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Catherine of Siena's Challenge to Pope Gregory XI: Lessons for Today

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During the recent debate regarding the crisis in the Catholic Church, disagreement with hierarchical authority has been denounced by many as evidence of a number of serious problems, ranging from lack of knowledge of true Catholic doctrine and lack of fidelity to the Catholic tradition, to moral ambiguity and destructiveness to the Catholic community. Yet, throughout its history Christianity has acclaimed many who have disagreed with authorities in an effort to reform the church and challenge its leadership to a more authentic interpretation of the tradition.

This history goes back to the Old Testament. For instance, the prophet Jeremiah accused the priests of his community of leading people astray because they listened to false prophets and valued their power more than the common good. In the New Testament, Jesus denounced interpretations of the tradition being taught by Scribes and Pharisees (the religious leaders of his day). In post-Biblical times, many of our saints have confronted church authorities in efforts to foster reform. Among these is Catherine of Siena, a fourteenth-century laywoman who challenged hierarchical authority, including two popes, yet has been declared a doctor of the church. Her story offers an important source of reflection regarding disagreement with authorities in our current church crisis.



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CATHERINE OF SIENA

Catherine, born in 1347, was a single, middle-class woman, a member of a lay group formed under the spiritual guidance of the Dominican Order and, therefore, someone with no official power in the secular or ecclesiastical order. Attracted early on to a life of prayer, Catherine intended to live at home, focus on prayer and become involved in caring for the poor and the sick in her community. However, through her personal encounter with God she felt called to an active involvement in a broad spectrum of spiritual, social and political concerns. She acted as spiritual adviser to many who gathered in her room in the home of her parents; she mediated between individuals of powerful rival families; she attempted to mediate with and influence leaders of city states; she offered advice to popes, cardinals and other church officials.

In the course of these involvements she wrote more than 300 letters, twenty-three of these to Popes Gregory XI and Urban VI.

LETTERS TO GREGORY XI

In letters to Gregory XI she did not hesitate to challenge him regarding his spiritual life, his decisions concerning appointments of church officials and his political policies. The excerpts below show the confidence with which Catherine expressed dissenting views and the boldness and the directness of her language. At the same time, her letters reveal the love and the concern for the church, the pope and his office. This love undergirded and motivated her dissent. In the letter cited below, Catherine called into question the pope's spiritual and moral motivation. She thought he was too fearful and selfish. She boldly dissented from the pope's plan to use military force, suggesting this policy was against God's will.

I long to see you a courageous man, free of slavish fear, learning from the good gentle Jesus, whose vicar you are. . . . Now this is just what I want you to do, father. Let go of yourself wherever selfish love is concerned. Do not love yourself selfishly, nor others selfishly, but love yourself and your neighbors for God's sake. . . . Up then, father; don't sit still any longer! [Further on, Catherine comments regarding the rumored military plans of the papacy for returning from Avignon to Rome.] And, as you value your life, see that you don't come with an army, but with the cross in your hand, as a meek lamb. If you do, you will fulfill God's will. But if you come in any other way you will be violating that will rather than fulfilling it. [To Pope Gregory XI in Avignon, France, ca. May 1376]

In other letters, Catherine emphatically pointed out to Gregory XI his weakness and errors in dealing with church officials. He was not acting forcefully and wisely regarding their sinful and inappropriate behavior; he was not giving priority to the holiness of those appointed to church office. Such weakness of leadership was causing harm to the laity's trust in the church's ability to act with justice and integrity. Further, Catherine disagreed with the pope's policy of pursuing certain civil alliances because she felt these would compromise his freedom to choose leaders and policies that followed God's will rather than temporal priorities. The following excerpts illustrate these points:

Next I beg you to turn your attention to punishing the sins of the Church's pastors and officials when they are acting improperly. See to the appointment of good ones who are living virtuously and justly — which they must do for the honor of God, for their own salvation, and because it is their duty. Besides, lay folk are watching you very closely because they have seen all the trouble that has come of wrongs going unpunished. [To Pope Gregory XI in Rome, late January 1377]

Reform her [the Church] I say, with good pastors and administrators. And I know you can hardly do that with war, since as long as you think you need princes and lords, you will consider yourself obligated to appoint pastors in their way rather than your own. That, however, is the worst of reasoning: to appoint in the Church — no matter what the appar-

ent need — pastors or any others who are not virtuous but self-seeking. . . . And they must not be bloated with pride . . . nor leaves that whirl about in the winds of worldly ostentation and vanity and wealth.
[To Pope Gregory XI, January or February 1377]

GOVERNANCE POLICIES VERSUS DOCTRINE

In the letters just cited, Catherine disagreed with Gregory XI regarding policies related to church governance and was critical of his living of Gospel values, but she did not challenge doctrinal issues or the hierarchical structure of the church. Thus, Gregory XI's intent to form certain alliances and to use military power, and his reluctance to punish offending church officials were not policies determined by doctrine. This distinction regarding the content of disagreements with authority is not usually made in our current crisis. For example, challenging the handling of abusive priests, challenging dioceses to greater transparency about the use of finances, or calling for structures and processes that would offer a greater consultative voice to priests and laity are issues of governance that do not question existing doctrine. That bishops should consult with priests and laity is supported by Vatican II and does not imply that the hierarchical structure of authority should be changed. Yet individuals and groups calling for these changes have been judged as suspect in doctrinal matters.

