



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of January 25, 2013,  
Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul

**Dear Friends,**

“**T**HERE can be no doubt that, in Europe’s complex history, Christianity has been a central and defining element,” declared Blessed Pope John Paul II on October 1, 1999, when he proclaimed Saints Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa Benedicta of the Cross co-patronesses of Europe. “The Christian faith has shaped the culture of the continent and is inextricably bound up with its history ... For through their upright and honest lives inspired by love of God and neighbor, countless Christians in a wide range of consecrated and lay vocations have attained a holiness both authentic and widespread, even if often hidden. The Church has no doubt that this wealth of holiness is itself the secret of her past and the hope of her future. ... Saint Catherine of Siena’s role in the unfolding history of the Church and also in the growing theological understanding of revelation has been recognized in significant ways, culminating in her proclamation as a Doctor of the Church [by Pope Paul VI, on October 4, 1970].”

The daughter of a cloth dyer, Giacomo Benincasa, and his wife, Lapa, Catherine and her twin sister Giovanna were born in Siena, Italy, on March 25, 1347. They were born after twenty-two brothers and sisters. Giovanna soon died and, in 1348, the Benincasas adopted a ten-year-old orphan, Tommaso della Fonte. From her childhood, Catherine felt a deep attraction to God and MARY. When she was just five, she used to fervently recite the Hail MARY, repeating it on each step going up or down the stairs. Later, she always would recommend recourse to MARY at any opportunity: “MARY is our advocate, the Mother of grace and mercy. She is not ungrateful toward her servants.” Around the age of six, she had a vision of Christ blessing her. This experience increased Catherine’s zeal. Her religious education included readings from the lives of the saints, hermits, and desert fathers, whom she would later try to imitate by a life of asceticism and solitude. Catherine’s attraction to the Dominican order increased when Tommaso entered the Dominican novitiate in 1353. At the age of seven, Catherine made a vow of chastity.

## Ingenuity

**W**hen she was twelve, Catherine allowed herself to be dressed fashionably to satisfy her mother and Bonaventura, her older sister. In August 1362, Bonaventura died in childbirth. After this death, the parents wanted to marry off Catherine, who categorically refused. They sought Tommaso’s support. Given Catherine’s firm resolution to be consecrated to God, her brother convinced her to cut off her hair, which irritated her parents greatly. Besides the punishments and



Saint Catherine of Siena

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bullying she endured, she was chased from her room where she liked to spend long periods alone in prayer, and she was forced by her mother, who did not understand her, to do the servant’s household tasks. So Catherine decided to make “a little monastic cell” within herself, in which she enclosed herself with JESUS while she worked. To facilitate her recollection and obedience, she strove to see in her mother the Blessed Virgin MARY; in serving her father, she imagined herself serving JESUS; her brothers and sisters were Christ’s disciples and the holy women... Her ingenuity enabled Catherine to be contemplative in the midst of the world, to be in the world without being worldly, transforming the circumstances of ordinary life into encounters with God. Later on, she would tell her disciples that “everything done out of charity for one’s neighbor or oneself, all these external works whatever they may be, if they are done with a holy will, are a prayer.”

One day, Catherine had a vision of Saint Dominic offering her a lily and a Dominican religious habit. In the face of Catherine’s determination, her father finally gave her permission to join the Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic (called the *Mantellate*, because of their black mantles, *mantellata* in Italian). These were primarily widows who devoted themselves to charitable works and got together to attend Mass and receive religious instruction. Presented by her mother, Catherine was rejected by the sisters, who found her too young and perhaps too fanatical. But a bit later, overwhelmed by the zeal and

courage Catherine showed in enduring a serious illness, the sisters agreed to accept her, and in late 1364 she received the habit.

