

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Catherine of Siena — A Courageous Woman

Whenever people seem to be despairing over conditions in the Church today, I like to remind them that the upheavals of the twentieth century are really quite mild compared to some of the schisms and persecutions and rebellions of past centuries. Perhaps



one of the worst periods the Church ever survived was the fourteenth century "Babylonian exile," when a French Pope moved the Papal residence to Avignon, causing endless political struggles which almost split the Church in two. The saint who did the most to heal the rupture was not a churchman, scholar or statesman — it was St. Catherine of Siena, a thoroughly likeable young woman whose life and person-

ality are very relevant to the issues facing women in the Church, and indeed in all careers, today.

There are several biographies of Catherine, ranging from her confessor's, Raymond of Padua, written fifteen years after her death and using first-hand knowledge and accounts, to the one by Sigrid Undset, the great twentieth century Danish novelist. Catherine, herself, also left us a great volume of her own writings, the Dialogues, and over four hundred letters. Through all the writings runs the two-fold theme of God's special gifts to her and her fearless, astonishing response to Him.

Catherine's desire to give herself to God baffled her middle-class Tuscan parents; she did not want to be a nun, and yet refused to consider the various suitors they arranged for her. She finally persuaded them to help her become a member of a Third Order of Dominicans, and even this was unorthodox, since it was a group of widows and older women who lived in their own homes and met for some spiritual counseling and direction regarding their good works. Catherine's efforts and influence in these good works were prodigious but, more important, she became the spiritual leader of widely-differing segments of a city's population, men, women, priests, nobility, politicians, theologians. Her great formula for holiness still speaks to us: "To love God in ourselves and others without moderation."

Whether involved in the bitter interfamily battles of the period, the bloody wars between the Italian city-states or even in the violent political struggle between Avignon and Rome over where the Pope should reside, Catherine was a fearless messenger of peace. It

was not her brilliance, beauty, education, personality or any human force alone which made her such an extraordinary power for good; she was simply without self-interest, every human faculty turned inside out in the service of God. Because she truly did not care what people thought of her personally, she became a David among many Goliaths.

But it was not simply a matter of "doing her own thing." From very early childhood, Catherine arrived — through the most arduous prayer and self-denial — at a point of discernment which we used to call mysticism. She was in such constant and loving contact with God that she knew HER thing was HIS thing! Nothing was planned or executed without long hours of withdrawal into a communing with God.

And I can almost hear a response... "well, if you are a contemplative, you have more time to pray." Remember, Catherine was not a nun; she was for several years only a servant in her parents' home, caring for them and her many siblings (she was one of twenty-three children, but several died in infancy!). So any busy housewife can identify with that phase of Catherine's life; in her journeys, writings and highly-organized efforts to train others to help the poor and sick, she is a model for all Christian women who labor outside the home. Today so much is written about our public worship that it sometimes obscures the centuries-old tradition of private prayer, the one-to-one conversation with God. It is true that we need to express our love and concern for others in social action and public worship — but we never lose the need for squaring our own interior, our own conscience, with what we perceive as God's Will for us. And to perceive that Will we need quiet reflection times. In years past, people combined that time with their Mass or Benediction, with holy hours and novenas. But the new liturgy asks us to be more active, more vocal, more "public." So, like Catherine, we have to make sure our daily or weekly schedule includes solid blocks of time to be privately prayerful.

God will probably not ask most of us to make decisions affecting the people of God or the policies of our nation... at least, not as individuals, as He did with Catherine. But we are not thereby excused from being as passionately committed to the good as she was. We have the same obligation to spread God's word, to serve the poor, to love and heal the Church, to promote unity among all we meet as we go through life. Catherine was only thirty three when her exhausted body gave up its soul. All Italy mourned her death; miracles occurred with astonishing



St. Catherine, as she is depicted in Ithaca's St. Catherine of Siena Church.

frequency almost immediately after her death. Her writings are a timeless legacy to us from a valiant Christian heroine, a legacy as meaningful to twentieth-century America as it was to fourteenth-century Italy.

vatican news

Strengthen Moral Conscience

During the General Audience on July 13 Pope Paul VI delivered the following address.

What we are about to say to you, to give also to this momentary spiritual meeting which our audience is, a core of good thoughts, of exhortation and regeneration, worthy of being remembered and elaborated again personally, is extremely simple. We have already recalled it to the attention of our listeners on other occasions. It concerns the subject, the old but ever new subject of consciousness, and let us specify at once, moral consciousness.



The reason for this choice can be sought at the summit of our pastoral ministry. Is it not our office to speak of the science of life, which consists in living well? And what do we, pastors of souls, desire if not that our faithful should listen to us and follow us along the paths of Christian virtues? (cf. Jn 10, 14).

And the reason itself can be seen also in a more modest and immediate intention, that of calling your attention and your faithfulness to that common but so precious norm of life, contradicted so often today, which is called honesty, good conduct, the dignity of one's behaviour. Today the news of our public life is full of criminal events; delinquency is widespread; dishonest living is a way open to so many people whom we call respectable; falseness of civic morals is

admitted as an art of looking after one's own interests, or of concealing corrupt actions; so many young people, unfortunately, let themselves be swept along to deplorable and degrading forms of senseless behaviour. This no one can deny, documented as this degeneration of public morality is by all the modern media of social communication.

One would think that the norms of morals are weakened, that civic education now admits a vulgar abasement of society; and that the ancient laws of civilization and honesty are now pedantic and antiquated conventions.

What has happened? It is difficult to say with adequate precision of words. Yet it is easy for everyone to observe that not only the exterior, but also the interior, personal forms of modern life are generally discredited, as a tribute to the contrary ways of so-called permissiveness. The latter — alas! — not only corrodes the apparent varnish of civic morals, but boasts, as it can, of demolishing the ethical and public framework of today's society even in its superior principles of human civilization.

Let us not judge our world now. But let us be content to preserve the necessity of true, personal dignity, such as will strengthen our conscience with regard to its duty of being both human and Christian.

It is useful to recall the twofold expression of consciousness, which can be, as the masters teach, psychological or moral. It is an important distinction. Psychological consciousness is reflective knowledge about oneself. This today can be improved and kept in exercise by culture and the surrounding community scene which stimulates this psychological reflection.

We will not speak about it now. Moral consciousness is the subject of this talk of ours, and it is extremely important for the concept of life, which we are anxious to serve and educate. The "know thyself" of ancient philosophy has in moral consciousness its most complete and highest expression, for an essential and decisive aspect of the development of the human personality. And why? Because in this form of consciousness the spirit is guided by a natural tendency, which classical philosophers called "synderesis," to interior recourse to innate principles related to human action. These principles go beyond the frontiers of the subjective sphere, and are addressed to the origin of conscious activity; they aim at the specific relationship of the human being with the Absolute, the relationship with God. That is, moral consciousness is measured in relation to Good and Evil. It guides man to his source and his destination, and gives the spirit the sense, which will then become judgment, of his transcendent responsibility.

An extremely important perception, we were saying, it is the basis of the moral evolution of our spirit, and that is of our moral consciousness.

The latter, beloved Sons, is not a source of empty and troublesome problems, such as scruples, uncertainty in action, the psycho-ethical involution of the spirit; but it is simply man's conscience as a man, and, for us Christians, as Christians. He who is accustomed to include in his prayer, that is in his conversation with God, the examination of conscience, knows what comfort, what light, what source of personal autonomy, can come from this examination which has as its mirror the eye of God.

Try it! With our Apostolic Blessing