Dear friends:

Picking up on the comments I made yesterday about saints, I decided to focus on a well known saint. Today we celebrate the Feast Day of St Catherine of Siena, one of only four women to be named as Doctors of the Church and the only laywoman. She was born in Siena on the feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 1347 the 23rd of 25 children, born as a twin whose sister died in infancy. Although she did not take vows as a nun, she was a consecrated virgin and belonged to the Dominican Tertiaries. These are lay men and women who make a commitment to live a Christian way of life and to “animate temporal things through the charism of St. Dominic.” You can learn more about this apostolate at https://laydominicans.org/about/meet-the-lay-dominicans/

Born just prior to the Great Plague sweeping Europe, she committed to caring for the sick and is a worthy patron for nurses and sick people. Known for her many visions and mystical ecstasies, Catherine also suffered periods of intense abandonment and desolation where she felt that God had turned away from her.

In her 20s, Catherine was called to a more public life and corresponded with many influential figures, including the pope, often calling them out on their failures to live lives worthy of their stature. She is credited with achieving peace between the Holy See and Florence, convincing the pope to return from his Avignon exile in 1376, and helping to heal the schism in the papacy whilst on her deathbed in 1380.

Her Dialogues are considered classics in Italian literature, and record her mystical visions, which she dictated while in a state of ecstasy. St. Catherine died in Rome on April 29, 1380, at the age of 33 and is a patron saint of both Italy and Europe. Here is a sample of her writing:

My Nature Is Fire

In your nature, eternal Godhead,
I shall come to know my nature.
And what is my nature, boundless love?
It is fire, because you are nothing but a fire of love.
And you have given humankind a share in this nature,
for by the fire of love you created us.
And so with all other people and every created thing;
you made them out of love.
O ungrateful people!
What nature has your God given you? His very own nature!
Are you not ashamed to cut yourself off from such a noble thing through the guilt of deadly sin?
O eternal Trinity, my sweet love!
You, light, give us light.
You, wisdom, give us wisdom.
You, supreme strength, strengthen us.
Today, eternal God, let our cloud be dissipated
so that we may perfectly know and follow your Truth in truth, with a free and simple heart.
God, come to our assistance!
Lord, make haste to help us!
Amen.

It is interesting that many very creative people do their best work when suffering. I remember David Haas telling us at a workshop that he wrote one of my favourites of his pieces while in the clutches of a severe depression. It also is a good song for these times and you can listen at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sgm9lkTNQmc While not downplaying the toll of depressive illness, he told us that it was tempting to pray for a regular depression if it would give birth to work like this. It is worth noting that several of the people who commented on this piece report that it helped lift them out of a bad patch....

This prayer for a time of depression comes from St Ignatius of Loyola:

O Christ Jesus,
when all is darkness and we feel our weakness and helplessness,
give us the sense of Your presence, Your love, and Your strength.
Help us to have perfect trust in Your protecting love and strengthening power,
so that nothing may frighten or worry us, for, living close to You, we shall see Your hand,
Your purpose, Your will through all things. Amen.  (note that green is the colour of hope)

Having come to know the genetic strength of depressive illness through my mother, my sibling and some of my children, I am grateful for short, focused prayers like this from saints I admire. The despair which depression can bring used to be seen as a sin or lack of faith; if you have heard that, you may appreciate this conversation with a priest and a physician who partnered to write a book on the subject.

Today, I leave you with this performance by students, parents and staff of an English school community:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doJ2Fd6jRpQ
May it bring some joy to this grey day!

Until tomorrow,

Gillian