

The Four Women Doctors of the Church

“Doctors of the church are recognized not only for living the Gospel, but for giving it expression, and for integrating theological wisdom and the spiritual life.”

~Elizabeth A. Dreyer, Accidental Theologians

There are 36 Doctors of the Church who have been approved by a Pope. Four of these accidental theologians are women. These Doctors were approved posthumously, most over 100 years after their death. With careful attention to the context in which they were writing, their world view, and how they lived, their work continues to inspire. The resurgence of feminism has caused many of us to seek out faith teachings written by women. But remember, the term feminist originated in the 19th century, so it's incorrect to claim these women as early feminists, but it is possible to see in their works the support of women's dignity and equality.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179) was the 10th child of a noble German family and at age 8 was offered as a companion to Jutta of Sponheim (as she entered religious life as a Benedictine) as a tithe to God. Hildegard's work includes theology, letters, music, medicine, and created images. She integrated theological thinking and experience to respond to the needs of her time, including church renewal and reform. I encourage you to find her music on YouTube or iTunes.

Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380) is the copatron saint of Italy with Francis of Assisi. Both of their bodies were marked with Christ's wounds. Catherine was the first Italian woman to have her works published in her local Tuscan dialect. Catherine, like many others of her time, linked sin to the physical body. She practiced extreme asceticism in an attempt to be more holy, but later advised her followers to be more moderate. Catherine incorporates graphic metaphors into her work to explain our relationship with God. In her work, God is madly in love with us (drunk with love) and we should live up to this divine calling and love our neighbors.

Teresa of Ávila (1515 – 1582) is the granddaughter of a Jew who was forced to convert to Christianity as part of an effort to unite Spain based on religious and ethnic purity. In 1485 he was accused of backsliding and humiliated by the local church. Teresa's family moved to Ávila, but this event had lasting effects on the family. Teresa's father sent her to the convent because of her flirtatious teenaged behavior, she returned home to recover from an illness after which she decided to enter the Carmelites. Teresa had several severe bouts of illness and used recovery time for spiritual growth. She knew God was calling her to look upon those who are suffering and compassionately care for them; love of God leads to love for neighbor.

Thérèse of Lisieux (1873 – 1897) parents felt called but were denied acceptance into religious life. She grew up in France with four sisters who all entered religious life. On a family trip to Rome she ignored the custom of being silent during an audience with the Pope and begged to enter religious life before she reached the required age. She wanted to enter the cloister in order to pray for priests and save souls. Her little way included joy even in suffering.

At Home:

Remember to be gracious to yourself as everyone's spiritual journeys are different. Engage in whatever your heart desires. Remember that this is about spending time in the divine presence not about completing tasks, so it's ok to simply breathe and connect with God in the way you know best. After all, prayer is where we get to know ourselves in God's presence. Each of us will experience this time differently, but hopefully all of us will grow in our desire to spend time with God.

What you will find in this devotional:

Each reading will include scripture, hymn texts, prayers, and questions to guide your meditation. Below I've described how you might like to engage with these passages. Each reflection is meant to stand on its own, so you can do them in whatever order you like or repeat the one you like best. This devotional is simply a tool and you get to decide how to use it. The following is how I have engaged with this devotional but that doesn't mean you have to do exactly the same.

Prepare:

Candle(s) or advent wreath, matches/lighter, writing utensil, scripture (we are using lectionary year B), comfortable chair, cozy blanket, or whatever you need to feel like the holy spirit is hugging you close.

Beginning:

Do not light your candle. Wait. Just wait a moment and ponder the darkness. If it isn't dark close your eyes. Take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds and slowly. Repeat at least three times. Get comfortable in the darkness and empty your mind. Release your worries and focus only on the darkness of your closed eyes or the unlit candle in front of you. For a moment, ponder the darkness. Is darkness fearful or comforting? What about emptiness? For some, dark and empty conjure up a stone-cold tomb, for others a soft warm womb. What other thoughts and feelings come through as you wait in the empty darkness as we begin this advent meditation? When you are ready, slowly open your eyes and light your candle. Gaze at the light for a moment. Take a few more deep breaths.

Lectio Divina

Reading – read the passages, silently and aloud. If you are doing this exercise with a prayer partner, each of you should read the passage aloud. Make a note of the words or phrases that speak to you.

Meditating – think of the words and phrases you noted. What does God say this text means?

Praying – talk to God about this passage and ask what you are to learn

Contemplating – quiet yourself, do nothing, and simply listen

Acting – what is God asking me to do?

