

PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS AS GOOD NEWS

# Liguorian

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**All Work and  
No Pray**

**Corinthian  
Correspondence**

**Papal  
Crisis or  
Growing  
Pains?**

# Catherine

*of Siena*

**Living the  
Lenten Message**

**Lent  
&  
Easter  
Wisdom**



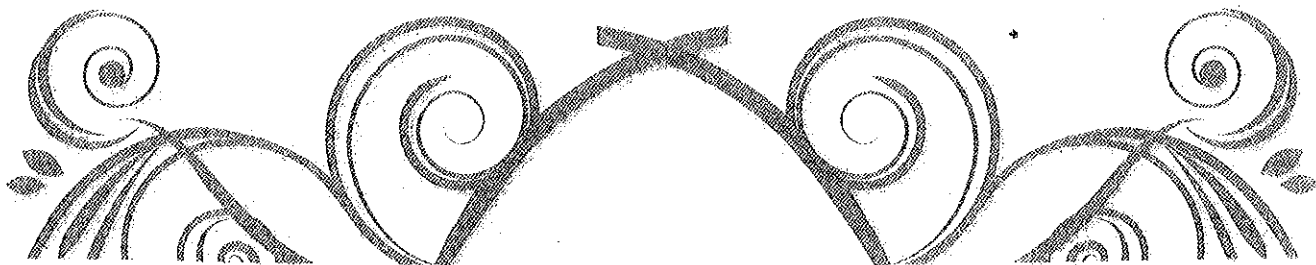
# Catherine *of Siena*



**LIVING THE LENTEN MESSAGE**

**Thomas K. McDermott, OP**

*L*ent is a time when we pause and reflect on whether we are becoming the kind of persons God made us to be. There should be nothing boring or self-diminishing about our reflection during this season, because to believe in God is a great adventure that can be compared to an exhilarating mountain hike with the saints as our trustworthy guides. Certainly one of the most outstanding guides is Saint Catherine of Siena, Italian Dominican mystic and doctor of the Church, who died in 1380 at the age of thirty-three.



Most people, if they are familiar with Catherine at all, know that she went to Avignon, France, and urged Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome, which he did. Less known is her spiritual teaching found in the compendium of her spiritual thought known as *The Dialogue*, her 381 letters to all types of people (popes, kings, a mercenary, a prostitute, craftsmen, merchants, and a homosexual) and 26 prayers. Taken as a whole, her “writings” (if they can be called that, because she was an illiterate and dictated her letters to secretaries—sometimes three at a time) help us grasp the full significance of the Gospel so that we can live more fully by it in our own time.

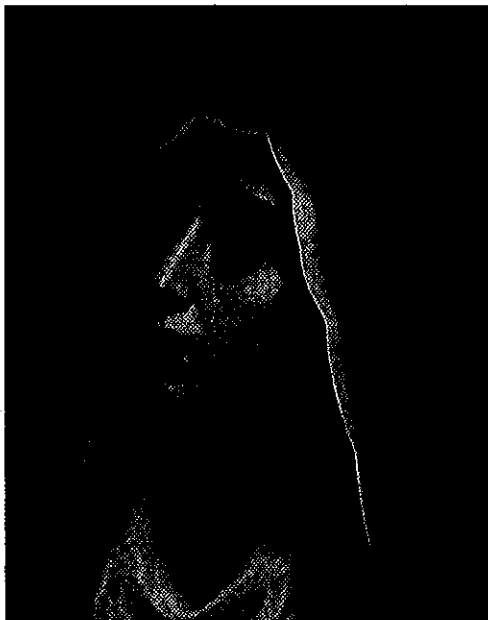
Catherine had a sunny Italian disposition, graced by an “outgoing affability in her charity, and a charming graciousness in her dealings with others,” according to Blessed Raymond of Capua, her spiritual director, friend, and biographer. A woman once told Raymond that every time she saw Catherine, she would feel happy and inclined to pray. “She had a special charm,” he says, “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 God.” Once, on her way to the nearby Dominican church in Siena, a poor woman approached her. Completely forgetful of self, Catherine succeeded so well in counseling her that the woman began to laugh with joy and said, “This young woman comforted me so much that I feel quite at peace with my whole self.”

