

# St. Catherine of Siena

BORN 1347; DIED 1380  
VIRGIN AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH  
FEAST DAY: APRIL 29

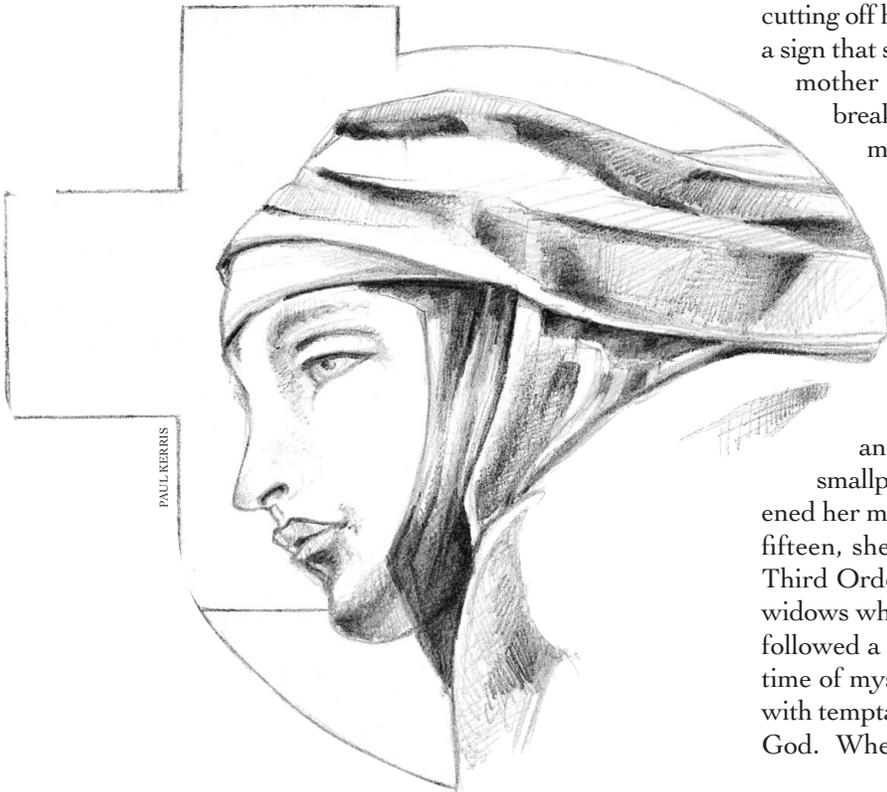
**F**EW SAINTS have ever flashed across the world like a thunderbolt. St. Catherine of Siena is numbered among this select company, who lived during the terrible period when the Black Death (bubonic plague) was killing a third of the population of Europe, popes had not resided in Rome for more than a generation, Italy had been wracked by civil wars for generations, and the Hundred Years' war between France and England was in its first decades.

Catherine was born in Siena (a town a little south of Florence, Italy). She and a twin who died shortly after birth were the twenty-third and twenty-fourth of twenty-five children of Giacomo di Benincasa, a well-to-do and saintly wool dyer, and his wife Lapa Piagenti. Only half of the children sur-

vived to adulthood. In childhood, Catherine was graceful, lively, friendly, full of laughter, charming, and already pious; going upstairs or downstairs, she knelt on each step to pray a Hail Mary.

When Catherine was six, while coming home with her brother from a visit to a married sister, she suddenly stopped in the road, completely oblivious until her brother grabbed her hand. She had seen a vision of Jesus seated in glory in Heaven, surrounded by saints. Jesus had smiled at her, stretched out his hand to bless her, and at that moment she gave herself totally to him and desired only solitude and prayer. Her behavior was a trial for her mother, who did not want to understand what was happening.

