

[Page 7:]

## *Celebration of the Sixth Centenary of St. Catherine of Siena*

# **Richness of humanity perfected by grace**

*In the afternoon of 30 April the Holy Father presided over a solemn Eucharistic concelebration in St. Peter's Basilica on the occasion of the VI centenary of the death of St. Catherine of Siena. John Paul II delivered the following homily:*

1. An innumerable host of 'wise virgins', like those praised by the Gospel parable we have listened to, have waited, in Christian centuries, for the Bridegroom with their lamps well filled with oil, to take part with him in the feast of grace on earth, and glory in Heaven. Among them, there shines forth before our eyes today the great and dear St. Catherine of Siena. A splendid flower of Italy, a sparkling gem of the Dominican Order, a star of peerless beauty in the firmament of the Church, whom we are honoring here on the sixth century of her death, which took place on a Sunday morning, about the third hour on 29 April 1380, while the feast of St Peter Martyr, whom she loved so much, was being celebrated.

Happy to be able to give you an initial sign of my deep participation in the celebration on the centenary, I cordially greet you all, dear Brothers and Sisters, who to commemorate the glorious date in a worthy way, are gathered in the Vatican Basilica, where there seems to hover the ardent spirit of the great Saint of Siena. I greet particularly the Master General of the Friars Preachers, Father Vincent de Couesnogle and Archbishop Mario Ismaele Castellano of Siena, the principal organizers of this celebration. I greet the members of the Dominican Third Order and of the Ecumenical Association of the "Caterinati", participants in the International Congress of Studies about Catherine, and all of you, dear pilgrims, who have traveled along many roads of Italy and Europe to gather at this centre of the Catholic world, on such a beautiful and significant feast day.

### **Her rich humanity**

2. Today we look to St. Catherine in the first place to admire in her what immediately struck those who approached her: the extraordinary richness of humanity, not dimmed in any way, but on the contrary increased and perfected by grace, which made her almost a living image of that true and wholesome Christian 'humanism', the fundamental law of which is formulated by Catherine's confrere and teacher, St Thomas Aquinas. In the well-known aphorism 'grace does not

suppress, but presupposes and perfects nature' (Summa Theol. 1 q, 1, a. 8 ad 2). The man of complete dimensions is the one who is fulfilled in Christ's grace.

When in my ministry I insist on calling the attention of all to the dignity and values of man, which must be defended, respected and served today, I am speaking above all of this nature that came from hands of the Creator and was renewed in the Blood of Christ the Redeemer: a nature that is good in itself, and therefore curable in its infirmities and perfectible in its gifts, called to receive that 'additional' element which makes it a participant in divine nature and 'eternal life'. When this supernatural element is grafted onto men and can set with all its power in him, we have the miracle of the 'new creature', who in his transcendent loftiness does not cancel all that is purely human but makes it richer, fuller, more firm.

In this way our Saint, in her nature as a woman generously endowed with imagination, intuition, sensitiveness, will power and industry, with capability and power of communication with readiness for the giving of herself and her service is transfigured, but not impoverished in the light of Christ who calls her to be his bride and to identify herself mystically with him in the depth of 'interior knowledge' as well as to commit herself in charitable, social and even political action, in the midst of the great and the ordinary, the rich and the poor the learned and the ignorant. And she, almost illiterate, becomes capable of making herself heard, and read and taken into consideration by rulers of cities and kingdoms, princes and prelates of the Church, monks and theologians, by many of whom she is even venerated as 'teacher' and 'mother'.

She is a marvelous woman who in that second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century shows in herself what a human creature, and---I stress---a woman, the daughter of humble dyers, was made capable of when she can listen to the voice of the one Pastor and Teacher, and nourish herself at the table of the divine Bridegroom, to whom, as a 'wise virgin' she has generously consecrated her life.

We have here a masterpiece of grace renewing and raising the creature to the perfection of holiness which is also the full realization of the fundamental values of humanity.

### **Letters reveal "the wise virgin"**

3. Catherine's secret in responding so docilely, faithfully and fruitfully to the call of her divine Bridegroom, can be grasped from her own explanations and applications of the parable of the 'wise virgins' which she gives several times in letters to her disciples. In particular, in the one sent to a young niece who wishes to be a 'bride of Christ', she makes a little synthesis of spiritual life which applies

especially to those consecrated to God in the religious state but gives directions and guidance for everyone.

‘If you want to be a real bride of Christ – the Saint writes – you must have the lamp, oil and light’. ‘Do you know what is meant by this, my dear?’

Here is the symbolism of the lamp. ‘By the lamp is meant the heart, which must be like a lamp. You see very well that a lamp is wide above, and below it is narrow and our heart is made in the same way, meaning that we must always have it wide above, by means of holy thoughts. Holy images and continual prayer. With our memory always tuned to remembering the beneficent deeds of God and principally that of the Blood by which we have been redeemed.

‘I also said to you that the lamp is narrow below’ so is our heart, meaning that it must be narrow as regards these earthly things, not desiring them or loving them in a disorderly way, nor craving them in greater quantity than what God wishes to give us but we must thank him always, admiring how sweetly he provides for us so that we never lack anything’. (*Letter 23*)

In the lamp we need oil. The lamp would not be enough if there were not oil inside it. And by oil is meant that sweet little virtue of deep humility. Those five foolish virgins, priding themselves only and vainly on the integrity and virginity of the body, lost the virginity of the soul, because they did not bring with them the oil of humility’. (*ibid*)

Finally, it is necessary that the lamp should be lit and that the flame should burn otherwise it would not be enough to let us see. This flame is the light of holy faith. I say the living faith because the saints say that faith without works is dead’ (*ub et., Letters 79, 360*).

