing entreaties. Before she arrived at Florence, she was met by the priors or chiefs of the magistrates; and the city left the management of the whole affair to her discretion, with a promise that she should be followed to Avignon by their ambassadors, who should sign and ratify the conditions of reconciliation between the parties at variance, and confirm every thing she had done. The saint arrived at Avignon on the 18th of June, 1376, and was received by the Pope and cardinal with great marks of distinction. His holiness, after a conference with her, in admiration of her prudence and sanctity, said to her: "I desire nothing but peace, I put the affair entirely into your hands; only I recommend to you the honor of the church." But the Florentines sought not peace sincerely, and they continued to carry on secret intrigues to draw all of Italy from its obedience to the Holy See. Their ambassadors arrived very late at Avignon, and spoke with so great insolence, that they showed peace was far from being the subject of their errand. God suffered the conclusion of this work to be deferred in punishment of the sins of the Florentines, by which means St. Catharine sanctified herself still more by suffering longer amidst a seditious people.

The saint had another point no less at heart in her journey to Avignon. Pope John XXII, a Frenchman, born at Cahors, bishop, first of Frejus, then of Avignon, lastly of Porto, being made pope in 1314, fixed his residence at Avignon, where John's successors, Benedict XII, Clement VI, Innocent VI, and Urban V, also resided. The then Pope Gregory XI had made a secret vow to return to Rome; but not finding this design agreeable to his court, he consulted the holy virgin on this subject, who answered; "Fulfill what you have promised to God." The Pope, surprised she should know by revelation what he had never discussed with any person on earth, was immediately determined to carry his good design into execution. The saint soon after left Avignon. We have several letters written by her to him, to press him to hasten his return; and he shortly after followed her, leaving Avignon on the 13th of September, in 1376. He overtook the saint at Genoa, where she made a short stay. At Sienna, she continued her former way of life, serving and often curing the sick, converting the most obstinate sinners, and reconciling the most inveterate enemies, more still by her prayers than by her words. Such was her knowledge of heavenly things, that certain Italian doctors, out of envy, and with the intent to expose her ignorance, being come to hold a conference with her, departed in confusion and admiration at her interior lights. The same had happened at Avignon, some time before, where three prelates, envying her credit with the Pope, put to her the most intricate questions on an interior life, and many other subjects; but admiring her answers to all their difficulties, confessed to the Pope they had never seen a soul so enlightened, and so profoundly humble as Catharine. She had many disciples: among others, Stephen, son of Conrad, a senator of Sienna. This nobleman was reduced by enemies to the last extremity. Seeing himself on the brink of ruin, he addressed himself to the saint, who, having first made a thorough convert of him from the world and its vanities, by her prayers miraculously, on a sudden, pacified all his persecutors, and calmed their fury. Stephen, from that time, looked upon as dust all that he had formerly most passionately loved and pursued; and he testified of himself, that by her presence, and more by her zealous discourses, he always found the divine love vehemently kindled in his breast, and his contempt of all earthly things increased. He became the most fervent among her disciples, made a collection of all her words as oracles, would be her secretary to write her letters, and her companion in her journeys to Avignon, Florence, and Rome; and at length, by her advice, professed himself a Carthusian monk. He assisted at her death, and wrote her life at the request of several princes; having been witness of her great miracles and virtues, and having experienced often in himself her spirit of

prophecy, her knowledge of the consciences of others, and her extraordinary light in spiritual things.

