

## Women of Faith



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*For whoever would draw near  
to God must believe that he  
exists and that he rewards those  
who seek him.*

–Hebrews 11:6

By faith, we believe in God and  
believe all that he has revealed  
to us and that Holy Church  
proposes for our belief.

–CCC, 1842

**BLESSED ANGELA OF FOLIGNO (1248–1309)**

*Wife; Mother; Widow; Franciscan Tertiary*

FEAST DAY: *January 4*

PATRONAGE: *the death of children; people ridiculed for their  
piety; sexual temptation; temptations; widows*

Nothing bolsters our faith like a good old-fashioned conversion story. These tales of transformation remind us of our own conversion or inspire us to seek a deeper conversion, which can mark the beginning of sanctity.

For Angela of Foligno, the longing to know Christ didn't come until late in life. Yet she ended up embracing the Catholic faith with such fervor that she became a mystic, united to Christ in a special way through the intimacy of prayer.

Angela was born into a wealthy Italian family. Her non-Christian upbringing was a worldly one, and so she grew into a superficial woman. She married a rich man at a young age, but she was more devoted to the pleasures of the world than to her vocation as a wife and mother. Biographers speculate about the details of this period of her life, but Angela only reveals that she was in a constant state of mortal sin.

“No one can be excused for not having and finding divine grace,” she would later write. “The most bountiful God distributes his grace abundantly to all, that is, to all who wish and seek it.”<sup>1</sup>

Angela's life was a testimony to this. She began opening herself to divine grace after having a vision of Saint Francis in 1285. Following this experience, she joined the Third Order of Saint Francis. But it was not until her husband died five years later that she entrusted her life entirely to the hands of God.

Giving up her wealth and possessions, Angela depended completely on providence. She began a community of Franciscan tertiaries devoted to caring for the needy. Under the direction of a holy priest, she grew in her mystical union with God. She recorded her conversion and experiences in her *Book of Visions and Instructions*, a lasting testament to her profound faith in Christ.

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**SAINT CATHERINE DE' RICCI (1522-1590)**

*Religious; Incorruptible*

FEAST DAY: *February 13*

PATRONAGE: *bodily ills; sick people*

We have no empirical evidence to prove that purgatory exists. Like heaven and hell, purgatory is beyond the bounds of our physical universe and, so too, beyond the sciences dealing with the universe. But our faith, along with the testimony of certain saints, declares that purgatory is real and that the holy souls there benefit from our prayers and penances on their behalf.

Saint Catherine de' Ricci believed in purgatory. Her faith in this Church teaching was so firm, in fact, that she chose to offer up twelve years of excruciating pains on behalf of the holy souls.

Alexandrina de' Ricci was only thirteen years old when she joined the Third Order of Saint Dominic. Later her wealthy father begrudgingly allowed her to enter the Dominican community at Prat in Tuscany, where she eventually became the perpetual prioress. The convent was the perfect home for this young woman, who was prayerfully devoted to meditating on the passion of Christ.

Eight years after joining religious life and taking her new name, Catherine had her first spiritual ecstasy of the Passion. Along with receiving the stigmata, for the next twelve years Catherine regularly experienced all the stages of Christ's suffering, revealing in her face his agonies and pains. This happened every Thursday at noon and lasted until Friday at 4:00 PM. Catherine offered these sufferings for the release of those in purgatory. She earnestly desired to help these souls be united to their Savior. Through various revelations she

sometimes learned when a particular soul had entered purgatory and when that soul went on to heaven. As her reputation spread, people flocked to the convent to request her prayers for their deceased loved ones. Catherine's confident faith in the power of prayer and penance brought great consolation to many struggling with grief.

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**Saint Catherine of Genoa** (1447-1510)

*Wife; Incorruptible*

FEAST DAY: *September 15*

PATRONAGE: *brides; childless people; difficult marriages; people ridiculed for their piety; temptations; victims of adultery; victims of unfaithfulness; widows*

In an attempt to escape life's sorrows, we sometimes seek distractions that offer little in the way of lasting peace. Drugs, alcohol and sexual addictions are certainly in this category, but shopping, eating, socializing, watching television and movies and surfing the Internet can be forms of escape too. These "quick fixes" never solve our underlying problems but perhaps cover our pain for a time.

Catherine of Genoa initially gave in to this escapist mentality. Born of the noble Fieschi family in Italy, her parents forced her to marry Giuliano Adorno at age sixteen for the sake of political alliances. Catherine had wanted to follow her sister into religious life, but instead the sensitive and intelligent girl found herself the wife of a reckless, extravagant, fierce and openly unfaithful man. (After Giuliano's death, Catherine would prove herself a generous widow in taking on the care of his illegitimate daughter.)

As if the clash of their temperaments weren't enough, Catherine had to deal with isolation at home for long periods while her husband was doing who knows what, who knows where. She suffered this painful situation for five years before seeking comfort in the frivolity of parties and amusements. She indulged in fashionable cultural trends for another five years. Then she had a change of heart.

