

Places in Rome

The Pantheon and Santa Maria «sopra Minerva»

On entering the Piazza della Rotonda, the Pantheon looms unexpectedly before one's eyes, looking as though its gray stone bulk has emerged unscathed from the depths of time. It is possibly the best preserved of all the buildings of ancient Rome, and its gigantic dome is an unequalled triumph of architecture.

The most impressive part of all is to cross the portico of ancient pillars, pass through the open bronze doors and enter the interior of the temple. There an unsuspected marvel is to be seen: the light that flows from the circular opening in the ceiling, slips round the curved walls and fills the whole space with serene golden luminosity, majestic and restful.

The Pantheon, as its name suggests, was the temple that the Romans dedicated to all their gods. The building we have today was built in the reign of the Emperor Hadrian, between 118 and 128 AD. Centuries later, when the Roman Empire had been almost completely evangelized, the Emperor Phocas gave it to the Church, and in the year 609 Pope Boniface IV transformed it into the church of Sancta Maria ad Martyres. From that time on the church was also a great reliquary, because the Pope wished it to be the final resting-place of the mortal remains of thousands of Christians, many of them

martyrs, which had been buried until then in the Catacombs.

At that late stage, almost at the dawn of the Middle Ages, the dedication of the former Pantheon to the Christian martyrs showed how deeply indebted the Church felt to those who had borne witness to Christ to the extreme of giving their lives for their faith. Children like Tarcisius, virgins like Agnes and Cecilia, mothers like Perpetua, old men like Polycarp, had proved, amidst their weakness, to be stronger than all the Roman legions. They had triumphed, like their





Master, in the madness of the Cross, and so merited to be hymned and venerated down the centuries.

In the history of the Church, there are very many Saints who spent at least part of their lives in Rome and showed outstanding devotion to the martyrs. One of these is St Catherine of Siena, who lived in Rome at the end of her life, from November 28, 1378 to April 29, 1380, and loved to go and pray before the shrines commemorating the Apostles and the first Christians who had given their lives for the Faith.

St Catherine went to Rome at the request of Pope Urban VI, who needed her prayers and advice to resolve the crisis of the Western Schism. St Catherine lived in a house very near the Pantheon, together with more than twenty "Caterinati", as her disciples were known, who had followed her from Siena.

St Josemaría, founder of Opus Dei, was another saint with deep devotion for the martyrs who, throughout the world, have been the seeds from which new Christians have grown in the Church. This is evidenced by his words in a homily given in 1972: "**I venerate with all my strength the Rome of Peter and Paul, bathed in the blood of martyrs, the center from which so many have set out to propagate throughout the world the saving word of Christ.**"¹

Santa María Sopra Minerva

Behind the Pantheon, and very close to the street where St Catherine lived, is the church of Santa María Sopra Minerva, where St Catherine's mortal remains rest, in a sarcophagus under the main altar. This church is the only Gothic church in Rome, and it holds a large number of works by notable artists, but ever since the

¹ St Josemaría Escrivá, "Loyalty to the Church" (11), *In Love with the Church*, Scepter, 1989.

end of the fourteenth century, it has been visited above all by faithful who wish to appeal to the intercession of St Catherine of Siena.

In Rome, Catherine devoted herself fully to the service of the Church and the Pope. At the invitation of Urban VI, she spoke at a consistory of Cardinals, urging them to trust in the Lord and stay firm in defense of the truth. She wrote to the kings of the different countries in Europe to persuade them to recognize the one true Vicar of Christ. She also wrote persuasive, fiery letters to several leading figures of Christendom, appealing to them to come to Rome per fare muro, to create a bulwark around the Pope. And she pacified the inhabitants of Rome when riots broke out in the city because of the intrigues of schismatics.

Above all, St Catherine committed herself to prayer. In a letter written a few months before her death, when she was already seriously sick, she described her day. "At around nine o'clock, when I come out from Mass, you will see a dead woman walk along the way to St Peter's, and go in there once more to work [i.e. to pray] in the nave of the holy church. There I stay until it is nearly time for Vespers. I would wish to remain there day and night, until I see this people submit and render obedience to their Father, the Pope."²

St Catherine made her own the sufferings of the Church in those difficult times. In Rome, God accepted the offering of her life for the Church, which the Saint had made repeatedly. And so, exhausted by the suffering that oppressed her heart because of the schism that rent the Mystical Body of Christ, and additionally afflicted by serious sickness, she surrendered her soul to God surrounded by her disciples, whom she did not cease to admonish to live in fraternal charity, urging them to be ready to give their lives too for the Church.

2. St Catherine of Siena, *Letter 373*.



St Josemaría had great devotion to St Catherine of Siena ever since he was young. For instance, in her honor he gave the name *catalinas*, "*catherines*", to the notebooks in which he wrote personal notes about matters of his soul.

Years later, when the Church was going through difficulties, St Josemaría again had recourse to St Catherine, since she had been a passionate defender of the truth in somewhat similar circumstances. He wrote, "**I've stoked up the devotion, which in me**

3. Letter to Florencio Sanchez Bella, quoted in A. Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei, Volume III: The Divine Ways on Earth*, p. 372.





goes back a long time, to Saint Catherine of Siena - because she knew how to love the Pope with filial love, because she know how to serve God's holy Church sacrificially, and because she knew how to speak out heroically."³

All Christians need to be able to speak out, to explain the marvels of God in lively and convincing ways - the reality of the Church, the incomparable beauty of Christian life, which provides the answers to the deepest aspirations of the human heart. And so, like the Christian faithful of the early centuries, we will transform this world of ours. We will make it possible for more and more people to embrace the truth and proclaim it in their turn, to bring others to share in the freedom of the children of God, which leads to the good of human society and international relations. "Ignorance," the founder of Opus Dei often said, "is the greatest enemy of our faith, and at the same time the greatest obstacle to carrying out the redemption of souls."⁴

He also said, "We must spread the truth, because *veritas liberabit vos* (Jn 8:32), the truth makes us free, while ignorance enslaves. We have to uphold the right of all men to live, to own what is necessary to lead a dignified existence, to work and to rest, to choose a particular state in life, to form a home, to bring children into the world within marriage and to be allowed to educate them, to pass peacefully through times of sickness and old age, to have access to culture, to join with other citizens to achieve legitimate ends, and, above all, the right to know and love God in perfect liberty, for conscience, true conscience, will discover the imprint of the Creator in all things."⁵

4. St Josemaría, *Letter dated January 9, 1951*, n. 8, quoted in Vazquez de Prada, vol. III, p. 202.

5. St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, n. 171.



The mortal remains of St Catherine of Siena rest beneath the main altar.

