

April 30

ON SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA

118.1 First Point

Saint Catherine had such a special love for purity that she made a vow of virginity when only seven years old. To do that is to be specially favored by grace and to perform heroic acts of virtue even in childhood. With time this virtue grew so strong in her that when her parents proposed to her a very advantageous marriage she refused and never wanted even to hear it mentioned again. This angered her parents against her so much that they obliged her to do all the lowliest and most difficult household chores. She was very happy about this and endured with the greatest patience all the ill-treatment they inflicted on her at the time. She contented herself with setting up a sort of little oratory in her heart, where she withdrew to console herself with God.

If, because you are aiming to do good and to work for your perfection, you are made to suffer insults and scorn, would you be ready to put up with such treatment patiently? It is on such occasions that we see if our virtue is solid.

118.2 Second Point

This saint made use of austerities to help her preserve the treasure of her purity. Her austerity was so extraordinary that she can be said to have carried it to excess. For three years she spoke to no one except her confessor. Every day she took the discipline for an hour and a half; she wore an iron chain on her body, slept sitting only in a chair, never ate meat, and drank only water. On one occasion she did great violence to herself by sucking the pus that came from the sore of a sick person. She endured patiently a calumny spread by an invalid woman whom she nursed. When Jesus Christ asked her to choose between a gold crown and one made of thorns, she chose the thorns.

Would you make a similar choice? When will you love mortification and suffering as this saint did?

118.3 Third Point

To reward her for so many trials and so much mortification, God favored Saint Catherine with such consolations that it can be said of her that having participated in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, she merited to have some share in his glorious life⁶¹⁴ even in this world. When her parents maltreated her and kept her in a state of humiliation, she enjoyed the happiness of conversing interiorly with God and of being consoled by him. During the time of her profound silence, Jesus Christ often came to visit her and talked familiarly with her. After she had sucked the pus out of the sore, as we mentioned, Jesus Christ allowed her to drink a sweet liquor flowing from the wound in his side. After that, she was almost constantly caught up in ecstasy.

This is how God gives even in this life the hundredfold of what we do for him.⁶¹⁵ Oh! how this should spur you on to suffer willingly for the love of God!

Catherine (1347 - 1380) was born in Siena, the daughter of a wealthy wool dyer, Giacomo Benincasa. In adolescence she was drawn to prayer and solitude and became a problem for her mother by resisting any suggestion either of marriage or of becoming a nun. A compromise was reached when she joined the Third Order of Saint Dominic at the age of 16. The rigorous, humble life of prayer on which De La Salle focuses in his meditation drew a large following of people including priests, and this became the foundation for an extraordinary life of extensive public influence. It was Catherine who convinced Pope Gregory XI to leave Avignon in 1376 and return the papacy to Rome, though this led the French cardinals to revolt and caused the great Western Schism that lasted for 70 years. She lived only 33 years, but her influence was exceptional, and her writings, including over 400 letters, earned for her from Pope Paul VI in 1970 the title of Doctor of the Church. Her feast is now celebrated on April 29.