

Saint Catherine of Ricci

Feast day: February 13th

Alexandrina dei Ricci was born of a patrician family, but Catharine Bonza died leaving her motherless in her infancy. She was trained in virtue by a very pious godmother. The little girl took Our Lady as her mother and had for her a tender devotion. The child held familiar conversations **with her guardian angel**, who taught her a special manner of saying the rosary and assisted her in the practice of virtue.

As soon as Alexandrina was old enough to go away from home (age 6 or 7), she was sent to the convent school of Monticelli, where her aunt, Louisa dei Ricci, was the abbess. Besides learning her lessons for which she was sent, the little girl developed a great devotion to the Passion. She prayed often before a certain picture of Our Lord, and at the foot of a crucifix, which is still treasured as "Alexandrina's crucifix." Returning from the monastery when her education was completed according to the norm for girls, she turned her attention to her vocation.

In her plans to enter a monastery of strict observance, she met with great opposition from her father Peter. She loved the community life that had allowed her to serve God without impediment or distraction. She continued her usual exercises at home as much as she was able, but the interruptions and dissipations that were inseparable from her station, made her uneasy.

Finally, Peter allowed her to visit St. Vincent's convent in Prato, Tuscany, which had been **founded by nine Third Order Dominicans** who were great admirers of Savonarola. Alexandrina begged to remain with them; however, her father took her away, promising to let her return. He did not keep his promise, and the girl fell so ill that everyone despaired of her life. Frightened into agreement, her father gave his consent; Alexandrina, soon recovering, entered the convent of Saint Vincent.

In May 1535, Alexandrina received the habit from her uncle, Fr. Timothy dei Ricci, who was confessor to the convent. She was given the name Catherine in religion, and she very happily set about imitating her beloved patron. Lost in celestial visions, she was quite unaware that the sisters had begun to wonder about her qualifications for the religious life: for in her ecstasies she seemed merely sleepy, and at times extremely stupid. Some thought her insane. Her companions did not suspect her of ecstasy when she dozed at community exercises, spilled food, or broke dishes.

Neither did it occur to Sister Catherine that other people were not, like herself, rapt in ecstasy. She was about to be dismissed from the community when she became aware of the heavenly favors she had received. From then on there was no question of dismissing the young novice, but fresh trials moved in upon her in the form of agonizing pain from

a complication of diseases that remedies seemed only to aggravate. She endured her sufferings patiently by constantly meditating on the passion of Christ, until she was suddenly healed. After her recovery, she was left in frail health.

Like Saint John of Egypt and Saint Antony, Catherine met Philip Neri in a vision while he was still alive and in Rome. They had corresponded for a long time and wanted to meet each other but were unable to arrange it. Catherine appeared to Philip in a vision and they conversed for a long time. Saint Philip, who was also cautious in giving credence to or publishing visions, confirmed this. This blessed ability to bilocate, like Padre Pio, was confirmed by the oaths of five witnesses. Also like those desert fathers, Antony and John, she fasted two or three times weekly on only bread and water, and sometimes passed an entire day without taking any nourishment.

Like Saint Catherine of Siena, she is said to have received a ring from the Lord as a sign of her espousal to him--a mysterious ring made of gold set with a diamond, invisible to all except the mystic. Others saw only a red lozenge and a circlet around her finder.

Sister Catherine was 20 when she began a 12-year cycle of weekly ecstasies of the Passion from noon each Thursday until 4:00 p.m. each Friday. The first time, during Lent 1542, she meditated so heart-rendingly on the crucifixion of Jesus that she became seriously ill, until a vision of the Risen Lord talking with Mary Magdalene restored her to health on Holy Saturday.

She received the sacred stigmata, which remained with her always. In addition to the five wounds, she received, in the course of her Thursday-Friday ecstasies, many of the other wounds which our Lord suffered. Watching her face and body, the sisters could follow the course of the Passion, as she was mystically scourged and crowned with thorns. When the ecstasy was finished, she would be covered with wounds and her shoulder remained deeply indented where the Cross had been laid.

Soon all Italy was attentive and crowds came to see her. Skeptics and the indifferent, sinners and unbelievers, were transformed at the sight of her. Soon there was no day nor hour at which people did not come, people in need and in sin, people full of doubt and tribulation, who sought her help, and, of course, the merely curious. Because of the publicity that these favors attracted, she and her entire community asked our Lord to make the wounds less visible, and He did in 1554.

Her patience and healing impressed her sisters. While still very young, Catherine was chosen to serve the community as novice- mistress, then sub-prioress, and, at age 30, she was appointed prioress in perpetuity, despite her intense mystical life of prayer and penance. She managed the material details of running a large household were well, and became known as a kind and considerate superior. Catherine was particularly gentle with the sick. Troubled people, both within the convent and in the town, came to her for

advice and prayer, and her participation in the Passion exerted a great influence for good among all who saw it. Three future popes (Cardinals Cervini later known as Pope Marcellus II, Alexander de Medici (Pope Leo XI), and Aldobrandini (Pope Clement VIII)) were among the thousands who flocked to the convent to beseech her intercession.

