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POVERTY: BLESSING AND WOE

A Study of the Different Senses of Poverty and its Place in the Spiritual Life According to the Writings of Catherine of Siena

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CHAPTER ONE

ONTOLOGICAL POVERTY

> "And where were you, Lord, while my heart was suffering in the agony of all those horrors?" And our Lord said: "I was in your heart...If I had not been there, those thoughts would have made an entrance to your inmost heart and you would have taken pleasure in them. But because I was present in it, your heart turned from them in loathing. And because you were disgusted with them you tried to drive them out; and because you could not drive them out you were filled with grief and sadness. It was I who was working in you all this time. Hidden in your heart, I was guarding it from your enemies on every side; but on the outward side I was allowing you to be distressed in as far as this would help to save your soul."[1]

Raymond of Capua relates this interchange between Catherine and the Lord in prayer as an illustration of Catherine's understanding of human nature and God. Catherine was beset with temptations against purity, not only with thoughts, but with vivid images and sounds as well. Furthermore, she felt abandoned by God, for in the midst of temptation God had withdrawn all feeling of His presence. Having run the gantlet of her temptations, she came through them asking the

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[1]L 1, 11, 110.

Lord, with a hint of indignation, as to His whereabouts during her trial.

In the answer given above God offers as evidence of His presence and of His goodness at work in her life the fact that she did not consent to temptation, but rather turned from it with loathing. This, together with the sadness Catherine felt at not being able to deliver herself from temptation, is testimony to her own intrinsic nothingness apart from God and of His goodness making up for her defect: she could not have resisted without Him, but would have consented to temptation. Catherine had only to look into her heart, reflecting on her experience in the light of faith, to recognize her own weakness and that it was God who was keeping her safe. God tells Catherine that He permitted this severe and prolonged temptation just so she might come to the full awareness of who she is and who He is.

What Catherine learned about herself and God in this experience of temptation is not conditioned by her time, culture, femininity, or her individual make-up. On the contrary, it is true for people of every time and in every place. She learned that, in and of themselves, all human creatures are nothing, the term she uses when speaking about the poverty of human creaturliness. Everything human beings are, have and need comes from God as a pure gift of love. This knowledge, acquired within the soul after reflecting

upon an experience of temptation or trial or weakness, is what constitutes ontological poverty.

Poverty, as explained in the Introduction, is taken to mean any deficiency in what is desired or desirable, or in what constitutes adequacy. In this particular sense of the word however, poverty does not refer to a lack of money or possessions. Rather, it refers to a person's inability to come into existence, to stay in existence, to control one's life and circumstances, to make satisfaction for sin and to avoid sin. Indeed, it signifies a human creature's inability to be, have or do anything apart from God. Therefore, based on Catherine's comments, ontological poverty is not a matter of choice (as is, for example, evangelical poverty), but is the common lot for all people necessarily. People are poor by God's design. In so far as people are human beings, they can neither refuse, alter, nor deny the fact of their inherent poverty.

Catherine does not use the words poverty (povertà) or "ontological poverty" in reference to what people learn about themselves and God. She does, however, use the word miseria, which conveys a sense of poverty or want, and she uses it in reference to human nature.[2] Catherine's focus is primarily

[2]The following are references to Catherine's use of the word miseria where it alludes to the poverty of human nature. The word miseria, wretchedness, is understood as meaning an extreme poverty, indigence, scarcity or want, not in a material, but in an ontological sense: the nothingness of human nature in and of itself. Therefore, when the word poverty is applied to human nature in this chapter, it is

on the defect or poverty of human nature in and of itself. For example, people would like to rid themselves of bothersome temptations but cannot, nor can they even resist giving in to them with their own strength. This is a first-hand experience of their own nothingness. The poverty (miseria) of human creaturliness can cause sadness, confusion, even despair, just as much as any material poverty. Lest it appear too foreboding, though, Catherine teaches that God's goodness (misericordia), meets each defect and makes up for human inadequacy.[3] In other words, men and women might be nothing in and of themselves, but they receive existence, grace, and everything else they need to live and attain the goal of heaven from God in His goodness. Therefore, dependence on God's goodness to make up for human deficiency is an important element of ontological poverty.

