

Dominicans celebrate the feast of St Catherine of Siena in Johannesburg, South Africa

Sr Alison Munro, OP, May 2016



Dr. Nontando Hadebe



Fr. Albert Nolan, OP

Dominicans from across Gauteng gathered to celebrate the feast of St Catherine of Siena, to honour a saint who left a major mark on the history of the Church and on the Dominican understanding of what it means to be involved in the market place.

Dr Judy Coyle, IHM, gave a presentation on the medieval women mystics and their call to holiness for us today. Their lives predated St Catherine, and yet their spirituality had an influence on her own, with many of the same themes present.

Beguines lived a form of life open to women who did not become religious and who did not marry. The Beguine life flourished for about one hundred years in the urban centres of Europe where the problems associated with territorial wars, diseases, and marriage by war and rape flourished. Its drawcard was the holy life, offering also a greater freedom than did the other options open to women. Characteristically Beguines cared for the sick and lepers, and practised a piety centred on the Eucharist and the humanity of Christ, and on prayers for the deceased. Some had heretical leanings, some were mystics. They wrote and taught in the vernacular, and turned to the Dominican friars who in turn consulted them and wrote about them. Themes of Trinitarian union, of the image of the river losing its own identity once it flows into the sea, of the mystical union of God and the soul, of Christological devotion to the humanity of Christ, of Jesus as the only way to God, of self-knowledge, keep recurring. One of the central themes is that of courtly love (not romantic, but of the lesser for the greater).

All too often today, and in the time since Vatican II, we take so much of our wealth for granted, but are reminded by the lives of the Beguines and of Catherine of Siena to hold as treasures of our faith Scripture, tradition and the mystical.

Dr Nontando Hadebe had been invited to imagine what St Catherine might say to Pope Francis in our own day, making historical comparisons and finding parallels. She began by noting that St Catherine's spirituality and dedication moved her from confinement to public space where she was a political mediator, challenging popes to act with integrity and passion for the unity and witness of the Church.

St Catherine worked at persuading Pope Gregory to return to Rome, and on Pope Urban urging him to be more understanding and patient towards the people around him. Catherine had clarity of vision, and was very Christocentric. She appealed to Pope Gregory for the sake of the unity of the Church, expressing concern for the office of the pope. She counselled him, speaking with authority, not to be afraid, to be a man, to respond to the call of the Spirit with boldness.

The three popes of our time (John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis) have each reacted differently to Vatican II, and there is in some manner a kind of papal schism. In the Church there are divisions, corruption, financial mismanagement, crisis in the priesthood. Pope Francis is in Rome, active in politics with 'soft power', and exerting influence. He is accessible, and active through the media. He is very popular, has adopted a simple lifestyle, is responsive to crises in the world, is very pastoral and orientated to human rights, and looks like a perfect pope. He has addressed the US Congress, the United Nations, and political leaders. But there are challenges around a kind of schism in the Church between liberals and conservatives, expressing a wide range of views. Francis takes a middle-ground approach. At the same time there is a large gap between the teachings of the Church and the lives of ordinary families.

"Catherine would be affectionate to Francis", says Dr Hadebe, "supportive of him, recognising the strength of the continuity of his teaching with that of other popes". She would challenge him on equal inclusion of women and the laity's vocation and the priesthood of all believers (cf Acts 2: 17:17-20 'I will pour out my Spirit on *all flesh*'). Francis understands there is an environmental crisis, but not, she suggests, "that women are most affected". She would challenge him on inclusion of homosexual people (cf 1 Cor 12: the gifts of the Spirit allow *each person* to participate.) Francis reminds us in *Laudato Si'* about listening to scientific evidence, "but he is not doing the listening around homosexual concerns" says Dr Hadebe. Catherine would call on him to be consistent, to bring back the humanity and dignity of all people. And thirdly she would call on him to strive for unity in the Church, not being a slave to it, not trying just to please everyone at the cost of truth. "We need clarity, not a vagueness" which may well lead to people's turning away. "Not everyone", as we know, "wanted to listen to Jesus when his sayings were too hard" (cf Jn 6: 55-60 Many disciples decided to leave Jesus; it is the Spirit who give life, but some of you do not believe).

Sr Felicity Cunningham OP (Newcastle Dominican) preached at the celebration of the Eucharist, presided over by Fr Stan Muyebe, Provincial of the friars.