

ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA.

PATRON SAINT OF ITALY.

It is peculiarly fitting that St. Catherine of Siena should be proclaimed one of the Patron Saints of Italy while Pius the Twelfth occupies the Papal Chair. We can recognise many attributes common to each. His Holiness is one of the most learned men of his age, one who has acquainted himself very fully with the politics of his time, he has gifts of diplomacy also possessed by the Saint, and he has the same love for humanity, the same desire for its well being and sympathy with its sufferings.

On the last day of the ceremonies connected with the proclamation of this Saint, as one of the Patron Saints of Italy, all the Cardinals of Rome, Members of the Papal Court, Members of the Diplomatic Corps and many other dignitaries awaited His Holiness in the Church of St. Maria Sopra Minerva when he came to preside over the final passages in the ceremonies connected with the proclamation. While he knelt before the High Altar, under which lie the relics of Saint Catherine, there was placed on her recumbent statue a beautiful and richly jewelled crown given by the patrician ladies of Rome. The proceedings must have been impressive and inspiring according to an account of them sent us from Italy.

Catherine Benincasa, best known as St. Catherine of Siena, has long been recognised as one of the historical nursing saints. She was born in 1347 and died in 1380 at the significant age of thirty-three. The people of her native town gave her the name of Euphrosyne, which means Child of Joy and seems to indicate a kind of playful intermingling of pagan and Christian tradition in their thoughts of the child. Joy and gaiety were characteristics of the early years of St. Catherine and they appear to have endured throughout her comparatively short life as did also her love of flowers, which, in her childhood's years, she used to weave into garlands for her friends on festive occasions. During these years she felt a great reverence for all sacred and beautiful things and a well-known mystical experience, when she was six, has been regarded as one of great importance, as a revelation from the spiritual world and an inspiration for her wonderfully fruitful life.

One wonders what might have been the effect of the education she missed. Would it have stultified the development of her glorious natural gifts of intuition and clarity of vision?

Catherine was the second youngest of a family of twenty-five; her twin sister and most of the others died before reaching maturity. At the age of twelve her parents commenced to make plans for her marriage, in those days of early betrothals this was nothing unusual; we are told of how her mother and a much loved married sister tried to persuade her to adopt all the personal adornments customary in her time for girls whose parents wished them to marry. Catherine persevered with their recommendations for a time, in spite of her desire to give herself up to a religious life; at last, with the approval of her confessor she cut off her beautiful hair with her own hands and refused to use the paint and cosmetics provided. Opposition to her wishes ended when her father saw a dove circling round her while she was at prayer and after this he was ready to agree that his daughter's aspirations were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Forthwith she had, in his house, her own little cell which, with her stone pillow, is still shown to visitors at Siena.

Catherine's father, Giacomo Benincasa, has been described as little more than an ordinary artisan, but this is incorrect. He was a master craftsman and had his own dye-works in which he employed many men. His goods went to other countries as well as his own and he was prosperous in times when brightness and variety in colouring made his particular craft one almost to be regarded as a fine art. He was a man looked up to in the town and he participated in its government. Nevertheless, man of substance though he was, it is noteworthy that, like others of his time, he attached no importance to education so far as women were concerned; Catherine Benincasa taught herself the alphabet when she was twenty and did not learn to write until the later years of her life; all her voluminous writings were accomplished in the course of a very few years. Such was the girl who was to become one of the greatest religious reformers, a politician who has influenced the history of centuries after her death, a psychologist, poetess and some say a prophetess. She had long and strenuous arguments and



SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA.

From a contemporary fresco by her disciple Andrea di Vanni in the Cappella della Volte in San Domenico.

discussions with Pope and Cardinals and attacked the policy of the Church with a pertinacity and determination that ended in capitulation to her claim for reforms and, in spite of persecution, made her actually one of the most powerful personalities of her time.

But it is in St. Catherine as a figure in nursing history that we are chiefly interested; in spite of, or because of, her erudition, or intuition as many regarded it, she had a wide sympathy with all humanity, particularly with the suffering; she transformed this sympathy into practical activity

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