



"God is closer to us than water is to a fish."

~ St. Catherine of Sienna

Blessings to you all on this 29th day of April!

Today is the feast day of St. Catherine of Sienna (1347-1380). As you can see, or perhaps already knew, she lived only 33 years. Yet in her short lifespan, achieved great fame and acclaim. She is not only one of the most brilliant and influential saints of the middle ages, but she remains the only lay person to have achieved the title "Doctor of the Church," and is the first of only two females of such recognition. She's always been one of my favorite saints. My maternal grandmother was from a Sicilian village named in her honor, Santa Catarina, which I had the opportunity to visit long ago. It's also where my great-great uncle Luigi Ferlisi was a cardinal and built a church there. Not surprisingly, my firstborn daughter was bestowed her name.

St. Catherine is renowned for her deep spirituality, her unwavering courage, her selfless compassion, and most importantly, her great love for God. Although she never took religious vows and lived in a convent, her faith was more like one who had "isolated" themselves in cloister and dedicated themselves to prayer and contemplation. Her insight and wisdom was used to influence all segments of her world, including clergy and laity, popes and princes, priests and politicians. Fearless to preach the Gospel and speak the truth, she even once reprimanded Pope Gregory!

Catherine is known as a peacemaker, a diplomat, a mediator, a teacher, preacher, and writer. Her most famous published work is called "The Dialogue of Divine Providence." Pretty deep stuff!

Often named as one of the Christian Mystics, Catherine's spiritual insight gave her the ability to see into one's soul and read people's hearts and minds. She is also said to have had the "gift of tears," a rare and strange powerful sense of compassion and empathy for all. I once met a monk at Weston Priory in Vermont with the same "gift," although I must say it puzzled me greatly and still does.

St. Catherine once said, "God requires nothing else of us except that we show our neighbors the love we have for God." She is not only the patroness of Italy and Sicily, but all of Europe. Maybe you'll be surprised to know that St. Catherine of Sienna is the patroness of the United States of America!

Now here is why I'm writing about her today, aside from the fact it is her feast day, St. Catherine was the 25th (yes 25th!) child born into her family, and she was born just when the worst pandemic in human history was taking effect, the Bubonic Plague, also known as "The Black Death" which is said to have killed half of Europe, and much of Asia. Some estimate around 200 million casualties! (Incidentally, it also originated from China.)

Most of the population of Sienna fled to the countryside when it raged, but Catherine stayed behind to care for and pray with the sick, as well as to bury the dead.

Remarkably, she never contracted the virus, even as she spent her years living with the infected (they had no masks as of yet). She chose not to stay at home and *shelter in place*, but rather to go forth and be a vessel of Grace. It's no wonder she is one of the patron saints for nurses, doctors, health care workers, and of course, Pandemics.

I've visited her grave in Rome at the beautiful Basilica di Santa Sopra Minerva. Her tomb is beneath the feet of Michelangelo's "Risen Christ" marble masterpiece. How symbolic!

Her cathedral is in Sienna, one of my favorites in all of Italy (the stone work is amazing). It's there, in the cathedral sanctuary, where her incorruptible head is enshrined. (No small miracle there)

As we continue in this modern day plague, we could learn much from her Godly virtues and wisdom; how we, the people of God, can bring God's comfort, hope, and much needed mercy to our world. St. Catherine wrote, "Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire." She also wrote, "Start being brave about everything, drive out darkness and spread light. You are rewarded not according to your work or your time, but according to the measure of your love."

Our world could sure use more people like St. Catherine of Sienna; perhaps you could begin today to emulate that divine grace.

Happy Feast Day, St. Catherine, who went home to glory on this 29th day of April.

May God's peace be with you all,

Fr. Peter

"Proclaim the truth and do not be silent through fear."

~ St. Catherine of Sienna