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## Catherine of Siena: Doctor of Communion

THOMAS McDERMOTT, OP  
United States of America

It has been more than forty years since Pope Paul VI wrote *Mirabilis in Ecclesia Deus* in which he proclaimed the Virgin of Fontebranda a Doctor of the Church and expressed his hope that «the doctrine, method and learning of Catherine will bring it about that charity may soar in Christian hearts, and that... the desire for holiness may sharply increase among men and women everywhere».<sup>1</sup>

Despite continued interest in the life of St. Catherine, her «doctrine, method and learning» as found in the *Dialogue of Divine Providence*, her 381 extant letters and twenty-six prayers, is largely unknown outside of Italy. However, this situation may be changing and we could see the springtime of new engagement in Catherine's thought. Several recent publications give hope to such a renaissance. For example, we have recently witnessed the final translation into English of the entire Catherinian Corpus;<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope PAUL VI, Apostolic Letter *The Title of Doctor of the Universal Church is Conferred on Saint Catherine of Siena*, «*Mirabilis in Ecclesia Deus*» (4 October 1970), § 1, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 63:9 (30 September 1971), 674. An English translation can be found on my website [www.drawnbylove.com](http://www.drawnbylove.com).

<sup>2</sup> In 2008 the Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies published the fourth and final volume of Dominican Sister Suzanne Noffke's translation of Catherine's letters, bringing to completion her monumental translation project of the entire Catherinian corpus. Unless otherwise noted, the English translations of Catherine's works in this paper are taken from Noffke's translations: Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. and intro. S. NOFFKE, OP, New York and Mahwah 1980; Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. with notes S. NOFFKE, OP, 4

the 2002 release of all her works, complete with a concordance on cd-rom;<sup>3</sup> and the more recent arrival of my work entitled *Catherine of Siena: Spiritual development in her life and teaching*, the first academic study in English that serves as a systematic guide to Catherine's mystical thought.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, other recent developments such as the current interest in spirituality and mysticism, a new openness to doctrine and the patrimony of the Church, particularly among young English-speaking Catholics, and the renewed attention to the mystical experiences of Christian women – all contribute happily to this welcome revival.

As a modest contribution toward the fulfillment of Paul VI's hope and in an effort to present Catherine's rich and practical teaching, so long ignored, I propose to show how her life and teaching marvelously exemplify the goal of human existence as a dialogue or communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit *and* with our neighbor in the very heart of the Trinity. Her profound participation in the intimacy of Trinitarian life was actualized through her radical self-giving, self-forgetting love of neighbor in God. She has much to teach us about entering into divine and fraternal communion. From this salutary lesson we will deduce the characteristics of her communion with others and her impact on them, her theological methodology, her special, unique way of "doing" theology, and her relevance for the world of today.

vols., Tempe (Arizona) 2000-2008; Catherine of Siena, *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, ed., trans., notes S. NOFFKE, OP, San José 2001<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. SANTA CATERINA DA SIENA, *Opera omnia. Testi e concordanze*, Recensione critica di testi: *Lettere* a cura di Antonio Volpato, *Dialogo e Orazioni* a cura di Giuliana Cavallini; coord. Fausto Scaffoni, OP, Pistoia, Provincia Romana dei Frati Predicatori, Centro Riviste, 2002 [cd-rom].

<sup>4</sup> Written by myself and published by Paulist Press (New York) in 2008.

## Communion with God

The goal of human existence as communion with the Trinity appears prominently in various places in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. For example, in no. 760 we read: «God created the world for the sake of communion with his divine life, a communion brought about by the "convocation of men in Christ"».<sup>5</sup> Catherine makes this truth more explicit, showing us that the depth of our communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is "mirrored" in the quality of our communion or relationship with others against the backdrop of the paschal mystery of Christ and his sheer surrender, absolute receptivity, infinite humble self-giving, and unreserved, unending *yes* to the Father.<sup>6</sup>

Catherine's communion with God first comes to light at the tender age of six when she experienced an attractive vision of Christ above the church of San Domenico in Siena. From then on her life can be regarded as an ever-increasing communion of mind and heart with Christ. She had a seemingly insatiable thirst to know him to such an extent, as she told her confessor, friend and biographer Raymond of Capua, that she believed herself to have been espoused to Christ.

The starting point of communion with God is found in Catherine's often repeated command to «lift the eye of the intellect» to the Crucified. In other words, we must cease all self-preoccupation and look upwards just as she did on that day long before, and see the God-Man whose blood is the indubitable sign of his infinite, self-giving love for us.

The cornerstone of her own life and teaching, Raymond says, was the fundamental maxim that the eternal Father re-

<sup>5</sup> See UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Washington DC, 2000<sup>2</sup>, nos. 1024, 1107, 1108, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M.A. FATULA, OP, *The Triune God of Christian Faith*, Collegeville, MN, 1990, p. 60.

vealed to her soon after she entered into seclusion in a small room or «cell» in her family house:

Do you know, daughter, who you are and who I am? If you know these two things you will have beatitude within your grasp. You are she who is not, and I AM HE WHO IS.<sup>7</sup>

This is the beginning of Catherine's well-known doctrine on self-knowledge. Her spiritual thought is thereafter marked by a constant appeal to reason. Instead of demanding conformity of the will to a strict moral code, Catherine constantly enjoins us to «return to the cell of self-knowledge» which is the foundation of prayer for everyone from incipient to perfect.