St. Catharine wrote to Pope Gregory XI, at Rome, strongly exhorting him to contribute by all means possible to the general peace of Italy. His holiness commissioned her to go to Florence still divided and obstinate in its disobedience. She lived some time in that factious place, amidst daily murders and confiscations, in frequent dangers of her own life many ways; in which she always showed herself most undaunted, even when swords were drawn against her. At length she overcame that obstinate people, and brought them to submission, obedience, and peace, though not under Gregory XI, as Baillet mistakes, but his successor, Urban VI, as her contemporary historian informs us. This memorable reconciliation was effected in 1378; after which Catharine hastened to her solitary abode at Sienna, where her occupation, and, we may say, her very nourishment, was holy prayer; in which intercourse with the almighty, he discovered to her very wonderful mysteries, and bestowed on her a spirit which delivered the trust of salvation in a manner that astonished her hearers. Some of her discourses were collected, and composed the treatise *On Providence*, under her name. Her whole life seemed one continual miracle; but what the servants of God admired most in her, was the perpetual strict union of her soul with God. For, though obliged often to converse with different persons on so many different affairs, and transact business of the greatest moment, she was always occupied on God, and absorbed in him. For many years she had accustomed herself to so rigorous an abstinence, that the blessed Eucharist might be said to be almost the only nourishment which supported her. Once she fasted from Ash Wednesday till Ascension day, receiving only the blessed Eucharist during that whole time. Many treated her as a hypocrite, and invented all manner of calumnies against her; but she rejoiced at humiliations, and gloried in the cross of Christ as much as she dreaded and abhorred praise and applause. In a vision, our Savior is said one day to have presented her with two crowns, one of gold and the other of thorns, bidding her choose which of the two she pleased. She answered: "I desire, O Lord to live here always conformed to your passion, and to find pain and suffering my repose and delight." Then eagerly taking up the crown of thorns, she forcibly pressed it upon her head. The earnest desire and love of humiliations and crosses was nourished in her soul by assiduous meditation on the sufferings of our divine redeemer. What, above all things, pierced her heart was scandal, chiefly that of the unhappy great schism which followed the death of Gregory XI in 1378, when Urban VI was chosen at Rome, and acknowledged there by all the cardinals, though his election was in the beginning overawed by the Roman people, who demanded an Italian Pope. Urban's harsh and austere temper alienated from him the affections of the cardinals, several of whom withdrew; and having declared the late election null, chose Clement VII, with whom they retired out of Italy, and resided at Avignon. Our saint, not content to spend herself in floods of tears, weeping before God for these evils of his church, wrote the strongest and most pathetic letters to those cardinals who had first acknowledged Urban, and afterward elected another; pressing them to return to their lawful pastor, and acknowledge Urban's title. She wrote also to several countries and princes in his favor, and to Urban himself, exhorting him to bear up cheerfully under the troubles he found himself involved in, and to abate somewhat of a temper that had made him so many enemies, and mollify that rigidity of disposition which had driven the world from him, and still kept a very considerable part of Christendom from acknowledging him. The Pope listened to her, sent for her to Rome, followed her directions, and designed to send her, with St. Catharine of Sweden, to Joan, queen of Sicily, who had sided with Clement. Our saint grieved to see this occasion of martyrdom snatched from her when the journey was laid aside on account of the dangers that were foreseen to attend it. She wrote however to queen Joan: likewise two letters full of holy fire to the king of France, also to the king of Hungary, and others, to exhort them to renounce the schism.

We pass over the ecstasies and other wonderful favors this virgin received from heaven, and the innumerable miracles God wrought by her means. She has left us, besides the example of her life, six treatises in form of a dialogue, a discourse on the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, and three hundred and sixty-four letters, which show that she had a superior genius, and wrote perfectly well. While she was laboring to extend the obedience of the true Pope, Urban VI, her infirmities and pains increasing, she died at Rome on the 29th of April, in 1380, being thirty-three years old. She was buried in the church of the Minerva, where her body is still kept under an altar.

Her skull is in the Dominicans' church at Sienna, in which city are shown her house, her instruments of penance, and other relics. She was canonized by Pope Pius II in 1461. Urban VIII transferred her festival to the 30th of this month.

When we read the lives of the saints, and consider the wonderful graces with which God enriched them, we admire their happiness in being so highly favored by him, and say to ourselves that their labors and sufferings bore no proportion to the sweetness of heavenly peace and love with which their souls were replenished, and the spiritual joy and consolation which were a present superabundant recompense and support. But it was in the victory over their passion, in the fervor of their charity, and in the perfection of their humility, patience, and meekness, that their virtue and their happiness chiefly consisted. Nor are we to imagine that God raised them to these sublime graces without their assiduous application to the practice both of exterior and interior mortification, especially of the latter. Self-denial prepared them for this state of perfect virtue, and supported them in it. What pity is it to hear persons talk of sublime virtue and to see them pretend to aspire after it, without having studied in earnest to die to themselves. Without this condition, all their fine discourses are mere speculation, and their endeavors fruitless. (*From her life by Raymund of Capua, her confessor, afterwards general of the Dominicans; also by Stephen, prior of the Carthusians, near Pavia, who had intimately known the saint, and from other contemporary authors. Likewise Diva Catharine Senesis Vita per Joan, Pinum, Tolosanum. Bononise, 4to. 1505. See her history judiciously and elegantly compiled by F. Touron, t.2, a writer justly extolled in the Journal de Scavants, and honored with great encomiums by Pope Benedict XIV. Her life by her confessor, containing things omitted in other editions, is printed in Italian at Florence, in 1477, 4to., in a Gothic character; yet this is a translation from the Latin: also another printed at Sienna, in 1524, 4to. See also Papebroke's Remarks, Apr. T. 3, p. 851. A.D. 1380*)

References:

- 1) Catholic Online. St. Catherine of Siena. https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=9 (Accessed 10Dec2021)
- 2) The Hours of the Divine Office in English and Latin (1964). Volume Two: Passion Sunday to end of July. The Proper of the Saints translated by Mary Ryan for the Order of St. Benedict, Inc. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1761-1762
- 3) Reverend Alban Butler (1883). *The Lives of the Saints* as republished by Loreto Publications: Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 2020. Book Three, Vol. IV & V - April and May, 292-301. (*Reprinted with permission*)

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