Her charm, however, did not preclude her strength of character, as shown in her willingness to go to any extent for

the “honor of God and the salvation of souls.” To the vacillating Pope Gregory XI, she wrote, “Since Christ has given you authority and you have accepted it, you ought to be

using the power and strength that is yours. If you don’t intend to use it, it would be better and more to God’s honor and the good of your soul to resign.” Her criticism of the Church and the hierarchy, however, always came from her place at the very heart of the Church, which she loved with all her being.

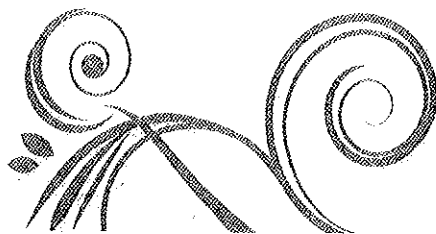
What was it about Catherine of Siena’s faith that made her the “people person” she was, filled with an uninhibited love for God and neighbor, someone of “complete dimensions,” as John Paul II described her? Let us look briefly at her spiritual thought as found in her writings, which afford us a wonderful glimpse into her faith and worldview.



*What was it about Catherine of Siena’s faith that made her the “people person” she was, filled with an uninhibited love for God and neighbor?*

Catherine was enamored with truth. The two most important truths are the truth about the human person and the truth about God. The truth about what it means to be human is that we are finite creatures who will one day return to dust. Everything we have is God’s gift. Without God’s sustaining us at every moment of our existence, we

would simply cease to exist. Apart from God, we are, quite literally, “no-thing.” This thought alone might cause us to become depressed and despairing if it were not for another facet of this truth: we are made in God’s own divine image and likeness. This brings us to the truth about God: he created us in his own image and likeness because he wants to be in relation with us so that he can share with us his “wealth”—his divine life, joy, and beauty.



***Alms need not be in the form of food, money, or clothing, but in any action that comes from an authentic desire to help others.***

These two fundamental truths—the truth about what it means to be a human being and the truth about God—must always be kept together or we would fall into despair or presumption. Taken together, they tell us that we have no being apart from God, but because we are made in God's image and likeness and are capable of receiving his divine life, we are also precious, loved, and important. This double truth, seemingly so simple and yet so profound, is the cornerstone of Catherine's entire spiritual thought and the invisible foundation of her own amazing life.

But there is more. God, on his own initiative and out of love, has chosen to reveal more of himself. When God became man at the Incarnation, he made himself "little" so that we might see him and know the truth about him. Before Bethlehem, God was a "deep abyss" or a "peaceful sea" to which human beings had no point of entry. In becoming man, God made of himself a portal, a gate, a bridge, into the mystery of the Trinity. The truth about God was made most fully known at Calvary when, out of love, the God-man spilled every drop of his blood for his "rational creatures." This fact absolutely preoccupied Catherine, and the blood of Christ became for her the great symbol of a new field of divine energy and the possibility of a whole new way of life. In her letters she urges us to step into this field by bathing, immersing, washing, nourishing, satiating, fortifying, drowning, forget-

ting, warming, inebriating, or clothing ourselves in this blood.

Lent is a time for spiritual growth, and Catherine has much to teach us on the subject. The eternal Father, she said, sent his Son as a bridge between heaven and earth. We are pilgrim travelers

who move forward on this bridge by increasing in knowledge and love of God. "One who knows more loves more," Catherine says in *The Dialogue*. The journey along the bridge is in three stages. In the first stage, the pilgrim traveler is the type of Christian who fulfills his or her religious obligations not out of love, but out of fear of God's punishment. Fear, however, cannot bring us to God. Because we are made by Love and for love, we are always looking for something to love. As we know and love God more, we are transformed into the "faithful servant" who does the right thing no longer out of fear but out of love—sadly, love for God's gifts instead of God himself. This type of love is actually nothing more than self-love. As knowledge and love increase, the faithful servant is re-created as a "friend" and then a "child" of God, who loves God not for his or her own sake but for God's sake, like a good son or daughter loves a parent. This Lent we can hear Catherine challenging, "What kind of love do *you* have for God?"

The truth about our love of God is reflected, Catherine says, in the quality of our love of neighbor. Do we love our neighbor primarily because we want to feel good about ourselves or feel accepted? Do we love God because we enjoy the occasional good feeling we experience in prayer or solely for the sake of going to heaven? If so, Catherine says, we don't really love God or neighbor, but ourselves.

The pilgrim traveler passes along

the Christ-bridge with "two feet": love of God and love of neighbor. The more one loves God, the more one loves "whatever the One we love loves." Of all his visible creatures, God loves human beings the most. But we can only love God and others as much as we know that God loves us: "It is the nature of love to love as much as we feel we are loved." Knowledge and understanding of the truth of God's radical love for us are crucial.

