

## Pope Francis, Catherine of Siena, and Why Women Mystics Still Matter

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As Catholic women of faith, we experience ourselves called to discipleship of Jesus and to mission within our church and within the world where we offer our service and solace, companionship and compassion, reconciliation and grace. Vatican II has shaped our particular moment in history. This work of the Holy Spirit unleashed such Pentecostal energy within our ecclesial community that the ship of Holy Mother Church was propelled from the safe harbor of some practices both familiar and outdated—and found itself blown into an expanse of the open sea of the modern world. Many of us were caught up in this enthusiasm of Spirit's promise. Others were affected and defined by the change, even if they did not entirely understand it. We adopted an ancient symbol of the church as a community—the people of God—sharing in the one universal call to holiness. We felt ourselves sent out on mission with a conviction that our following of Jesus would bring hope and joy to the whole world.

Lay women of faith were deeply involved in a variety of lay movements that preceded Vatican II. In fact, they led to the affirmation of the role of laity in the church's mission to the world. Pauline-Marie Jaricot in Lyons, France had founded the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dorothy Day had already established her Catholic Worker Houses in New York; so too, Catherine de Hueck Doherty her houses of hospitality in New York and in Canada; and Patty Crowley and her husband the Catholic Family Movement in Chicago. Simultaneously with the Council and in its wake,

various forms of lay ministry, lay missionary ventures, and social outreach efforts led by women exploded.

### Pope Francis and *Evangelii Gaudium*

With Francis I's papacy, we have been witnessing a dramatic re-embrace not only of Vatican II, but a change in the style of the papacy from a renaissance monarchy to servant leadership—a more dialogical and pastoral mode of leadership exemplified in Francis. In his Apostolic Exhortation from the recent Synod on Evangelization, *Evangelii Gaudium*, we have what John Allen called his "I have a dream speech" in which he lays out his hopes and dreams for the immediate future of the church.

We have been moved by his appealing and consistent parable in action of how he wants all pastors of the church to act, so much closer to the way Jesus spoke and acted in

the Gospels. And in this Apostolic Exhortation, he not only firmly emphasizes the message of God's love and mercy, expressed in Jesus, but also his deep conviction that the work of evangelization belongs to the entire People of God. We are participating in a departure from the small, purified remnant church of Benedict XVI to Francis I's desire for a church of the poor. Referring to God's preference for the poor, he wants a church that is poor, that extends itself to the poor, and is evangelized by the poor. He wants a church close to the poor, and does not want them pastorally abandoned.<sup>1</sup> We have seen a contrast in our American church, where school and parish closures signal shift away from a mission to the poor to a default service if those who can afford to pay for the pastoral services of the church.

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Francis integrates the social teaching of the church with the Gospel and calls us all to a new world of wider relationship of family. In his vocabulary "fraternity"—citing Benedict XVI's stunning statement from *Caritas et Veritate*—that globalization makes us all neighbors but does not make us brothers and sisters of one another which the Gospel clearly requires.<sup>2</sup>

### Women in the Evangelizing Church: Limits and Possibilities

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis describes the role of the Holy Spirit in this new evangelization, which in his view embraces the entire world. Yet this energizing summons to Christian evangelizing in an inclusive way within every culture and every class is ultimately the work of the Spirit.

And hence, my title: Do Women Mystics Still Matter? *Evangelii Gaudium* says the Holy Spirit works in the church understood as the People of God. I cite it, because it is one of the few places where women of faith are clearly addressed and included.

The Holy Spirit also enriches the entire evangelizing Church with different charisms. These gifts are meant to renew and build up the Church. They are not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safe-keeping; rather they are gifts of the Spirit integrated into the body of the Church, drawn to the center which is Christ and then channeled into an evangelizing impulse. A sure sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial character, its ability to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God's holy people for the good of all. Something truly new brought about by the Spirit need not overshadow other gifts and spiritualities making themselves felt. To the extent that a charism is better directed to the heart of the gospel, its exercise will be more ecclesial. It is in communion, even when this proves painful, that a charism is seen to be authentic and mysteriously fruitful. On the basis of her response

to this challenge the Church can be a model of peace in our world.<sup>3</sup>

Although Francis wants to create a place for women in leadership in the church, there is as yet no indication what this will look like. What we hear is a dictum that a path to ordained ministry remains closed, as does the possibility of women becoming cardinals!<sup>4</sup> These intimations leave us for the near future exactly where we have always been. In the Church, we are limited in our authority to exercise leadership, to preach in liturgical contexts and to engage in pastoral ministry within education, health care, and parish roles. In society, by contrast, we are authorized to lead in secular and public institutions for which we are qualified by professional credentials.

