

FEAST OF CATHERINE OF SIENA

29th April 2021

Catherine was a truly extraordinary woman. She lived in troubled times (1347-1380) marked by the Black Death that prowled the land; armies fighting each other on behalf of their client-cities; the Pope having left Rome for Avignon. She came from a prosperous family and her parents wanted her to have a good marriage. However, she felt very strongly called to live as the bride of Christ. She lived a life of solitary prayer for three years before re-joining her family and working with the sick, the poor, prisoners and plague victims. After a powerful, ecstatic experience of Christ in 1374, she commenced her public role, mediating in an armed conflict between the city of Florence and the Avignon-based papacy. She travelled to Avignon to Pope Gregory XI insisting that he return to Rome. Her mission was a surprising success. However, shortly after his return to Rome, Gregory died. The College of Cardinals elected Urban VI who turned out disastrously. The cardinals, regretting their choice, elected another Pope, but failed to persuade Urban to retire. The church now had two rival Popes. Catherine remained loyal to Urban, judging that for all his faults he had been validly elected. Shortly before her death she had a vision in which it seemed as if the church like a mighty ship was being placed on her back. She died at the age of thirty three. Catherine was both a mystic and a woman of the world, who served those in greatest need and involved herself in the great issues of church and state of the day. The gospel reading is very suited to her feast. Jesus speaks both as a mystic and as one who serves those who are overburdened. He blesses God his Father, as one who knows the Father in a way no one else does, just as his Father knows him as no one else does. Jesus also speaks as one who invites all who are overburdened to come to him for rest. His intimate relationship with God flows over into a loving and caring relationship with all who struggle under heavy burdens. Catherine, like Jesus, was a mystic in action. We are all called to be mystics in action, people who are called into an intimate relationship with God and his Son and then sent to live out of that relationship by bringing God's rest and loving presence to all who are in need of it.