Liturgical Moments

St. Joseph Parish

Spring 2025

March 8/9, 2025: The First Sunday of Lent

Good evening/morning. I am [name] and I serve as a [Lector/on the Liturgy Committee]. Lent in our parish marks the return of our Liturgical Moments. The Liturgy Committee is always seeking your input on topics for our series, and last spring several people suggested that we recognize Women's History month in March. In response, this Lent's Liturgical Moments will focus on the four women saints who have been named Doctors of the Church.

Saints, in our Catholic tradition, are most simply our beloved dead who have gone before us back to God. We all know some saints, many of us can name friends, relatives, teachers, mentors of exceptional holiness who lived lives of service to the Gospel, and who have died. We remember them and their faithful lives in our families and parishes. But sometimes that memory of an exceptionally devout life spreads beyond a small local community and inspires the whole of the Church, which in turn names the person an official saint. When that saint has left behind writings that continue to inspire the whole Church, that saint might be named a "Doctor of the Church." The four women saints who have been named Doctors of the Church are: St. Thérèse the Little Flower, St. Teresa of Ávila, St. Catherine of Sienna, and Saint Hildegard of Bingen.

Inspired by Pope Francis's Jubilee Year, we will offer a brief pilgrimage through time, moving backwards toward the early church. The fifth and final Liturgical Moment will explore the women in the scriptures of Holy week.

Today we begin with the saint who lived most recently, the only one we have actual photographs of – St. Thérèse of Lisieux, known affectionately as St. Thérèse, The Little Flower. St. Thérèse was born in 1873, in north-west France. The youngest of nine children, four of whom died in childhood; Thérèse's mother died of breast cancer when she was only 4 years old, so her elder sisters helped to raise her. As her older sisters left one by one to enter the local Carmelite Monastery, St. Thérèse became convinced, at the age of 9, that she too was called to religious life.

When she was 14 years old, she petitioned her local bishop to allow her to enter the Carmelites. When the bishop replied that he would think about it, Thérèse and her father went on a pilgrimage to Rome and during an audience with the pope, Thérèse broke protocol and spoke directly to Pope Leo XIII– begging the pope to allow her to enter the Carmelites. The pope was not unkind, but also did not grant her wish, telling her instead to wait for her Bishop's answer. But her clarity of vocation did not go unnoticed, and Thérèse was allowed to enter the cloistered order of Discalced Carmelite nuns when she was just 15 years old.

She is remembered and most famous for her autobiography, which is called in English: The Story of a Soul. In The Story of a Soul, Thérèse speaks of the "little way" to holiness, one filled with "doing little acts with great love." Thérèse lived and taught a spirituality of attending to everyone and everything well and with love. Thérèse's spirituality is of doing the ordinary, with extraordinary love. "What matters in life," she wrote, "is not great deeds, but great love."

Her focus on the "little way" of love is a quiet rejection of hierarchy and structures of priviledge. She aligns herself and her understanding of spiritual growth with the little ones, those outside the corridors of power. The Story of a Soul is grounded in the belief that holiness is open to everyone and the path toward holiness is love. Her focus on the "little way" anticipates the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the universal call to holiness.

Thérèse died of tuberculosis in 1897 at just 24 years of age. She was canonized a saint in 1925, and named a Doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II in 1997. Her feast day is October 1st. We have a statue of her in the back of church, where she continues to remind us that the path to holiness is filled with small acts done with great love.

Thank you for listening.

March 15/16, 2025: The Second Sunday of Lent

Good evening/morning. I am [name] and I serve as a [Lector/on the Liturgy Committee]. This Lent, in recognition of Women's History Month, our Liturgical Moments are focusing on the four women saints who have been named doctors of the Church. Doctors of the church have not only lived lives of holiness and sacrifice typical of all saints, but have also left for us a written record of their spiritual growth. Their writings have had an outsized influence on the church as a whole.

Last week we reflected on St. Thérèse, The Little Flower, a nineteenth century French nun of the Order of Discalced Carmelites. Today we will move back another 300 years in time to the 1500's and reflect on the saint who founded the Discalced Carmelites St. Teresa of Avila, who left us copious accounts of her spiritual development.

St. Teresa of Avila was born in 1515 in Castille, Spain, the fifth of twelve children of a wealthy family. Educated by Augustinian nuns, she was steeped in scripture. She found great inspiration in the story of the woman at the well, and often prayed, "Lord give me of that water that I may not thirst." When she struggled in her spirituality, she found encouragement in St. Augustine's Confessions and in the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene. Teresa loved the mass. Even when she struggled with her faith, she wrote that she never tired of listening to sermons, "however bad they may be."