### **“If I had not been there...”**

**F**rom her novitiate, Catherine, who led a very ascetic life, was favored with apparitions and dialogue with JESUS. Yet along with these mystical gifts came moments of doubt and anxiety, and strong temptations. After an especially strong temptation, Our Lord appeared to Catherine: “Good and most sweet JESUS,” she said to Him gently, “where were You when my soul was prey to such torments?”—“I was in your heart, Catherine, for I only depart from those who first leave me by consenting to sin.”—“What! You were in my heart drowning in such disgusting thoughts?”—“Tell Me, Catherine, did these thoughts cause you joy or sadness?”—“Oh, Lord! Immense sadness and disgust.”—“And what was it that made you sad, if not My presence in your heart? If I had not been there, you would have consented to those temptations. It was I Who made you reject them and be distressed over them. And I was delighted by your fidelity to Me during this painful struggle.” In one of her letters, Catherine would divulge the precious lesson she drew from this trial: “God allows temptation so that our virtues might prove themselves and to increase His grace; so that we might not be conquered, but conquerors thanks to our trust in the divine assistance that enables us say with the Apostle Paul: *I can do all things in Him Who strengthens me* (Phil. 4:13).”

Several figures from the Old Testament—Abel, Abraham, Job, Tobias—remind us that God makes His dearest friends pass through trial and temptation. It is by being tempted that we experience our weakness and the weight of the malice we carry within ourselves. This self-knowledge places us in truth and humility, and is very beneficial for our salvation. Temptation leads us to practice the virtue that is opposed to the vice toward which we are inclined. Finally, it forces us to turn to God in prayer—in this sense, it is a source of union with God. This is why the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* declares, “There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle” (CCC, 2015).

In 1368, Catherine’s father fell ill and died, in spite of his daughter’s prayers. That same year, in a vision that would forever remain in Catherine’s heart and mind, the Virgin presented her to JESUS, Who gave her a magnificent ring, telling her: “I, your Creator and Savior, espouse you in the faith, that you always will keep pure until you celebrate your eternal nuptials with Me in Heaven.” Catherine continuously felt and even saw this ring, although it was visible only to her. From then on, Catherine put her love of God into practice even more by a yet greater care of the sick and the poor. She did miracles for them. But she was also the object of ridicule and slander—some accused her of being a loose woman.

Catherine was graced with the gift of tears, the expression of a deep sensitivity and a great capacity for emotion and tenderness. Many saints have had this gift, which recalls the emotion of JESUS Himself, Who did not hold back or hide His tears before the tomb of His friend Lazarus and the grief of Mary and Martha, and also at the sight of Jerusalem, during His last days on this earth. “Remember Christ crucified, God and man,” Catherine wrote to a correspondent. ... “Make your aim the Crucified Christ, hide in the wounds of the Crucified Christ and drown in the blood of the Crucified Christ.”

### **“The doctrine of MARY”**

**T**hrough her brother Tommaso, Catherine met Bartolomeo di Domenico, a young Dominican. A great spiritual friendship was born between them. Bartolomeo taught her theology, and she was generous with her encouragements. Catherine’s fame spread, and she developed an intense activity of spiritual direction for people from every walk of life: nobles and politicians, artists and ordinary people, consecrated religious, and clerics. Around her formed a group of followers whom she urged to work for the salvation of others. She called zeal for souls “the doctrine of MARY,” for, as she explained, “as a man, the Son of God took on the desire for His Father’s honor and our salvation. So great was this desire that in His ardor He ran through sufferings, shame, and insults to His ignominious death on the Cross. But, the same desire was in MARY, for she could desire nothing but God’s honor and the salvation of souls.” Catherine also began to travel. But her activity aroused astonishment, both in Siena and in the Dominican Order and, in 1374, she appeared before the Dominicans’ General Chapter in Florence. She was given as a spiritual director a learned and humble priest, Raymund of Capua, a future Master General of the Order, who became her confessor as well as her spiritual son (today he is honored as Blessed).