Natural reason provides some understanding, but it is only by the light of faith that we can see the way to our divine destination of full communion with the Three-in-One. This truth is encapsulated in her well-known image of «the eye of the intellect, the pupil of which is faith». It is knowledge, enlightened by faith, that allows us to see the truth – the all important truth – about ourselves and God: we are only creatures and apart from God we would cease to exist; the sin of our first parents has wounded us and our own sins have further darkened the eye of the intellect. These sobering truths are balanced by the truth about God: that out of love he made us in his own image and likeness, to be free and subject only to himself; through the infusion of his divine life he desires us to be «other christs»; the shedding of his blood makes known the endless immensity of his divine love for us.

The knowledge to which Catherine refers is the love-knowledge a lover has of the beloved. «Love follows knowledge» is a central theme in her spiritual thought.<sup>8</sup> Over and over again she

<sup>7</sup> RAYMOND OF CAPUA, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Conleth Kearns, OP, Wilmington, DE, 1980, § 92. Kearns's work is a translation of Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda maior*, AASS Aprilis, tomus 3, 826-967.

<sup>8</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 1.

reminds us that «one who knows more, loves more».<sup>9</sup> The progression of knowledge and love which brings us into an ever-greater communion of intellect and will with the Trinity is the flowering of baptismal grace. By responding to the almost irresistible attraction of grace, our love of God and others deepens and expands. In the major section of the *Dialogue* called «The Bridge», this increase of knowledge and love transforms the pilgrim traveler from one who is initially possessed of merely slavish fear of God's punishment, then to the faithful servant whose love of God is mercenary and, at last, to the friend and the son or daughter of God who loves him in a completely disinterested way.

Although Catherine was a person of great passion who was described by one contemporary as «always joyful and of a happy spirit», she was distrustful of emotions as reliable indicators of progress on our spiritual journey.<sup>10</sup> «The reason [the soul] is joyful and glad», she says, «is that she has what she wanted. For it is characteristic of any love whatever to feel gladness [*allegrezza*] when one receives what one loves. So you cannot trust gladness in itself».<sup>11</sup>

Sin is essentially a result of defective knowledge which leads to defective love of oneself, others and God. It acts like a cataract that covers over «the eye of the intellect, the pupil of which is faith» so that the intellect is darkened and truth cannot be seen as it really is. The root sin is selfish self-love, which is gradually chipped away as one learns the truth about oneself and God.

<sup>9</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Testimony of Fra Tommaso Caffarini in M.H. LAURENT, *Il processo Castellano con appendice di documenti*, Milano 1942 (Fontes Vitae S. Catharinae Senensis Historici, 9), col. 1258.

<sup>11</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 106.

## Communion with Others

The more our faculties of intellect and will are conformed to Christ's, the more he shares his divine life with us. As a result we are raised into an ever-greater communion with the Trinity, not as individuals but in communion with one another in Christ and in the Church. The Spirit of Christ draws us together in the Son and thus into the very being of God.

Catherine maintains a strong and persistent emphasis on charity toward others in her writings. Over and over again she stresses the importance of practical, self-effacing, self-donating love of neighbor. The eternal Father's repeated instruction on the bond between love of God and love of neighbor forms the basis of her conviction. «The soul, as soon as she comes to know Me, reaches out to love her neighbor».<sup>12</sup> Our first duty is to «reflect that God requires nothing else of us except we show our neighbors the love we have for God».<sup>13</sup> Having deeply assimilated this truth, Catherine writes to Ristoro di Piero Canigiani: «It is the nature of love ... to love whatever the one we love loves».<sup>14</sup> In a letter to Raymond a few months before her death she says: «Love for our Creator cannot be sustained unless we love others for God's sake».<sup>15</sup> Catherine's emphatic teaching, conveyed through the image of a pregnant woman, is that our possession of the virtues can be verified only when they are put into action in our relationships with others:

If a woman has conceived a child but never brings it to birth for people to see, her husband will consider himself childless. Just so, I [says the Eternal Father to Catherine] am the spouse of the soul, and unless she gives birth to the virtue she has conceived [by

<sup>12</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 89.

<sup>13</sup> *Letter* 89.

<sup>14</sup> *Letter* 299.

<sup>15</sup> *Letter* 343.

showing it] in her charity to her neighbors... then I insist that she has never in truth conceived virtue in her.<sup>16</sup>

It is God's design as well as a matter of justice that we love our neighbor, as the eternal Father tells her:

And because I loved you without being loved by you, even before you existed (in fact it was love that moved me to create you in my own image and likeness) you cannot repay me. But *you must give this love to other people*, loving them without being loved by them. You must love them without any concern for your own spiritual or material profit, but only for the glory and praise of my name, because I love them. In this way you will fulfill the whole commandment of the Law, which is to love me above all things and your neighbor as your very self.<sup>17</sup>

Catherine found an even stronger reason for reaching out to her neighbor when the eternal Father revealed to her that the quality of our love of neighbor reflects the quality of our love of God: souls «love their neighbors with the same love with which they love Me».<sup>18</sup> We see in Raymond's biography of Catherine, the *Legenda maior*, how her love of neighbor passed through stages commensurate with her progressive love of God: e.g., the "crisis" in the cell occasioned by the Lord's apparent withdrawal from her and her loss of consolations corresponds to the time the sick woman Andrea withdrew her affection from Catherine. In both cases Catherine perseveres in her love of God and neighbor. After she drinks the foul matter at Andrea's "open side", the Lord rewards her with the mystical slaking of her thirst at his open side. Our love of neighbor passes through the same stages as our love of God: slavish fear, mercenary love, and finally friendship and filial love.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 89. Emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, cc. 26-87.