Women suffer exclusion from the conversations, settings, and roles that influence ecclesial decision-making, and we feel continued limits on our authority in ministry within and beyond the church. However, we still feel the competence of our charisms, the gifts of the Spirit, that impel us into ministries of teaching, social justice, spiritual direction, catechetics,

and a host of social ministries. Without any legitimate route to the "office" of ordination, and without other structures for consultation, women (and lay men) retain only a charismatic or mystical path to leadership in the Church. Hence, the significance of why women mystics still matter.

### Mystics at the Service of the Church

What do I mean by a mystic at the service of the church? By this I mean, women who ponder the word of God in their contemplative prayer and are open to being led by the Spirit or perhaps even "driven" by the Spirit as John the Baptist and Jesus were, or overshadowed by the Spirit as was Mary. A mystic is a person who experiences a sense of the presence of God in his or her life and organizes the whole of life and ministry around it.

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Francis eloquently describes preaching and pastoral care, directly addressing all the clergy, from just such a contemplative view of the Gospel, citing the example and teaching of Jesus. He wants this same God-soaked, Spirit-inspired basis for the ordained as well, since they are the ones who regularly preach.

This is a complicated time in our church for women religious. Our leadership in this country is in the final stages of the "doctrinal examination" of LCWR communities with several congregations invited to Rome for further "friendly" conversations related to their reports. Without consultation or dialogue with ecclesial authorities, some notable women theologians who affirm women's experience of the mysteries of faith are called into question by bishops. In such a moment, I take comfort in the examples and experience of noted women mystics in our shared Christian history.

#### **Women Named as Doctors of the Church**

The example of Catherine of Siena, a laywoman, profoundly led by the Spirit through her mystical experience to work for the reform of the corrupt and dysfunctional church in the fourteenth century. It was encouraging to note that she was named a Doctor of the Church, along with Teresa of Avila, and Therese of Lisieux in 1970. These doctors of the church are honored not only because of their holiness of life but precisely for their "teaching." Isn't this particularly significant in a university setting like this one here at Xavier in Chicago?<sup>5</sup>

More recently, in 2012, Benedict XVI belatedly canonized and declared the most prominent theological, prophetic woman of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Hildegard of Bingen a Doctor of the Church a few months before he resigned from the papacy.<sup>6</sup> This canonization only took eight centuries and a German, medievalist pope to rectify errors made earlier in two ineffective processes. It also required the tenacity of Hildegard's community which secretly and quickly prepared all the documentation needed for this recognition by the Pope.

Hildegard was an herbalist and keen scientific observer of the natural world and a composer of liturgical music. She made a preaching tour of the Rhine toward the end of her life with the approval of the local bishops. She was long-honored as a saint in Germany but not in the universal church. The longevity and scholarship of Hildegard's Benedictine community, still vital after 800 years, might also be seen to constitute a miracle.

In 1979, nearly a decade after the first women doctors of the church were named, the Pontifical Theological Commission finally judged that women, lay or vowed religious, might qualify as theologians.<sup>7</sup> In the 1970's, I was pleased when women were recognized as doctors of the church, but was quite innocent of the significance of that recognition—that the mystical teachings of these women were recognized as authentic and trustworthy theological instruction for the universal church. I had already been taught by a number of prominent women theologians in scripture, patristics, spirituality, and systematic theology.

When I received my own doctorate in Christian Spirituality in 1986, I was stunned when one of my Jesuit mentors toasted me as a "doctor" of the Church at my graduation party. This playful reference to an honorific recognition applies only to canonized saints whose teachings are recognized as free from error and applicable to the universal church. Of course, it took a theologian friend to impress upon me a recognition of the particular service to the church for which I was now qualified by education and called by vocation. As a woman with both theological and ecclesiastical credentials, my vocation took on a much deeper meaning.