When Teresa entered the Carmelite convent in Avila, at age 20, she found a religious community that was unusually social, whose parlor was open to educated lay people and filled with frequent conversation.

At the age of 40 after 20 years of relaxed religious life, Teresa had a profound conversion experience while encountering a statue of Jesus on the way to his crucifixion. Soon afterwards, she began to experience God in visions which we call "mystical experiences." These became the foundation of her spiritual life. She had visions of Jesus and saints, angels and demons. At the instruction of her confessor, she wrote down the details and

progress of her visions which had drawn some attention from the Spanish Inquisition. Nevertheless, her first book, The Life of Teresa of Jesus, which explained the theological meaning of her visions, was found by church authorities to be fully in accord with church teachings.

It is important to note that St. Teresa's spiritual growth took place during a time period of tremendous political and religious upheaval. The few decades before her birth saw the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain, the rise of the Spanish Inquisition and Spanish exploration of the New World. Just two years after her birth, Martin Luther ushered in the Protestant Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church's response to Luther and other Protestant reformers, was known as the Catholic Counter-Reformation, culminated in the Council of Trent and coincided with Teresa's growing confidence in her vision.

It was in this spirit of reform that Teresa's spirituality deepened as did her desire to live a more authentic religious life. With eventual papal approval, she set out to establish a different sort of convent, one where the women would live in almost total silence, austere poverty, vow perpetual abstinence, and where they wore habits of course cloth and rejected shoes for the simpler sandals. They became known as the "Discalced Carmelites" because the word "discalced" means without shoes! Her convents accepted women of all social classes and dowries were no longer required to join a religious order. Teresa based her reforms on the idea of returning to the vision of the order's founders, a rationale that anticipated Vatican II's call for the reform of religious life.

Her vision of this quieter, more austere religious life began to attract others, and she went on to establish 14 convents of Discalced Carmelites throughout Spain. Even male Carmelites followed her model of reform. She is remembered as a leading figure in the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

In addition to her first book, The Life of Teresa of Jesus, she also wrote Foundations, which was advice for nuns in her new convents, as well as The Way of Perfection and the

Interior Castle, classics of Christian spirituality to this day. Despite the enormous influence of her writings – indeed some scholars believe that René Descartes "borrowed" certain philosophical insights from Teresa's writings, she remained grounded by her life in community. She believed in the advice she gave her nuns in her book, Foundations:

> *But my daughters, good heavens! Do not be disconsolate when obedience leads you to be concerned with external, worldly matters; understand that, if your task is in the kitchen, the Lord walks among the pots and pans, helping you in all things spiritual and temporal.*
>
> *Foundations* (Ch. V)

Teresa of Avila died in 1582 at 67 years of age, was canonized a saint in 1622, and named a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970. Her feast day is October 15st.

Thanks for your kind attention.

March 23, the Third Sunday of Lent

Good evening/morning. I am [name] and I serve as a [Lector/on the Liturgy Committee]. As you will remember, this Lent in honor of Women's History Month, our Liturgical Moments are focusing on the four women saints who have been named doctors of the Church.

Last week we focused on St. Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Spanish contemplative and reformer. This week we will move back further in time to the 14th century and get to know a little about Saint Catherine of Sienna. Catherine of Sienna was an Italian lay-woman, ambassador, mystic, political activist, diplomat and prolific letter writer.

Saint Catherine of Sienna lived from 1347 to 1380. This was a time of tremendous social, political and religious upheaval and conflict in all of Europe, but especially in Italy. Catherine was the 24th child of a prosperous family; she began to have visions of God as a young girl. She resisted her parents' attempts to find her a husband by cutting off her long hair so that she would appear less marriageable. By the time she was a teenager, she had withdrawn from the world, living in a small cell in her parent's house. She spent her days in prayer and fasting, continuing to have visions of God and the Blessed Mother.

After a particularly powerful vision where she saw herself spiritually wedded to Christ, she felt called to leave her cell and work with the poor and imprisoned in Sienna. She became a member of a group of lay people inspired by St. Dominic. She served the urban poor, attended the dying in hospitals, visited and ministered to people on death row in prison, and nursed many friends through the plague. Her holiness began to attract followers, and she had a devoted circle of friends who sought her spiritual guidance. They called her "Mamma." This group grew to include her confessor and friend, Blessed Raymond Capua, who wrote her first biography after Catherine's death and then went on to lead the Dominican Order. She was known in Sienna as "*La Beata Popolana*," the blessed daughter of the people.

