

- On our mural behind me, you'll find an image of St. Catherine of Siena, dressed in a Dominican habit and holding in her arms a ship, which is a symbol of the Church.
- Though a woman in a time when women did not generally have a voice in public matters, St. Catherine single-handedly changed the course of the entire church in her short 33 years of life during the 14th century.
- The 14th century was not an easy time for the Catholic Church. While we weren't suffering from the great persecutions resulting in the martyrdom of so many Christians that we saw 1000 years earlier, we still had our struggles.
- Plagues were common, decimating a very sizeable portion of the European population. Yet, the Church's biggest struggle in the 14th century was a crisis known as the Avignon Papacy.
- The Avignon Papacy was the period from 1309 – 1377 in which the popes, 7 in all, lived in Avignon, France, rather than Rome. This move happened as the result of a clash between Pope Boniface VIII and King Phillip IV of France, known as "Phillip the Fair."
- In this struggle for power, Pope Boniface was preparing to excommunicate Phillip and place all of France under interdict because the French king refused to submit to the pope's authority, and he was using Church monies to pay for his wars.
- Before this happened, though, Italian allies of King Phillip broke into the papal palace, beat and kidnapped Pope Boniface, who eventually died from his wounds. The subsequent pope, Benedict XI, absolved the king of his crimes, but he died just months after his election.
- The next pope: Clement V, however, was French, and a close friend of King Phillip's. He was elected only after King Phillip intervened in a deadlocked conclave and forced the cardinal to elect his friend.
- It was Pope Clement who, at Phillip's insistence, moved himself and the entire papal curia to Avignon in 1309, establishing a sort of "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy, and placing the papacy – and thus the Church – under the influence of the French monarchy.
- Sadly, the Avignon popes and the bishops and cardinals working with them lived lavishly, much like any prince of that time. Corruption was rampant, and the scandal of such wealth amongst the Church's leaders really harmed the papacy and the Church as a whole.
- Given the politics in the Church at the time, it seemed an impossible situation to resolve. Yet nothing is impossible for God. And God often raises up saints to solve such intractable problems. St. Catherine of Siena was one of these saints.
- Knowing that the long-term security of the Church required the papacy being in Rome, St. Catherine began writing letters to Pope Gregory XI, who was pope from 1370-1378.
- And when it appeared that her letters were not enough, St. Catherine even traveled to Avignon to visit with the pope over the course of the summer of 1376.
- Eventually, through her diplomacy, her prayers, and her offering up of sacrifices and sufferings, St. Catherine of Siena convinced Pope Gregory to return to Rome, despite the pressure being placed on him by the cardinals.
- An illiterate woman, who is now a doctor of the Church, brought the scandal of the Avignon Papacy to its end, and restored the papacy to its rightful place.
- You see, it is not governments or organizations, not even religious orders, that change the world. It's individuals on fire with love for God and intent upon doing His will that change the world.

- And when God finds a soul both loving and courageous, He will use that saintly soul in a way that seems impossible to those who limit themselves to thinking as the world thinks.
- We are now living in a time in which the world needs saints more than ever. As we consider the terrible state of our society and the world at large, we need loving and courageous souls to step up and live counter-culturally.
- What makes these saintly souls effective? A commitment to truly imitating Christ – even to the point of being willing to suffer at the hands of others. They are people who are willing to live at odds with this world in order to change it. That’s really the point of today’s epistle.
- St. Peter reminds us today that we are pilgrims and sojourners in this world, and that we are called to live in a manner that is above reproach, loving everyone, and being willing to endure the injustices of others.
- Truly, my friends, we have to strive to live like Christ in all ways. There are plenty of people in our world – and even in the Church – who will tell you that being like Christ is just a matter of being nice and non-offensive. Yet, that’s a lie.
- I’m not counseling you to not be nice or to try to offend others. But there were times when Christ wasn’t so nice, and there can be no doubt that He offended others – but it was all in service of truth, and in the service of authentic charity.
- Sometimes truth and charity demand that we say and do things that others will not like, and that will anger others – even intensely. But we cannot worry about that. Our job as Christians is to speak the truth in love.
- Remember: our vocation as Christians is to live as other Christs out in the world. This means we are called to cultivate virtue within ourselves and our children. It means that we are called to an intense prayer life. It means that we are called to living and speaking the Truth.
- In a world that’s darkened by sin and enthralled with sensual pleasures, where serving oneself is really the creed by which most men live, we must stand apart and be different.
- This is hard, but the saints show us the way. In the lives of saints like St. Catherine of Siena, we see the awesome power of God triumphing over corruption and greed, but only because this a loving and courageous soul, intent upon God’s will, was willing to step forward.
- If we want our world to change, then we need to step forward!
- Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, St. Catherine did and said all that was necessary to convince a wishy-washy and weak-willed man like Pope Gregory XI to defy the power-hungry and lavishly-living cardinals of the papal curia and return to Rome.
- In short, St. Catherine prevailed against the sinful norms of her times and acted as another Christ out in the world, and God used her in a very powerful way, unlikely instrument though she was. And He can do the same with us, if we are but willing to suffer for Him.
- May we each be strengthened in courage and in genuine charity, may our souls be set on fire with love for God and our fellow man, and may we have the fortitude to follow God’s will no matter what the cost.
- St. Catherine of Siena, pray for us.