#### **Catherine of Siena as Mystic, Reformer, Peace-Maker, Apostle**

To deepen our reflection on why mystics still matter, I focus on Catherine of Siena, a mystic, reformer, peace-maker, and apostle. I share with you some of the assessments of two women scholars who have specialized in the study of Catherine of Siena.

They have proposed reasons they felt Catherine deserved this recognition as a theologian even though the judgments of the men who actually made the decision did not give Catherine enough credit for her gifts of teaching and counsel expressed in her unique vernacular theological idiom. I then describe Catherine's own sense of being missioned or authorized by her mystical experience to roles of preaching, peace-making, and reform of the church. She identified with the role of apostola (apostle like Mary Magdalen who became an apostle to the apostles). She felt herself commanded by God to write her book, *The Dialogue*, which was inspired by a series of Catherine's mystical experiences and composed over a period of time.

Catherine of Siena did not have access to the level of education we take for granted. Learning from sermons and conversations with theologically trained men in her circle, she demonstrated a powerful degree of retention. She was a creative and original thinker despite the fact she learned to read and write only late in life.<sup>8</sup> She relied on the knowledge she gained from sermons and conversations, her practical wisdom, her ministry of service, and her mystical experience. She promoted the spiritual growth of her disciples through her own preaching and letter writing, her attempts at peace-making, and her dedication to church reform.

#### Modern Scholars' Perspective on Catherine

The Dominican theologian, Mary O'Driscoll summarizes Catherine's theological approach:

We note that it describes a spiraling movement which begins when the human person seeks self-knowledge. The movement reaches its apex in the intimate bond of love which that person experiences with the absolute other, God known as Love, and with all human persons. At whatever point we pause along the spiral we are aware of the dynamic relationship

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between God and humanity; the divine-human dialectic at work. ...we discover that the key to her synthesis is Jesus Christ.

Catherine the theologian is a constant truth-seeker.... *The Dialogue* opens with her desire to "pursue truth and clothe herself in it," and it closes with the prayer: "Clothe, clothe me with yourself, eternal Truth." The theme running through all her theology can be described as a quest for truth. She wants to know the truth of who she is and she wants to know the truth about who God is. Within these two parameters she wants to know the truth about everything else: the Church, her neighbor, the world, sin, salvation." She understands that the more she knows of the truth, the more she can love, for "love follows knowledge." Throughout her quest she appreciates that she can grow in knowledge of the truth only when she is enlightened by God, whom she delights in referring to as "First Truth," and by Jesus Christ who is "Gentle Truth."<sup>9</sup>

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In Catherine's view, this truth is available to everyone, but is especially manifest in the apostles, martyrs, confessors, evangelists, and doctors of the church who are

"living witnesses to the truth in the mystic body of holy church. They are like lamps set on a lamp stand to point out the way of truth, perfectly lighted that leads to life." This way to life is based on their experience, "for they have experienced it in themselves. So every one...has enough light to know the truth if you but will...if you do not decide to put out the light of your reason by ...selfishness."<sup>10</sup>

Catherine further explains, "All receive according to their capacity and according to their readiness to know me, for I do not spurn their dispositions. ...the eye of understanding has received a light beyond any natural light, infused by grace, and in this light the doctors and the other saints came to know the truth in the midst of darkness."<sup>11</sup> It is instructive to notice that Catherine largely offers her own teaching on the basis of this same inner authority

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because she experiences herself as illumined from within. And in other parts of the Dialogue and in her letters she describes discernment of spirits as being developmental, increasing according to a pattern she describes as three lights.

According to Dominican Suzanne Noffke, in Catherine's theology, only God is "master of truth" ...as one who holds, embraces, relates as creative artist and lover. All others are servants and ministers of truth, called to embrace truth also as lovers and bring it to birth in the world in Jesus Christ, God and human, in whom is embodied both mastery and servanthood of truth."<sup>12</sup> This view leads her to see that all members of the church who carry out the mission of Christ, ordained or not, are servants or disciples of Christ who alone on earth is teacher or master of truth.<sup>13</sup>