As Catherine approached marriageable age, her parents persuaded her to pay more attention to her dress and grooming. She allowed her hair to be dressed and wore fashionable clothing, but only for a short time before declaring that she would never marry, enforcing her declaration by cutting off her glorious hair and shaving her head, a sign that she meant to take religious vows. Her mother insisted that the whole family try to break Catherine's determination by harassment, scolding, having to do the maid's household work, and never allowing her to be alone. She remained patient and serene. Her father finally accepted that she must be allowed to follow her own calling. He gave her a tiny room of her own, where she began a period of intense prayer, fasting, and penance. During this period she fell ill with smallpox, which nearly killed her and frightened her mother into agreeing to her desires. At fifteen, she was allowed to enter a Dominican Third Order known as the Mantellates, mostly widows who lived at home but wore a habit and followed a highly penitential rule. This began a time of mystical visions and consolations, along with temptations and a sense of abandonment by God. When Catherine was not quite nineteen,



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Jesus appeared to her, together with his mother and an entire multitude from Heaven, and spiritually espoused her to himself.

Catherine undertook hospital nursing, deliberately choosing those whom other nurses avoided, such as cancer victims and lepers. Her prayer life was so intense that she went into ecstasy even when among others at home or in church, and her levitations were witnessed by many people. Extraordinarily charming, holy, and radiantly happy, Catherine attracted a group of friends and disciples around her, who called her “Mamma” despite her youth. These included Dominican and Augustinian priests, the rector of the hospital, an artist, a poet, one of her sisters-in-law, and others who were, as they said, “be-Catherined.” Catherine was able to read their thoughts and was aware of their temptations even when they were absent from her. However, not everyone in Siena shared this high opinion of her and, in 1374, when she was twenty-seven, she was required to attend a general meeting of the Dominican Order in Florence to explain herself. She was completely cleared of every charge, and it was then that she was assigned the Dominican Bl. Raymond of Capua as her spiritual director, who became her disciple as well.

Following Catherine’s return from Florence, the Black Death again broke out in Siena, and she nursed plague victims, helping them prepare for death and even burying the dead herself. Her work was characterized by joy and the effectiveness of her spiritual ministry, bringing many to conversion and repentance before death. She also ministered to condemned prisoners so that they might die in God’s grace. One prisoner laughed in joy at seeing Catherine praying for him in the moments before his death.

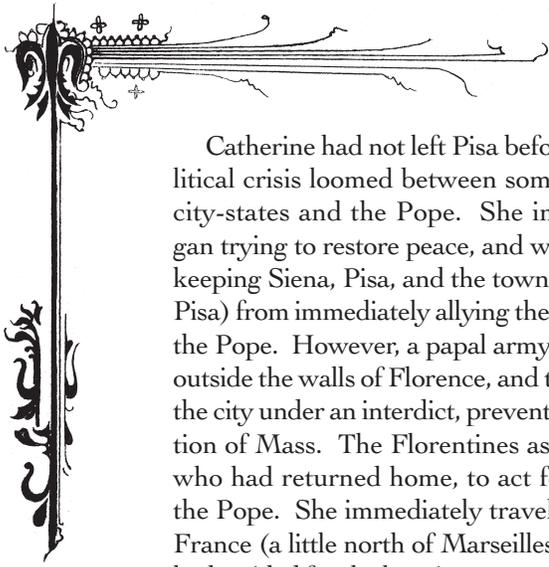
As Catherine’s reputation spread, people began to come to her for counsel. Three priests were put in charge of hearing the confessions of those who repented of lives of sin as a result of Catherine’s influence. She also influenced people from all walks of life, from kings to humble unknowns, through letters, almost four hundred of which survive today. She also became widely known as a peacemaker in an age of constant feuding. She began writing to Pope Gregory

XI, on subjects such as the scandal of the papacy’s absence from Rome, the need for reform of the clergy, and the administration of the Papal States (lands in Italy directly governed by the pope). Her letters are unique in the history of the Church in their power, authority, conviction, humility, fearlessness, and daughterly love (she called the Pope “sweetest Babbo mine” — that is, Daddy; Catherine was the only person ever to so address a pope).

