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Meditations: April 29, Saint Catherine of Siena

Some reflections that can assist our prayer on the feast of Saint Catherine of Siena.

04/29/2024

- At the service of charity and the conversion of sinners
- True wisdom is in tune with God's heart
- Sharing our faith with others

ON TODAY'S FEAST, the Church's liturgy offers us the following prayer: "O God, who set Saint Catherine of Siena on fire with divine love in her contemplation of the Lord's passion and her service to the Church, grant through her intercession that your people, by participating in the mystery of Christ, may ever exult in the revelation of his glory."^[1] — These words are a good summary of the life of the saint we are celebrating today. Her ardent love for Christ led her to dedicate herself to serving the Church and those around her.

Catherine Benincasa was born in the year 1347 in Siena, in a very large family. Right from childhood, her deep piety led her to dedicate her life to God, despite the misunderstandings with her family. At the age of eighteen, she was accepted by the third order Dominican women in the city. She continued to live in her parents'

home, leading an intense life of prayer amid the daily distractions of a family with many children. At the age of twenty-one, Catherine had an experience that would forever mark her life; she saw that God was calling her to dedicate herself with all her strength to charitable works and to strive for the conversion of sinners. Saint Josemaría was attracted by the fact that this saint “while living in the world, made her interior cell in her soul, so that wherever she was she never left her cell.”^[2] After that decision, the young woman spent several years caring for the sick people in Siena, enkindling the hearts of many people with love for God and neighbor.

A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house (Mt 5:14-15). Catherine’s heart had been illuminated by the loving face of

Jesus and she understood that her light could not remain confined within the walls of her own home. And she set in motion a revolution around her, made up of prayer and deeds of service.

BOTH IN THE letters of Saint Catherine and in her well-known work *The Dialogue*, we see a striking harmony between doctrine and mystical experience, especially if we take into account that the saint had not been able to receive a broad cultural formation. But from a very young age she had attended the preaching of the Dominican priests in her city; there she listened attentively to the explanations of Sacred Scripture, the examples of the lives of the saints and the instruction in the faith. Over time, she would also nourish her inner life with the

guidance of a spiritual director in Siena.

Saint Catherine's life reflects very well the words that Jesus uttered one day, filled with joy: *I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children (Mt 11:25).*

“True wisdom also comes from the heart. It is not only a matter of understanding ideas. If you know many things but have a closed heart, you are not wise. Jesus says that his Father's mysteries are revealed to the ‘little ones,’ to those who trustfully open themselves to his Word of salvation, who feel the need for him and expect everything from him. Their hearts are open and trustful towards the Lord.”^[3] Saint Catherine welcomed gratefully the lights God was granting her and thus attained a deep knowledge of the mystery of God. In *The Dialogue* she writes: “Oh,

inestimable Charity, sweet above all sweetness! Who would not be inflamed by such great love? What heart can help breaking at such tenderness? It seems, oh, Abyss of Charity, as if you were mad with love for Your creature, as if You could not live without us, and yet You are our God who have no need of us. Your greatness does not increase through our good works, for You are unchangeable, and our evil causes You no harm, for You are the Supreme and Eternal Goodness. What moves You to do us such mercy through pure love, and on account of no debt that You owed us, or need that You had of us?”^[4]

Carried away by this intense contemplation, the saint of Siena communicated God's love to the people around her. She began with those who came to listen to her and to find encouragement for their spiritual life. But the outpouring of

her inner life did not end there; over the years, she would address letters to a large number of people, many of them public figures of the day. Not infrequently her letters contained calls to live in a way that was consistent with the Gospel message and to seek to do God's will. Her intimate relationship with Jesus gave her the strength needed to speak about God with clarity and sweetness.

MANY PEOPLE have been inspired by Saint Catherine's holy life, including Saint Josemaría. From a young age he had a special devotion to this saint. For example, he used to call the notes he made about his own interior life "catherines." "The strength of Saint Catherine of Siena moves my heart," the founder of Opus Dei said. "She speaks truths to

the highest people, with a burning love and diaphanous clarity.”^[5] So in 1964 the founder of Opus Dei decided to appoint her as intercessor for an apostolate for which he had special esteem: that of imbuing the broad field of public opinion with Christ’s charity.

Jesus is the truth that illumines the life of every man and woman and rescues them from darkness.

Offering this light to others – while trying to ensure that first it is lit in our own lives – is one of the works of mercy. Bringing our faith to others means “helping them to know God’s revelation, so that the Holy Spirit can act in people through our testimony: as a witness, with service. Service is a way of life . . . If I say that I am a Christian and live in this way, this attracts others. Faith should be transmitted not in order to convince others, but to offer them a treasure.”^[6]

Saint Catherine, before exhorting people to draw closer to the faith, had spent years caring for the sick in her city. The same charity that led her to dedicate herself to those most in need moved her later to write letters in which she invited people to be faithful children of the Church. The credibility of her message was backed up by a life shining forth with love for God and neighbor. We ask Saint Catherine and our Mother Mary to intercede before God so that He may grant us a charity that is nourished by prayer and shown in deeds of love, and that announces the truth that leads to life. “The most profound lesson we are called to transmit, and the most certain way to get out of doubt, is the love of God with which we have been loved (cf. *1 Jn* 4:10). A great love, free and given to us forever. God never goes back on his love! ”^[7]

[1] Roman Missal, Collect for the Memorial of Saint Catherine of Siena.

[2] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, 21 April 1973.

[3] Francis, Angelus, 5 July 2020.

[4] Saint Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, no. 25.

[5] Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 35, no. 3.

[6] Francis, Homily, 25 April, 2020.

[7] Francis, General Audience, 23 November 2016.