

THREE SAINTS

Women Who Changed History



Genevieve of Paris
Catherine of Siena
Teresa of Avila

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Contents

Introduction / 9

I St. Genevieve of Paris, Fearless Leader / 13

Chapter 1: Genevieve's Promise / 15

Chapter 2: Attila's Threat / 24

Chapter 3: Genevieve's Triumph / 32

II St. Catherine of Siena, Diplomat / 43

Chapter 4: From Prayer Cell to Political Hell / 45

Chapter 5: A Confrontation with the Pope / 57

Chapter 6: Success in Florence, Failure in Rome / 68

III St. Teresa of Avila, Reformer / 87

Chapter 7: Tainted Blood / 89

Chapter 8: A Challenge to the Status Quo / 106

Chapter 9: A Bold Approach / 119

Chapter 10: An Unwelcome Summons / 128

Conclusion / 139

Notes / 143

Resource Guide / 153

Acknowledgments / 157

Introduction



Traditional accounts of the lives of women saints have given scant attention to their influence in public affairs. Because biographers have focused mainly on their personal holiness and miraculous powers, stories of their bold and daring actions have too often been neglected. One exception, of course, is Joan of Arc. Much scholarly and popular interest has concentrated on St. Joan because of her exceptional, highly visible military leadership. But biographers' attention to her exploits, and their slight of those of other saintly women, has left us with the impression that their accomplishments were insignificant in comparison.

Recently, however, I chanced to open a typical book about the lives of saints; the kind of book that is really a collection of idealizing sermons extolling their virtues. St. Genevieve of Paris (c. 422-512) caught my attention. The author noted Genevieve's efforts to save the Parisians from Attila the Hun, rescue the people from starvation by leading a caravan of boats through a barbarian blockade, and repeatedly persuade Frankish chieftains to release captives—all summarized in a few sentences. Such skimpy treatment left me wondering about the rest of the story. Descriptions of the complexity of each

situation, as well as Genevieve's grasp of political strategy and tactics, were missing.

Three women saints in particular have captured my attention and interest: Genevieve of Paris, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila. They were born in different countries of Western Europe and lived during widely dissimilar historical periods spanning the fifth to the sixteenth century. I did not expect to find these women engaged in courageous political action during times often considered less enlightened than our own. Each was involved in significant political actions that changed history, and their efforts to reform church and state, despite overwhelming opposition, surprised me.

While a complete description of their contributions to history is not possible in this short book, I hope to draw attention to their neglected stories, their influence, and their accomplishments.



Genevieve of Paris (c. 422-512), despite threats against her life, prevented Parisians from fleeing to certain death when they panicked over an imminent attack by Attila the Hun. Later she emboldened Parisians to stand firm against the barbarian leader Clovis while she negotiated governing terms with him.

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) braved prejudice against women active in any sphere other than home or convent and involved herself in Italian politics of both church and state. She pressured wavering Pope Gregory XI to keep his promise to return the papacy from Avignon to Rome. In hundreds of letters to kings, queens, military leaders and civic officials, she gave advice concerning the pressing problems of her time. She sent scorching letters to cardinals admonishing them against corruption. During a period of widespread violence, she negotiated a number of peace agreements, including one between Florence and the Holy See.



Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) challenged the status quo of both Spanish society and the Church by rejecting the practice of labeling certain individuals “honorable” and looking down on others who did not have socially acceptable ancestry. She overturned the longstanding tradition of aristocratic dominance over Carmelite convents. Through political skill and personal charisma, she prevailed over those who opposed her reforms. In an age of suspicion and repression by torture, she constantly had to outwit the watchdogs of the Inquisition because she encouraged the practice of “mental prayer,” which was considered dangerous at the time.



Traditionally, women saints have been esteemed by Christians as ideal role models for women. But the image most often presented has been that of holy and miraculous otherness, an image out of the reach of us mortals. My research has uncovered a more complex and varied image of these women saints, revealing bold, daring actions in public life that grew out of their private, spiritual lives.

My goal in *Three Saints* is to widen our limited view by focusing on the concrete actions and decisions these women took in their day-to-day public lives. I have included historical background and cultural details of their times to give a sense of the reality and complexity of their involvement in public life. What were the political challenges they faced? How did they overcome the cultural and religious restrictions under which they lived so they could pursue their goals? What political successes and failures did they experience?

We are often told that the saints were people “just like us.” But there is nothing like the messy world of politics to show real human struggles. Conflict, confusion, controversy and criticism are all part of the human condition, as well as successes and failures. For Genevieve, Catherine and Teresa, their engagement in public affairs was an important and essential part of their holy lives.