

Ancient Wisdom: Catherine of Siena

*Be who God meant you to be
and you will set the world on fire...* (The Dialogue)

So wrote St Catherine of Siena, a 14th Century Italian mystic, reformer and political influencer, whose words can guide us in walking the paths of justice, peace and compassion in our complex world. An unusual religious, living outside of formal convent life, Catherine of Siena felt the call to God's mission at an early age and spent three years in solitude and contemplation before launching herself into ministry to the sick, the imprisoned, those condemned to die and more broadly to unification of a divided Church.

Although she died at the young age of thirty-three; Catherine's understanding of the cutting edge of God's mission, and the need to continually speak out, agitate and educate, echoes across the centuries.

*We have enough exhortations to be silent.
Cry out with a thousand tongues
–I see the world is rotten because of silence.*
(The Dialogue)

I recently saw a t-shirt bearing the words of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich: *Well-behaved women seldom make history*. This slogan suited Catherine of Siena perfectly. She was an outspoken, uncompromising and determined advocate for authentic discipleship.

Catherine of Siena's call to advocacy is as important today as it was in her divided world.

Speak the truth in a million voices. It is silence that kills. (The Dialogue)

We could ask ourselves where is the silence in our nation? Perhaps in the hidden and not so hidden poverty which surrounds us; the epidemic of violence against women; the hopelessness of refugees languishing in detention; the ongoing social, political and cultural silencing of our First Nations People.

Perhaps it is in the missed opportunities to speak out against racism, homophobia and intolerance in our families, workplaces and community groups. Or our failure to call out those who use the politics of fear to drive bitterness and hate in our communities.

Joan Chittister recently addressed the MIA Generative Conversation Conference. She urged delegates to speak out, with intention and determination; to frequently ask ourselves 'what are we doing and who knows about it'? What

do we stand for and what does this mean? She was urging us to leave behind notions of political niceness and fear of consequences and to be true heralds of justice and compassion, and a voice for those who have been silenced or marginalised in our nation and in the world.

Catherine of Siena would have agreed wholeheartedly. If we are to be who "God has meant us to be" then we must speak out in our world of fake news, social media, celebrity influencers and the politicisation of poverty.

As Catherine would say: *Proclaim the truth and do not be silent through fear.*

Catherine took strength in her belief that God walked with her in life, giving encouragement and comfort as she challenged her world.

*You have surrounded me
with your goodness and your gentle mercy;
and nourished in me a love for you
and for my neighbour.*
Thank-you. (Set Aside Every Fear. 2020. p.109)



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REFLECTION: How can your ministry be more vocal in opposing injustice and nurturing a more compassionate world?

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