

## Homily for Catherine of Sienna, April 29, 1380

April 29, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*1 John 1:5–2:2; Psalm 36:5–10; Luke 12:22–24, 29–31*

There were no, what came to be called, “lesser feasts” in the American Prayer Book until 1979. Quite honestly, I was surprised early this morning to discover that the commemoration of Catherine of Siena, who died on this date, April 29, in the year 1380,<sup>1</sup> was included in the first edition of the book we commonly call *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, published in 1963.<sup>2</sup> There are only two commemorations in that calendar that are included with no description, unlike for example, Saint Luke the Evangelist or Francis of Assisi, Friar. One is Saint Joseph, the other, Catherine of Siena.<sup>3</sup>

How to describe Saint Joseph remains a matter of honest theological debate. Although Joseph is mentioned in a mid-second- to early-third-century text called the *Protogospel of James*,<sup>4</sup> an apocryphal New

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<sup>1</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2ed. (ODCC), (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “Catherine, St., of Siena,” 253–54.

<sup>2</sup> *The Calendar and the Collects, Epistles, and Gospels for the Lesser Feasts and Fasts and for Special Occasions* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Correction: While preparing a homily for the commemoration of Dame Julian of Norwich for May 8, 2020, I discovered that her name in the calendar also lacks a description.

<sup>4</sup> ODCC (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. Joseph, 757–58.

Testament text, his name does not come up in the calendars of the Christian West until the ninth century, devotion in the Christian East began sooner, inspired by a fourth- to seventh-century text, called in English, “the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*.”<sup>5</sup>

Again, as far as I know, the only other name in the 1963 calendar without a descriptive title is that of Catherine of Siena. In the Roman Catholic Church until 1969, her feast day was April 30, April 29 was taken by the-then patron saint of inquisitors, Saint Peter the Martyr, the Inquisitor. He was assassinated on April 29, 1252.<sup>6</sup> So the date became free for Catherine.

Now, my grandfather always had a small statue of Saint Christopher, on the dashboard of his car, even after Christopher and most of the other “Holy Helpers,” also known as the “Auxiliary Saints,” were dropped from the Roman Catholic Church’s calendar in 1969.<sup>7</sup>

In his homily on Sunday, October 3, 1970, Pope Paul VI recognized Catherine of Siena as a “doctor” of the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., s.v., “Peter, Martyr, St.,” 1073.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., s.v., “Auxiliary Saints;” 115; “Christopher,” 282.

Roman Catholic Church, placing her among the great theologians of church history, Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome to mention three.<sup>8</sup> In the homily (available on the Vatican website only in Italian and Portuguese—for the record, *Google Translate* gave an English translation as I hit “enter”), Paul VI mentioned her mystical marriage Christ, her reception of the stigmata, and he noted “how hungry she was for justice and full of bowels of mercy in trying to restore peace within families and cities, torn apart by rivalries and atrocious hatreds.”<sup>9</sup>

Catherine was the daughter of a dyer in Siena. She is said to have had her first vision at the age of six. She became a Dominican tertiary at the age of 16. There are good records of her death. Because the year of her birth is not certain, the statement in our *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* that she died at the age of thirty-three is not certain.<sup>10</sup>

The online *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes Catherine as “a mystic,” as does *The Oxford Dictionary of the*

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., s.v. “Doctors of the Church,” 414; “Catherine, St., of Siena,” 253–54.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/homilies/1970/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_hom\\_19701003.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/homilies/1970/documents/hf_p-vi_hom_19701003.html), (accessed 29 April 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Compare *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2006); ODCC, s.v. “Catherine, St., of Siena,” 253–54.

*Christian Church*,<sup>11</sup> and that she advocated another crusade to the Holy Land<sup>12</sup>—neither Paul VI’s homily, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, nor *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* mention her interest in a war for the Holy Land. She dictated letters and one work of great note, what seems to be the standard English edition has this title, *The Dialogue of the Seraphic Virgin Catherine Of Siena, dictated by her, while in a state of ecstasy, to her secretaries, and completed in the year of Our Lord 1370, together with an account of her death by an eye-witness translated from the original Italian, and preceded by an introduction on the life and times of the saint, by Algar Thorold*.<sup>13</sup> It was published in 1907 and is easy to find online.

I want to go back to one thing that Pope Paul said in his homily. He drew our attention to these words found both in Matthew and in Luke, “Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; <sup>6</sup>yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.’”<sup>14</sup> We should

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<sup>11</sup> ODCC, s.v., “Mysticism,” 952.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Catherine-of-Siena>, (accessed 29 April 2020).

<sup>13</sup> <http://catholicplanet.com/ebooks/Dialogue-of-St-Catherine.pdf>, (accessed 29 April 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 11:25–26.

not be entirely surprised that the Lord makes his presence known in the mystery of human lives.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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