

St. Catherine of Siena Feast Day
Reflection by Sister Joan Delaplaine, OP
April 29, 2017

A VERY HAPPY FEAST DAY! Catherine: Dominican preacher, teacher, healer, reconciler, writer, mystic, and all in a mere 33 years; first woman named as Doctor of the Church! A woman whose times were like our own in many ways: upheavals, insecurity, fear, wars, natural calamities, lost faith and scandals in the church. And how did our sister Catherine face these challenges? As Suzanne Noffke summarized it: "The Truth and Love that is God possessed her, and she laid her whole being on the line with his for the life of the world."

Yes, Catherine's mad lover God was Truth *and* Love. Her favorite way of referring to God was as Gentle First Truth! As I reflected on Catherine and our own time, however, two phrases grabbed hold of me and wouldn't let go: TRUTH OF LOVE and LOVE OF TRUTH. *Catherine's grounding in the Truth of Love, who is God, impelled her to take the love of truth to others.* Perhaps you've seen the cover of *Time* magazine earlier this month: "*Is Truth Dead?*" Alternative facts and fake news seem acceptable; some don't even care, or even echo Pilate: "What is truth?" It's as though there's a cloud over us, making it difficult to perceive the light of truth. But we heard Jesus pray for us: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth ...

I consecrate myself that they also may be consecrated in truth." We Dominicans of Veritas hear that Word poignantly today, and, hopefully, realize the relevancy of the Dominican charism for our nation and our times. Truth of Love and Love of Truth!

And what does that Truth of God's Love look like? The TRUTH OF LOVE, such as we celebrated recently at the Triduum, is not all warm, fuzzy, good feelings. No, what we witnessed instead, is a Master, lovingly on his knees, tenderly washing dusty, dirty feet of the very ones that would soon run in abandonment and fear. The truth of Love looked like sharing bread and wine with those who could not/would not shortly feed his need for their presence in his agony and his prayer. The truth of this Love forgave the very ones beating him, nailing him to a cross. And, most of all, his Love is most startling as he trusts his Abba who promised to be with him, yet he experiences stark aloneness. Or as our Catherine described it – a God mad with Love – and incarnating it on the wood of the cross. "What more could I do that I have not done?"

During Catherine's three years of solitude she contemplated this Truth of Love, a Divine Love so absolutely gratuitous, everlasting, infinite mercy, and total Self-giving! Catherine longed to cling to this truth of love and this intimacy, and had to struggle to let go of this time and space that she treasured.

The scene reminds me of Mary of Magdala who longed to cling to the Risen Lord, but Jesus had to say; (paraphrased) "Don't cling, Mary! We've got eternity for this, dear one! Right now, I need you to bring the Truth of my Risen Presence to the brothers locked up in fear." After three years, God was trying to lure Catherine from her cell to the streets with pretty much the same plea. I need you to walk with two feet; love of God and love of all that God loves. Like our small contingency who left our campus yesterday; today walking on two feet in Washington, D.C., with others for love of the Truth of Climate Change. They will witness to the call of all people to be part of healing and preserving God's beloved creation.

In some ways, it is comforting, isn't it, to know that growth in the spiritual life was a difficult challenge for Catherine, as it is for most of us. It was in prayer, her biographers tell us, that she wrestled with a temperament that was critical, impatient, self-willed, and wanted to be in control.

But God could take those very limitations and bless her with determination to help reform the church, courage to face opposition, and a passion for reconciliation so needed amongst the peoples and cities of her time. Or like the encounter with the Risen Christ who transformed locked up fearful disciples to fearless preachers speaking the truth in love. It is all God's work.

Like her Master, who from the death bed of his cross, could not SEE the positive results of all his teaching, healing, loving; so, too, Catherine's suffering was in awareness that she had not been able to accomplish with her life what she had hoped and worked for. She told her friends, however, that her only desire was to persevere and never let go of hope and trust in God's Providence.

Although Catherine couldn't see positive results of her life's work, here we are, over 800 years later, still singing her praises. Openness to the Truth of Love impelled her to speak the love of truth to so many, and that little part of God's world was changed forever. I wonder how our Catherine, in her own inimitable way, would challenge each of us today to speak the truth in love in our Community, in our families, in our nation?

With that challenge, let us close with a prayer of Catherine's:

"Today, eternal God, let our cloud be dissipated
so that we may perfectly know and follow your Truth in truth,
with a free and simple heart." Amen! Alleluia!

- Sister Joan Delaplane, OP