

November Book Recommendation
Summary of the Book by Dan Brent

Speaking with Authority: Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today by Mary Catherine Hilbert O.P., PhD, Paulist Press, 2008, \$15.95.

St. Catherine of Siena was not a theologian. In fact she was uneducated. Yet in 1970, Pope Paul VI named her (along with St. Theresa of Avila) a Doctor of the Church.

Born in 1347, Catherine Benincasa lived her brief 33 year life – she died in 1380 – in the tumultuous period of the black plague and the Avignon papacy. She had neither credentials nor position to impact the politics of either church or state. And most debilitating of all, she was a woman in an era when women were perceived in church, state, and society in general, as inferior and out of place in public discourse.

Yet remarkably she wielded incredible influence. She is generally credited with persuading Pope Benedict XI to return the papacy to Rome, ending the Avignon era. She worked tirelessly for peace among the Italian city-states and between them and the papacy.

Speaking with Authority explores the source of Catherine's persuasiveness and effectiveness and basically finds it in two gifts. Her saintly love for Christ crucified, nourished by prayer, drove her to preach and write with the authority of Truth itself. And her persevering courage moved her to confront authority – church and civil -- with a boldness that could not be dismissed.

Author Hilbert is suggesting that women today have a responsibility still to confront the sins of both church and civil leaders. Circumstances have changed since the fourteenth century. The times are different. Not all of Catherine's convictions or solutions would be appropriate in our twenty-first century world.

But the world and the church are still in need of the challenging corrective voice of women.

Like Catherine's century, our world and church need to be summoned anew to gospel values. "Failure to engage difficult and church-dividing issues jeopardize the preaching of the gospel." (p.2)

Pope Benedict XVI has urged women to "seek their proper place." (p.9) Given the official church perspective on women in ministry, one can understand suspicions that "proper place" means to the pope something quite modest – bordering on subservience. So Hilbert hopes that Catherine's "courageous and prophetic witness in her own time can inspire and help to sustain a similar response . . . among women today." (p.11)

The book examines Catherine's "authority" from three perspectives: vocation, wisdom, and compassion.

God, Catherine was convinced, called her to get involved. She understood baptism as requiring each Christian to further the kingdom according to their gifts and the circumstances of their lives. “The plague victims, the poor of the city of Siena, and political prisoners she came to know made a claim on her and helped shape her concrete response to the gospel.” (p.33) She also felt herself called to preaching and peacemaking. The popes alternately used her and threw her away. But invited or uninvited she forced her message on them with constant conviction. And “Catherine perceived her own vocation to exceed the stereotypical roles of women in her day.” (p.37) “She felt empowered and commissioned by Christ and his Spirit.” (p.38)

“There was no suggestion,” Hilkert writes, “in either the (Vatican) Council documents or Paul’s letter (1Cor.) that the Spirit’s diverse charisms are distributed according to gender.” (p.44)

The second basis for Catherine’s authority is “wisdom”. The author says that, “the authority of women’s speech does not come . . . from political roles or ecclesial position, but from the truth of the words spoken, the authenticity of the speaker, and the relationship of trust and genuine concern that allows one to speak.” (p.61) And Catherine understood that, to be received, truth must be spoken in love.

Catherine was summoned to counsel popes. How silly, Hilkert muses, that the Vatican won’t allow otherwise-qualified women to give spiritual direction to seminarians.

The third basis for authority is “compassion”. Women have a special capacity for compassion. Catherine saw the blood of Christ as like mother’s milk nourishing all of humanity. “It was not suffering that saved us, but rather a love that was fierce enough to triumph over the forces of death and evil and a compassion that was broad enough to encompass all of creation.” (p.101) Catherine witnessed the suffering and division that failed leadership was creating and cried out: This cannot go on!

So, “Speaking unwelcome words, naming difficult truths, raising questions, protesting policies, organizing resistance, and working and praying for healing and change are all dimensions of the politics of compassion in our day.” (p.114) “Women speak with authority – with depth, freedom, authenticity, and wisdom – when they speak with compassion of the truth that emerges from their experience.” (p.117)

Catherine failed to bring peace to the Italian city-states and she died with the church in schism. But she had persisted and trusted the Lord when all seemed futile and wasted. Hilkert concludes by noting, “There are women today as well who experience a desire and call to be engaged in building up God’s reign on earth in ways they often could not have imagined. At the intersection of their gifts of personality and grace with the unique needs of their time and place, they discover a sense of vocation and energy for mission that impels them to speak and act . . . from and about their experience of God.” (p.119)