Third Wednesday of the Easter Season
Memorial of St. Catherine of Siena, Doctor of the Church
and Co-Patroness of Europe
Bishop John Barres
St. Agnes Cathedral
April 29, 2020

The history of American literature reflects so many dimensions of the
development of thought and philosophy, historical events and conflicts, and a
desire to create a distinctive identity apart from Europe.

Benjamin Franklin, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph
Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel
Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Emily
Dickinson, Mark Twain, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Stephen Crane,
Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald (who chronicled the North Shore
Long Island experience in the 1920s), Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner,
John Steinbeck, Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Jack Kerouac, Toni
Morrison – each of these names brings to mind a wide range of themes,
characters, plots, images and history that reflect the American experience.

The writers – be they novelists, poets, play-writers or screen writers –
influence each other and build upon one another. For instance, Herman
Melville says that his own contributions to American literature were
grounded not only in his careful reading of William Shakespeare but his
careful reading of the novels and literary technique of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

In his essay Tradition and the Individual Talent, T.S. Eliot insists that fine
poets of the present absorb in depth the contribution of the poets that went
before them. It is only because they have absorbed the classics that went
before them that they can make their own unique contribution to poetry.
Today, we celebrate the Feast Day of St. Catherine of Siena, a Doctor of the Catholic Church, who lived from 1347 to 1380. Spiritual theologian Donna Orsuto summarized her unique contribution in this way: “A remarkable woman of the 14th century, St. Catherine was a woman of God, a woman of the Church and a woman of her times. She functioned as a de facto diplomatic envoy to two popes, negotiated peace, lobbied both Church and secular powers on behalf of one of those popes in the time of the Great Schism, and authored a mystical dialogue that greatly influenced both Church doctrine and Italian literature for centuries to come.”

Just as we traced the luminaries and the mutual influences in our American Literature, we can also trace the luminaries and the mutual influences in our classic Catholic spiritual literature.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Paul, St. Ignatius of Antioch and the Patristic and Eastern Fathers, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. Benedict, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. John Henry Newman, St. Terese of Lisieux, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross and so many, many others – each one builds on those who went before them and provides a foundation stone for those who come after them in their life, their mysticism and their writings.

Today we celebrate the life, the mysticism and the writing of St. Catherine of Siena. She shows how our individual conversions and reforms make us instruments of the Church reform of our own day.

She has many harmonies with the life and contribution of St. John Paul II. The depth of their Trinitarian and ecclesial mysticism impacted the public life of the mission of the Church and society.

St. Catherine of Siena’s work *The Dialogue of Divine Providence* finished in 1378 is a classic of Catholic spiritual literature that has greatly influenced Catholic spiritual theology, our Catholic sense of the union of doctrine and prayer, and our prayer experience.
Daily spiritual reading from both the classic works of Catholic mysticism and spirituality and contemporary works that show how Catholic spirituality can be lived effectively in the modern world is critical to our spiritual growth.

It is the kindling that focuses and sharpens our mental prayer. The classic texts of Catholic mystics such as St. Ambrose, St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, the women doctors of the Church St. Teresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Siena and St. Terese of Lisieux are concrete expressions of these saints interceding at the throne of God for our spiritual progress and our individual call to holiness and mission.

When this spiritual reading is done faithfully each day reinforcing and complementing our lectio divina of the Scriptures, it is amazing how over the course of ten, twenty, fifty years how many fine works can be prayed over and applied practically in a person’s life.

Spiritual reading must be done slowly and meditatively. We should see the reading through the lens of both a literary critic (with careful attention and analysis of imagery, symbol, structure, rhetoric, style, historical setting) and a spiritual theologian (with careful attention to how the work is situated in the history of the Church’s spiritual literature and its influence historically as well as an understanding of how the saint’s reflection on their prayer experience is related to the Church’s theology of the Trinity, ecclesiology, theology of grace, sacramental theology and anthropology).

One thing we remember today as we contemplate the contribution of Catholic luminaries and saints and their writings through the centuries and the Gospel from the Gospel of John Chapter six is that what they all had in common was a blazing love for the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ that ignited and guided their lives.

The Eucharist is what set their lives, their prayer, their writings, their evangelization and their witness in history on fire.