

**Wednesday 17 May 2000– The Saints speak to the Priests**

**LECTURE BY PROFESSOR MARIA ANTONIETTA FALCHI PELLEGRINI**

**ST. CATHERINE AND THE PRIESTS: A MESSAGE FOR THE CHURCH OF THE  
THIRD MILLENNIUM**

Your Eminencies, Excellencies, reverend and dear priests, I feel especially honoured to provide this small service to you, whom St. Catherine of Siena defines as "Ministers of the Blood of Christ", in this patriarchal Basilica, centre of Catholicism, housing the Chair of he who is the "Sweet Christ on earth".

"In the centuries, always, the visible events of the life of the Church are prepared in the silent dialogue of the souls consecrated with their Lord. The Virgin, who cherished in her heart every word addressed to her by God, is the model of those attentive souls in whom the prayer of Jesus the high priest, lives, and those souls who, following His example, devote themselves to the contemplation of the life and passion of Christ, preferentially chosen by the Lord to be the instruments of His great works in the Church, like St. Bridget and St. Catherine of Siena".

These are the words of Edith Stein and provide a surprising introduction to the understanding of St. Catherine, her privileged relationship with the Church and her Ministers. This phrase covers the three Saints recently proclaimed by John Paul II as Co-Patronesses of Europe: St. Bridget of Sweden, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross. It is a significant coincidence, perhaps the intuition of a common path whose outcome the author could not foresee. However, these three women certainly have in common "the contemplation of the life and passion of Christ", and the sharing of His priestly prayer.

Through these considerations, we reach the heart of Catherine's sainthood, its basis, as solid as rock: the love for Jesus Crucified, which becomes love and dedication to the Church, her Spouse, her earthly Vicar and her Ministers. It is a love which is both daughter and mother, tender and strong, apprehensive and reassuring, severe and comprehensive, who asks for and gives all without sparing herself. This is why the Saint has been chosen and accepted to become the instrument of God's work in the Church.

The life of this girl from Siena was extraordinary and many-faceted. She was born in 1347, the twenty-fourth daughter of the cloth dyer Iacopo di Benincasa and of Monna Lapa; she died in Rome in 1380, was canonised by Pius II in 1461, proclaimed a Doctor of the Church on October 1970 by Paul VI, and finally proclaimed Co-Patroness of Europe on 1 October 1999 by John Paul II. This path over many centuries of history of the Church, indicates a growing relevance of Catherine's message of Catherine in a new cultural and social situation.

The Siennese saint, who refused the marriage her mother wished to impose on her, in order to totally devote herself to her only Spouse, Jesus, living her mystical marriage in the world, in the Dominican Third Order of the Catherinians, wonderfully incarnates the "female genius "

described by John Paul II in the *Mulieris Dignitatem*. In the Pope's words, the union with Christ and freedom rooted in God explain the great work of Saint Catherine of Siena in the life of the Church (M.D., n.27).

Only union with Christ must have given Catherine, in a period when women had no opportunities for action outside the home or the convent, the strength to travel, to speak in public, to deal with popes and kings, to undertake valuable and difficult functions of pacification in the bloody political conflicts of the time, to fight for the reform and the unity of the Church, divided first by the exile in Avignon and then by the Western Schism. Catherine, a young uneducated woman who authoritatively dealt with the most powerful men of the time! This strength was certainly not her own, nor the authority she showed, as she herself tirelessly repeated. Christ spoke in her and through her; she had become a perfect instrument of the will of God. She wrote to the powerful in the name of Jesus Crucified and His precious Blood, and in this glorious name she scolded and incited, always aiming at the glory of God, the good of the Church, the salvation of souls, the peace of all men.

Reading the life of Catherine, we recall the words addressed to the Holy Virgin by the Archangel Gabriel: "Nothing is impossible for God". And the Lord also reminded Catherine of these words when he asked her to leave home and begin her public apostolate. In her life everything is the work of God. This included her doctrine, of which Pius II, in the bull of canonisation, said "non acquisita fuit", i.e. not justified by her cultural background, as well as her action, which transcended every possible commitment of human strength. Of her Paul VI, proclaiming her Doctor of the Church, said: "what is most striking in the saint is the inherent wisdom, the lucid, profound and inebriating assimilation of divine truths and of the mysteries of the faith... an assimilation, though favoured by very singular natural talents, but obviously prodigious, due to a charism of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit".