One event in Catherine's life contributed enormously to her conviction that divine and fraternal communion are inseparable, namely, when the Lord commanded her to leave the seclusion and consolations of her cell, where she had lived for three years, and join her family at the dinner table. Years later she shared this experience with Raymond, telling him how she was traumatized and burst into tears, saying that the Lord was driving her away from him, that she did not want to be separated from him for even a moment, that meal times meant nothing to her, that she had turned her back on human companionship in order to find him, and that she had no desire to go back or do anything that might lead to her being separated from Him. Here is part of the Lord's reply:

I have no intention whatever of parting you from myself, but rather of making sure to bind you to me all the closer, by the bond of your love for your neighbor. Remember that I have laid down two commandments of love: love of me and love of neighbor. (...) It is the justice of these two commandments that I want you now to fulfill. On two feet you must walk my way; on two wings you must fly to heaven.<sup>20</sup>

As Cavallini says so pithily, the Lord impressed upon Catherine the reality that «the neighbor in fact is not a means of separation, but a means for a closer and more intimate contact with God».<sup>21</sup> Her decision to obey and leave her cell was momentous in her life.

Catherine's many mystical experiences, which go largely unrecorded in her own writings but which Raymond recounts in the *Legenda maior*, were far from being private and individualistic experiences. Each one represents a broadening and deepening of her outreach to neighbor as her communion with the Trinity intensifies. The "mystical espousals" (c. 1367), the highpoint

<sup>20</sup> RAYMOND OF CAPUA, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, § 121. Emphasis mine.

<sup>21</sup> G. CAVALLINI, *Caterina da Siena tra mistica e apostolato*, «La Patrona d'Italia: S. Caterina da Siena» 44/3 (maggio-giugno 1989), p. 9.

of her seclusion in the cell, represent the union of Catherine's will with the divine will and the expectation that she would bring to birth many spiritual "children."<sup>22</sup> The "mystical exchange of hearts" (1370) was a further perfection of the union of wills which gave her a «boundless love of neighbor» for whom she was now prepared to die.<sup>23</sup> In the same year, the *mystical death* was a preparation for her entry into Christ's mission for the salvation of sinners through his suffering and death.<sup>24</sup> The invisible *stigmata* (1375), which for Catherine corresponded to "the marks of Jesus" received by St. Paul (Gal 6,7), signaled her definitive entrance into the passion and death of Christ for the salvation of sinners.<sup>25</sup> The *investiture vision* one year later represented the bestowal of a universal mission directed toward peace, conversion and Church reform.<sup>26</sup>

In Catherine's teaching the spiritual journey is never conceived as solitary or private but one that is made in communion with others, as seen in the eternal Father's words to her:

You must gather together, as [my Son] said, either two or three or more. One alone is excluded from my companionship, since I cannot be "in the midst" of someone who has no companion. Those who are wrapped up in selfish love of themselves are alone, mere nothings, because they are cut off from my grace and from charity for their neighbors. And once deprived of me through their own fault, they turn to nothingness — for I alone am who I am. So those who are alone, those who are wrapped up in selfish love of themselves, are neither taken account of by my Truth nor acceptable to me.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> RAYMOND OF CAPUA, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, § 257.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, § 182.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, §§ 212-213.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, §§ 194-195.

<sup>26</sup> *Letter* 219.

<sup>27</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 54. Cf. JOHN PAUL II, General Audience of January 9, 1980 (Internet: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/audiences/catechesis\\_genesis/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_19800109\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/catechesis_genesis/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19800109_en.html)) («Mankind does not realize his es-

For her part, Catherine's cultured group of followers, called derisively by outsiders the "Caterinati" ("catherinized" ones) but whom she called her «bella brigata» or «famiglia», many of whom were educated and drawn from the nobility, were constantly close to her heart as can be seen in her many prayers and supplications on their behalf right up to the moment of her death.

**«Make yourself an instrument to give to everyone what they need»**

In the *Dialogue*, the eternal Father commands Catherine to «make yourself an instrument [*mezzo*] to give to everyone what they need according to their disposition and as I, your Creator, will command you».<sup>28</sup> We have seen the importance of the neighbor in Catherine's spiritual thought; we will now look at the particular way in which she lived out her communion with the Trinity in her communion with others.

Before doing so, however, let us recall Catherine's tremendous impact on others. Numerous depositions made by her former followers in preparation for the canonization process, as well as statements by her biographer Raymond of Capua, describe Catherine as someone whom people simply enjoyed being around, how they felt better after listening to her, and how she could elicit the best from others. Fra Tommaso Caffarini, one of her devoted disciples and the major promoter of her cause, relates that «she had a special charm and as many people approached her, be they men or women, of every rank and of every profession, she made them all better and brought them back to

sence except by existing with someone, and even more profoundly and more completely, by existing for someone»).

<sup>28</sup> «... fa che tu sia uno mezzo di dare a ciascuno quello che lo' bisogna...» (*Dialogue*, c. 109).

God».<sup>29</sup> Described as the «mother of thousands of souls», Fra Bartolomeo Dominici, another disciple and former confessor of hers, testified to her effect on others:

Who in fact could say enough about all the people and the types of people she brought back to a better life through her holy exhortations! How many noble matrons she induced to wear the religious habit! How many noble young women were moved by her words and the example of her life of virginity and the voluntary observance of extraordinary austerity! How many young men were converted and entered different Orders! How many religious she led to a better life! How many prostitutes she brought back to a chaste life! How many murderers and men who had gone astray through grave and old enmities did she reconcile with lasting peace, and owing to her holy admonitions were reunited in sincere and good friendship! It would take too long and in any case would seem incredible to tell how she, with her admirable speech, sweetly comforted the pious, frightened and confounded the arrogant and insolent; and not only the unlearned and the common people, but also princes, barons, solders, great prelates, illustrious doctors of the two laws, medical doctors and expert professors in Sacred Theology: in a few words she would ignite the more pious sentiments of the good people that spoke with her, miraculously and beneficially she confounded the crafty and bad ones.<sup>30</sup>

