

Mary Catherine Hilbert. *Speaking with Authority: Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today*. New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008. 137 pages. \$15.95.

In 2001, Mary Catherine Hilbert, O.P., Professor of Theology at Notre Dame University, delivered the Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. Although published at that time, Paulist Press has reissued the volume and invited Dr. Hilbert to revise and expand her introduction to the lectures in the light of the issues women religious are facing currently. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious has been under investigation and the Vatican is conducting a visitation of congregations of women religious in the United States.

Mary Catherine Hilbert brings words of encouragement and challenge, reminding all women and men of another woman who, centuries earlier, spoke truth to power. In her lectures Hilbert tells the story of and lifts up the theology of one of the few women Doctors of the Church, Catherine of Siena. As she notes in her introduction, the similarities between the church and world in Catherine's fourteenth-century and our twenty-first are striking. Catherine confronted a church, "torn by internal divisions . . . scandals . . . led by ministers whose lives often fail to reflect the gospel they preach . . . A world in which the violence of war is fueled by intertwined religious, economic, and political motivations" (1). So too do women and men today. Therefore, Hilbert argues, we will find in Catherine a model for confronting the worldly powers and challenging the leaders of the church to "accept their responsibility for the authentic preaching of the gospel" (1).

Confronted by a leadership that is seeking once again to delimit women's roles and activities in the church, returning them to their "proper place," Hilbert seeks to make the argument that women's voices are needed in the church and in the world more than ever. She agrees that there is a proper place for women in the church but she offers an alternative vision based on the life and writings of Catherine Siena and she explores the sources of authority for the preaching of women in the church. However, I would argue that one might understand this as an examination of the sources of authority for all women and men who preach.

Hilbert first examines the authority of vocation. Catherine was convinced that she was called to preach and began a preaching mission near her home in 1377. After a brief examination of the scriptural evidence for and against the preaching of women, Hilbert observes that throughout the history of the church, women have experienced a similar call to exercise ministry in the church and they speak of that in terms of their baptismal vocation. Catherine understood that both men and women are created in the image of God. She also understood that, through baptism, men and women were made part of the body of Christ and granted unique charismas for the up building of the church. Hilbert argues that "if baptism becomes the starting point for a specifically Christian understanding of vocation, differences of sex and gender remain part of the uniqueness of a person, but not determinative" (45).

When she was named a Doctor of the Church, Catherine was chosen primarily for her gift of wisdom. That is the second source of authority that Hilbert examines; the authority of wisdom. Catherine understood that women and men were to respect those in authority within the church. But even more than that, they were to answer to "the higher authority that comes from the Spirit's mediation of all truth" (54), and discernment of that truth "is cultivated through prayer, patience, and perseverance" (80).

The third and final source of authority for Catherine and for all called to proclaim the gospel is the authority of compassion. Catherine, Hilbert notes, always grounded her authority in

the “blood of Jesus or Christ crucified” (90). It is the overflowing love of God and participation in the suffering of the world that calls to us and asks us to do the same. We are called to drink the cup of “charity, forgiveness, and compassion” (98).

This volume invites us to remember and be challenged by the writings of one of the great saints of the church, Catherine of Siena. But we are also strengthened and challenged by one of the principal theologians of the church today, Mary Catherine Hilbert.

For those women who have been ordained, it is important to remember and to stand in solidarity with the majority of Christian women who continued to be put in their “proper place,” i.e., silenced by their churches. The Holy Spirit calls women and men and Mary Catherine Hilbert offers an excellent argument for recognizing that call.

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