She became famous for her sound teaching, much of which she communicated in letters to nuns, priests, and laity. Here she addressed a “summary of Christian perfection” to a young nun:

1. We must force ourselves to detach our heart and will from all earthly loves, except for the love of God. We must love no fleeting things. Above all, we must not love God selfishly for our own sakes, but with a love as pure as his own goodness.
2. We must direct all our thoughts, words and actions to his honor. And by prayer, counsel, and good example seek his glory solely, whether for ourselves or for others, so that through our actions all may love and honor God. This second thing is more pleasing to him than the first, as it better fulfills his will.
3. We must aim more and more to accomplish the divine will: not only desiring nothing special to happen to us, bad or even good, in this wretched life, thus keeping ourselves always at God’s disposal, with heart and soul at peace. But we must also believe with a firm faith that Almighty God loves us more than we love ourselves, and takes more care of us than we could take care of ourselves. Let us always remember, never doubting, that it is the eternal, sovereign, all-powerful God who does, orders, or allows everything that happens. Know that nothing comes to pass without his divine will. If, through his mercy, this conviction becomes strongly impressed upon our wills, we shall easily take all things from his sacred hand with well-contented hearts, always thanking him for fulfilling his holy will in us.

Of the cloister that Catherine directed, a widow who had entered it observed: "If the world only knew how blessed is life in this cloister, the doors would not suffice and the thronging people would clamber in over all the walls."

A contemporary painting of Catherine attributed to Nardini (at the Pinacoteca of Montepulciano) shows a not unattractive, though relatively plain woman. Her eyes protrude a bit too much and her nose is too flared to account her a classic beauty, but she possessed high cheekbones, dark hair, widely spaced eyes, and full lips. Her mein is that of a sensitive woman who has experience pain and now has compassion.

St. Catherine knew St. Philip Neri and Sr. Mary Magdalene di Pazzi. She counseled many lay people and guided them in their spiritual lives. We have approximately 1000 of her letters! Most have never been translated into English. Catherine was not gloomy or overly serious. She was "always cheerful and merry!" She possessed a warm, friendly personality that spilled over into concern for others showing them love in simple things. At one time she was in charge of the young girls boarding at the monastery. They called her "the snack mistress!"

Catherine's influence was not confined within the walls of her convent. She was greatly preoccupied by the need for reform in the Church, as is apparent from her letters, many of them addressed to highly-placed persons. This accounts, too, for her reverence for the memory of Savonarola, who had defied the evil-living Pope Alexander VI and been hanged in Florence in 1498. Saint Catherine was in touch with such contemporary, highly-orthodox reformers as Saint Charles Borromeo and Saint Pius V.

After Catherine's long and painful death in 1589 or 1590, many miracles were performed at her tomb. Her cultus soon spread from Prato throughout the whole of Italy and thence to the whole world. The future Pope Benedict XIV, the "devil's advocate" in Catherine's cause for canonization, critically examined all relevant claims. As in the case of her younger contemporary, Saint Mary Magdalene de'Pazzi, canonization was not granted because of the extraordinary phenomenon surrounding her life, but for heroic virtue and complete union with Christ.

Catherine died of natural causes, after a long illness, when she was 68 years old. She is patron saint of those who are sick, and her relics rest in the reliquary chapel in the Basilica.

"Gather up all your worries and make a bundle of them and throw them all into those most holy wounds of Jesus Christ. You could not put them anywhere better than in Jesus and his most holy Mother. They are the ones who are perfectly capable of consoling and calming the human heart..."

St. Catherine left us with the beautiful Cantic of the Passion which is sung slowly. It used to be sung in Dominican houses every Friday of Lent and continues to be in many places.

The Cantic of the Passion

St. Catherine D'Ricci experienced the stigmata and every Thursday-Friday accompanied Jesus in His Passion. Despite Catherine's extraordinary interior life, she continued to serve the monastery in many capacities including prioress for 36 years. The Cantic of the Passion was revealed to Catherine

immediately after her first great ecstasy of the Passion. Our Lady desired Catherine to spread it as a form of prayer and contemplation pleasing to Our Lord.

The Canticle is chanted in some Dominican monasteries on the Fridays of Lent.

Prayer:

My friends and My neighbors * have drawn near and stood against Me.
I was delivered up and came not forth; * My eyes languished through poverty.
And my sweat became as drops of blood, * trickling down and upon the ground.
For many dogs have encompassed Me * the council of the malignant hath besieged Me.
I have given My body to the strikers * and My cheeks to them that plucked them.
I have not turned away My face from them that rebuked Me * and spit upon Me.
For I am ready for scourges, * and My sorrow is continually before Me.
The soldiers, plaiting a crown of thorns, placed it upon My head.
They have dug My hands and feet; * they have numbered all My bones.
And they gave Me gall for My food; * and in My thirst, they gave me vinegar to drink.
All they that saw Me laughed Me to scorn; * they have spoken with lips and wagged their heads.
They have looked and stared upon Me; * they parted My garments among them and upon My vesture
they cast lots.
Into Thy hands I commend My spirit; * Thou has redeemed me, O God of truth.
Be mindful, O Lord, of Thy servants, * when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom.
And Jesus having cried out with a loud voice * gave up the ghost.
The mercies of the Lord * I will sing for all eternity.
Surely He hath borne our infirmities * and carried our sorrows.
He was bruised for our sins.
All we, like sheep, have gone astray; * every one hath turned aside into his own way.
For the Lord hath placed upon him * the iniquities of us all.
Arise, why sleepest Thou, O Lord? * Arise and cast us not off to the end.
Behold, God is my Saviour, * I will deal confidently, and will not fear.
We beseech Thee, O Lord, help Thy servants * whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy Precious Blood.

V. Have mercy on us, O benign Jesus.

R. Who in Thy clemency didst suffer for us.

Look down, we beseech Thee, O Lord, on this Thy family for which Our Lord Jesus Christ did not hesitate to be delivered into the hands of the wicked, and suffer the torments of the Cross.