During Catherine's lifetime Italy was not yet a united country, but rather a group of city-states often in conflict with each other. The conflict between Florence and Rome was especially acute. The pope moved himself and his curia away from the chaos of Italy to southern France, and lived in the French city of Avignon. , Catherine was sent by the Republic of Florence as an ambassador to mediate this conflict with Rome. While not immediately successful in that endeavor, she did manage to convince Pope Gregory XI to return the papacy to Rome, a topic she had been writing to him about for some time. Her letters to the pope have been described as written in "an intolerably dictatorial tone, a little sweetened with expressions of her perfect Christian deference." After the papacy's return to Rome, and after Gregory's death, she did manage to broker a peace between Florence and Rome.

During a very short period of calm after Pope Gregory returned to Rome, Catherine wrote her great mystical treatise, Dialogue of Saint Catherine, sometimes called Dialogue of a Soul, where she detailed insights into the relationship between God and each person as had been revealed to her in her visions. She imagined God as the ocean, and each of us one of the fishes who swim in the ocean. She encouraged her friends to, "Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire."

But conflict soon broke out in the church, when after Pope Gregory's death, one pope was elected in Rome and a different pope elected in Avignon! This threw all of Europe into turmoil as each royal house and city state declared allegiance to one or the other pope. Catherine was called to Rome to support the cause of Pope Urban VI, and wrote hundreds of letters to European powers urging them to support Pope Urban. Her work as a diplomate for the Holy See was exhausting. Catherine suffered a series of strokes and died in Rome in 1380 at the age of 33.

She is remembered today as the spiritual mother of the Dominican order, bringing together a contemplative life with service to the most vulnerable, as well as for her writings, her diplomatic efforts, her commitment to the church and to the poor and suffering. Her words from the fourteenth century ring as true now as they were then when she

encouraged her friends to “Proclaim the truth and do not be silent through fear. The world is lost through silence.”

Catherine of Sienna died in 1380, was canonized in 1461, and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970. Her feast day is celebrated on April 29th.

Thank you for listening.

March 29/30, the Fourth Sunday of Lent

Good evening/morning. I am [name] and I serve as a [Lector/on the Liturgy Committee]. Today is our fourth Liturgical Moment and we will turn our attention to St. Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th century German Benedictine nun and a genius.

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098 to a minor noble family in Germany. The tenth child in her family, she was sent at age 8 to live with a holy woman, Jutta, who eventually became Abbess of a Benedictine convent. When Jutta died, Hildegard was elected Abbess of the convent, where she served for 40 years.

Since childhood, Hildegard experienced visions, which she understood to be seeing things by the "light of God," or the "living Light." But it was not until she was in her early 40's that she had a vision that directed her to write down what she saw, and that is when her writing career began. Her first book, Scivias, explained over twenty-five different visions she had experienced. Her early writings were approved both by her bishop and by the Pope, so her fame grew and her writings multiplied. She completed two additional volumes of visionary theology in her lifetime, explaining all of salvation history through allegorical visions, offering commentary on the scriptures and moral advice for the nuns in her care.

Hildegard had moved her community of nuns to a rural location away from, and over the initial objection, of the Abbot. In her role of Abbess to her Benedictine community she exercised great care for the spiritual welfare of her sisters. For their edification, she composed many musical works for use in liturgy and in their daily religious life. Hildegard was one of the first composers to both write the music and the text of her compositions. She wrote what is considered to be perhaps the first morality play, the *Ordo Virtutum* (The Play of the Virtues) which was comprised of 82 different songs and is the earliest known musical drama not part of a liturgy – some might call it the first opera! An additional 69 musical compositions of hers survive with both Hildegard's text and musical notation. She

felt that music was able to give us a glimpse of the state of perfect happiness that existed in the Garden of Eden before the Fall.

In addition to her theology and music, Hildegard wrote important early works in the sciences and medicine, based on her careful observations of the natural world and her experiences while running the Infirmary in her convent. Her volume on natural science, called *Physica*, contains nine books that explain the properties of various herbs, plants, minerals, and foods and extols the natural balance of the created world. Her book *Causae et Curae* explains the workings of the human body and offers practical advice for healing cuts, burns, and setting broken bones. She wrote of the power of *Viriditas*, or the greening power or balance in nature and in the human person in relation to the natural world. She is seen by many as an early ecologist; her respect for nature can be seen as a precursor to Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Sí*.

