

A sister's act brings a medieval saint to life again

Jeannette Cooperman | Mar. 31, 2009



Dominican Sr. Nancy Murray portrays St. Catherine of Siena.

One of 24 children in a lively Italian family, Caterina Benincasa tangled with a feisty mother to become a lay Dominican and work with the poor in Siena, Italy. She comforted people dying of the plague, visited prisoners, traveled at the pope's behest and became famous for the letters she wrote to men and women of all walks of life.

One of nine children in a lively Irish family, Nancy Murray tangled with a feisty mother to become a Dominican sister and teach and work with the poor in Chicago. She attended people dying of cancer and AIDS, visited prisoners, traveled the world and then became famous for her one-woman performance as St. Catherine of Siena.

More than six centuries stretch between the two women's lives.

Murray, who's the sister of comedian Bill Murray and every bit as sharp-witted, isn't about to claim sainthood. But when she puts on the rough, heavy habit of a medieval Dominican nun and begins speaking in a rolling Italian accent, her words tumbling over each other, staccato and full of fire, then gentle and tender ? the distance closes.

Whenever Murray prepares to perform at a church or school, she reads back copies of the bulletin and finds out what people are doing that's similar to something St. Catherine did. Soup kitchen? Sheltering the homeless? A long-sleeve-shirt project to protect migrant workers from pesticides?

"I incorporate their stories so they recognize themselves," she said. She makes bridges in her performance between the medieval woman and the present day. She calls her show "Catherine of Siena: A Woman for Our Times."

At the start she asks her audience, in St. Catherine's thick Italian accent, "if they have brought along their

imaginations, because we are all about to go on a journey." Then with simple props -- a table, chair, candle, crucifix and small bouquet of flowers -- Sr. Nancy brings the 14th-century Dominican to audiences of all ages, sharing the vision and wis-dom of a determined woman whom she believes continues to be an inspiration.

"Our Catholic church, for example, has not had a stellar record," Murray said dryly. "So when you look at somebody from the 14th century confronting it -- a woman, who was 27 at the time -- you can imagine how countercultural she was."

When the pope sent Catherine as his emissary to Florence, townspeople set fire to the house where they thought she was sleeping. Afraid of endangering her companions, she wrote the pope a strong letter: "When are you going to get back here? We need you to come back to Rome and be a voice for unity. The church is like a flock that is being torn apart by wild wolves."

Later, she arrived in corrupt Avignon and announced, "It stinketh!"-- then spoke of "weeds planted in the garden of the church," a reference to bishops whom Pope Gregory XI had appointed.

People always think Catherine was a nun, Murray said, because she wore the habit and founded two convents, but "if she had been a nun, we never would have heard about her, because she never would have gotten out of the cloister." Quite the contrary, Catherine's entire life was an encouragement to speak out, Murray said.

Sliding into her Italian accent, she quoted Catherine: "I see the world going to ruin because people choose to remain silent. Speak out as if you had ten thousand tongues."

The Dominican motto is a single word, Veritas, and it announces a moral obligation to speak the truth. St. Catherine developed the political savvy to discern that truth long before she joined the order.



And so did Nancy Murray.

"Catherine's father was a cloth dyer, and his customers were wealthy people," she explained. "They would talk with him about the church and politics and government, and he would bring these ideas to the dining table as education for his family."

Of her own large family, she said: "Families form you -- and the dinner table was our first stage. Not only did the kids try to make their dad laugh, but everyone lingered and talked, because the first one up would have to do all those dishes.

"My father's and grandfather's humor was not telling jokes; it was situation comedy, all improv," she added. "Even my father's style of discipline -- if we whined, instead of yelling at us, he'd imitate our whining and make us feel like nerds."

Family friction intensified with Murray's decision to join the Dominican Sisters of Adrian, Mich. Her mother

once attended a profession of final vows in another order, and all she remembered was the drama of the young woman, clad in wedding dress and veil, throwing her crown of flowers to her parents and saying, "I renounce the world and all its treasures."

"Too much," laughed Murray. "It left a terrible impression on her. She had no sense of any great spiritual adventure."

It was Murray's father who signed the papers for her to enter, placating her mother by saying, "They have rules of silence; she won't last long." He'd been in seminary himself, for a time. Then he failed Greek and met her mother.

Nancy Murray did last, though, surviving even the dread silence.

The second oldest and first girl in a boisterous, wisecracking family, Murray had grown up an extrovert and an instinctive caretaker. Her biggest fear when she entered the Dominicans was that she'd be too lonesome for her little brothers and sisters, but she wound up teaching children the exact age of her youngest siblings. So from the start, she equated her students with family.