Within five years of leaving the seclusion of her cell, this lover of solitude and former recluse, who had vehemently protested when the Lord commanded her to re-enter the world, was so preoccupied with the salvation of souls that she now spoke of «eat-

<sup>29</sup> Deposition of Fra Tommaso CAFFARINI in *Vita di Santa Caterina da Siena. Scritta da Fr. Tommaso Caffarini, discepolo della Santa*, a cura del P. Giuseppe Tinagli, Prefazione del P. Giacinto Laurent, OP, Siena 1938, p. 133. Critical edition: Thomas Antonii de Senis "Caffarini", *Libellus de Supplemento. Legende proluxe virginis beate Catherine de Senis*, Part III, Book IV, c. 24, Primum ediderunt Iuliana Cavallini - Imelda Foralosso, Roma 1974, p. 66.

<sup>30</sup> I. TAURISANO, OP, *Santa Caterina da Siena nei ricordi dei discepoli: Fra Simone da Cortona, Don Stefano Maconi, Fra Bartolomeo Dominici*, Roma 1957, p. 109-110 (Italian translation of parts of the *Processo Castellano*).

ing and tasting" (*mangiatore e gustatore*) them. This unique Catherinian expression appears for the first time in one of her earliest extant letters: «You will learn to eat and savor souls, the food of God's servants, and there I advise and beg you to find your delight always».<sup>31</sup> So compulsory was her self-giving love of neighbor, no matter how deeply the person had descended into sin, that saving souls was as important for her as eating food is for survival. Her desire to work for the salvation of souls, which initially drew her to St. Dominic and the Order of Preachers, was augmented by a mystical experience she underwent shortly after leaving the cell when the Lord showed her the beauty of the soul of an old woman whom she was nursing. He said to her:

Look, dear daughter, at this soul. When it was already lost, I won it back through you. Is it not a thing of splendor? Would not anyone endure the greatest trials in order to win so exquisite a creature? I myself am Beauty Supreme from which all other beauty is derived. Yet so enchanting is the beauty of the souls of men that I gladly came down upon this earth and shed my Blood in order to redeem them. How much more should you yourselves take on you toil and labor for the sake of one another, so that so splendid a creature may not be lost? That is why I have given you a vision of this soul: to rouse you still more to spend yourself for the salvation of souls...<sup>32</sup>

This vision of the soul's beauty prompted Catherine to ask God for a particular gift: the ability to see the state of the soul of anyone she would meet. The Lord granted the request.

Let us now examine the way in which Catherine lived out her fraternal communion as seen in the way in which she approached others in her letters and, indirectly, in her description

<sup>31</sup> Letter 99 to Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi, one of Catherine's earliest and closest disciples. Noffke dates the letter to February or March 1372. The expression "to eat and savor souls" appears more than twenty times in the letters and is an interpretation of Christ's words, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to complete His work" (Jn 4,34). In his commentary on this passage (see Homily 34), Chrysostom says that just as we long to eat food, Christ longs for our salvation.

<sup>32</sup> RAYMOND OF CAPUA, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, § 149.

in the *Dialogue* of good bishops and superiors. Among others of ordinary standing, we can identify six characteristics.

First, Catherine *loved others in God and for him* in that her love of neighbor was never apart or separate from her love of God. This is the fundamental principle of all her relationships with others. She explains it to Raymond in the *Legenda maior* using an analogy of plunging into a divine sea in which everything is seen through the medium of the water:

Such a soul, she would say, neither sees nor loves either itself or any other created thing. It loses all remembrance of itself and of others. Upon my asking her to explain this she would say: «The soul which sees that it itself is nothing, and which knows that all its good is in its Creator, turns its back, with all the powers of its being, on itself and every creature, and plunges itself totally in its Creator. From [then] on it directs all it does, above all and throughout all, to him. Its whole mind is set on never going one step outside of him in whom it realises it has found its whole good and its complete and perfect happiness. This union of love grows daily more intense, and eventually the soul is, in a manner, so transformed into God that all its thoughts – its understanding and its love and its memory – are taken up exclusively with God, and busy about God alone. Itself and other creatures it sees only in God; it thinks of them and of itself exclusively in God. It is like what happens when a person dives into the sea and swims underwater. He sees nothing and touches nothing but the water and whatever is submerged in the water. Outside the water he sees nothing, feels nothing, and touches nothing. And if the images of the things outside fall in or on the water, he does not see them as they are in themselves, but only as they are or appear in the water. To envisage things in this way», continued Catherine, «means that love of self and of other creatures is now brought under the rule of right order, and can no longer stray beyond its proper bounds. It is now subjected to a rule which is divine. Existing and acting only in God, it no longer lusts after anything outside of God».<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> RAYMOND OF CAPUA, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, § 100, p. 92-93.



Catherine also loved others «for God» in that everything she did was directed ultimately to giving God honor and glory. God is honored in the salvation of souls.<sup>34</sup> Her practical application of loving others in and for God appears in the *Dialogue* where the eternal Father instructs her:

If you have received my love sincerely without self-interest, you will drink your neighbor's love sincerely. It is just like a vessel that you fill at the fountain. If you take it out of the fountain to drink, the vessel is soon empty. But if you hold your vessel in the fountain while you drink, it will not get empty: indeed, it will always be full. So the love of your neighbor, whether spiritual or temporal, is meant to be drunk in me, without any self-interest.<sup>35</sup>

We know our love of neighbor is not perfect if we are jealous or distressed when we are not getting the return on our love that we want or when the one we love loves someone else more than ourselves.<sup>36</sup>

Catherine *identified with others*, even her enemies, and walked in solidarity with them. She advises us to «gently understand» others:

And those vices that you seem to recognize in others, attribute them not only to them but to yourself, exercising true humility. And if indeed a person has a specific problem, he will correct it better after having been so gently understood, up to the point of his telling you the very thing you wanted to say to him.<sup>37</sup>

We are afforded an indirect insight into Catherine's personal approach to others in the description of «good shepherds»

<sup>34</sup> «What these blessed ones want is to see me honored in you who are still on the way, pilgrims running ever nearer your end in death. Because they seek my honor they desire your salvation, and so they are constantly praying to me for you» (*Dialogue*, c. 41). Cf. IRENAEUS, *Adv. haeres.* 4, 20, 7, PG 7,1037: «The glory of God is man fully alive».

