

Catherine of Siena and the pandemic

Unless God intervenes, another great wave of pandemic is about to break on the shores of our country, originating in the tsunami of India's suffering. The images we have seen and the stories we have heard are heart breaking and mingle our tears with our own fears. We pray for God's mercy for India, God's wisdom for our leaders, and God's strength to reach out with the compassion of the cross and the courage of the resurrection of Christ Jesus.

Catherine of Siena is a model of this compassion and courage. She lived and died over 600 years ago in Italy, the last child of a large, believing and praying family. When she was only six years old, she began to feel the pain of Jesus' crucifixion in her own body. At age 16, she devoted her life to prayer for three years, and then began a life of visiting the sick in the crowded hospitals (a plague was going on then too). People began to gather around her, drawn by her happy and humble manner and her spiritual insights. As passionate and insightful youth today are sometimes mistreated by public leaders, Catherine's outspoken advice on world affairs brought her grief too. When she was 30, she moved to Rome under the protection of the Dominican Order and began a life of writing and prayer, corresponding with church and government leaders. She is remembered on April 29, the day she died, as "a woman of boundless energy, singlemindedness and devotion to her ideals, able to deal effectively with rulers, diplomats, and leaders of all kinds, and loved by common people for her deep Christ-centred spirituality" (Philip Pfatteicher, *Festivals and Commemorations*, p. 172). She was only 33 years old.

Here is a passage from the book she dictated to her secretary during her last years in Rome. It is entitled *Dialogue or A Treatise on Divine Providence* because Catherine is reporting conversations with God.

"Dearest daughter, the willing desire to bear every pain and fatigue, even unto death, for the salvation of others is very pleasing to me...I have already told you that with the increase of love, grief and pain increase...Patience cannot be proved in any other way than by suffering, and patience is one with love. Therefore bear yourself with courage, for unless you do, you will not prove yourselves to be spouses of my truth...." (Pfatteicher, p. 175).

May God inspire many more young people today with this love of God that leads them to help others and speak out about the conditions that cause suffering and injustice. May God protect them in and through the Church as they give themselves to lives of courageous compassion. May we all grow in prayer and patience to persevere in the course that we must follow through this pandemic and be living signs of the Gospel. This prayer attributed to Catherine of Siena may resolve our longing into words:

Holy Spirit, come into my heart; draw it to Thee by Thy power, O my God, and grant me charity with filial fear. Preserve me, O beautiful love, from every evil thought; warm me, inflame me with Thy dear love, and every pain will seem light to me. My Father, my sweet Lord, help me in all my actions. Jesus, love, Jesus, love. Amen.