

The Church Against Itself

Our Catholic Heritage

The Church Experiences a Crisis of Faith

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

Historians have called the years from 1300 to 1500 the age of transition, a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Reformation era. The central idea of the Middle Ages was the pervasive influence of the Church over society. The Holy Father, the Vicar of Christ, was considered the supreme sovereign in doctrinal and moral matters, and indirectly, therefore, superior to kings and emperor in temporal affairs.

The 14th century brought a crisis of authority within the Church which almost destroyed it. The attacks on the authority and even the life of Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303); the Avignon Captivity; the philosophical and theological repudiation of the structure of the Church; the Great Western Schism and the Renaissance period all brought about a crisis of faith, a decline in the prestige of the Church, and a rejection of the power and pre-eminence of the papacy.

Loyal Christians winced when they heard of the kidnapping of Pope Boniface VIII (1303) by the forces of some rebellious Italian cardinals and of the French king, Philip the Fair, who had earlier written the Holy Father in sneering language: "Philip, by the Grace of God, King of France, to Boniface who calls himself Pope, few or no greetings." The emerging French nation was attempting to control the Church in France.

France could not assert such control until Pope Boniface's death. Soon after, the "Oldest Daughter of the Church" dominated the papacy in Avignon from 1305 to 1377. Petrarch, the great Renaissance writer, termed this prolonged sojourn of the papacy in France the "Babylonian Captivity," a term that has stuck.

All seven popes of the Avignon Captivity were Frenchmen, and all of them failed to protect the independence and the spiritual prestige of the

Holy See. Even though the Ecumenical Council of Vienne (1311-1312) had called for a thorough reform of the Church in its head and members, the popes at Avignon gave little attention to reform. Instead they were preoccupied with the Black Death (1348-1350) which decimated the population of Europe; the Hundred Years War between France and England (1338-1453); and the maintenance of the operations of the Holy See. They began a system of taxation and centralized administration which led to many abuses and produced almost universal dissatisfaction. Many of the people who served the pope served themselves rather than the Church. Many more people in Europe saw the papacy as favoring the French nation. Anti-papal hostility mounted and Christianity became fragmented from within.

It is a mistake, however, to paint too drab a picture of the Church at this period. One of the glories of

this age was that the faithful themselves, despite the personal weaknesses of their leaders, found ways to practice personal asceticism and to produce three outstanding saints: St. Bridget of Sweden (d. 1372); St. Catherine of Siena (d. 1380); and Pope St. Celestine V (d. 1296), the only pope who reigned between 1085 and 1572 to be canonized. St. Celestine V had opened this era. St. Bridget and particularly St. Catherine were prophetic voices who called the popes to return to Rome. Pope Urban V (1362-1370) did return briefly to Rome in 1367 but rebellion in that city forced his hasty departure to Avignon.

Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378) returned the papacy to Rome in 1377. The "French Connection" was finally broken. The inescapable lesson for the Church was that the papacy had to be independent from individual states, and that the Church is continually in need of reform.

St. Catherine of Siena — Mystical, Practical

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

Thunderous cries for the reform of the Church echoed throughout Christendom during the Avignon Captivity. These cries were heard at the Ecumenical Council of Vienne (1311). Dante severely rebuked Pope Clement V (1305-1314) for "having married the Church to the kingdom of France." Petrarch was so incensed at the situation that he called Avignon, with gross exaggeration, "the hell of the living, the cesspool of vices, the sewer of the earth."

The prophetic voice of St. Catherine of Siena took up the cry. It was an indignant voice, that was at once mystical and practical.

Catherine, the last of 25 children of the Benincasa family of Siena, was born in 1347. She was only six years old when she had her first vision of the glorified Lord. From that day, she vowed to bring the sinful world back to Christ.

One night while she was in her early teens, St. Dominic appeared to her in a dream and invited her to enter the convent of the Sisters of Mercy of Siena, who were members of the Dominican family. Sure of herself and of her vocation, she announced upon her entrance into the order: "I was chosen and sent on this earth to right a great scandal." The scandal, of course, was the Avignon Captivity.

From all outward appearances St. Catherine was hardly attractive. She spoke neither the French nor Latin of the educated classes, but only the Tuscan dialect of the poor people. But she had an inner beauty which shone in her compassion for

the poor and her charity for the sinner. She was one of the marvelous mystics of history.

In 1366, she contracted a mystical marriage with Christ. For one period in her life she lived for 55 days on nothing but Holy Communion, and the Lord graced her body with the stigmata as He had done earlier for St. Francis of Assisi.



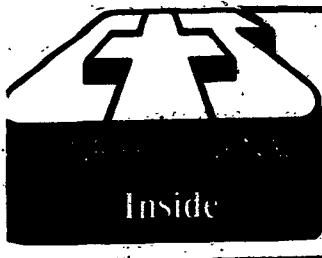
St. Catherine of Siena (Art by Robert McGovern)

People considered her a saint and her influence spread from Siena to all of Europe. Her heartfelt love for Christ constrained her to love His Church which she thought was betraying Him.

She had written to Pope Gregory XI reprimanding him for keeping the papacy in Avignon. In 1376 she was invited to talk with him and reminded him that it was his duty as Holy Father to reform and unite the Church, to seek peace among the warring nations; to carry the Cross to the Holy Land; and to bring himself and the Holy See back to Rome, the city consecrated by the blood of St. Peter. When the Holy Father asked her why he should accede to her demands, she showed him her stigmata. He asked for no further proof of her mission.

Beguiled by the reasonable spirituality of St. Catherine, and finding the political atmosphere in Rome more hospitable to the papacy, Pope Gregory XI returned to Rome in 1377, and died there a year later. St. Catherine was there to greet him because she firmly believed that, whatever weaknesses a pope might have as an individual, it is the duty of every Catholic to recognize his position as the Vicar of Christ on earth. Her love for the Church and for its head, Jesus Christ, is evident in her many letters and in her famous "dialogues," a classic spiritual book on Divine Providence.

St. Catherine of Siena died in 1380 and was canonized in 1461. In 1970 Pope Paul VI honored her and St. Theresa of Avila as Doctors of the Church. It was St. Catherine's devotion to the cause of Christ's Church that makes her such a noble figure.



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