

# The Way of the Mystics

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## St. Catherine of Siena—A Mystic in the World

The soul cannot live without love, but always wants to love something, because she is made for love, and by love I created her.

ST. CATHERINE, *Dialogue*.

It is one of the most consoling facts that mystics seem to flourish especially in turbulent times. The graces of contemplative prayer need but a pure heart in which to take root, however much the world may be torn by wars and unrest. There is no more striking example of the mystic life lived in the turmoil of the world than that of St. Catherine of Siena. Few women have had a more amazing career than this young dyer's daughter, who made her way from the plain little room in her parents' house to the palace of the Popes of Avignon, who braved revolutionary crowds and wrote letters to cardinals and kings, and all through her life preserved her uninterrupted union with God in times perhaps as unsettled as our own. What was it that made such a life possible, what were the doctrines on which it was built? She herself has given us the answer in her *Dialogue* and *Letters*, which contain a wealth of mystical thought. For it is her mystic life that gives us the explanation of her extraordinary power over men and women, by which she converted criminals on their way to the scaffold and faced the intrigues of the French Cardinals who tried to prevent the Pope's return to Rome.

At the root of her spiritual life, the source of her power, is her doctrine of the "inner cell." This cell, which she herself never left, consists, as it were, of two compartments. They are knowledge of God and knowledge of self, summed up in the great twofold truth by which she was guided: "I am He Who is, and thou art she who is not." This fertile principle of the knowledge of God and of self nourishes man's spiritual life from the first stirrings of Divine Grace to the sublimest heights of the mystic union. At the beginning it is the root of virtue, for through the knowledge of the Divine Omnipotence and the nothingness of the creature the soul is brought to the fear of God, the beginning of wisdom, by which she turns away from those things that displease Him and does those He commands. Then, in gratitude for the benefits received, she begins to increase in the knowledge of God and of herself, and through this knowledge servile fear is gradually transformed into love. For, as God teaches St. Catherine, "the soul should season the knowledge of herself with the knowledge of my goodness," else she might fall into despair.

Yet at this stage her knowledge is far from perfect; it needs to be purified in temptation. "For one does not arrive at virtue except through knowledge of self, and knowledge of me, which knowledge is more perfectly acquired in the time of temptation,

because then man knows himself to be nothing." St. Catherine, though she received the call to perfection in her first vision at the age of six, and made a vow of virginity at seven, knew the power of temptation as only the Saints know it. When she was twelve years old her family decided to marry her, and her elder sister persuaded her to show off her beautiful hair. For a time nature had her way and Catherine made herself look pretty. But grace was not to be conquered by vanity. The future saint learned the transitoriness of all earthly beauty through the sudden death of the same sister who had taught her the female arts of pleasing. Under the impression of that death the vow of the child was renewed by the woman, and the early love of God, tested in temptation, became the full-grown love that is stronger than death. This first temptation was followed by other trials, which taught Catherine that the nothingness of the creature is most deeply experienced when the soul is visited by aridity and desolation. They are the most powerful means by which Divine Providence leads her to perfection, for, said the Lord to her, "This I do so that, coming to perfect self-knowledge, men may know that of themselves they are nothing and have no grace, and accordingly in time of battle fly to me."

Knowledge, then, is the mother of true humility, for it is inconceivable to the saint that a man should truly know himself to be a creature and not be humble. And this knowledge of self brings forth another virtue, patience, which Catherine calls the Queen of virtues and the marrow of charity, for it is "conceived in self-knowledge and in knowledge of my goodness to the souls, and brought forth by means of holy hatred and anointed with true humility." Thus the supernatural life gradually unfolds through knowledge, for it is "in the house of self-knowledge, with holy prayer, where imperfections are lost."