Her docility to the action of God and the gift of the Spirit is what makes St. Catherine great, in a total union of love between He who is and she who is not, as in her typical language she expresses the relationship between the Creator and the creature. "I decided to send women, unknowing, weak and fragile by nature, but rich in my divine wisdom, to confound their pride and rashness", says the Lord. Once again God has chosen the weak to confound the strong and has revealed the mysteries of His Kingdom to the little ones, to a great little woman.

Near to Mari in the obedience of the faith, Catherine is also near her in the spiritual maternity of the Church. "Catherine reflects in herself the image of Mary, mother of the Church. She feels this maternal task as her own very particular mission". She therefore suffers when she sees her Spouse exhausted and pale due to her children, whom she accuses and scolds for this reason; all the more so if the very Ministers injure the Spouse of Christ by their conduct. As John Paul II recalls, proclaiming her Co-Patroness of Europe, the Sienese virgin unreservedly spent her whole life for the Church. She herself testifies this to her spiritual children on her deathbed: "Recall, dearest children, that I have given my life for the Holy Church".

In 1370, revived after the experience of mystical death, Catherine confided to her Confessor that she heard the Lord speak these words; "The cell will no longer be your usual home; indeed, for the salvation of souls you shall also leave your city... you shall bear the honour of

my name and my doctrine to small or great, be they lay, clergy or religious. I shall place on your mouth a wisdom, which no one can resist. I shall lead you before Pontiffs, Heads of the Churches and of the Christian people, so that through the weak, as is my way of acting, I shall humiliate the pride of the strong".

This is how Catherine of Siena's public life began, out of obedience to the love of God. The more she left the cell of her room to become ambassador of Christ, "Sweet Truth" in Italy and Europe, the more she concentrated in her "interior cell" where the soul is alone with the Lord. Here and here only did she take from the Crucified the wisdom and strength for the action. Certainly, St. Thomas and the entire Christian tradition are present in Catherine, assimilated by the religious environment surrounding her. But the Saint is not based on a human culture, but rather, like St. Paul, on the knowledge of Christ Crucified, and as a true daughter of St. Dominic, she transmits to others what she has learned in contemplation.

The life of the Sieneese saint shows that action and contemplation are not alternatives, or opposites, but necessarily compensate one another, since neither is complete without the other. This teaching appears all the more significant in today's society, where we live in a continuous race against time. No pastoral or working task can distract us from intimacy with Him without whom nothing would have meaning. We must remain in the "interior cell", the cell of "self-knowledge". Catherine never tired of telling this to the priests, is the first weapon to defeat the temptations and snares of the world.

While Italy was torn by civil strife and the Church was subject to corruption and political interests, the work of the Saint has three major objectives; the pacification of the Italian cities, the reform of the Church and the return of the Pope to Rome from Avignon. She devoted herself unsparingly to each task, armed only with the strength of her faith and her charity. God crowned her work with success. The return of Gregory XI from exile in Avignon was the greatest of these results, the one for which history will always remember the name of Catherine, an arduous result for anyone, impossible for a girl lacking any earthly power. But God worked through her.

The joy for the return of the Pope was short lasting. Soon after the Church was torn by schism. Catherine went to Rome, called by Urban VI. Here she consumed her remaining strength in a sacrifice for the Church, unsparingly sustaining by every means the legitimate Pontiff, by fierce scolding, exhortations and prayer for this last battle whose end she did not see.

The battles fought by St. Catherine for the Church are witnessed to in her letters to Popes, Cardinals, monks and priests. In them there is always a great love for the holy Ministers, love joined with devotion and respect, reverence for the dignity of the Sacrament they administer. "Father, for reverence for the Sacramento", as she often said to the priests. The depth of this love, which certainly did not depend on the human characteristics of its recipients, is equal only to the strength of the reproof of those who injured the face of the Church-Spouse. It was the awareness of this love that made Catherine free, enabling her to make accusations and reproofs for the good of the Church, without fear of being motivated by other, more earthly reasons.

Only the Pope could correct the defects of the priests, and not the laity who should always revere them, since Christ left to the Apostle Peter and his successors the key of His Blood, from which all the Sacraments gain life. The Pope, with ardent faith recognised by Catherine as "sweet Christ on earth" and called with tender affection "My kindest daddy" is asked to work strongly for the reform of the Church. "Intervene to eliminate the stink of the ministers of the Holy Church; pull out the stinking flowers and plant scented plants, virtuous men who fear God".

