

and unity of the Church, and sent letters to famous and powerful men and women urging them to live holy lives.

However, her extreme fasting led to an illness that ended her life. Her spiritual director ordered her to eat, but she said it was too physically difficult to eat food. Although exhausted and near death, Catherine spent the last weeks of her life praying in St. Peter's Basilica for Church reform and for Church unity. She suffered a stroke, and died in Rome on April 29, 1380. She died at the young age of 33.

The Dominicans treasure the body of Catherine in the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome, but Siena has her head enshrined in St. Dominic's Church. Between her death and burial, there were 8 miracles documented. Pope Pius II canonized Catherine in 1461.

On October 4, 1970, Pope Paul VI included her in the list of the Doctors of the Church. "Doctor of the Church" is a title given by the Catholic Church to saints that are recognized as having been of particular importance, regarding their contribution to theology or church doctrine.

Here is one of her teachings about maintaining an inner room or 'cell':
"Go to the dwelling, the cell, of self-knowledge. There I want you to open the eye of your understanding with loving desire. Walk across the cell and get into the bed, the bed in which is God's tender goodness, which you find within this cell... Rest here then, and never leave. You won't be able to have your actual cell very often, but I want you always to live within the cell of your heart and carry it about with you."

St. Catherine of Siena, pray for us!

For Reflection

- What stood out to you about St. Catherine?
- How did Catherine maintain a closeness with God?
- How does her life inspire you to live your daily life?

Watch the companion video & listen to the audio discussion of what Catherine can teach us, at our website!

Socials with the Saints – PILGRIM CENTER of HOPE

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St. Catherine of Siena

Doctor of the Church

Born: March 25, 1347

Died: April 29, 1380

Canonized: July 1461 by Pope Pius II

Patronage: Italy, Europe, against illness and temptation, firefighters, nurses

Feast: April 29

Caterina Benincasa was born in Siena, Italy on the Feast of the Annunciation, in 1347. She and a twin sister who did not survive, were the youngest of 26 children. Her father, Giacomo, was a prosperous wool dyer, and lived with his wife, Lapa, in a spacious house in an area of Siena called the Fontebranda district.

At the age of 6, Catherine had an experience which is said to have determined her vocation. Walking home with her brother, Stefano, suddenly she stopped still in the road, gazing up at the sky. Catherine saw a vision of Christ seated in glory; beside him stood the apostles St. Peter and St. Paul, and St. John the Evangelist. Christ was smiling at her, and she saw him lift His hand and bless her with the sign of the cross. Only after Stefano had gone back and seized her by the hand did she wake, as from a dream. She made a secret vow to give her whole life to God.

Years later, she told her confessor that it was then that she began to study the way of the saints, especially St. Dominic and the desert fathers. The Dominican monastery, with its fortress-like church, was at the top of the hill above her home. This early contact with the Dominicans profoundly influenced the development of her own spirituality.

When she was twelve, her mother, with marriage in mind, started trying to get Catherine to pay attention to her appearance. She finally told her mother that she would never marry and cut off her hair. As punishment, she was made to do menial work in the household, which she bore with sweetness. The hardest labor, humiliations, contempt, and the insults of her sisters, were to Catherine a subject of joy; and she embraced these "crosses" with heroic patience. Her father finally came to the realization that further pressure was useless, and Catherine was permitted to do as she pleased. In a small, dim room set apart for her use, a cell 9 feet by 3 feet, she gave herself up to a daily life of prayer and fasting.

Soon she obtained permission to become part of the Dominican religious community as a tertiary, known in that community as the “Mantellate”, which was usually only granted to matrons or widows. She received the white robe and veil which stand for purity of body and soul, and the black cape which is the symbol of humility and death to this world. She was able to be affiliated with the religious community but continue to live at home. For 3 years she spoke only to her confessor and never went out, except to church.

She had many visions of Christ. In 1366, in a vision of Christ accompanied by His Mother, she became a Bride of Christ – a Mystical Marriage. Taking Catherine’s hand, Mary held it up to Christ, who placed a ring upon it and espoused her to Himself, bidding her to be of good courage, for now she was armed with a faith that could overcome all temptations. To Catherine, this ring was always visible, though it was invisible to others.

Catherine was overcome with this truth: that God had loved us first, a love that was unconditional; “I loved you without being loved by you, even before you existed.” She chose to love her neighbors as she had been loved by God. The years of solitude and preparation were ended. Like other Dominican tertiaries, she volunteered to nurse the sick in the hospitals, choosing to serve those afflicted with the worst diseases. She continued to experience many ecstasies at this time. In 1370, she had the ecstatic experience of exchanging hearts with Jesus; also a series of visions of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.

Public opinion of Catherine was divided; many Siennese revered her as a saint, while others called her a fanatic. Here was a young woman with many followers – even men! She had to go to Florence to appear before the general chapter of the Dominicans to defend herself. Raymond of Capua was then appointed as her confessor, and he became her disciple and biographer.

When she returned to Siena, a terrible outbreak of the black plague pandemic surged; this was a turning point for Catherine; she and her sisters worked nonstop to relieve the sufferers. Without hesitation, she went into places where no one else would go. She cared for the sick, washing their wounds, and burying them. It is said that up to half of the population of Siena died from the plague.

Her deeds of mercy, along with a growing reputation as a worker of miracles, caused the Siennese to turn to Catherine for all kinds of difficulties. She was easy to speak with, had a remarkable instinct for delivering a word of encouragement when it was needed, was rooted in the realities of everyday life, and had a good sense of humor.

Blessed Raymond of Capua, her great friend and spiritual director, said: “She drew the souls of men to the things of God, and made them take delight in God himself. She drove out despondency from the hearts of any who shared her company, and banished dejection of spirit and all feelings of depression, bringing instead a peace of soul so deep that those who experienced it did not know themselves.”

Her writing conveys her closeness to God. She wrote her *Dialogue of Divine Providence* (a Spiritual Testament); a conversation she had with God. Also the *Orations*, prayers that she directed to Jesus during her ecstasies, were gathered and written down. Catherine wrote some four hundred letters of great literary beauty. A young lay woman without an official role or title within the Church, she yet did not hesitate to write or dictate respectful yet honest letters to all kinds of people: cardinals, monks, family members, nuns, priests, a king – not to mention two Popes, Gregory XI and Urban VI.

In 1375 when visiting Pisa, in front of a crucifix in the church of St. Christina, Catherine saw 5 red rays come from the cross, piercing her hands, feet and heart – the wounds remained as the stigmata, the wounds of the crucified Christ, which caused her pain and were visible to herself alone during her life, but seen by others on her body after her death.

Catherine received very many mystical graces in the Eucharist. Her visions and ecstasies often lasted 3-4 hours at Communion; many priests later attested to it. For the seven-year period prior to her death, she took no food into her body other than the Eucharist. Her fasting did not affect her energy, however. She maintained a very active life during those seven years.

At the time, the Church was suffering for a variety of reasons – scandals, politics, division... Because of all this, the pope had been living in Avignon, France for about 70 years. For Catherine’s entire life, there had been a pope in Avignon.

She worked for peace within the different regions of Italy, corresponding with Pope Gregory XI. In 1376 she traveled to Avignon to encourage him to return the papacy to Rome, which eventually did come to pass.

Shortly after Gregory XI returned to Rome, he died. A conclave elected Pope Urban VI, but again because of politics, a splinter group of cardinals elected an anti-pope. Urban VI summoned Catherine to Rome so she would be close to advise him. From 1377 until her death in 1380, she worked for the peace