This truly Thomist emphasis on knowledge, which the Tertiary of Siena must have imbibed from her Dominican directors, is complemented by one of her most characteristic doctrines, her teaching on faith as "the pupil of the eye of the intellect," considered by Garrigou-Lagrange the leading idea of her whole life. At a comparatively early stage of her mystic development she asked God for the perfection in faith, and it was granted her in a vision known as her "Espousals." In a mystic festival, in the presence of St. John the Evangelist, St. Paul, St. Dominic and David who

played the harp, Our Lady asked her Divine Son to espouse Catherine to Himself in faith ; and in token of the Betrothal she received an invisible ring. With the extraordinary intellectual vigour so characteristic of her spirituality the mystic experience bore fruit in her teaching. However highly she esteems the human intellect capable of showing man his duties, it needs faith as the eye needs the pupil "in order to discern, to know and to follow the way and the doctrine of my truth—the Word incarnate ; and without this pupil of faith the soul would not see." Reason and faith are made for each other and are as inseparable as the pupil is from the eye. When the pupil is destroyed the eye cannot see ; when faith is lost reason falls into error. Thus, when the soul covers the pupil of faith "with the cloth of infidelity, drawn over it by self-love," she no longer sees. Faith has become ineffective and has ceased its mission of illuminating the soul.

It is remarkable that St. Catherine attributes this failure neither to intellectual difficulties nor to bad influences and evil habits, but to the deepest root of all spiritual failure, to love of self—that is, to sin against the First Commandment. Though she was still living in what is commonly called the "ages of Faith," the time of the Avignon Popes and the Great Western Schism was characterized precisely by this loss of the living faith through the inordinate self-love of so many of the Church's members, especially among the higher clergy, which St. Catherine spent her whole life to remedy. For faith, in her language, does not just mean an intellectual assent to the truths of Revelation. Faith for her is a dynamic force that controls the whole Christian life. If to her the weak and vacillating Gregory XI is yet "the Christ on earth," if the lukewarm or even vicious priests are yet the "Ministers of Blood" though they should commit sacrilege at every Mass they offer, it is by the "pupil of the most holy faith" that she discerns behind these miserable human instruments the tremendous spiritual realities they represent. In her letters we read again and again the command : "Open the eye of your intellect" ; for it is to the great truths of the faith that she wants to guide her "spiritual family," as she calls the group of men and women of all ages and stations in life who had gathered round her powerful personality. These truths must be discerned first by the intellect and appropriated by faith in order to be loved by the will and practised in daily life.

Among these truths there is one especially dear to her, to which she recurs again and again, the great saving truth of Redemption in the Precious Blood. Her letters begin almost invariably: "I, Catherine, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, write to you in His Precious Blood." This mystery of the Redemption she develops in the beautiful simile of the Bridge, revealed to her by God the Father. He teaches her that He has given man the Bridge of His Son "in order that, passing across the flood, you may not be drowned, which flood is the stormy sea of this dark life." On the day of the Ascension this bridge rose from earth to heaven, yet without leaving the earth, for it is made of "the height of the divinity, joined with your humanity." Through the union of both in Christ man can now safely cross the river of life, for the bridge is made of stones which signify the virtues. They were built into the bridge only after the Passion of Our Lord, which released the streams of grace, for heaven was opened "with the key of His Blood." But the Eternal Truth adds a warning, lest man should trust presumptuously in the efficacy of this Blood: "And observe that it is not enough, in order that you should have life, that my Son should have made you this Bridge, unless you also walk on it." And God showed her that "though He created us without ourselves, He would not save us without ourselves."

Yet He knows human weakness, and in His mercy, lest we should faint on the way, He has provided places of refreshment on this Bridge, which are the Sacraments. They were given us to renew our strength and to fit us for the spiritual ascent to which Christ, the Bridge, invites us. For in His crucified Body St. Catherine discerns the three stages of the spiritual life. His pierced Feet symbolize the affections, which must be detached from earthly pleasures in order to become "steps by which thou canst arrive at His Side which manifests to thee the secret of His Heart, because the soul, rising on the steps of her affection, begins to taste the love of His Heart, gazing into that open Heart of my Son." St. Catherine was one of the first mystics to whom, as to St. Gertrude, God revealed the Sacred Heart. It plays, however, a smaller part in her life than in that of the Benedictine Saint. In this passage from the *Dialogue* access to the Sacred Heart symbolizes the second stage of the spiritual life, the illuminative way, in which the soul acquires the virtues. Only when she has passed this second step "the soul reaches out to the third, that is to the mouth

where she finds peace from the terrible war she has been waging against her sin."

"Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth"—these words have signified to St. Bernard, and, indeed, to generations of Christian mystics, the heights of the spiritual life, the Divine union tasted by the soul who has reached the summits. Though she may still suffer intensely in her lower part, she is established in the peace that surpasses all understanding, in the "ground," the *scintilla animae*, where she receives a foretaste even in this life of the beatitude of the saints in heaven. Thus the "Bridge" of the Incarnate Son is both a safe way to salvation for the multitude of the faithful, and an ascent to the heights of contemplation for those called, like St. Catherine herself, to the summits of the mystic life.

These few characteristic doctrines of the Saint have been pointed out because her life is penetrated probably to a higher degree than that of any other woman mystic by theology. Maxime Gorce calls her "une très grande théologienne"; but her theology was learned not in the lecture room but in the school of contemplation; it was, according to the verdict of the Church in the process of her canonization, infused. The infused knowledge of the Saints is a complex thing, as we have already seen in the case of St. Hildegard. It abstracts neither altogether from the natural gifts and inclinations of the subject, nor can it be accounted for by human agencies alone. As regards the first point, St. Catherine was certainly influenced by her Dominican entourage; her stress on truth and on the importance of the intellect are thoroughly Dominican. On the other hand, her doctrine is of a surety of touch, a theological accuracy and a mystic elevation which would be admirable in a trained theologian but which are altogether marvellous in a young woman of very little education. It cannot be explained except by supernatural illumination, working on the natural data of an unusual intelligence helped by constant intercourse with theologians. For infused knowledge has a certain likeness to artistic inspiration. This, too, presupposes the ordinary groundwork, the technique that can, and indeed must be learned. But in order to produce a real work of art the artist needs "inspiration," a mysterious force that cannot be acquired but is a "gift." Thus also grace, on the natural foundations of human influences and personal leanings, builds up its edifice of infused knowledge

by which the contemplative penetrates the mysteries of faith in a manner far more profound and vitalizing than the theologian whose learning is not enlivened by the mystic current.

It has seemed necessary to insist on the intellectual side of St. Catherine's mysticism in order not to be taken aback by the extraordinary states in which her life abounds. For even an expert in spirituality of the rank of a Henri Bremond could prefer the Ursuline Beata Marie de l'Incarnation to the Saint of Siena because, he writes, "Catherine de Sienne pâmée entre les bras de ses compagnes, ne nous scandalise point, mais nous l'aimerions mieux debout." This is a serious misunderstanding which, moreover, applies not only to St. Catherine, but to all mystics whose interior life expresses itself in strange physical phenomena.

The idea of St. Catherine "in a swoon in the arms of her companions" was probably suggested by the well-known picture of Sodoma representing the imprint of the Stigmata. There is, as the remarks of Bremond show, a school of thought that tends to minimize these "extraordinary" graces and to be apologetic about them, as if they were almost disreputable incidents in the lives of the Saints of which the less said the better. This may be a salutary reaction against an unhealthy avidity for these things; but for all our insistence that the essence of mysticism does not consist in them, we have to remember that the Church, by sanctioning special feasts, e.g., of the Stigmata of St. Francis and of those of St. Catherine, has herself set the seal of approval to the supernatural origin and the high spiritual significance of these states. There is nothing unhealthy or hysterical about the physical conforming of the body to the Body of the crucified Spouse of the soul. It is a well-known phenomenon even in the natural sphere that a long marriage tends to produce a surprising likeness in the features of husband and wife. Thus in the realm of the supernatural God chooses some men and women especially dear to Him and produces in them certain physical likenesses to His Incarnate Life. In St. Catherine's case this physical assimilation even went so far that on one occasion, when her director, Bl. Raymund of Capua, could not believe in the greatness of the revelations granted to her, he suddenly saw her face changed into that of Our Lord, and when, overawed, he asked her who she was, she answered: "I am He Who Is."