Closing:

Sit quietly for a moment and do absolutely nothing. When you are ready thank God for spending this time with you. Blow your candle out.

1st Candle: Hope

Lectionary texts include Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Psalm 80: 4-7

- ⁴ Lord God of heavenly forces,
how long will you fume against your people's prayer?
- ⁵ You've fed them bread made of tears;
you've given them tears to drink three times over!
- ⁶ You've put us at odds with our neighbors;
our enemies make fun of us.
- ⁷ Restore us, God of heavenly forces!
Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

Mark 1:8 "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In the hymn "In the Bleak Midwinter" water is like a stone. This frozen water reminds me of waiting and hoping. Waiting for God in this advent season, knowing "heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain; heaven and earth shall fall away when He comes to reign". Hoping that God once again enters our lives in a special way this season.

Teresa of Ávila used imagery of water when she talked about prayer and spiritual life. Sometimes prayer is work; like filling a bucket from a well in order to water your garden. Sometimes prayer is hard and that's ok. Contemplation is difficult at the beginning. We get better the more we practice, kind of like having a water wheel or irrigation system in place. There is a little less work on our part as we begin to worry less about "getting it right" and simply spend time in God's presence. The more comfortable we get with our spiritual practices the easier it is to get the water flowing. Other times, God sends rain, and there is no work at all on our part. In these times, we are participants in the prayer and God leads the prayer. And sometimes prayers are tears, a cry for God to help us, a cry for God to send the rain. God cries for us too.

How is your prayer like water? Is it frozen? Is it work? Is it tears?

Where does your hope spring from in the bleak midwinter?

2nd Candle: Peace

Lectionary texts include Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2; 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13

Lord, you've been kind to your land; you've changed Jacob's circumstances for the better.

² You've forgiven your people's wrongdoing; you've covered all their sins.

⁸ Let me hear what the Lord God says, because he speaks peace to his people and to his faithful ones. Don't let them return to foolish ways.

⁹ God's salvation is very close to those who honor him so that his glory can live in our land.

¹⁰ Faithful love and truth have met; righteousness and peace have kissed.

¹¹ Truth springs up from the ground; righteousness gazes down from heaven.

¹² Yes, the Lord gives what is good, and our land yields its produce.

¹³ Righteousness walks before God, making a road for his steps.

Mark 1:3 The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Hymn #3 Comfort, Comfort You My People "Now prepare for God a way; Let the valleys rise in meeting and the hills bow down in greeting. Make you straight what long was crooked, make the rougher places plain; let your hearts be true and humble, as befits God's holy reign."

Thérèse of Lisieux beckons all Christians to the Little Way. Her little way was the way of the cross and in seeing suffering and love in the face of Jesus. As she entered the convent, she offered her suffering as prayer for lost souls and for priest reform. Later, she understood suffering lead her to love. Thérèse suffered joyfully and offered her joy in suffering to Jesus to comfort him. She saw his love for her in his face (the suffering face that was wiped by Veronica's veil) and offered her love to him and to others smiling even as she suffered. Thérèse suffered physically and emotionally throughout her life. But she found connection with Jesus and with others in this suffering. She would seek out the most irritating members of her Carmelite community and spend time facing them (as she did with the Holy Face). Thérèse desired face to face relationship with others as Jesus did, with non-judgmental acceptance and radical hospitality. Her little way was really a big way in its patience, fidelity and sacrifice of ego. This little way of interacting with her world inside the convent with a true and humble heart was as difficult for her as lifting up valleys and making the rough places plain.

How are you making a little way for Christ to enter your own life?

How can you show love to others who are suffering (even if you are also suffering)?

Can you find little ways to offer love, justice, and peace?

3rd Candle: Love

Lectionary texts include Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b-55; John 1:6-8, 19-28; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Psalm 126

When the Lord changed Zion's circumstances for the better, it was like we had been dreaming.

² Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter; our tongues were filled with joyful shouts. It was even said, at that time, among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them!"

³ Yes, the Lord has done great things for us, and we are overjoyed.

⁴ Lord, change our circumstances for the better, like dry streams in the desert waste!

⁵ Let those who plant with tears reap the harvest with joyful shouts.

⁶ Let those who go out, crying and carrying their seed, come home with joyful shouts, carrying bales of grain!