#### Catherine as Reformer

This understanding leads her to speak the truth as she receives it to all who seek her counsel and some who don't. She persuades Gregory XI in Avignon to return to Rome in 1376, and deal with needed reforms in the Church in her day. In a letter to Urban VI,

she defends a Dominican whom Urban VI had silenced because he raised questions about "certain abuses and papal appointments." In her letter, she acknowledges Urban's jurisdiction, but advises him that he should want helpers who really help and that he should welcome the "pure truth as it stands."<sup>14</sup>

How did Catherine as a woman assume such an audacious role for herself within Italy and the church in the 14<sup>th</sup> century? Once she affiliated herself with the Dominicans as an exceedingly young mantellate, she gained the protection of the Friars who gave her permission to travel and teach. She traveled with an entourage that included clergy who were kept very busy with the confessions of those whose hearts she converted. Raymond of Capua, who became Master General of the Dominicans, was assigned as her

spiritual director and theological advisor. He prepared documents for her canonization emphasizing her mystical experiences and the phenomena that accompanied them.<sup>15</sup>

#### Catherine as Peace-Maker

In a vision before she left for Avignon to try to end the war between Florence and the Avignon papacy, Christ gave her the cross, put it on her neck, and an olive branch in her hand, telling her to carry the cross and to announce to the people a great joy. The symbols of the cross and the olive branch indicate divine approval for her special mission to bring peace and salvation to all of humanity by traveling and speaking rather than by staying home and praying. Here she identifies with the role of the itinerant preacher (the angel who announces good news, in her case to the shepherds of the church) and to be actively involved in the negotiations. Also in this vision, she saw the infidels and Christians both enter into the side of Christ and believed she was to reconcile Christians and infidels. Against further complaints by the local Siennese government for

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engaging in activities unacceptable for women in her times, she claims her work is authorized by God whom she would not dare disobey. Further, Catherine talks about "hiding in Christ's wounds," which expressed a willingness to suffer on behalf of her mission but also symbolized her closeness with Christ who will act on her behalf. And in another period of prayer, she hears Christ telling her, "So go back there and do not fear. For I will be the one to work for you."<sup>16</sup>

In her letters, she equates the suffering entailed through gossip and criticism with ascetical suffering, a way of participating in the suffering of Christ. When her mother complains about her travels, she compares herself to the apostles who are forced to leave Mary, the mother of Jesus, behind in the house

because the Spirit sends them on mission. Here Catherine is an apostle and her mother is placed in the role of a stay at home Mary.

### Catherine as Apostle

Finally, Catherine identifies with saints from the apostolic church, particularly Mary Magdalen and the apostles. She writes of Mary Magdalen as an apostle of love and cites the legend of her preaching in Marseilles. She appeals to Mary's willingness to break with social conventions and her freedom of movement in a man's world. Catherine sees her as a fearless female apostola whose example teaches women to seek and to love God in unconventional ways without regard for gossip or criticism and to preach the Gospel of salvation to all who will listen.<sup>17</sup>

If Catherine of Siena so easily identified with both male and female apostles in her own day, how much more easily for women today to identify across stereotypical gender identifications. Today it is common for women to ignore fixed gender roles. Contemplation of the scriptures inspires mystical experience which can reveal that God calls women to their most fundamental identity as embodiments of Christ.

I find it particularly poignant that Catherine died of congestive heart-failure in Rome before her efforts to end the schism between Urban the VI and Clement the VII succeeded. She died uncertain about the success of her efforts to convert clerics to live up to their calling. As Mary Catherine Hilkert describes Catherine:

Catherine of Siena wrote, spoke, and acted out of the conviction that conformity to Christ is conformity to the will of Christ and conformity to the pattern of his life. The promise of baptism is that the Spirit will conform women, men, and children into communities of disciples who become a living remembrance of the one who created inclusive communities and open table-sharing, who welcomed children and attended to the needs of the poor and the outcast, who sought out those who were lost or abandoned. We recognize Christ in ministers of the gospel who bring hope to the hopeless, who preach unlimited forgiveness, who

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bind up wounds and offer new possibilities to those who do not believe in themselves or God's power. To image Christ is to en flesh the life of the one who celebrated life in all its fullness and who exercised mercy even in the midst of his own dying.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, we dedicate ourselves to the particular ministries we experience ourselves to exercise.

