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## **Mystic and Reformer: Catherine of Siena**

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the question why he never became a saint is worth recording: "I am a good Catholic. Without La Salette I might have been a very bad one."

This book is recommended to all who wish to refresh their devotion to Our Blessed Mother.

SISTER MARY ALICE

## MYSTIC AND REFORMER

CATHERINE OF SIENA. By Igino Giordani. Translated from the Italian by Thomas J. Tobin. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1959. vi, 234p.

This 234-page biography of a great 14th-century mystic holds the reader's close attention. The author surrounds his main character with a description of the turbulent church history of the day. However, St. Catherine remains firmly in the center of the story.

Her life was extraordinary: an illiterate young woman, she was nevertheless a chosen soul, whose words ring out as a message to us, the readers of today, as they did to the leaders of state and church of yesterday. She was born on March 25, 1347, the twenty-fourth child of Giacomo and Lapa Benincasa. She entered the world in an age of crisis, political, economic and social. As a child in a lively household, she was convinced that she should dedicate herself to God. Even at the age of six she had received her first vision of God and the saints. Her many biographers agree with Giordani that Catherine's wisdom and knowledge were not acquired but infused. From the time of this first vision she determined to walk the road of sanctity, despite difficulties, not the least of which was the conflict in her own family. They considered Catherine's attitudes madness. The road she chose was that of charity, recollection, and penance.

At the age of 16 she was invested with the Dominican habit and she continued to live in her own home. Christ came to her, spoke and walked with her. It was He who taught her. These extraordinary daily encounters became ordinary events in her life, culminating in her 20th year in the mystical betrothal.

St. Catherine's rapid change from illiteracy to a deep knowledge of letters seems clear to all as evidence of divine intervention. How, then, did it come about that a mystic, a contemplative, could, in the thirteen years of life remaining, do so much to confound the learned ones and to astound the incredulous? Even in her own day—in the midst of unbelievers—all came to admit the reality of her miracles,

her visions and the manifestation of her power with all classes of people. She began her reform in Siena, making many conversions by prayer and by interview. She began to go out among the sick and to the prisons, preaching and beseeching that they turn to God. People came to her seeking help and advice.

The most important historical event of these times was the change of papal residence to Avignon; the Babylonian captivity, as it is called in the history books. After a bitter struggle aided by Catherine's action and prayers, the Pope was persuaded to return to Rome. In the fields of economics and political science too Catherine gave norms taken from the Gospels and the Fathers of the early Church

Catherine of Siena gave strength to the weak and courage to the fearful because she depended so much on God. This book can take its rightful place with the other biographies written about her.

SISTER MIRIAM CATHERINE

## STRONG MEDICINE

**SPIRITUAL HIGHLIGHTS FOR SISTERS.** By Rev. Bruno M. Hagspiel, SVD. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1960. x,228p.

This book is set up as conferences for religious, drawn from Father Hagspiel's fifty years of experience in giving retreats to Sisters. Since it focuses chiefly on the basic rules and regulations of day-to-day living in a religious community, it is useful both as a handbook of practical injunctions for novices still in training and as a recollection-day check-list for older religious. In any case some adaptation is needed: in general, because the spirit of religious communities differs one from another; for novices in particular, because the tone is too unremittingly stern; for older religious, because the points stressed are those about which they are admonished year after year so that the effect is negative and somewhat wearisome, whereas retreats (and recollections) should be principally precious times of "getting to know You".

Father Hagspiel's points are, of course, basic and no one who is interested in the development of personal spiritual life to the full would question them; but there is a rather frequent Jeremiastic tone to his exhortations. "Should someone accuse us of being covetous, dishonest, proud, lazy, sensual, uncharitable, we agree, because we