Affirmation of Faith: Based on Luke 1:46-55 CEB written by Pastor Karie

With Mary, we will glorify God with all that is within us. From the depths of our souls and the movements of our bodies we will rejoice in God our savior. For God has looked with favor on those whom the world says are worthless. We believe that God highly favors the marginalized and shows bias towards the poor. We are called to do the same, in God's holy name. God shows mercy from generation to generation of believers. God's strong arms cradle the weak and scatter away arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. God has pulled down the powerful and uplifted the lowly. God fills the hungry with goodness and sends away those who are full of themselves. God will come to the aid of the faithful, remembering the ways of mercy, just as was promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah, and to their decedent's forever. Amen.

Hymn #5 Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence "He will give to all the faithful, his own self for heavenly food"

Catherine of Siena used metaphors when describing prayer. Catherine sometimes uses female imagery for God and for Jesus. Prayer is like a mother giving birth and renewing us or feeding the baby. What is prayer giving birth to? The virtues of the soul; compassion, seeking truth, honest, respect, etc. In Catherine's time, it was believed that breast feeding gave the baby more than milk, breastfeeding gave the baby blood (life force). Breastfeeding was like drinking the blood of Jesus (it is a strange image but isn't that what communion is too?). When we nurse at God's breast, we get what we need to live a good life. Breastfeeding moms notice that their bodies respond to a baby's hungry cries. It is in her nature to respond to her child and it is in God's nature to respond to us. While breast feeding (and praying) a loving bond is formed; it is wordless, snuggling, connected with love.

What does it mean for you when you hear, take and eat, this is Christ's body broken for you, and take and drink, this is Christ's blood poured out for you?

What are you giving birth to? Or what is God bringing to life?
How have you seen God respond to your hungry cries?

4th Candle: Joy

Lectionary texts include 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26b-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Luke 1:26-38; Romans 16:25-27

Psalm 89

¹ I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. ² I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. ³ You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: ⁴ ‘I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.’”

Romans 16:25-27 ²⁵ Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶ but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷ to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

#309 Of the Father's Love Begotten “Of the things that are that have been, and that future years will see, evermore and evermore”

Hildegard of Bingen saw God and creation as connected, not separated, through all things, all generations, all of the cosmos, all of time. Or to borrow a few words from the hymn “the source and the ending”. Of the Father's Love Begotten reminds me a little of these passages and of Hildegard's work. There is a connection with the trinity and all of creation and all people. In her plays the only “voice” that doesn't sing is the devil's because a life without God cannot sing, which reminds me of the hymns' line about every voice in concert singing praise to God. Hildegard loved singing, seeing it as a way to praise God with our whole selves.

She saw body and spiritual health as integrated, and perhaps we would understand her in our modern terms as holistic. She had a list of things to avoid in order to live a healthy life, the first is stress and the second is anger. There is certainly something timeless about this observation.

“Greening” or Viriditas is an important part of Hildegard's theology that has to do with the Holy Spirit animating life in nature and in the soul. Green souls alive in holiness are filled with virtue and fervor for God. Sometimes when I listen to Hildegard's music, I imagine vines with leaves shooting and blossoms blooming. Her work is easy to find on YouTube.

Ponder for a moment the eternal work of God animating all of life, including your soul.

What is your favorite hymn or spiritual song? Or just your favorite any kind of song? How do you feel while you are singing along?

How does how you are feeling spiritually emotionally affect your physical health? Do you clench your jaw when you're stressed?

Christ Candle

Psalm 97: 11-12

¹¹ Light is planted like seed for the righteous person; joy too for those whose heart is right.

¹² Rejoice in the **Lord**, righteous ones! Give thanks to his holy name!

Luke 2: 15-38 ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹ After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Teresa of Ávila

Christ has no body now, but yours. No hands, not feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion into the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world.

Take a moment to ponder this experience in your heart.

You are the beloved of God and you are called to go out into the world and to love others.

Other Scriptures to read over Christmas Eve and Christmas Day:

Proper I: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Proper II: Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20

Proper III: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-12; John 1:1-14

This devotional was created in part to meet the requirements of the Spiritual Formation Certificate at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary using notes from The Four Women Doctors: Teresa of Ávila, Catherine of Siena, Thérèse of Lisieux and Hildegard of Bingen, October 25 – November 20, 2020 An Online Spiritual Formation Elective taught by Sr. Kathleen Flood O.P.

Sources used in creating this devotional include:

Dreyer, E. A. (2014). *Accidental Theologians: The Four Women Who Shaped Christianity*. Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media.

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