### Reflection on Academic Ministry in a University

My last very brief reflection relates to those of us here whose primary calling is some form of ministry within a Catholic university. Yes, teaching is a ministry whether in the classroom or through publications. And campus ministry is not the only location for evangelization in a Catholic school. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel, Francis gives explicit attention to the mission in universities by naming academic circles as a "different culture" to which to proclaim the Gospel. This he understands as an encounter between faith, reason, and the sciences, a creative apologetics with the potential of "encouraging a greater openness to the Gospel."<sup>19</sup> Francis "appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their scholarly efforts to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and sciences" as "part of the Church's saving mission."<sup>20</sup>

He encourages us: "Universities [are] to be outstanding environments for articulating and developing this evangelizing commitment in an interdisciplinary and integrated way."<sup>21</sup> In his view, "Catholic Schools, which...join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a... valuable resource for the evangelization of culture, even...where hostile situations challenge us to greater creativity in our search for suitable methods."<sup>22</sup>

I end on this note, leaning into the future before us, leaving it to you who share this ministerial context to ponder what this might mean for you. Personally, I was consoled by Francis' attention to my particular context in a non-denominational Divinity School in a secular university. As a spiritual director and

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professor in spirituality, I have long been skilled in accompanying others in their spiritual growth. Within the divinity school where we serve some forty-two denominations and the occasional Jew or Muslim, I appreciated the way Francis described ecumenical dialogue as contributing to the unity of the human family as well as to the unity of the Christian faith.

I found helpful his attention to the intellectual life and the need to engage in it as a Christian as well as to engage disciplines beyond my own, as a less obvious form of evangelization. More than anything we say, we communicate the joy of the Gospel and the claims of the Gospel on us above all when others recognize our joy as Christians and our love and care of one another within our particular sphere of mission.

By virtue of our own baptism and the charismatic gifts of the Spirit which compel our love for the Church and our service to the Church, we, as non-ordained women and men, will continue to speak our truth from the authority and the love of God poured out in our hearts. The Spirit drives us to embrace our suffering world, as well as those who suffer within the Church itself, as it strives to become a more inclusive, dialogical, and inspirited institution, becoming a clearer embodiment of the Gospel. This is why I think women mystics still matter. ♦

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the sensus fidei, but in their difficulties, they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them." Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis I, (November 24, 2013) Vatican Press, §198. "I regret that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privilege and

preferential religious care." (§200).

<sup>2</sup> E.G., § 221, and more extensively in "Fraternity as the Foundation of Peace and as the Pathway to Peace," the Pope's Message for World Day of Peace. (8 December 2013) §5.

<sup>3</sup> E.G. §130.

<sup>4</sup> On August 2, 2016, Francis appointed a commission to study the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate focusing on the earliest history of such service in the church in response to a request from the May 12, 2016 meeting of USIG to open the diaconate to women. This work has just begun and does include a significant cohort of women theologians.

<sup>5</sup> This piece was first given as a lecture at St. Xavier University in Chicago on March 19, 2014 in their Women and Faith lecture series.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI proclaimed her a saint of the universal church on May 28, 2012 and a doctor of the church October 7, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Lay and women religious in Europe were admitted to doctoral level studies in theology and Scripture in the 1930's and in the U.S., only in the 1960's. Exception was the Ph.D. program at St. Mary's in South Bend, Indiana begun by Sister Madeleva Wolff in the mid 1940's for lay men and women, but especially women religious who were to educate the young women in formation in their own communities.

<sup>8</sup> Suzanne Noffke, OP, "Catherine of Siena, Justly Doctor of the Church? Theology Today 60 (2003): p.58

<sup>9</sup> Mary O'Driscoll, OP, "Catherine the Theologian" Spirituality Today, 40 /1 (Spring 1988) 15-16, accessed at [www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/88401odriscoll.html](http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/88401odriscoll.html), Fordham University Library, December 21, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> *Dialogue*, Ch 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Dialogue*, Ch 85.

<sup>12</sup> Noffke, p.59.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Noffke, p.61.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Scott, "St. Catherine of Siena, 'Apostola,'" Church History 61/1(March 1992), 37. Accessed <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3168001>, Yale University Library, April 2, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Cited by Scott, p.41.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Catherine Hilbert, *Speaking with Authority: Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2008): 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, §132.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, §133.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, §134.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, §134.