

**THE SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA AWARD
PRESENTED BY VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL
SEPTEMBER 14, 2012**

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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My very dear friends,

I am deeply honored to be a recipient of the St. Catherine of Siena Award. I want to share it, however, with my sisters and brothers of Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport, many of whom are here this evening. The award is theirs as much as it is mine. Each one of them has unselfishly contributed his or her special gifts to the reform and renewal of the Church that we love.

It is fitting that this award should be named for St. Catherine of Siena, for she, like us, lived during an unsettled period in the life of the Church. For seventy years in the fourteenth century the popes abandoned the bishopric of Rome, their primary responsibility, and took up residence at Avignon in southern France. Recognizing how wrong that was, Catherine admonished Pope Gregory XI and eventually persuaded him to return to Rome.

Our Church today is buffeted by similar turbulence. The Church in which we grew up is collapsing. I believe that that is the work of the Holy Spirit who is deliberately pulling down the edifice built on clericalism and hierarchy, an edifice that Jesus would find incomprehensible.

Yet, amid the wreckage that now afflicts the institutional Church, Catholics everywhere, and most especially our brave and courageous nuns, continue to do the work of Jesus Christ, feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, the sick, and the elderly, and speaking out against war and militarism. The beauty of the Church, when viewed through the lens of the commitment of its followers to the transformation of our society, is still there for all to see.

We are in the early stages of a New Catholic Reformation, a time of unease and instability and confusion. Yet the seeds of reform are there, transforming the Church, restoring its pristine beauty, and giving it a new luster. That process of renewal will continue long after most of us have passed through the gates of Paradise to see God, no longer darkly, but face to face.

We cannot now conceive of the many aspects of that renewed and reformed Church, but let me suggest some possibilities.

The Church that we envision will, at last, reveal the full flowering of the spirit of Vatican II. Rather than a hierarchical Church dominated by celibate males, our Church will truly be manifest as the People of God.

Our Church will acknowledge, once and for all, that all of us, men and women, are equally disciples of Jesus and, by virtue of our baptism, have a full right to participate in every aspect of the life of the Church, administrative, economic, liturgical, theological, and pastoral.

Our Church, after so many centuries of denial, will acknowledge that women, the primary transmitters of the faith ever since Mary Magdalene first proclaimed the good news of the Resurrection, are made in the image and likeness of God and are truly called to serve God in every phase of ministry.

Our Church, casting aside centuries of homophobia, will warmly embrace our gay brothers and sisters, whose nature is the work of a good God who creates only good things.

Our Church will put an end to the two-class system embedded in canon law that reserves all decision-making power to a self-selected and self-perpetuating band of ordained men and denies to the non-ordained, both men and women, who constitute the vast body of the faithful, any meaningful role in the work of the Church.

Our Church will elect as our bishops and pastors, persons known to the community, who understand that their role is to be servants, not tyrants. Our bishops and pastors will live among us, not apart from us, conversing with us, listening to us, getting to know us, and sharing in our joys and sorrows. Like St. Peter, some will choose to marry, and others like St. Paul, will choose

not to. Our bishops will put aside all false pomp and circumstance, lavish costumes and pointy hats, better suited to the baroque era, rings encrusted with jewels, and shepherd's crooks made of gold and silver that no real shepherd could ever afford.

Our Church will seek to change current laws that reserve ownership of church property to the bishops alone. Rather, the ownership of churches and schools will be vested in the People of God who built them and sustain them financially. Our bishops, instead of regarding that property as their own to be disposed of as they will, will recognize that they have an unbreakable obligation to be accountable and transparent in their stewardship.

Our Church will not tolerate the terrible betrayal of our children by priests and bishops entrusted with their care. Our bishops, unlike those who, proclaiming themselves the authentic teachers of morality, nevertheless presided over and facilitated the worst moral crisis in the history of the Church, will no longer countenance and cover-up the sexual abuse of our children by priests and nuns. As we honor and remember the survivors, our Church will be resolved that this will not happen again.

Our Church, emulating the practice of the earliest times, when great religious questions were debated and voted upon in church councils rather than decided by fiat from Rome, will create elected representative councils and synods on every level. In them our Church will seek to determine the *sensus fidei* or sense of the faith shared by the entire People of God. In them all the faithful will have an effective voice concerning every issue affecting our spiritual lives.

Our Church, while united in faith, will recognize that unity does not require uniformity. Just as the Body of Christ is made up of many members with many different gifts, our Church will welcome diversity.

Our Church will understand the essential role of our theologians who probe the mysteries of our faith. Our Church will reject forever the totalitarian spirit that demands an unquestioning submission of mind and will. Our Church will no longer bully, threaten, silence, or wrongfully excommunicate our theologians, but will encourage their inquiries in the expectation that they will lead to a deeper understanding of our Christian faith.

Let me conclude with these words from a hymn known to all of us, a hymn that could be our anthem: “Let us build the City of God, May our tears be turned into dancing, For the Lord, our light and our love, has turned the night into day.” For many years now we have shed copious tears because of the malaise afflicting our Church. Yet we must use all our hearts, all our minds, and all our strength so that our Church may be sanctified and cleansed and shine forth once more “in splendor without spot or wrinkle” (Eph. 5:27), as a sign of truth, hope, trust, honesty, inclusivity, charity, and justice. As a people of hope, we know that the time will come, though we know not the day nor the hour, when the Lord will wipe away every tear and lift the darkness that envelops our Church and shine a new, bright light upon us.

Now, let’s build the City of God!