It is, indeed, the greatness of the revelations that causes these

phenomena, and St. Catherine's life was particularly rich in them. One of the most extraordinary among them is that known as her "mystic death," which was produced by the sudden overpowering realization of Our Lord's love for souls. At the thought of it her heart seemed to break, she entered into an agony, and, to all appearances, lay dead for four hours. According to her own testimony she enjoyed during these hours something akin to the Beatific Vision, and at the same time she was shown the pains of purgatory and hell. When she returned to life she wept three days with grief at being once more separated from the full union with her Lord, just as St. Teresa, coming out of her famous "ecstasy of Salamanca," exclaimed "I die because I cannot die." St. Catherine's mystic death, which seems in a way to have resembled St. Paul's great rapture during which he knew not whether he was "in the body or out of the body," prepared her for a more intense apostolic life, which had until then been confined mainly to the nursing of the sick and the visiting of the poor, and inflamed her with that burning love of souls that was to overcome all obstacles to her mission and convert the most hardened sinners. For such extraordinary graces are almost always given for others, and they have to be bought invariably by suffering.

The sufferings of the Saints are of those mysterious realities that can be understood only in the light of the Passion of Christ. The mystics' thirst for suffering, so conspicuous in their lives, yet so unintelligible to human nature, is a sign of their intimate union with the Lord who said to His disciples: "If any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." St. Catherine had her full share in this Cross, in illness and slander, in opposition and misunderstandings. But what weighed most heavily on her and what was most intimately connected with her mystic life was the state of the Church, "the Spouse of Christ" as she loves to call her, corrupted by the vices of the clergy and soon to be torn by schism. When this Great Western Schism, which she had long foreseen, became a reality, her ardent love impelled her to make the supreme sacrifice and to offer her life for the Church. "Then the devils called out havoc upon me, seeking to hinder and slacken with their terrors my free and burning desire. So they beat upon the shell of the body; but desire became the more kindled, crying: O Eternal God, receive the sacrifice of my life in this mystical body of Holy Church! I have nothing to



give Thee save what Thou hast given to me. Take then my heart and press it out over the face of Thy Spouse." Her desire was fulfilled to the letter. From that time until her death the remaining months of her life were one long agony of physical and spiritual torments. "This body of mine remains without any food, without even a drop of water; in such tortures as I never at any time endured. . . . In this way, and many others which I cannot tell, my life is consumed and shed for this sweet Bride. I by this road, and the glorious martyrs by blood."

Thus, at the end of her life, St. Catherine was perfectly conformed to her Lord by the mystery of vicarious suffering. She had throughout the period of her apostolic activities performed terrifying penances and endured intense sufferings on behalf of sinners. But now she did it all for the Church as a whole and in obedience to a formal command from God, who, in answer to her anxious question: "What can I do, O unsearchable fire?", said to her: "Do thou offer thy life anew." The possibility of suffering for others is a necessary consequence of the teaching on the Mystical Body given by St. Paul, who could say of himself that he filled up in his body what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ. For the sufferings of the mystics are in a very real sense the extension of the Passion, and the redemptive power accorded to them by Divine Love is part of the great redemptive process, perfectly accomplished by the author of our Redemption on the Cross, yet mystically "filled up" in the sufferings of the members of His Body, which is the Church.

Thus the last months of St. Catherine's life were a slow crucifixion in which she, purified of her own faults as she had doubtless long been, could offer the sufferings of her soul and body in expiation for the Church Militant. Shortly before her death a sign was given her of her approaching end: she felt the ship of the Church resting on her shoulders and fainted under the weight. The last Lent of her life she heard Mass at dawn every day. At the hour of Terce she went to St. Peter's, where she remained in prayer for the peace of the Church till Vespers, thus fulfilling her own words: "When I depart out of this body, I shall truly have consumed and given my life in the Church and for the Church."

*Pretiosa est in conspectu Domini mors Sanctorum ejus.* St. Catherine's death was the consummation of her mystic life. She had always desired martyrdom, and if the actual outpouring of

her blood was denied her, she poured out her life mystically as an acceptable offering. With her body reduced to no more than skin and bones the living flame of love for God and for His Spouse seems to have literally burned her out, until the life of grace, so powerful in her on earth, could unfold into the unending life of glory in heaven.