<sup>35</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 64.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 102. My translation.

(bishops and religious superiors) in the *Dialogue* where the theme of identification with others is prominent:

In their love and hunger for souls they even laid down their lives to rescue them [the little sheep] from the devil's hands. They made themselves weak along with those who were weak. That is, to keep the weak from being confounded with despair and to give them more room to expose their weakness, they would show their own weakness, saying, «I am weak along with you». They wept with those who wept and rejoiced with those who rejoiced. Thus they knew how to give everyone the right food so tenderly. They encouraged the good by rejoicing in their goodness, for they were not gnawed up with envy but broad in the generosity of their own charity for their neighbors and subjects. [...] Those who were superiors became as subjects. They who were in authority became as servants. Though they were healthy, without the sickness and leprosy of deadly sin, they became as if afflicted. Though they were strong, they became as if weak. With the dull and simple they showed themselves as simple, and with the lowly, as lowly. And so with every sort of person they knew how to deal humbly and with charity, giving to everyone the right food.<sup>38</sup>

Examples abound in her letters where Catherine takes the side of the sinner, often by switching to the first person plural toward the end. Let it suffice to give just two examples. In her letter to Bérenger, an abbot and apostolic nuncio, she writes: «I your unworthy daughter have assumed and will continue to assume the debt of your sins myself. Your sins and mine we shall burn together in the fire of gentle charity, where they are consumed».<sup>39</sup> And to the parish priest at Asciano she writes:

We are ransomed servants; we can no longer sell ourselves. But when we are in deadly sin we do blindly sell ourselves to the devil. I beg you, for love of Christ crucified: let's get out of such slavery! I'll say no more, but let me tell you this much: my own sins are

<sup>38</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 119. Here Catherine expands on 1Cor 9,19-23.

<sup>39</sup> *Letter* 109.

numberless. So I promise you that I will take both mine and yours and make of them a bundle of myrrh which I will keep in my breast with constant bitter weeping.<sup>40</sup>

Catherine strove to be *compassionate and not judgmental* as reflected in the eternal Father's words to her:

For often such a person's intention is good; there is no one who can judge the hidden heart. When you cannot see clearly and openly whether the sin is deadly, you must not pass judgment in your mind, but be concerned only about my will for that person. And if you do see it, you must respond not with judgment but with holy compassion.<sup>41</sup>

Give up judgment, which belongs to me, and take up compassion with hunger for my honor and the salvation of souls.<sup>42</sup>

But I told you that it is not right for you to hand anyone over merely on the basis of what you see or feel within you or even what you see externally. Unless you have clearly seen the truth or have understood it through an explicit revelation from me, you are not to reprove anyone except in the manner I have already explained.<sup>43</sup>

Given the times in which she lived, Catherine is remarkably positive, hopeful and always mindful that the human person is made in the image and likeness of God.

In her writings and in the *Legenda maior*, there is ample evidence of how seriously Catherine objected to passing judgment on others. In his First Prologue to the work, Raymond says that «she ruled out of her life any passing of judgment on her neighbor, be it lawful or unlawful, and renounced all concern about how people might judge herself».<sup>44</sup> In the *Dialogue*, Catherine admits to the eternal Father of having once been judgmental of others, particularly priests:

<sup>40</sup> Letter 24.

<sup>41</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 100.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 103.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 105.

<sup>44</sup> RAYMOND OF CAPUA, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, § 12.

You gave me as well a medicine against a hidden sickness I had not recognized, by teaching me that I can never sit in judgment on any person, especially on your servants. For I, blind and weak as I was from this sickness, have often judged others under the pretext of working for your honor and their salvation.<sup>45</sup>

She herself was the victim of intense criticism on the part of others, especially because of her singular way of life.<sup>46</sup>

She insisted on *the necessity of fraternal correction* and was not slow in giving it, albeit in the best possible way and always with the objective of bringing about positive change. Not to correct someone is nothing more than disguised selfish self-love. She warns Gregory XI that the desire to merely «live in peace» with those in error «is often the greatest cruelty».<sup>47</sup> No one was exempt from her tough love and her friends, such as Raymond, were often the recipients of the sharpest rebukes. For example, she strongly chastised him when he decided, out of a legitimate fear of being killed, not to cross the border into France so as to deliver a message from Urban VI to Charles V, and called him «a child» who had been driven off and «willingly fled, very happy that God made concessions to your weakness!»<sup>48</sup>

In her dealings with others, Catherine *appeals to our human dignity*, made as we are in the divine image and likeness. In keeping with a certain tradition, she hardly mentions the Commandments but speaks often of the virtues and of the necessity of our «putting on virtue» after «having stripped» ourselves of vice, or

<sup>45</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 108.

