Each human is created in the image and likeness of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Church falls on troubled times in every age as man chooses to reshape God in the image of man.

“Following the martyrdom of St Stephen, the Church underwent a period of persecution” (Acts 8:1b…) at the hands of Saul. He had a faulty vision of the Church. He saw every Christian as a threat and persecuted them as defectors from the Jewish faith. “His vehement opposition to Christianity reveals how difficult it was for a Jew of his time to accept” Jesus as the promised Messiah (footnote to Acts 8:3).

Today we celebrate the Feast of Catherine of Sienna one of the great Doctors of the Church. The Church was deeply divided as flawed kings tried to make God into their own image. Philip, the King of France and his successors, pressured the popes to leave Rome and live under the political pressure of France’s Monarchy. “Respect for the papacy waned throughout the Church and reached a critical low point by the time Catherine entered the picture.”

Catherine, from a very young age, exhibited a great love for Jesus and pledged herself as a perpetual Virgin. She once said, “In your nature, Eternal God, I shall know my own.” Her trust and faith in Christ were unquestionable. Jesus, in turn, helped her to grow in spiritual wisdom well beyond the physical limitations of her limited education. She had learned to read with great difficulty and could not write until well into adulthood.

With infused knowledge through mystical encounters with Christ, it was as if Christ lived in her. In one mystical encounter, Jesus appeared to her “holding in his holy hands a human heart, bright red and shining”. He opened her side and put the heart within her saying: “Dearest daughter, as I took your heart away from you the other day, now, you see, I am giving you mine, so that you can go on living with it forever.” Catherine truly lived St. Paul’s words, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). iii

People from every walk of life asked Catherine for her spiritual guidance: nobles and politicians, artists and ordinary people, consecrated men and women and religious, including Pope Gregory XI who was living at Avignon in that period and whom she energetically and effectively urged to return to Rome.

In 1376, Catherine spent three months in Avignon pleading with the pope to return to the Holy city of Rome. The mystic surprised the Pope by telling him that she knew about the private vow Gregory had made before God to return the papal residence to Rome if elected pope. Catherine was disappointed to learn that Gregory soon buckled under the pressure of influential French cardinals. She sent him a letter fervently urging the pope to be faithful to his promise to God: “I beg of you, on behalf of Christ crucified, that you be not a timorous child but manly. Open your mouth and swallow down the bitter for the sweet.”iv

In the Acts of the Apostles, “there was great joy in that city” (Acts 8:8) due to the faithful witness of Phillip. Likewise, with the faithful Catherine. There was great joy in the city of Rome when Gregory XI returned the papacy to Rome in January 1376 and brought an end to a scandalous period in church history of the 7 decades of the Avignon Papacy.

The church often falls into troubled times, as man chooses to reshape God in the image of man. Our own age is not without fault for all too often we forget the wisdom of Genesis from the dawn of time. “When God created human beings, he made them in the likeness of God; he created them male and female. When they were created, he blessed them and named them humankind” (5:1-2).

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i catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/how-st-catherine-brought-the-pope-back-to-rome
ii Address Of Pope Paul VI During The Last General Meeting Of The Second Vatican Council, 7 December 1965
iii vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20101124
iv how-st-catherine-brought-the-pope-back-to-rome