Besides disagreeing with governance policies, Catherine questioned the pope's living of Gospel values. She did not hesitate to conclude that political considerations and issues of power rather than justice drove Gregory XI's handling of church officials. She strongly suggested that Gregory was motivated by self-centeredness and lack of courage. Such questioning did not imply a challenge to doctrinal principles or disrespect for church authority. Indeed, today we interpret her challenge as part of her love for the church and her concern for an exercise of authority based on the exemplary living of Gospel values. I suggest that there is no significant difference between these challenges by Catherine and the questions of those today who wonder if authorities forgot the Gospel call to justice and protection of the poor and powerless in order to avoid scandal, or the questions of those who wonder if some bishops are protecting their positions of power rather than being wholeheartedly committed to a truthful accounting.

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PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO LIVING GOSPEL VALUES

Clearly not all disagreement with hierarchical authority is constructive for the growth and the authentic reform of the church, so the church community is called to discern, to sort out which voices of challenge and critique to follow and trust. While this "sorting out" is a complex process that cannot be fully discussed in this article, Catherine's example offers some guidelines. The spiritual tradition of the church holds that disagreement with church authorities is most likely to be authentic when those who disagree are rooted in a life of relationship with God and a pattern of life that seeks God's will.

Catherine is a saint precisely because the church community has agreed that her relationship with God and her following of gospel values is exemplary. Her confrontation with authorities was rooted in love for the church and deep desire for its holiness. This love was fostered through her commitment to a relationship with God and growth in practice of Gospel values, and this journey was encouraged and guided by spiritual directors and other religious leaders in her community. That is, her religious experience was shared and tested with others committed to the same ideals.

In other words, the quality of a person's commitment to living the Gospel and to the transformational relationship with God that this implies offers important information regarding authenticity of discipleship. The

greater the authenticity of discipleship, the more likely critique of authority will be in tune with the ideals of Christianity. We cannot conclude, as some critics of dissent suggest, that uncritical agreement with authority is the primary criterion for authentic Christian discipleship. Accordingly, despite the difficulties involved in evaluating the spiritual journey of others, the issues of commitment to the living of Gospel values and a relationship with God must be raised if we are to recognize those among us called by the Spirit to renew and revitalize the church.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, what are the lessons to be learned for today from Catherine's story? First, it is possible to be critical of hierarchical authority and yet love the church and the best of its tradition. Therefore, one cannot conclude that because persons disagree with authority they are unfaithful to the church; disagreement with governance policies, concern for reform congruent with official teaching in the church and

questions regarding the practice of Gospel values by authorities do not imply dissent regarding essential doctrine. Retrieval of the prophetic tradition of the church, including examples such as Catherine's, might also serve to bridge the polarization between "conservatives" and "liberals" regarding the crisis in the church. Throughout the history of the Christian tradition, authentic activism aimed at church reform and wholehearted personal commitment to a relationship with God and the living of Gospel values are closely linked.



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REACTIONS TO LOSS AND TRAUMA VARY MORE THAN EXPECTED

The destruction of the World Trade Center and more recently the crisis of clergy sexual abuse have brought to the fore many books and articles on how we react to loss and severe trauma. The prevailing wisdom is that there is a typical pattern of how ordinary people cope with grief and severe trauma. Indeed, so prevailing is this wisdom that those who do not show signs of the pattern are considered either extremely healthy individuals or deniers.

Psychologist George A. Bonanno, Ph.D., of Teachers College, Columbia University, begs to differ. In an article in the January 2004 issue of *American Psychologist* he reports on several reviews of research and a series of studies he and his colleagues have conducted on reactions to loss and trauma. In the prevailing wisdom, resilience in the face of such traumas is a rare trait. Bonanno belies that assumption. In one study he and his colleagues found that many bereaved people exhibit little or no grief, but are not cold and unfeeling and lacking in attachment to those they have lost. Instead, he argues, almost half of the bereaved people in the study showed genuine resilience in the face of their loss, yet prior to the loss had not been rated as cold and unfeeling. Nor did they show delayed reactions to the loss. A review of available research also demonstrates that resilience in the face of violent and life-threatening events is also quite common. He argues that resilience is far more common than many believe.

Bonanno believes that resilience in people comes from different sources. Some have a personality trait called hardiness that helps them to weather loss and trauma. For others, strange to say, self-enhancing biases, i.e., tendencies to rate oneself better than one is, help. For still others, even repression seems to help. Finally, positive emotions and laughter assist resilience in the face of loss and trauma.

The point is that reactions to loss and trauma vary among individuals, and we need to take this into account not only in self-evaluations but also in our pastoral care.

Source: George A. Bonanno, "Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive After Extreme Aversive Events?," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 20-28.