<sup>46</sup> There is an autobiographical echo in the *Dialogue*, c. 100, when the eternal Father tells Catherine that souls who have clothed themselves in God's will «find joy in everything. They do not sit in judgment on my servants or anyone else, but rejoice in every situation and every way of living they see, saying, "Thanks to you, eternal Father, that in your house there are so many dwelling places!" And they are happier to see many different ways than if they were to see everyone walking the same way, because this way they see the greatness of my goodness more fully revealed».

<sup>47</sup> Letter 239.

<sup>48</sup> Letter 333.

«planting virtue» after having «dug out vice» with the «knife of conscience». <sup>49</sup> Sin is loathsome and repugnant, but human nature, although wounded by sin, still reflects the beauty of God. «We love God and hate ourselves – not the self that is [God's] creation, but the self we see rebelling against our Creator». <sup>50</sup>

Catherine adapts herself to individual persons and situations. Her principle here is stated in the *Dialogue* when the eternal Father tells her, «Reprove yourself if ever the devil or your own short-sightedness should do you the disservice of making you want to force all my servants to [go] the same way you yourself follow». <sup>51</sup> She strove to give «everyone the right food». <sup>52</sup> Her sensitivity to the uniqueness of each person and situation is seen most clearly in her letters, as noted by the Dominican Thomas Deman of *le Saulchoir* in his 1935 study:

We must be careful that her resoluteness is not taken for rigidity: faithful to what she is thinking, she adapts the expression to the needs or capacities of her audience. She says the same thing, but she says it differently, according to whom she is writing (a Jew, a princess, a grieving mother, a religious): she possesses a gift of versatility and mobility, which is nothing else than a fine understanding of concrete situations and the consciousness of what is original in each particular case. <sup>53</sup>

## Theological Method

Among all the Doctors, Catherine is unique in the fact that she was illiterate for most of her life and therefore her thoughts

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Dialogue*, c. 23.

<sup>50</sup> *Letter* 101.

<sup>51</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 104.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 119.

<sup>53</sup> Th. DEMAN, OP, *La théologie dans la vie de sainte Catherine de Sienne*, «Supplément à la "Vie Spirituelle"» 1 Janvier 1935, [3]. I am grateful to Sr. Pauline Nugent, CCVI, PhD, for the translation.

had to be dictated to others. Regardless of this fact, every Doctor of the Church is a theologian and has an «eminent doctrine», as Jean Galot, SJ, states:

The doctor is one who has set forth revealed doctrine manifesting deep *understanding* of this doctrine and giving it an *expression* worthy of admiration, so that a special charism of light granted by the Holy Spirit can be recognized in him. What distinguishes the charism of the doctor, in fact, is the excellence of the doctrine, the way in which he understands and expounds revelation. This charism implies an effort of doctrinal penetration, reflection and elucidation, with regard to the mysteries of the faith. This requires a certain *personal originality*, so that it is possible so to speak of a real contribution to doctrinal development. <sup>54</sup>

Catherine, like the other women Doctors, Sts. Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux, presents religious truth not from the perspective of scholarship but rather from that of an intimately lived experience. I have described her elsewhere as a «doctrinal mystical theologian» who, like all genuine mystics, illuminates particular aspects of revelation afresh and makes certain accepted but neglected truths astonishingly clear. <sup>55</sup> Her major work, the *Dialogue*, is an example of a type of private revelation known as a successive locution. Private revelation has a legitimate role in the Church, as stated in the *Catechism*: to assist the faithful in grasping more and more the full significance of Christ's definitive revelation and to help «live more fully by it in a certain period in history». <sup>56</sup>

What does this unlettered woman of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, whose writings Yves Congar, OP, nevertheless described as «incredibly

<sup>54</sup> J. GALOT, SJ, *Recognize the Charism in its Specific Value*, «L'Osservatore Romano», Weekly Edition in English, June 29, 1981, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> See McDermott, *Catherine of Siena. Spiritual development in her life and teaching* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 225.

<sup>56</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 66-67.

dogmatic», have to say to theologians today?<sup>57</sup> First and foremost, an examination of her life and teaching shouts resoundingly to us that “doing” theology is essentially not a technique. Before talking about God, the theologian must be in communion with him. An approach to the truths of the faith that is rooted in contemplation is therefore necessary. Theologians who lack the authentic *gnosis* or love-knowledge of the Beloved which arises from contemplative union with God will produce defective or aberrant theologies, at best fixated on minutiae of no importance or at worst altogether false.

The fascinating story of the learned Franciscan theologian Lazzarino da Pisa, recounted by Fra Bartolomeo Dominici in his deposition, is a case in point. Jealous of Catherine’s popularity among the Sieneese, he sought her out only for the purpose of exposing heresy or ignorance on her part. But in the end Lazzarino is turned around by her and comes to realize that «he knew only the outer rind while she had penetrated the sweet essence».<sup>58</sup> Learned people, says the eternal Father in the *Dialogue*, often «neither see nor understand anything but the outer crust, the letter of Scripture. They receive it without any relish».<sup>59</sup> Catherine appreciates true learning but scorns learned people who «never understood learning because the horns of pride kept them from tasting its sweet marrow».<sup>60</sup> Ever the devoted disciple of «quel Paoluccio», she is entirely in sympathy with his criticism of those who are «ever learning and never attaining to knowledge of the truth» (2Tim 3,7) and thus blow about like leaves in the wind.

<sup>57</sup> Y. CONGAR, OP, *Le Saint-Esprit dans les prières de Sainte Catherine de Sienne*, in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi Cateriniani*, Siena-Roma, 24-26 aprile 1980, Roma 1981, p. 333 (Online: [http://www.centrostudicateriniani.it/download/Congresso\\_internazionale\\_di\\_studi%20cateriniani.pdf](http://www.centrostudicateriniani.it/download/Congresso_internazionale_di_studi%20cateriniani.pdf)).

