

Life

St. Catherine was born in Siena, Italy in 1347. When she was 6 years old, she saw a vision: Jesus was sitting in glory surrounded by saints. At the age of 7, she resolved to remain chaste and serve the Lord. When she was 16 years old, her parents wanted her to get married, so she cut off her hair in protest. Her parents originally coerced her by treating her as a maid, but her father saw that she went to the small room to pray joyfully after working hard every day, knowing that he could not dissuade her, he let her have her way.

Catherine neither chose to get married nor to abandon secular life; she decided to live a life of active prayer, devotion to the Lord and love of others outside the monastery.

Catherine joined the Third Order of St. Dominic and spent the next three years living a life at home of deep and solitary prayer and meditation; praying, fasting and doing penance alone in her room every day, during which she was constantly tested. In 1366 Jesus appeared to her and they entered into a mystical marriage. Thus another phase of her life began as she left her room to serve others; this included tending to the sick, giving to the poor, and visiting prisoners. Jesus appeared to her more and more frequently. She often appeared in a state of ecstasy in the church, and there were more miracles. Some people began to follow her. Catherine taught them how to practice virtue and become holy, and her reputation spread abroad. In 1374, Catherine experienced a long period of trance, as if dead, and she entered another phase. Catherine began to act as a messenger of peace for various places and the church, mediating disputes among nobles, corresponding with many influential figures, admonishing and even exhorting them to repent and remain holy, including the pope at the time. She also wrote *The Dialogue*, an account of her intimate conversations with Christ.

Previously, when Pope Gregory XI took refuge in Avignon, France, due to the raging Bubonic plague in Italy and the continuous wars between the city states, he left the administration of church affairs in the hands of a group of corrupt clergy who stayed in Rome. Saint Catherine went to Avignon in person and bluntly stated that the place was full of evil and urged the Pope to return to Rome, which he did. Unfortunately, the Pope passed away, soon after the church was split by the Western Schism, with a period of two Popes reigning at the same time. Catherine felt the sins of the Church and the need for atonement and suffered greatly for this cause. She died soon after at the age of 33. She was named the patron saint of Italy and the patron saint of Europe. In 1970, Saint Catherine was honoured as a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI.

Reflection

St. Catherine lived during a time when the Church was corrupt and divided. She prayed fervently, and entered the Truth, understanding Christ's will and did her best to unite the Church. Pope Francis praised her, and he also warned of the dangers of evil causing the internal division of the Church. The Pope said: "And the divisions in the Church do not allow the Kingdom to grow; they do not allow the Lord to be seen as He is. Divisions make you see this part, this one against the other. Always against!" (at the morning mass at Casa Santa Marta on September 12, 2016). Nowadays, there are different voices concerning how the Church should respond to social issues, making believes very troubled. May we also learn from Saint Catherine to understand God's will through prayers, and be an instrument of peace in times of division.

Prayer

During the public audience on November 24, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI pointed out that St. Catherine's spirituality was Christ-centred, and she also attached great importance to the Eucharist. The Pope pointed out that: "Like the Sienese Saint, every believer feels the need to be conformed with the sentiment of the heart of Christ to love God and his neighbour as Christ himself loves. And we can all let our hearts be transformed and learn to love like Christ in a familiarity with him that is nourished by prayer, by meditation on the Word of God and by the sacraments, above all by receiving Holy Communion frequently and with devotion." Let us also learn from St. Catherine to be Christ-centred, be together with Him through the Eucharist, and transform ourselves to be more like Him.

May we learn from St. Catherine and carry out God's will at any stage of life, and be instruments of peace. Saint Catherine of Siena, pray for us.