In her life, Catherine really nourished with great humility the lamp of her heart, and kept burning the light of faith, the fire of charity, the zeal of good works carried out for love of God, also in hours of tribulation and passion, when her soul reached its greatest conformation to the Crucified Christ, until one day the Lord celebrated the mystical wedding with her in the little cell where he lived, resplendent with that divine presence (*Life nos 114-115*)

If modern men, and especially Christians, were to succeed in rediscovering the marvels that can be known and enjoyed in the ‘interior cell’ nay more in the heart of Christ! Then, indeed, man would find himself again, the reasons for his dignity, the foundation of his every value, the height of his eternal vocation.

## Communion with others

4. But Christian spirituality is not exhausted in an intimate circle, nor is it directed to individual life and egocentric isolation. The elevation of the person takes place in the symphony of the of the community, Catherine, although she guards for herself the cell of her house and her heart, lives from her youth in communion with so many other sons of God, in whom she feels the mystery of the Church vibrating with the friars of St. Dominic, whom she joins in spirit even when the bell calls them all together, at night for matins with the Dominican women tertiaries of Siena, among whom she is admitted for the exercise of charity and the community practice of prayer; with her disciples who are increasing, forming around her a cenacle of fervent Christians, who accept her exhortations to the spiritual life and the incentives to renewal and reform that she addresses to everyone in Christ's name and it can be said, with the whole 'Mystical Body of the Church' (cf. *Dialogue*, C. 166) with which and for which Catherine prays, works, suffers, offers herself and finally dies.

Her great sensitiveness to the problems of the Church of her time is thus transformed into communion with *Christus patiens* [the Suffering Christ] and *Ecclesia patiens* [the Suffering Church]. This communion is at the origin even of her exterior activity, which, at a certain moment, the Saint is driven to carry out first with charitable action and with the lay apostolate in city, and very soon on a far wider plane, with social, political and ecclesial commitment.

In any case Catherine draws from that interior source courage for action and that inexhaustible hope that sustains her even in the most difficult hours, even when everything seems lost, and enables her to influence others, even at the highest ecclesiastical levels, with the power of her faith and the fascination of her person completely offered to the cause of the Church.

At a meeting of Cardinals in the presence of Urban VI, according to the account of Blessed Raymond, Catherine 'showed that Divine Providence is always present, especially when the Church is suffering and she did so with such ardor that the Pontiff exclaimed at the end: 'What has the Vicar of Jesus Christ to fear, even if the whole world were to oppose him? Christ is more powerful than the world, and it is not possible that He will abandon his Church.' (*Life* n, 334).

## Victim of expiation

5. That was an exceptionally serious moment for the Church and for the Apostolic See. The demon of division had penetrated the Christian people. There were disputes and quarrels everywhere. In Rome [page 8:] itself, there were people

who were plotting against the Pope, even threatening him with death. The people were in an uproar.

Catherine, who constantly encouraged pastors and faithful, felt, however, that the time had come for a supreme offering of herself, as a victim of expiation and reconciliation together with Christ. So she prayed to the Lord: ‘For the honor of your name and for your holy Church, I will willingly drink the cup of passion and death, as I have always desired to do; you are my witness, from the time when, by your grace, I began to love you with all my mind and with all my heart.’ (*Life*, n. 346).

From that moment she fell into a rapid decline. Every morning of that Lent of 1380, “she went to the church of St. Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, where, after hearing Mass, she remained for a long time in prayer, she did not come home until Vespers’, exhausted. The next day, early in the morning, ‘starting from the street called *Via del Papa* (today *Via di S Chiara*), where she lived between the *Minerva* and *Campo dei Fiori*, she set out briskly for St. Peter’s, a walk that would have tired even a healthy person’ (*Life*, n. 348 cf. *letter 373*).

But at the end of April she could no longer get up. Then she gathered her spiritual family round her bed. In her long farewell, she declared to those disciples of hers: ‘I put my life, my death and everything in the hands of my eternal Bridegroom. If it pleases him that I should die, rest assured, beloved sons that I have given my life for the holy Church, and this I believe through an exceptional grace granted me by the Lord’ (*Life*, n. 363).

Shortly afterwards she died. She was only 33 years old: a beautiful youth offered to the Lord by the ‘wise virgin’ who had reached the end of her waiting and her service.

We are gathered here, six hundred years after that morning (*ibid*, n. 348) to commemorate that death and above all to celebrate that supreme offering of her life for the Church.

My dear Brothers and Sisters, it is consoling that you have come in such large numbers to glorify and invoke the Saint on this happy anniversary.

### **Tribute of praise**

It is right that the humble Vicar of Christ, like so many of his predecessors, should inspire you, precede you and guide you in paying a tribute of praise and thanks to the Saint who loved the Church so much, and laboured and suffered so much for her unity and for her renewal. And I have done so most willingly.

Now let me present to you a final memory, which is intended as a message, an exhortation, an invitation to hope, a stimulus to action; I am taking it from the words that Catherine addressed to her disciple Stefano Maconi and to all her companions in working and suffering for the Church: 'If you are what you must be, you will set fire to the whole of Italy...' (*Letter 368*); to the whole world. Humanity needs this 'fire' today, too, in fact, more, perhaps, than in the past. May the word and the example of Catherine arouse in so many generous souls the desire to be burning flames which, like her, are consumed to give brothers the light of faith and the warmth of love which 'never ends' ( 1 Cor. 13:8).