<sup>58</sup> TAURISANO, *Santa Caterina da Siena nei ricordi dei discepoli*, p. 132-136; for an English translation, cf. McDermott, *Catherine of Siena*, p. 227-230.

<sup>59</sup> *Dialogue*, c. 124.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 132.

Catherine reminds us of the importance of always keeping before us the full meaning of revealed truths, of “relishing” it, and never allowing ourselves to be lulled into complacency from over-familiarity with them. All truth is transformative, and God has revealed nothing of himself that is of no importance to us. Her penetration of the significance of doctrines such as the Incarnation, Redemption, and the human person’s creation in *imago Dei* overflows in her zeal to make it known to others. Nowhere can her enthusiasm be seen more clearly than in her engrossment with the shedding of God’s blood for us. The blood, for Catherine, was the key that unlocks for us the truth about God. It manifests the truth that is both ancient and *new*, as she says in a letter to a Carthusian:

*His blood demonstrates the ancient truth revealed to us anew.* It is ancient in so far as we were in God’s holy mind from eternity; it became new for us when God created us in his own image and likeness, giving us being so that we might enjoy his supreme eternal good, the good he has in himself. But *we didn’t comprehend this new truth very well*, we didn’t in truth believe that God had created us to give us eternal life. ... *The blood revealed this truth to us anew.*<sup>61</sup>

Far from being a piece of inert information for Catherine, the blood of Christ, as the late English Dominican Kenelm Foster says, «expresses and symbolizes a positive active force; and to enter the blood is to enter the field of this force».<sup>62</sup> Catherine enjoins us to bathe, immerse, wash, nourish, satiate, fortify, drown, forget, warm, inebriate and clothe ourselves «in the blood».<sup>63</sup>

This enthusiasm for the truths of the faith and refusal to become accustomed to them is noted by Deman:

<sup>61</sup> Letter 315. Emphasis mine.

<sup>62</sup> K. FOSTER, OP, *St. Catherine’s Teaching on Christ*, «Life of the Spirit» 16 (1962), p. 318-319 (Online: [www.drawnbylove.com](http://www.drawnbylove.com)).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Letter 333 to Raymond of Capua.

To the theologian who reads the *Dialogue*, these pages may often seem of ordinary value. All, or nearly all, that the saint teaches him, he already knows, and in a certain sense, he knows it better. His own reasoning has greater rigor, his essays more order, his style greater sobriety, not to mention that he scrutinizes the pre-suppositions and the doctrines of which Catherine has kept only the flower. But this theologian is not a good judge. Perhaps he has reached a point of familiarity with these doctrines that their immense meaning and astounding grandeur cease to impact him. He no longer perceives their force. Who knows if he has not come to find "normal" the affirmations which in reality are the most unexpected and the most divine? This is where Catherine surpasses the theologian. She knew, as if from within, the truth of the doctrines that she relates to us. Without having scrutinized them abstractly, she perceived their full meaning. These are two very different things. It is only too true that one may analyze basic knowledge most correctly and in a most scholarly manner, without touching, without experiencing, without perceiving the reality with which it is charged. Catherine, on the other hand, penetrates admirably right to the heart of this reality.<sup>64</sup>

Having perceived the "full meaning" of religious truth and relished it, Catherine was impelled to communicate it to others in an array of continually changing images of walled cities, pasta, hearths, burning logs, worms, nursing infants, casks of wine, roasting lambs, tables, eagles, pregnant women, etc.

The theologian can learn yet another lesson from Catherine. Anyone who studies her works soon realizes that there is always an ecclesial orientation. She never comes across as isolated from the Body of Christ or as someone seeking originality at any cost. Instead, she is the daughter of a tradition which she echoes joyfully in her own sunny Italian way. This is not surprising because, as the contemporary spiritual writer Jacques Philippe says, «contemplation brings us into the heart of the mystery of the

<sup>64</sup> DEMAN, p. [20].

Church... The grace of prayer always integrates the one praying more fully into the mystery of the Church».<sup>65</sup> Catherine's increased concern for the moral and spiritual reform of the Church reflects a deepened interiority and realization of her spousal relationship with Christ and, therefore, with his Body the Church. The further we pass along the Christ-Bridge, she says, the more we are concerned with the honor of God, the salvation of souls and the reform of the Church.<sup>66</sup>

Her solidarity with others, communion with the Church, tireless self-giving, renunciation of all egoism, and spirit of wholehearted forgiveness can all be glimpsed in a remarkable passage in a letter to Raymond. Believing that Pope Gregory XI was angry with her, Catherine, not wanting to annoy him further, asked Raymond to communicate to him the following message:

Holiest Father, punish me, but punish me in reason, not in anger. With whom shall I take refuge if you forsake me? Who else will support me? To whom shall I go if you banish me? My persecutors hunt me and I flee to you and to the other children and servants of God. And were you to leave me and no more to care for me, but to be angry with me, I would hide myself in the wounds of Christ (you are His Vicar); and I know that He will receive me, for He wills not the death of a sinner. And when I had been received by Him you would not send me away, but we would stand together, each in his own place and fight courageously with the weapons of virtue for the sweet Bride of Christ.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> J. PHILIPPE, *Time for God*, New York 2008, p. 77.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *Dialogue*, c. 133.

<sup>67</sup> Letter 267 quoted in J. JORGENSEN, *Saint Catherine of Siena*, London - New York - Toronto 1938, p. 278-279.

