

St. Catherine of Sienna: A Heart on Fire!

Acts 15:22–31

Psalm 57:8–10, 12

John 15:12–17

(Friday for 5th Week of Easter)

In this morning's collect, the Church has us pray:

*O God,
who set Saint Catherine of Siena on fire
with divine love in her contemplation of the Lord's Passion
and her service of your Church,*

This love was ignited in her soul as a teenager. Born in Siena in 1347, into a very large family, she died in Rome in 1380, at the age of 33.

During her childhood, she lived with great intensity the spiritual presence of God, of Christ, and of Mary. She was the 23rd child of Jacopo and Lapa Benincasa and grew up as an intelligent, cheerful and intensely religious person. Her mother, Lapa, wanted Catherine to be well versed in the ways of society, and contracted a marriage with a good and handsome young man that she herself suggested. However, Catherine already had secretly married the Lord Jesus Christ.

Her father ordered Catherine to be left in peace, and she was given a room of her own for prayer and meditation.

Her love for Jesus so inspired her, that she served the Lord's Church tirelessly. She laid down her life for Jesus and his friends. There is a clear connection between love for Jesus and love for his Church. The last verse of today's Gospel has Jesus instruct us this way:

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

As St. Catherine contemplated the Lord's passion, it enkindled within her an ever deeper love for the Church. She understood that to love Jesus was to respond to his call to bear much fruit which she did.

As Blessed Paul VI said of her, when he declared her a doctor of the Church, the 4th of October 1970, in the center of her doctrine one encounters Christ crucified. She was, "was one who exalted the redeeming power of the adorable Blood of the Son of God, shed on the wood of the cross in expanding love, for the salvation of all generations of humanity." We could call her, because of this, the mystic of the Word Incarnate. But she is, at the same time, the mystic of the Church because, she "saw that Blood of the Saviour continually flowing in the Sacrifice of the Mass and in the Sacraments, thanks to the ministry of the sacred ministers and for purification and embellishment of the whole mystical Body of Christ. We may therefore say that Catherine was the mystic of the mystical Body of Christ, that is of the Church."

Right towards the end of her life she experienced the passion of Jesus in his suffering for the Church. In 1378, the Great Schism began, splitting the allegiance of Christendom between two, then three, popes and putting even saints on opposing sides. Catherine spent the last two years of her life in Rome, in prayer and pleading on behalf of the cause of Urban VI and the unity of the Church. She offered herself as a victim for the Church in its agony. She died surrounded by her "children" and was canonized in 1461.

In Catherine we see one who knew all too well that the Church on earth is made up of sinners on the road to becoming saints. Because she was able to keep Jesus always at the centre of her life the Lord's words in today's Gospel oriented how she lived:

You are my friends if you do what I command you.

The saints are given to us who are still alive in this world as an encouragement and example. Benedict XVI says of St. Catherine:

Learn from St. Catherine to love with courage, in an intense and sincere way, Christ and the Church."

This brings us back to today's Collect:

***O God,
who set Saint Catherine of Siena on fire
with divine love in her contemplation of the Lord's Passion
and her service of your Church,***

To love Jesus means to also love his Church. St. Catherine's enflamed heart is captured in this beautiful prayer:

"out of mercy you have washed us in his Blood, out of mercy you have wished to converse with creatures. O crazed with love! It did not suffice for you to take flesh, but you also wished to die!... O mercy! My heart drowns in thinking of you: for no matter where I turn to think, I find only mercy"

St. Catherine pray for us that our hearts would be set on fire with this same divine love for Jesus and his Church.