

Justice Anne Burke's Acceptance of the inaugural Voice of the Faithful Catherine of Siena Distinguished Lay Person Award on July 10, 2005, Indianapolis, Indiana

Good morning, dear friends. Please know how humbled I am by the courtesy of your recognition and the extraordinary honor you show to me in bestowing this first VOTF award named for that irascible Tuscan, Catherine of Siena. What a remarkable ideal she offers to each of us, even today. Her frank, unvarnished commitment to the truth was always an expression of a mystical faith and a savvy medieval sense of pragmatism. She is a powerful model for mature Christian living, one that any Appellate Court Jurist would do well to emulate. I am touched, sincerely, by your generosity and fortitude in bestowing this award. And I accept it warmly on behalf of myself and all of my colleagues on the National Review Board.

I must admit I take a certain personal delight in the character and holiness of Catherine. Her influence has been profoundly emotional for me.

In December of 2003 and January of 2004, I traveled to Rome with Bill Burleigh and Bob Bennett to meet with Curial Cardinals for NRB investigation,. None of us knew what to expect in those visits, as we had secured our invitations to the Holy See simply by faxing the Cardinal Prefects cold, because of the refusal of the Papal Nuncio in Washington to meet with us.

We had booked ourselves into one of Rome's great hotels, the Grand Palazzo Minerva, just yards from the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva. As you may know, this is one of the few Gothic-designed Churches in Rome, and the final resting place of the great Catherine of Siena, herself. Before making our way to the curial offices of the Cardinals, we galvanized ourselves with early Mass there, and a curious visit to the grave of Catherine beneath the main altar. Her tomb was energy-filled for us. As we knelt in prayer beneath the frescoes by Filippino Lippi and Perugino her spirit did stir in us. I believed we were emboldened for our trek up to the Vatican Hill.

I think what became so clarified for us during that visit to the Holy See, surrounded as we were by the antiquities of faith, was the glorious physicality of our faith. It was there, all around us, thanks to the bright minds of Renaissance artists. They provided so many images and expressions of our Savior. They grafted so many detailed glimpses into the great mystical moments of salvation. They fashioned so many images of the historical roots of our common faith. I am not sure if those Cardinals who glimpse these images on a regular basis become immune to the mystical power of these images, but I know that the three of us were deeply touched by both Catherine's nearness and the many hands that portrayed the legacy of Christian tradition, We went on our way ready for what ever was to come.

We met three Cardinals on our first visit—two courteous and welcoming, willing to dialogue with us; and one prickly, antagonized South American annoyed at the very presumption of our visit. He had little to say and appeared uninterested in the issue that

brought us to Rome. Needless to say, I wasn't rooting for him during the past papal election. He was really rough; and in my own exasperation, I thought of Catherine and the reception she must have received at the Papal Court in Avignon.

I thought of Catherine again on the second Roman visit in January. We returned because the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had not been present in Rome during our first visit. We realized, as soon as we came home, how important it was for us to speak with him. So we quickly faxed him and asked for a meeting. He responded by return fax. Within days we were heading back to Rome. We were to see him on a Saturday and he had decided that he would invite others in his Congregation to attend.

The morning of our meeting, we rose early and crossed the Piazza to Santa Maria and the spirit of Catherine of Siena. Her presence was there – powerful, resourceful and inspiring. After our last experience, I was certain we were on the same wave length. The soft light of a winter Roman morning added to the experience. She helped us get our Irish up, so I knew she was in our corner

At the Curia, we were led into a great Renaissance room; there was no mistaking where we were. This was the “West Wing”; it even smelled like it. Curialists with purple and red piping on their cassocks were pleasant as we waited for the Prefect. I had been forewarned by a friend, that His Eminence would arrive looking like a curate, with no external signs of his high office. A simple black cassock was all the authority he needed. And when he arrived, I understood why. His presence and posture, not to mention his electric blue eyes, drew everyone in the room together. He was engaging and direct; expressive and in a deeply listening posture. It was his meeting and he came with both ears open. He engaged us in assertive dialogue and had lots of questions of his own. It was not hard to figure out that in speaking to him, we were speaking into the ear of John Paul II. They had no secrets. He was frank, clear speaking and transmitted an honest sense of the seriousness of the issue before us. We broadened his perspective and he reinforced ours. Not a bad day's accomplishment. And of course, now that the Prefect sits on the chair of Peter himself, as Benedict XVI, our visit now has an added patina of mystical presence to it. I think Catherine was working overtime with us shaping the perspective of Cardinal Ratzinger in regard to the issue of clerical sexual abuse. I do not know a lot about what goes on inside the Vatican, but I know this much – Benedict XVI listened to our words and did not turn away from what we said.

So you can see why Catherine has such an appeal for me. She and I have worked together. And, as usual, there was a woman setting a Pope, or at least a Pope to be, straight. Now if we could only stretch that to a few more issues. But, as Catherine knew, it's one step at a time.

Catherine's patronage extends far. As you may know, she is the patron for many things — Siena, sexual temptation, bodily ills, the Diocese of Allentown, fire prevention, firefighters, illness, Italy, nurses, Europe, and people who are made fun of because they are pious. To that I am adding women justices of the Appellate Court.

Thank you again for this great honor. Thank you for all you do to shape the Church in our nation and to deepen the margins of accountability between those in authority and those who pay the bills.

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