During Pentecost 1374, Catherine received the stigmata of Christ: the wounds in the hands, feet, and side of JESUS Crucified were imprinted in her flesh, but invisibly, as she had formally asked of Christ. For her, spiritual life consisted of union with God Who is a “way of truth,” and on this way, Christ’s Passion is the best guide, “preferred above all books.” Love led Catherine of Siena to imitate Christ and His sacrifice on the Cross, through a life of asceticism, penance, prayer, and service to others. In this way, she became an “*alter Christus*” (another Christ). Her love of neighbor drove her to the point that one day she did not hesitate to enter the cell of a man condemned to death, in order to implore him to be reconciled with God. Niccolo di Toldo had been sentenced to death for political reasons. Catherine’s visit to his prison cell transformed the young man, who made his confession, heard Mass, and received Holy Communion. The day of his execution, to his great joy, Catherine was there. He did not stop whispering the names “JESUS” and “Catherine”. After the execution, the

saint saw his soul enter the bosom of God like “the bride arriving on the doorstep of her spouse”. Later on, God would reveal to Catherine how this condemnation had allowed Niccolo di Toldo to return to a state of grace and the friendship of God, and so to obtain salvation and eternal life.

### **An indispensable ministry**

From 1375 on, Catherine worked for the return of the popes from Avignon to Rome (since 1309, the papacy had resided in Avignon for political reasons), as well as for the unity and independence of the Church, which perhaps no saint loved as much as her. “The Church,” she wrote, “is nothing else than Christ Himself”, the depository of the God’s love for man; and the hierarchical Church is the indispensable ministry for the salvation of the world. That was the source of Catherine’s passionate respect and love for the Supreme Pontiff, in whom she saw “sweet Christ on earth,” to whom is owed affection and filial obedience. “Whoever disobeys the Christ on earth (that is, the Pope), who represents Christ in heaven, will not participate in the fruits of the Son of God.”

The saint was already teaching in her own way the doctrine on the primacy of the Supreme Pontiff, which would be defined by the First Vatican Council in 1870: all, pastors and faithful, “are bound to submit to [the Roman pontiff] by the duty of hierarchical subordination and true obedience, and this not only in matters concerning faith and morals, but also in those which regard the discipline and government of the church throughout the world. In this way, by unity with the Roman Pontiff in communion and in profession of the same faith, the Church of Christ becomes one flock under one supreme shepherd. This is the teaching of the Catholic truth, and no one can depart from it without endangering his faith and salvation” (First Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ”, ch. 3, DS 3060.)

Catherine’s exhortations put into action the mission she had received from God. It was not for her to disrupt the essential structures of the Church, or rebel against the shepherds, or make innovations in worship or discipline, but to return to the Spouse of Christ the Church’s original vocation. In fact, “Although by the power of the Holy Spirit the Church will remain the faithful spouse of her Lord and will never cease to be the sign of salvation on earth, still she is very well aware that among her members, both clerical and lay, some have been unfaithful to the Spirit of God during the course of many centuries ... Led by the Holy Spirit, Mother Church unceasingly exhorts her sons to purify and renew themselves so that the sign of Christ can shine more brightly on the face of the Church” (Second Vatican Council, “Gaudium et Spes”, no. 43).

As Pope Paul VI remarked, “St. Catherine loved the Church in its reality, which, as we know, has a double aspect. One is mystical, spiritual, invisible, the essential

one, fused with Christ the glorious Redeemer...; the other is human, historical, institutional, concrete, but never separated from the divine aspect. One may wonder if our modern critics of the institutional aspect of the Church are ever capable of grasping this simultaneity... Catherine loves the Church as it is... Catherine does not love the Church for the human merits of those who belong to it, or represent it. If we think of the conditions in which the Church was at that time, we can easily understand that her love had very different motives... St. Catherine does not hide the failings of ecclesiastics, but as she inveighs against such decadence, she considers it a motive and a need to love all the more” (General Audience of April 30, 1969).

### **In His arms**

The reform of the Church concerns first and foremost the clerics whom Catherine held in high regard. In fact, she wrote in her *Dialogues* these words God had revealed to her: “I have chosen my ministers for your salvation, so that by them the Blood of the one, humble, and immaculate Lamb, my Son, may be administered to you.” But she also worked for the reform of the laity. She wrote to a man who had given himself up to carnal passions: “Oh, my dearest brother, sleep no more in the death of mortal sin! I tell you the ax is already at the root of the tree. Take the spade of the fear of God which the hand of love makes use of. Spare me this corruption of your soul and body. Do not be so cruel to yourself, do not be your own executioner in decapitating yourself, cutting off this head Who is so sweet, Christ JESUS!... Put an end to your disordered living. I have told you and I repeat it: God will punish you if you do not mend your ways. But I also promise you that, if you wish to convert and take advantage of the moments you have remaining, God is so good, so merciful that He will forgive you, will receive you in His arms, will give you a share of the Blood of the Lamb, shed with so much love that there is no sinner who cannot obtain mercy. For God’s mercy is greater than our sins, if only we desire to change our lives.”

