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# DOCTRINE AND LIFELINE



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# WHERE IS THE NEW PENTECOST?

All intellectuals must remain free to change their minds, of course, and to admit that their thinking has been mistaken. The acquisition of knowledge, says St Thomas, sparks grief over past mistakes – which is why this gift of the Spirit is said to correspond to the beatitude ‘Blessed are those who mourn.’ It is clear that Joseph Ratzinger did change, and change fundamentally. In *Salt of the Earth*, he points out that his basic and unchanging impulse has always been to liberate the kernel of the faith from encrustations that obscure it. But *Highlights* shows a confidence in the council’s work that he did not maintain as cardinal prefect of the CDF. Reading his impressions, hot off the press at the time of the council, and comparing the history of the following decades, one sees again just how much difficulty the Catholic Church has had in attempting the change of mindset the council sought. Where is the new Pentecost that Pope John looked for? The challenge of institutional renewal is now redoubled by the clerical sexual-abuse crisis that has become a global scandal.

One particular judgment the young Ratzinger made as the council began may stick in the reader’s mind. He applauds the bishops for rejecting the Roman curia’s nominations for the conciliar commissions. The coup showed that the bishops would act ‘independently and autonomously,’ Ratzinger writes, and that the council had ‘decisively assumed the function assigned to it by canon law – the exercise of supreme power over the entire church.’

Supreme power over the entire church? As the decades since have amply attested, the full-blown collegiality that most bishops thought they were voting for has not occurred. Will Pope Benedict ever take this book off his shelf and glance back at what he wrote then? And if he does, will it jog his memory – and perhaps his conscience?

## Catherine of Siena and the Crisis in the Church

THOMAS McDERMOTT, O.P.

**J**UST AS accusations of clergy sex abuse in the U.S. seemed to be abating, a fresh wave began this spring in Europe. To many people the Church appears hypocritical and bankrupt morally and spiritually. As Jay Lindsay wrote recently in *The Huffington Post*: ‘The Church acts like a corporation fighting for survival at the expense of what is right, at the expense of its shareholders. The Church has lost its way.’

In the midst of this crisis, how can Catholics justify remaining in the Church? The words and deeds of St Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Dominican *Mantelata* or penitential woman who lived during an earlier crisis, can offer us some guidance and hope.

Catherine lived in worse times than our own because it was not only the Church which seemed to be collapsing but society and even the world itself. The Black Death or bubonic plague, one of the deadliest pandemics in human history, reached Sicily via Genoese trading ships from the Black Sea the year she was born. It is said that four-fifths of the population of Siena died from the plague the following year. There would be several successive waves of the disease during Catherine’s lifetime. One anonymous chronicler in Siena at the time wrote: ‘And no bells tolled, and nobody wept no matter what his loss because almost everyone expected death.... And people said and believed, “This is the end of the world”.’

Italy was a conglomeration of feuding monarchies, communes and republics with factions such as the Guelphs who supported the papacy and the Ghibellines who supported the northern Italian rulers. The

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peninsula was beset by foreign mercenaries, the most famous of which was the Englishman John Hawkwood to whom Catherine directed one of her 381 letters. Outside Italy, the Hundred Years War between England and France was waging and there was the additional threat of militant Islam as seen in the advance of the Turks twice to Vienna.

Catherine lived during a time of pessimism and cynicism. Barbara Tuchman, in her historical narrative *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* described the period as 'a time of turmoil, diminished expectations, loss of confidence in institutions, and feelings of helplessness at forces beyond human control.' The Popes lived in exile in Avignon between 1309 and 1377, returning to Rome only after Catherine went personally to the papal court and pleaded with Gregory XI. Monasteries and convents in Europe were decimated by the Plague, and in order to re-populate them unsuitable candidates were often accepted. The secular literature at the time described clerical celibacy as a joke. By the time Catherine died in 1380 the Church was in schism with an anti-Pope, Clement VII.

#### THE DIALOGUE

Three years before her death, Catherine (who was illiterate for most of her life) began dictating, while in a mystical state, '*il libro*' or the compendium of her spiritual teaching which we know today as the *Dialogue*. The work is God's answer to four petitions or requests made by Catherine, the first of which pertained to enlightenment regarding the situation of the Church and its moral and spiritual reform. The eternal Father's reply is found largely in chapters 110 to 134, a major portion of the book. It is here that Catherine manifests great respect and love for priests who, the eternal Father tells her, are his 'Christ' who have been sent 'like fragrant flowers into the mystic body of the Holy Church.'