The year after Catherine returned home from Florence, she visited Pisa (northwest of Siena) at the invitation of the town, which underwent a religious re-

vival as a result of her presence. She, too, had a significant experience there. Her prayer often focused on the sufferings of Christ and she was, as usual, completely lost in contemplation when, from the crucifix, there came five rays, blood-red, that pierced her hands, feet, and heart with such pain that she fainted. From that time until her death, she experienced the pain of these wounds, modeled on the wounds of Jesus’ crucifixion and known as “stigmata.” The wounds became visible to others only at her death. For most of the rest of her life, she lived entirely on the Blessed Sacrament, which caused her considerable concern because she was so noticeably “set apart.”





Catherine had not left Pisa before a serious political crisis loomed between some of the Italian city-states and the Pope. She immediately began trying to restore peace, and was successful in keeping Siena, Pisa, and the town of Lucca (near Pisa) from immediately allying themselves against the Pope. However, a papal army soon appeared outside the walls of Florence, and the Pope placed the city under an interdict, preventing the celebration of Mass. The Florentines asked Catherine, who had returned home, to act for them before the Pope. She immediately traveled to Avignon, France (a little north of Marseilles), where popes had resided for the last sixty-seven years, and conferred with Pope Gregory. (She was then only twenty-nine.) However, the Florentines failed to back Catherine up, for they did not really want peace on the Pope's terms, which were not lenient, and her mission failed.

The papacy's presence in Avignon had been the result of the nearly constant state of civil war in Italy. The Pope had often before been forced to flee Rome, and in 1305 Pope Clement V, most comfortable in France, fled to Avignon. Successor popes had not returned to Rome, despite the near-universal yearning of Europe, the many pleas from great leaders, including most notably the poets Petrarch and Dante, and St. Bridget of Sweden, and efforts of the popes themselves. Catherine's meetings with Pope Gregory provided the final stimulus. She even reminded him of a vow he had made to Rome that he had never revealed to anyone. He set out for Rome only months after her arrival, despite the opposition of the King of France, nearly all the cardinals, and the papal bureaucracy. Catherine left Avignon the same day, and spent the better part of a year encouraging a spiritual revival in the towns and villages subject to Siena. She also continued her correspondence with Pope Gregory on the subject of peace with Florence. He sent her there to persuade the city to reconcile to him, a

task that included an attempt on her life and that was crowned with success only after the death of the Pope the next year.

Now thirty-one, Catherine returned home again, where she wrote the mystical book known as the *Dialogues of Divine Providence* or *Dialogues of St. Catherine*, dictated over a period of five days. This book also clearly showed infused knowledge, which had also been in evidence when she had been questioned by theologians in several cities. However, her health was beginning to fail. She was very thin and in constant pain from the stigmata. What did not diminish was her charm and overflowing happiness.

Although Catherine had succeeded in bringing the papacy back to Rome and in achieving peace

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for Florence, another and worse spiritual crisis enveloped Europe shortly after the election of Gregory XI's successor, Pope Urban VI. Return of the pope to Rome had not reconciled all the cardinals (who were, by Church law, the electors of the Pope) to the loss of the papacy from Avignon. Pope Urban quickly gave evidence of favoritism to Italy and had a harsh personality,

adding incentive for some cardinals to declare his election invalid and to elect an antipope at Avignon. Thus began the “Great Western Schism” which was to tear Europe apart for nearly forty years. Catherine worked hard through her correspondence, with the Pope and Church and civil leaders to secure Pope Urban's recognition as the legitimate successor of Peter, always writing with tremendous authority. The Pope invited her to move to Rome so that she could advise and help him, and she did so in November 1378. She gave the remainder of her life in prayer, letters, personal visits on his behalf, and care of the poor and suffering, again living miraculously on no food but the Blessed Sacrament, for an entire year. In April 1380, she suffered a paralyzing stroke. She achieved one final success, reconciling Pope Urban with the government of Rome, and died eight days after her stroke, radiantly joyous as she approached union with her beloved Spouse.