Catherine knew that sanctification is attained through the sacraments of Penance and Communion, as she wrote to one of her disciples: “You must frequently purify your soul from the stains of sin through a good and holy confession, and nourish it with the Bread of Angels, that is, the sweet sacrament of the Body and Blood of JESUS CHRIST, God and Man.” She revived among her disciples the practice of frequent communion, which at the time had become very uncommon, and taught that the best preparation for sacramental communion was spiritual communion. This consists in aspiring to receive the Eucharist with a real and ardent desire, and this desire should not be solely at the moment of communion, but at all times and in all places.



The leaders of the city of Florence asked her to intercede with the Pope to obtain reconciliation between the papacy and their city. Catherine left in April 1376 for Avignon. She met the Pope and asked him for three things: to leave for Rome, to relaunch the Great Crusade, and finally, to fight the vices and sins in the bosom of the Church. In the city of Avignon, Catherine became the object of some mistrust due to her growing influence with the Pope, and also because of her ecstasies which sometimes took place in public. The Pope had theologians secretly keep her under surveillance who, after investigating, found nothing to reproach her with.

### *An immense pain*

**O**n September 13, 1376, Gregory XI, a French pope with poor health and a timid spirit, left Avignon for Italy, which was suffering violent disturbances. He arrived in Rome on January 16, 1377. Catherine herself had returned to Siena, before being sent by the Pope to Florence, a city still in revolt against the papacy. Catherine turned the Florentines' gaze toward "Christ crucified and sweet MARY," and told them that a society that is inspired by Christian values could never have sufficiently grave grounds for dispute to justify taking recourse to the reason of weapons rather than the weapons of reason. In 1378, she was granted numerous ecstasies which are the basis of the *Dialogues*, spiritual treatises that she dictated to five secretaries.

On March 27, 1378, Pope Gregory XI died. Shortly thereafter, Urban VI was elected to succeed him. But

some cardinals, most of them French, who were displeased with the new Pontiff's authoritarianism, gathered in Fondi on September 18, 1378, and elected Cardinal Robert de Genève as Pope, who became the antipope Clement VII. This separation from the legitimate Pope was for Catherine of Siena a very serious act insofar as it led to a schism that would last for forty years. Catherine left Siena and arrived in Rome on November 28, 1378. She was received by Pope Urban VI, who viewed her presence as significant support. Feeling this division of the Church as an immense pain, she began a crusade of prayers, and recommended acting with charity so that the problems within Christendom might be successfully resolved. She called on princes and cities to obey the Pope, and asked religious and hermits to support him. On January 29, 1380, during her last visit to the Basilica of Saint Peter, Catherine, absorbed in ecstasy in her prayer, saw JESUS approach her and place on her feeble shoulders the heavy and agitated barque of the Church. Overwhelmed by such a great weight, she fainted and fell to the ground. Not long thereafter, sick and exhausted, undoubtedly as a result of her many penances, she said her farewells to her friends. On April 29<sup>th</sup>, as the sick woman felt her end drawing near, she prayed particularly for the Catholic Church and the Holy Father. Before dying, she declared, "I have consumed and given my life in the Church and for the Holy Church, which is a very special grace for me." Then, her face radiant, she said these words of the Lord's: "Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit" (Lk. 23:46), and gently bowing her head, she fell asleep in the Lord, at the age of 33.

"Historically, Catherine's sacrifice seemed to fail," acknowledged Pope Paul VI. "But who can say that burning love of hers disappeared in vain if myriads of virgin souls and hosts of priestly spirits and of faithful and industrious laymen, made it their own? It still blazes in Catherine's words: 'Sweet JESUS, loving JESUS.' May that fire be ours, too, may it give us the strength to repeat Catherine's words and gift. 'I have given my life for Holy Church.' "

*Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.*

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