



Twelve Gardens of Stewardship

Garden of Citizenship

St. Catherine of Siena

God raised up this humble girl to be the Church's hero during the darkest periods of its history, the 14th century lead-up to the Great Schism.

St. Catherine answered God's call to political boldness during a time of great civil unrest in Italy. She "spoke the truth to power" - counseling both Pope Gregory XI and Pope Urban VI - and had a profound influence on the politics of her day and on world history, which was unheard of for a woman of her time. Her active citizenship and surrender to Christ is a remarkable story.

Catherine was born in Siena (Italy) in 1347. She was the 23rd child of a humble family - daughter of a tradesman, Giacomo di Benincasa and his wife Lapa. She grew up as an intelligent, cheerful and intensely religious person. From her earliest childhood, Catherine began to see visions and practice austerities. She loved to pray and would say the "Hail Mary" on each step as she climbed stairs. By the age of seven she had a vision of Christ in Glory and consecrated herself to Him, vowing to be His bride. Later, she endured bitter persecution for refusing to marry. As a teenager, Catherine was pressured to improve her appearance in order to attract a husband and protested by cutting off her hair! This anguished her mother greatly and resulted in family turmoil. Catherine's father finally settled the trouble by ordering that she be left in peace and be given a room of her own in his shop for prayer and meditation.

At the age of fifteen Catherine entered the Third Order of St. Dominic but continued to reside in her cell in her father's shop, where she lived a life of both active charity and contemplative prayer. She tended the sick - especially those afflicted with the most repulsive diseases - served the poor and worked passionately for the conversion of sinners. Even in spite of extreme fasting, we know from the writings of her contemporaries that Catherine remained radiantly happy, was full of practical wisdom and spiritual insight, and possessed extraordinary personal charm. Slowly, disciples began to gather around her - both men and women - who formed a strong spiritual fellowship, united by mystical love. Then, from this humble life, Catherine was summoned by God to guide the Church through the most difficult time in all its history.

During the summer of 1370, Catherine received a series of visions and special manifestations of Divine mysteries, which culminated in a prolonged trance - a kind of mystical death - in which she saw Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. She heard a Divine command to leave her cell and enter the public life of the world. This began Catherine's earnest involvement in the politics of her day.

The letters that Catherine had been writing mostly for the spiritual instruction of her followers began to take on more and more a note of public affairs. Catherine spoke with candor and authority, completely committed to Christ and certain of His direction, and not everyone wanted to hear what she was saying! Opposition and slander resulted from her political and spiritual activism and she was subjected to relentless persecution. Yet, Catherine's public influence reached great heights due to her evident holiness.

During this time in history, the Church's role in the world had become as much political as spiritual. From 1305, The Holy See (the Pope and operational headquarters of the Church) was no longer in Rome, but resided instead in Avignon (modern day France). The Church 'took sides' in the secular politics of the day and the Church officials, sometimes including Popes, were heavily influenced by the French kings. They acquired great wealth, lived the life of Princes and developed a reputation of corruption. Thus, the Church began to lose influence. Gross misgovernment of Papal officials led to religious and civic divisions in Italy, which were rampant to the point of civil war. In 1371, Pope Gregory XI became involved in a conflict with a Duke of Milan (in Italy) and declared war. The war ended in a truce however, the Pope's use of French temporal power for this – as well as other incidents - led to popular discontent and insurrection in the Roman Republic, including an uprising among the citizens of Florence. When Gregory excommunicated the inhabitants of Florence for rising against him, the Florentines sent Catherine to intercede for them.

Catherine worked tirelessly for peace. She dispatched letters to men and women in every station of life, corresponded with Princes and Republics (city-states) and was consulted by Papal Emissaries regarding the affairs of the Church. She implored Pope Gregory XI to leave Avignon and return to Rome. She also implored him to reform both the clergy and the administration of the Papal States. Catherine was unsuccessful in securing peace, but made such a profound impression upon the mind of the Pope that he yielded and removed the excommunication of the citizens of Florence. And - in spite of strong opposition from the French king and the College of Cardinals - Gregory left France and moved the Papal See back to Rome.

Catherine ardently threw herself into the cause of restoring peace to Italy and the Church. A great evangelist, she spent the greater part of 1377 leading a spiritual revival in the country districts of Siena. Then, early in 1378 she was sent by the Pope to Florence to make another effort for peace. Catherine left Florence only after news reached the city that peace had been signed between the Republic and a new pope. She immediately returned to Siena, where she enjoyed a few months of comparative quiet and dictated the famous "Dialogue", her book of her meditations and revelations.



*St. Catherine escorting Pope Gregory XI back to Rome
January 17, 1377*

In the meantime the Church's 'Great Schism', which Catherine had foretold, began. When the Roman conclave elected a pope to succeed Gregory XI, French cardinals had their own conclave elect their own Pope. This split the allegiance of Christendom between two Popes – and then three Popes - and put even Saints on opposing sides.

From the outset Catherine enthusiastically supported the Roman claimant, Pope Urban VI, who summoned her to Rome. There she spent what remained of her life working strenuously for the reformation and unity of the Church, serving the destitute and afflicted, and dispatching eloquent letters in behalf of Pope Urban VI to people in high stations and low stations, in all directions. She became very weak and begged Jesus to allow her to bear the punishment for all the sins of the world, and to receive the sacrifice of her body for the unity and renovation of the Church. After a mysterious agony of three months, which Catherine endured with extreme exultation and delight, she died. Her last political work, accomplished practically from her death-bed, was the 1380 reconciliation of Pope Urban VI with the Roman Republic.

St. Catherine is a patron Saint of Italy.

Sources: New Advent.org

Catholic-saints.info

American Catholic.org

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