Notwithstanding, she was fearless in exposing and criticizing the failings of priests and bishops. She is so indelicate, in fact, in her criticism that portions of the *Dialogue*, such as chapter 121 on homosexuality among the clergy, have been excised from various editions of the work. Catherine's theological vocabulary is that of homey images which

were constantly evolving. One image of the Church was a wine cellar in which is kept the life-giving Blood of Christ which is received in the Eucharist. The Pope is the cellar-master commissioned by Christ to administer the Blood and delegate others (priests) to assist him. The fundamental necessity of the Church is found in the fact that it, and none other, is the sole repository of the Blood of Christ which gives life to all. She saw clearly that the good of the Church was the good of humanity. Therefore, anyone who opposes the Church is his or her own enemy. The Church is the hope of the world.

Catherine was a contemplative whose love of the Church, despite its sordidness, grew in the course of her lifetime. The biographer Johannes Jorgensen said of her spiritual life:

Her love of Jesus expands, grows insatiable, infinite, is transformed into love of His Mystical Body, of the all-comprehensive, all-embracing Holy Catholic church.<sup>1</sup>

Like other saints and mystics, her contemplation brought her into the heart of the mystery of the Church. What Jacques Philippe says of St Thérèse of Lisieux could equally be said of Catherine:

[T]he more she centered her being on the love of Jesus, the more her heart grew in love for the Church.... Indeed, this is the only real way to understand the Church. Anyone who does not have a spousal relationship with God in prayer will never perceive the deepest truth of the Church's identity.<sup>2</sup>

We should not forget the dying words of another great mystic, St Teresa of Avila: 'I am a daughter of the Church.'

For Catherine, the Church is Christ and the Pope is the 'sweet Christ on earth.' However, when Catherine speaks of the sinfulness of the Church, so much present during her lifetime, she most often uses the image of the Church as the Bride of Christ, which St Paul alluded to in Ephesians 5:25. Here she imagines the Church as a beautiful maiden

1. Johannes Jorgensen *Saint Catherine of Siena*. London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co. 1938, p. 199.

2. Jacques Philippe, *Time for God*. New York: Scepter Publishers, 2008, p. 80.

whose face has been pelted and besmirched by the sins of the Church's mortal members. She often speaks of sin as leprosy on the face of the Church. It would never have occurred to Catherine to leave the Bride of Christ because of the sins of humanity. For her, the Church is infinitely more than a mere human institution.

#### OUTER AND INNER

Among various causes for the Church's sinfulness, Catherine identifies one in particular: a love for the 'outer rind' instead of the marrow, i.e., a preoccupation with surface instead of inner realities. Learned people, particularly the clergy, may know much about God, the Church, and Scripture, and yet not be in a love-union with God. The eternal Father tells her that such people 'neither see nor understand anything but the outer crust, the letter of Scripture. They receive it without relish' and 'approach this Bride [the Church] merely for her outer shell, that is, for her temporal substance, while she is quite empty of any who seek her marrow.' Bad priests 'never understood learning because the horns of pride kept them from tasting its sweet marrow.' Knowledge of Christ is not enough; we must be in *communion* with him.

Mary O'Driscoll has pointed out that Catherine saw her own lack of holiness as part of the sinful situation of the Church and acknowledged her part in it.<sup>3</sup> In her twenty-six prayers she frequently bemoans her own sinfulness. Although her sins would no doubt appear to us as the most minuscule of venial sins, she was extremely sensitive to them. As Jesus stood in solidarity with sinners at his baptism, so Catherine takes her place among sinful humanity.

#### CONVERSION

For her, the much longed-for reform of the Church was not a matter of institutional or disciplinary change, such as the abolition of celibacy, but rather a matter of *conversion*, the interior reform of the individual, beginning with the Pope himself as seen in one of her letters to Urban VI: 'Most Holy Father, it is time to detest sin in yourself, in your subjects

3. Mary O'Driscoll, O.P., 'We Remember Saint Catherine of Siena', *Spirituality*, March-April 2010, p. 128.

and in the ministers of holy Church.'