She loved her new convent life, but a year after she entered, her dad died suddenly. She was bracing herself to leave, sure that her mother would insist that she come home and help. Nancy figured she could get her old job back -- file clerk at Rotary International -- and she was glumly preparing to pack. But her novice director, who'd had a few memorable exchanges with her mother, gave Murray a quiet word of advice: "Ask your brothers and sisters." And when she did, they said, in one voice, "You stay where you are, and pray for us."

Her siblings have always kept her grounded -- and humble.

"After I entered the order, I gained like 40 pounds from all the bread and potatoes," she said, "and Billy came up and said, 'Nancy, if you think you can gain weight just because you entered and be a fat nun, we won't let you. Your students have got to look at you.'"

He called her "my sister the Sister, Nancy the nun."

After he made the film "The Razor's Edge," based on W. Somerset Maugham's novel about a man on a spiritual quest, her brother Bill started reading more about philosophy and spirituality, and their conversations changed, according to Murray. Once he'd called her when he needed the words to the hymn "Panis Angelicus" for a "Saturday Night Live" skit; later he wanted to know, in earnest, about Dominican spirituality. She told him about praying with open arms; about the prostration, still used in final vows; about Catherine, who was very much on her mind as she scrounged furniture for families just coming out of homeless shelters and sweet-talked Chicago businessmen into a free repair or a van for St. Sylvester's.

Now Sr. Murray flies all over the world, bringing a medieval saint alive for teenage refugees from Darfur or Catholics in Scotland or a youth group in Florida. A friend, Sr. Kathleen Harkins, was first to write a one-woman play about St. Catherine, but she kept telling Murray, "You should be doing this, because I never worked with poor people."

Some years after her friend's death, Murray finally agreed, rewriting the play to simplify it so she wouldn't need to cart around audio-visual equipment. She's been a blazing success.

She makes a deliberate effort, though, to stay in touch with the kind of people she learned so much from, back in Chicago. "I know that if I don't choose to be with poor people, I lose my own authenticity," she said. "They challenge you to live a more Christian life -- I think Jesus knew that. What am I accumulating? Get rid of it."

Give it up. Reading scripture and then having people continue to reinterpret it for me in flesh and blood -- that's what keeps me motivated."

I ask what she misses most in her vowed life. If not material possessions, what about sex? Or babies? "Oh, I would say those would rank right up there," she said dryly. "But I never would have anticipated how much I could have loved so many children. And adults, and teenagers, and elderly people. So I do believe I was blessed with a great gift of loving -- and a need to be loved, and to continue to find ways to do that."

Now used to Murray's quick shuttles back and forth across six centuries, I ask her how Catherine would react to today's economic tumult.

"I think she would say, 'OK, maybe this is a time for taking a look at some other values and treasures that people need to return to. Have we given so much power to the government, have we made gods of business, shopping and supermalls? Maybe we need to return some of that power to God, simplifying our needs and focusing on relationships and letting God be God in our lives."

And what might Catherine say about Murray's performances?

"Well, I hope she wouldn't take a right-handed slap-slap-slap and say, 'What do you do to me?' " Murray said, voice rising into a full Italian temper. "I'm hoping it wouldn't be like Sarah Palin meeting Tina Fey."

Then she turned serious. "I'm hoping she would be proud that she'd inspired us."

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St. Catherine of Siena

Catherine was born in 1347 in the Republic of Siena in Tuscany. She was both a mystic and a political activist.

At the age of 8, she began to experience visions. At 16 she took the habit of the Third Order lay Dominicans, living for three years as an anchorite in a room in her parents' house. When a vision commanded her to enter public life, Catherine began to tend the sick and dying and to visit condemned prisoners. She took an interest in the religion and politics of her day and developed a following.

It was chiefly her letters, advice and persistence that finally convinced Pope Gregory XI to leave Avignon, France, where the papal court had been since 1309, and return to Rome in 1376 to reform the clergy and administration of the Papal States. Catherine traveled to many cities in a day when travel for women was difficult, working for peace in Italy and in the church. She wrote hundreds of letters to important and ordinary people alike. She also wrote a book called *The Dialogue*, a conversation between God and the human soul.

She helped bring about peace between the Holy See and Florence, which had revolted against papal authority.

She died at age 33 in 1380. She was canonized by Pope Pius II in 1461. In 1970, she was named a doctor of the church. Her feast day is April 30. She is the patron saint of Italy.

-- Rich Heffern

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