As we come to know and love God, we naturally reach out in love of our neighbors. Lent is traditionally the time in which we express our love for neighbor through almsgiving. Catherine would say that our alms need not be in the form of food, money, or clothing, but rather any action that comes from an authentic desire to help others in any number of ways. It might be something as simple as just listening to someone. She herself was known in and around Siena for her corporal works of mercy, anonymously dropping off much-needed food at the doors of the needy. As a member of a group of single laywomen who had associated themselves with the Dominican Order, she nursed terminally ill members who had breast cancer and leprosy. Her most heroic acts, however, were for the spiritual well-being of the Church, the Holy Father, and her neighbor.

Sin, for Catherine, was much more than merely breaking God's law. When we sin, we do harm first and foremost to *ourselves*; our God-given humanity "shrinks" as the divine likeness in us disappears. Christ commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and Catherine says that *we* are our "chief neighbor." We must love ourselves with God's own love and not in any disordered or selfish way. Acts of penance—in which we express repentance for our sin and atone for the damage done—are a traditional part of Lent and should not be trivialized.

Such acts played an important part in Catherine's life. She distinguished, however, between the interior *virtue of penitence* and external *acts of penance*, which are the means and instruments of the virtue. "Perfection," the Lord tells Catherine, "consists not in beating down and killing the body but in slaying the perverse selfish will."

Prayer, another traditional Lenten practice, restores us to God's likeness. Contemplation flows easily from knowledge of self and knowledge of God. Despite a busy life, Catherine spent hours in prayer every day. She would urge us this Lent to put aside a few minutes each day to meditate on one or more truths of our faith: our creation in God's image and likeness, the evils that can arise when we objectify ourselves or others, that apart from God we are nothing, Christ's blood reveals that God withholds nothing, and that sin diminishes us. The best place to do this is before the Blessed Sacrament, but it can also be done in a quiet corner at home or even on our way to and from work.

Catherine would also recommend studying Scripture and the writings of the saints and mystics. One of her constant themes is "love follows knowledge." What God has revealed about himself is never neutral knowledge but, rather, is transformational. All truths of the faith have practical consequences in our daily lives. The lives of the saints have always been a fruitful source of spiritual renewal during Lent. If you're interested in knowing more about Catherine of Siena, I recommend you start by reading Arrigo Levasti's biography, *My Servant, Catherine*, available free of charge in its entirety on [www.drawnbylove.com](http://www.drawnbylove.com).

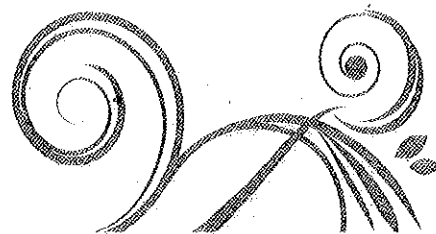
Catherine had great devotion to the Eucharist. She never took the reception of holy Communion for granted and would go into ecstasy for two or three hours every time she received it. She serves as a powerful reminder to us

of what Christ once said to her: "You could receive no greater gift than that I should give you myself, wholly God and wholly human, as your food." The eternal Father tells Catherine that he dwells in us whenever we receive the sacrament: "Just as the fish is in the sea and the sea in the fish, so am I in the soul and the soul in me, the sea of peace." (The quotes in this paragraph

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Lent should not be approached negatively. Catherine has a wonderful commentary on one of Christ's most difficult parables, the return of the unclean spirit: "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there" (Lk 11:24-26). It's not enough to simply "clean house," or repent of sin. As we remove sin, we must replace it with something positive: the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, as well as new ways of thinking and acting that make it possible for these to grow.

Gratitude and patience characterize the genuine followers of Christ who, knowing the truth about themselves and God, attribute to God alone all that we have. Ultimately, we must allow God to work freely in us in his own way, not ours. God will not ask our advice as his love re-creates us as unique, divine, supernatural images and likenesses. As Catherine once wrote to a friend, "We've been deceived by the thought that we would be more




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pleasing to God in our own way than in the way God has given us." ■

Father Thomas McDermott, a member of the Central Dominican Province, is assistant professor of spiritual theology at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and the author of *Catherine of Siena: Spiritual Development in Her Life and Teaching* (Paulist Press, 2008).

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