In her letters to the priests, Catherine outlines a reform which in order to extend to the entire body of the Church must start from personal conversion. She refers to love of self as the source of all vices and to humility as the first of the virtues. She recommends a sober life, detached from earthly pleasures, but attentive to the good of souls, inspired by purity, peace and charity. The priest lives in prayer, and as described in Catherine's beautiful symbolism, Catherine, "with the spouse of the breviary at his side". Addressing the priests in their various conditions with maternal solicitude, she always recalls, even to the most fragile, the dignity conferred on them by God as dispensers of the Blood of the Lamb. In order to help them to remember how "self-knowledge", obtained with the illuminated reason of faith, is an essential condition of a virtuous life and encourages them to entrust themselves to Mary, to whom, she writes, "you have been offered and given". The strength of her reproofs is also maternal; they are always oriented towards the conversion of those who have made an error. But there is one thing that is indispensable for Catherine: "Remain in the sweet and holy delight of God".

To conclude, let us listen to the wisdom-filled charism of Catherine the definition of priests. The Saint devotes many pages of her book to this (*The Dialogue of Divine Providence*) dictated by her when in ecstasy to her disciples, and describes the ministerial dignity, a gift of God, as a dignity superior to that of the Angels.

"Oh dearest Daughter, I have told you all this so that you may better know the dignity I have conferred on my ministers, and that their misery may make you sadder... They are my *anointed ones*, and I call them my *Christs*, because I have given them my own self to administer to you. Angels do not have this dignity, and I have granted to men, to those whom I have appointed as my ministers".

In this regard there is an especially valuable consideration in numbers 17/18/19 of the "Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons". Certainly, in present circumstances, it would not be exaggerated to say that a soul concerned for the "Christs" of God, such as Catherine, would feel like a providential instrument for the sanctification of the priests and the consequent good of the entire body of the Church, in a generous and motivated application of this Directory, as well as the subsequent documents of the Congregation for the Clergy, i.e. the inter-dicastery instruction "De Ecclesiae mysterio" and the circular letter "The Priest and the third Christian Millennium Teacher of the Word".

For Catherine, the priests are "ministers of the Sun", since they are ministers of the Body and Blood of Christ, who is one with God, the true sun. The functions and duties of priests are derived from this high Ministry: administering the Sacraments, devotion to the glory of God

and the salvation of souls, the illumination of the faithful with the word and with example, the correction of sinners, prayer for the faithful, charity to the poor.

The holy and virtuous ministers, God says to Catherine, themselves resemble the sun. They have, in fact, produced light and heat, "since in them there is no shadow of sin or ignorance, because they follow the doctrine of my Truth. They are warmed by it since they burn in the furnace of my charity". Thus they give light and heat in the mystical body of the Church, illuminating and heating souls with supernatural knowledge and the ardent charity.

For the priests, His "Christs", God always demands reverence and respect, whatever their human weakness may be, since any offence against them is also against Him. He asks Catherine and all the Christians to pray assiduously for the Holy Church and her ministers.

---

1 *The Prayer of the Church*, 1936.

2 Thomas of Siena detto il Caffarini, *Vita di S. Caterina*, P.II, c.I.

3 AAS, LXII, 31 October 1970.

4 Thomas of Siena detto il Caffarini, *op.cit.*, P.II, c.I.

5 C. Riccardi, *Il message filosofico and mistico of S. Caterina da Siena*, Ed. Cantagalli, 1994, p.152.

6 Raimondo da Capua, *Vita di S. Caterina da Siena*, l.III, c.IV, n.363.

7 *Ibid.*, n. 216.

8 Cfr. S. Caterina da Siena, *Dialogo della Divina Provvidenza*, c.115.

9 A Gregorio XI, Lettera 270.

10 A prete Andrea de' Vitroni, Lettera n.2.

11 A don Roberto da Napoli, Lettera n.342.

12 S. Caterina da Siena, *Dialogo della Divina provvidenza*, c.113.

13 *Ibid.*, c. 119.

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/jub\\_preti\\_20000517\\_falchi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/jub_preti_20000517_falchi_en.html) Accessed on November 10, 2018