Catherine's love for the Church was certainly not confined to the sanctuary. Her long journeys to Avignon, Florence, and Rome, her letter writing to virtually all the leaders of Europe, attest to the practicality of her love.

#### 'WASH THE FACE OF MY BRIDE'

About two years before her death, the Lord commanded her to 'wash the face of my Bride, holy Church' with her prayers, sweat and tears. Every day she would drag her frail body to St Peter's basilica where she would pray for hours on behalf of the Church.

Her final act of self-offering to God occurred in another mystical experience exactly three months before her death in which she cries out to God: 'What can I do, inestimable Fire?' and he answers: 'Offer your life once more, and never let yourself rest. This was the task I set you, and now set you again, you and all who follow you.' Catherine replies: 'O eternal God, receive the sacrifice of my life into this mystical body of holy Church. I have nothing to give except what you have given me, so take my heart and squeeze it out over the face of the Bride.' Then God removes her heart (which he had mystically exchanged with his own years earlier) and, squeezes out every drop of blood over the face of the Church, washing it clean of all impurity.

Like St Paul, for whom she was a devoted pupil and kindred spirit, Catherine was willing to complete 'what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body... the Church' (Col 1:24).

#### 'BEAUTY WILL BE RESTORED'

Humanly speaking, Catherine had more reasons for abandoning the Church than we do today and yet there is not the slightest indication in her writings that she ever considered doing so. What was the basis of her hope? Undoubtedly, her belief in the human and divine dimensions of the Church undergirded her hope that one day it would be what God intended it to be. In addition, Catherine reported to her confessor and friend Raymond of Capua that the Lord had assured her several times that the Church's 'beauty will be restored.' In April

1376, she reported to Raymond a remarkable mystical experience in which the Lord

explained and made clear to me every aspect of the mystery of the persecution the Church is now undergoing and of the renewal and exaltation that is to come. *He told me that what is happening now is permitted in order to make the Church once more what she should be.*

In one of one of her most unusual mystical experiences, the Lord tells Catherine that the reform of the Church would happen with the appointment of new bishops 'and other zealous ones.' Her disciple Caffarini recounts the experience which occurred on a Christmas night when the Blessed Virgin hands her Child to Catherine who

takes him in her arms; then, as she had seen the Mother do, she puts her cheek on that of his. The Newborn had on his breast and from his side a vine full of mature grapes. Big dogs came and bit them off with their teeth and brought them to some puppies who ate all the grapes and were full. [Catherine] meanwhile prayed unceasingly for herself, for her spiritual father, for the reform of the Church, for all sinners, and she bathed the body of the holy Child in her tears. The Lord revealed to her with that vision the reform she desired, showing her that the big dogs represented the new members of the Church, that is to say the good prelates and other zealous ones appointed to renew it.<sup>4</sup>

We see a glimpse of her hopefulness in the midst of so many troubles when she once awoke from another mystical experience in which the Lord had entrusted to her a cross and olive branch to bring to the ends of the earth. She reported to Raymond: 'Then I was marvelously happy. I was so confident about the future that it seemed I was already possessing and enjoying it.'

4. *Vita di Santa Caterina da Siena. Scritta da Fr. Tommaso Caffarini, discepolo della Santa.* A cura del P. Giuseppe Tinagli. Prefazione del P. Giacomo Laurent O.P., Siena: Elio Cantagalli, 1938, p. 179. This is an abridgement in Italian of Thomas Antonii de Senis 'Caffarini', *Libellus de Supplemento* (Book II, chapter 6).

## Green Shoots of Hope and Growth

BARBARA WHELAN

WHEN THE Ryan Report was published in May 2009, the opening lines of 'The Second Coming' by W.B. Yeats came to mind:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.

When the Murphy Report was published, five months later, the final lines of the poem came to mind:

And what rough beast, its hour come at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

And I shuddered.

Yet all death contains within it the seeds of new life. Thus it might be timely to look at the New Testament accounts of the early Church in an effort to identify the green shoots which are emerging today amidst such deep pain and see if they might help us in creating a living and loving community.

So what did the early Church look like? How was it organised? How did the early Christians practise their faith and proclaim the Good News?

### STRUCTURE

From the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that the Church in Jerusalem was essentially a very simple community with little in the way of structure. The community 'remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers' (Acts 2:42). The first mention of an institutional aspect appears in Acts 6 when the Twelve called a meeting to select seven others to

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