

Written by Francis Fernandez
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SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA Love for the Church and the Pope, the 'sweet Christ on earth'.

Born in Siena in 1347, Catherine Benincasa as a young girl joined the Dominican Third Order and was outstanding for her spirit of prayer and penance. Impelled by a great love for God, the Church and the Roman Pontiff, she worked tirelessly for the peace and unity of the Church in the difficult years of the Avignon captivity. She spent much time at the Papal court trying to persuade Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome, because that was the place from which Christ's Vicar on earth ought to rule the Church. 'if I die, let it be known that I die of passion for the Church,' she said a few days before her death, which took place on the 29th of April 1380. She wrote very many letters, of which about four hundred have survived, along with some prayers and 'elevations', and just one book, the 'Dialogue', which contains her own account of her intimate conversations with Our Lord. She was canonized by Pius II and her veneration spread rapidly throughout the whole of Europe. Saint Teresa of Avila said that, after God, the person she felt most indebted to for her spiritual progress was Saint Catherine of Siena. Pius IX declared her the second patron saint of Italy (along with Saint Francis of Assisi), and in 1970 Pope Paul VI proclaimed her a doctor of the Church. Love for the Church and the Pope, the 'sweet Christ on earth'. Although she did not have the benefit of a very formal education (she learned to read and write as an adult), and was only thirty-three years old when she died, Saint Catherine of Siena led an extraordinarily full and fruitful life, as if she was in a great hurry to reach the eternal tabernacle of the Blessed Trinity (John Paul II, Homily in Siena, 14 October 1980). She is a wonderful example to us of love for the Church and for the Roman Pontiff; whom she described as the sweet Christ on earth (St Catherine of Siena, Letters, Siena 1913, III, p211), and of forthrightness and courage in making herself heard by the men of her time. At that time, which was a particularly troublesome one in the Church's history, the Popes reigned at Avignon, in the south of France; Rome, as the centre of Christianity, had been allowed to fall into decay. Our Lord made Saint Catherine see that it was necessary for the Popes to return to Rome in order to inaugurate the long-awaited and very urgent reform of Church life. To this end she prayed tirelessly, practised penance and wrote unceasingly to the Pope, to cardinals and to the various princes of Christendom. Saint Catherine always professed unswerving obedience and love for the Roman Pontiff; of whom she wrote: Anyone who refuses to obey the Christ on earth, who is in the place of Christ in heaven, does not participate in the fruit of the blood of the Son of God (idem, Letter 207, III, p270). She continuously sent urgent appeals to cardinals, bishops and priests for the reform of the Church and christian living, and didn't shrink from taking them to task seriously, although always with great humility and respect for their dignity, because they are ministers of the blood of Christ (cf Paul VI, Homily proclaiming St Catherine a Doctor of the Church, 4 October 1970). It was principally to the Church's pastors that she addressed herself again and again, realizing that the spiritual health of the flock depended to a great extent on their own conversion and exemplary behaviour. Today we ask Saint Catherine to enable us to rejoice with the joys of our Mother the Church and to suffer with her in her sorrows. Let us ask ourselves how hard we pray each day for her pastors, and how generously we offer mortifications and hours of work and bear patiently life's difficulties, all of which sacrifices help the Holy Father to carry the tremendous responsibility that God has placed on his shoulders. Let us also pray for her intercession, that 'the sweet Christ on earth' may never be short of trustworthy helpers. With permission from Scepter UK. Short excerpt from IN CONVERSATION WITH GOD by Francis Fernandez. Available at SinagTala or Totus Bookstore 723-4326 or at www.totusbookstore.com (info@totusbookstore.com) To subscribe or unsubscribe, please email

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