## Relevance Today

Pope John Paul II made the following observation in his apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte* at the close of the jubilee year 2000:

Is it not one of the "signs of the times" that in today's world, despite widespread secularization, there is a *widespread demand for spirituality*, a demand which expresses itself in large part as a *renewed need for prayer*? Other religions, which are now widely present in ancient Christian lands, offer their own responses to this need, and sometimes they do so in appealing ways. But we who have received the grace of believing in Christ, the revealer of the Father and the Savior of the world, have a duty to show to what depths the relationship with Christ can lead. The great mystical tradition of the Church of both East and West has much to say in this regard. It shows how prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit's touch, resting filially within the Father's heart.<sup>68</sup>

Catherine, a layperson whose writings were intended not for cloistered religious but for everyone, stands out in the history of the Church as someone «wholly possessed by the divine Beloved» who shows us, perhaps even more by her life than by her marvelous doctrine, «to what depths the relationship of Christ can lead». Although she lived long ago, she validates for our time, as she did for her own, the path that Jesus himself trod and is a supreme example of the thomistic axiom that grace elevates nature and takes away nothing of value.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 *Novo millennio ineunte* (6 January, 2001), § 33 (Online: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_20010106\\_novo-millennio-ineunte\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html)).

<sup>69</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter On the Occasion of the Six-Hundredth Anniversary of the Death of St. Catherine of Siena *Amantissima Providentia*, English translation from *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, June 23, 1980, 7 (Online: [www.drawnbylove.com](http://www.drawnbylove.com)).

Before the Second Vatican Council, Karl Rahner, SJ, expressed the hope that in the future spirituality would be more theological and theology more spiritual. Catherine has a contribution to make in the realization of this hope. She answers and informs the demand today for a «lived theology»,<sup>70</sup> a theology that is not disconnected from life. We have already spoken of the way in which she points theologians toward a more contemplative approach to theology but she also serves as a corrective to the various strands of contemporary spiritualities whether they are rooted in Christianity or not. Often intellectually shallow and individualistic, the emphasis is frequently on lived experience separated from reason, resulting in a kind of spiritual narcissism in which one is preoccupied with a quest for "personal fulfillment," "authentic existence," "becoming fully alive," and "higher states of consciousness" that is contrary to Catherine's absolute surrender, total gift of self, and complete receptivity to the three divine Persons of the Trinity mirrored in her communion with others and expounded in her teachings.

Evelyn Underhill, in her renowned work *Mysticism: A study in the nature and development of spiritual consciousness*, attests to the fact that Catherine's life and teaching merit attention:

The true successor of Dante as a revealer of Reality, and next to St. Francis the greatest of Italian mystics, Catherine exhibits the unitive life in its richest, most perfect form. She was a great active and a great ecstatic: at once politician, teacher, and contemplative, holding a steady balance between the inner and the outer life. Well named, "the mother of thousands of souls," with little education she yet contrived, in a short career dogged by persistent ill-health, to change the course of history, rejuvenate religion, and compose,

<sup>70</sup> The expression «lived theology» is from JOHN PAUL II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 27.

in her "Divine Dialogue," one of the jewels of Italian religious literature.<sup>71</sup>

Let us hope that in the years ahead Catherine's rich spiritual teaching will receive the attention which it has always deserved and which is so long overdue.

### Abstract

La vita e l'insegnamento spirituale di s. Caterina da Siena costituiscono un magnifico esempio di umanità ben riuscita, perché ha realizzato lo scopo di ogni esistenza umana, il dialogo e la comunione con il Padre, il Figlio e lo Spirito e quindi anche con il nostro prossimo, al centro della Trinità. La sua intima partecipazione alla vita trinitaria si attuò con un radicale dono di sé, con un amore per il prossimo che era immerso in Dio e quindi dimentico di sé. Caterina ha così molto da insegnarci, per entrare nella comunione con Dio e con i fratelli. Da lei possiamo imparare le caratteristiche di tale comunione, l'attrazione che Caterina sapeva suscitare, il suo metodo per il cammino teologico, il suo modo di "fare" teologia, e la sua attualità rispetto alle problematiche della società contemporanea.

<sup>71</sup> E. UNDERHILL, *Mysticism. A study in the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness*, New York 1930, p. 467.

## *La antropología cristiana en Santa Catalina de Sena*

PEDRO FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ, OP  
España

Entro en este trabajo considerando no sólo el pensamiento, sino sobre todo la vida de Santa Catalina de Sena (1347?-1380), advirtiendo que la armonía entre su obra y su acción fue fruto no sólo de lo que escuchaba y veía fuera, sino sobre todo de lo que experimentaba y asumía dentro de sí. En Catalina hay una entereza de pensamiento y de acción, que procede definitivamente de su comunión con Dios y de su entrega total al designio de Dios sobre el hombre y sobre la sociedad religiosa y política de su tiempo. Los raudales de la gracia divina, a manera de fuerza impetuosa, brillaron en ella de manera excepcional, merced también a sus grandes cualidades humanas de inteligencia y voluntad.

Esta comunión densa entre lo que fue e hizo Santa Catalina se percibe en la unidad que existe entre el *Diálogo*, el *Epistolario* y el *Oracional*, es decir, en la obra dictada por ella. En el *Diálogo*, el *Libro* lo llamaba ella, encontramos el desarrollo del proyecto providente de Dios Padre, Hijo y Espíritu Santo, sobre el hombre; en el *Epistolario* encontramos la aplicación de este proyecto divino a las circunstancias de la vida humana en los niveles individual y social; y en el *Oracional* todo ello se transforma en oración de intercesión, acción de gracias, alabanza y adoración. Ahora bien, sin el Maestro divino, la primera y dulce verdad, ella no habría percibido y plasmado en la vida y en la palabra, con aquella fuerza luminosa, la dignidad del hombre, dotado de razón, y su vocación de vida eterna, iluminada por el don de la fe.