Somehow while accomplishing all this, she also kept up correspondence with popes, priests, princes and many other abbesses, offering advice and sharply criticizing corruption among the clergy. Over 400 of her letters survive. She also traveled through Germany, visiting other Abbeys and preaching – often to crowds of women and men, religious and lay – a truly remarkable accomplishment for a woman of the 12th century. And if that wasn't enough, she also made up her own language, with her own alphabet and also left us a cookie recipe.

St. Hildegard of Bingen died at age 81 in 1179. Pope Benedict XVI canonized her in 2012 and named her the 4th female Doctor of the Church on October 7, 2012. Her feast day is September 17.

Her advice from the twelfth century rings still true today:

> *"Glance at the sun.*
> *See the moon and the stars.*
> *Gaze at the beauty of earth's greenings.*

Now, think.
What delight God gives to humankind
with all these things. . . .
All nature is at the disposal of humankind.
We are to work with it.
For without it we cannot survive."

— Hildegard of Bingen

Thank you for your attention.

April 5/6, the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Good evening/morning, my name is [name] and I serve on the [Liturgy or Vision] Committee. Today as we celebrate the fifth Sunday of Lent we have come to our final Liturgical Moment of the season.

The past four weeks we have explored the lives and writings of the four female saints who have been declared Doctors of the Church: Thérèse the Little Flower, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Sienna, and Hildegard of Bingen, as we moved backwards through time from the 19th century to the twelfth. Today, our final week, we will jump back much further in time, to the women who accompanied Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem, through his crucifixion, death and resurrection.

We have four different gospel accounts of the last few days of Jesus' earthly ministry, and each gospel writer, presents a slightly different account of the dramatic events that transpired. It is not surprising that the gospels, which were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, after decades of oral transmission but from the pens of regular human writers, will of course vary on certain details – but when there is a common story in each of the gospels, that tells us that the story is important – so important that every early Christian community remembered this specific detail. So let's look at the role of the women around Jesus, focusing on what all four gospels tell us.

First, the story of the Passion starts with the woman who anoints Jesus. She is described as "a woman of the city" in Mark and Matthew, "a great sinner" in the gospel of Luke, and Mary the sister of Lazarus in the Gospel of John. The differences don't matter for our purposes – what the stories have in common matters. A woman anoints Jesus, on the head in several accounts, meaning for burial, and the disciples criticize the action, but Jesus rebukes their criticism. This woman recognizes what the male disciples are still in denial about - that Jesus is going to Jerusalem to be put to death.

When Jesus is dying on the cross, all four gospels tell us of the women who stayed with Jesus to witness his suffering. In the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we read that the women who traveled with Jesus from Galilee, "watched from a distance" as Jesus was dying on the cross. In Matthew's gospel the women are identified as those who "ministered to Jesus." The gospel of John moves these women to the foot of the cross, as depicted in our great Crucifix. But our crucifix takes some artistic license with the account, because while it shows only the mother of Jesus at the foot of the cross, the gospel account also includes Mary's sister and, Mary of Magdala. Homilists often focus on the profound abandonment of Jesus when his friends deny him and scatter in fear. We all tend to overlook the women who did not leave, although they are clearly named in each gospel.

The day after the Sabbath, it is the women who make a pilgrimage of hope to the tomb. They know that they saw Jesus die, but they also know that they are not finished with him, nor is he finished with them. They were the first, true pilgrims of hope. While the accounts differ in detail, in each gospel the first witness to the resurrection is Mary of Magdala. In each gospel, Mary tells the male disciples that Jesus is risen. In all of the gospels except in Matthew's, she is not believed. In the gospel of Mark, we read that Jesus actually rebukes the disciples for their "lack of faith and stubbornness" because they did not believe Mary of Magdala when she told them Jesus had risen.

This rebuke brings us full circle to the beginning of the passion account, the woman who anointed Jesus for burial as he made his way to Jerusalem and death. In perhaps the most ironic line in all of scripture, when the unnamed woman is criticized by the disciples for this anointing, Jesus tells the disciples:

> "She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." Mk 14:8-9

But we have not done that. None of the gospel writers even bothered to include her name. We, the Church, have forgotten much of the history of women saints, scholars, musicians, reformers, mystics. We don't even know her name.

But we can change that. We can remember our common foremothers in faith. We can remember the woman who never abandoned Jesus through his suffering. We can remember the women who were the first witnesses to the resurrection. We can become pilgrims of hope working toward building a church that remembers and celebrates the women of faith who have gone before us.

Thank you again for your kind attention. It's very helpful if you fill out one of the feedback forms in the back.