While Catherine had always been a practicing Catholic, at the age of twenty-six she came to truly know and understand God's loving presence and the power of his grace. This knowledge came upon her in a miraculous moment when she was praying in a church. Suddenly she felt the truth in her heart. Her life would never be the same.

Now a woman of faith, Catherine no longer needed worldly distractions to bring her peace. She began spending more time at Mass than at parties. Soon her influence affected her wayward husband. He joined the Franciscan Third Order, and the couple relocated to a poor section of Genoa. Eventually they moved into the Hospital of Pammatone, where they spent the remainder of their lives serving the poor and the sick.

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**SAINT CATHERINE LABOURÉ (1806–1876)**

*Religious; Incorruptible*

FEAST DAY: *November 28*

Some “visionaries” make a career out of proclaiming their alleged mystical experiences. But not Saint Catherine Labouré. This humble French nun kept quiet for forty-six years, speaking only to her confessor about her visions and messages from the

Blessed Mother. Just a few months before her death, Catherine finally told her mother superior that she was in fact “the sister of the apparitions.”<sup>2</sup> Through all those years Catherine’s simple faith and life of prayer, rather than any glory from her supernatural encounters, sustained her vocation as a Sister of Charity.

During her novitiate year of 1830, Catherine had several heavenly visions. She saw Jesus’ face in the Blessed Sacrament, the heart of Saint Vincent de Paul, who founded her order, and finally the Blessed Virgin.

Mary appeared to Catherine twice. The second time, she gave Catherine instructions to have a medal cast, bearing an image of Our Lady and the words, “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.” Thus was born the popular devotion to the “Miraculous Medal.”

The experience was very real. Catherine once scolded a skeptical sister for suggesting that the then anonymous visionary had only seen a picture of Mary. “Sister,” Catherine responded gravely, “the sister who saw the Blessed Virgin saw her in flesh and bone, even as you and I see each other now.”<sup>3</sup>

Although Catherine was able to hear Mary during prayer for the rest of her life, the visions came to an end. Catherine devoted herself to prayer and her routine duties. When someone asked if she found her life to be dull, she replied, “One is never bored with doing the Will of God.”<sup>4</sup>

God’s will for Catherine was that she work diligently at a hospice for old men for the rest of her days, always attending to the spiritual health of those in her care. All the men under her watch died with the grace of the sacraments.

When Catherine wasn’t taking care of elderly men, working in the kitchen or cleaning the chicken yard, she prayed. Before

the tabernacle her faith grew daily, as she told the Lord, “Here I am, give me what You wish.”<sup>5</sup>

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**SAINT EDITH STEIN (TERESA BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS)**

(1891–1942)

*Religious; Martyr*

FEAST DAY: *August 9*

PATRONAGE: *Europe; loss of parents; martyrs;*

*World Youth Day*

If one saint could come down from heaven for a day and speak to a modern audience, God would be wise to send Saint Edith Stein. Her personality, life and thought have captivated many a modern soul already.

Edith was a vibrant, beautiful and talented German woman. She relished spending time with her family and engaging in intellectual debates with her friends. She loved having picnics and going dancing. She was a brilliant student, earning her Ph.D. in philosophy by the time she was twenty-five. She was also a charitable soul who served as a Red Cross nurse during World War I.

But for all her gifts and her love of life, Edith went through a period of serious depression, even to the point of having suicidal thoughts. Questions about the meaning of life plagued her. Her lack of faith only intensified these struggles. Although she came from a devout Jewish family, Edith had stopped praying at age thirteen. She fervently sought the truth in her philosophical studies, but she did not find there the satisfaction for which her soul thirsted.

Upon the death of a colleague, Edith's life began to take a turn. She was amazed to find the man's widow at peace, thanks to her Christian faith and belief in heaven. This impressed Edith so much that she began to study Christianity. The quest Edith began as a teenager was finally culminating, not in some rational philosophical proof, but in the acceptance of the mystery of the cross.

Edith read (in one sitting) the autobiography of Saint Teresa of Avila. On finishing it she declared, "This is the truth!"<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter, Edith became Catholic, much to the chagrin of her faithful Jewish mother. Edith would have soon entered the Carmelite convent, following in the footsteps of Saint Teresa, but she waited in deference to her mother.

In the meantime Edith taught at a Dominican girls' school and gave public lectures, especially on the subject of women's nature and vocation in the light of faith. But as Nazi influence began to grow, her public influence began to shrink. With decreasing opportunities to serve in "the world" because of her Jewish heritage, she felt it was time to enter the convent.

At age forty-three the well-known author, speaker and philosopher entered the cloister in Cologne, Germany, as Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Her faith took her out of academic circles entirely and led her to a life of prayer and sacrifice in union with the suffering Christ.

After she relocated to a convent in Holland, the Gestapo arrested Edith along with other Catholics of Jewish descent in retaliation for a statement from the Dutch bishops. She was executed on August 9, 1942, in the gas chamber at Auschwitz.

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