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based on Catherine's use of the word miseria. See D XIII, 8-10; E 23, I, pp. 75-76; E 32, I, p. 121; E 33, I, p. 124; E 41, I, p. 169 (DT III, p. 20); E 51, I, p. 197; E 70, I, p. 266 (DT XXI, p. 88); E 78, II, p. 27; E 96, II, p. 106; E 116, II, pp. 181-183; E 123, II, p. 212; E 149, II, p. 299 (DT XXII, p. 93); E 153, III, p.4; E 199, III, p. 175; E 214, III, p. 240; E 246, IV, p. 53 (DT LXXXV, p. 346); E 259, IV, p. 106; E 263, IV, p. 124; E 266, IV, p. 135; E 334, V, p. 99; E 345, V, pp. 159-160; E 352, V, p. 193; E 362, V, pp. 238-239; E 366, V, p. 260; E 369, V, p. 267.

[3]D XXX. See ST 1a, q. 21, a. 3, responsio: "To feel sad about another's misery is no attribute of God, but to drive it out is supremely his, and by misery we mean here any sort of defect. Defects are not done away with save by an achievement of goodness...God is the first source of goodness."

This chapter will seek to explain ontological poverty by answering the following questions: when do people learn about the intrinsic poverty of their nature? where do they learn about it? what is the content of ontological poverty? and, what are some of its consequences? As ontological poverty is discovered in one's knowledge or perception of self and God, the answers to these questions will be found, for the most part, in what Catherine has to say about the knowledge of self and God in general. What people learn about themselves and God is not knowledge acquired for the sake of acquisition, but is meant to influence the will: it is meant to elicit a response in the will in areas such as the practice of virtue, prayer and penance.

When is Poverty Learned?

People come to an awareness of their ontological poverty by means of experience; it is knowledge gained by everyday-life experiences, and not by means of psychological introspection or scientific study.[4] Catherine seems to know that a lesson is internalized better when discovered through

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[4]Carlo Prestipino, "S. Caterina: il conoscimento, fondamento di una vita illuminata," Il veltro XXIV, no. 5-6 (Settembre-Dicembre, 1980): 515. See also ST 1a, q. 87, a. 1, responsio: "Therefore our intellect knows itself, not by its own essence, but by means of its activity. And this in two senses. First, speaking particularly, as when Socrates or Plato perceives himself to have an intellectual soul from the fact that he perceives himself to be intellectually acting. Second, speaking universally, as when we consider the nature of the human mind from the nature of the intellect's activity."

personal experience. That is why she does not direct her listeners to attend to what she says about who they are as human beings or who God is, but tells them to be attentive to their daily experiences. Experience is their teacher. People reach conclusions regarding their own limitations, weakness, inadequacy, dependence and sinfulness from real, concrete experiences.[5] Although there are any number of experiences that can reveal a person's innate poverty, Catherine mentions a few specifically.

Events Beyond One's Control

One experience that teaches people about their inadequacy and limitations is when they find that the course of events is beyond their control, not at their command. This becomes clear, not because someone points out to them the futility of trusting in themselves and their own knowledge, but because they have lived through it:

> ...that at such and such a time you want to do something that you are neither able, nor know how to do. Sometimes you may have the knowledge but not the ability; and when you have the ability, you may not have the knowledge. Sometimes you may not have the time; and if you have the time, you may lack the desire. I give all this to you in order to provide for your salvation; so that you might

[5]"...above all it is a conclusion from daily life regarding the dissatisfaction of our heart and our radical insufficiency..." Domenico Abbrescia, "La conoscenza di sè," Lineamenti di spiritualità cateriniana (Roma: Coletti Editore, 1964), p. 12.

> know your nothingness and have reason to humble yourself rather than become proud.[6]

Whether it be in something they would like to do, have to do, or ought to do, people are not always able to integrate their know-how, ability, desire and time in order to carry out the task. This experience naturally produces a certain amount of frustration which can, with reflection, lead people to discover their poverty.

The Inclination to Selfish Love

Catherine mentions another experience that is common to all human beings. She refers to it as "your own weakness, how inclined it is, with a perverse law bound up in your members" to rebel against God.[7] This phrase, used frequently by Catherine, alludes to St. Paul's famous commentary on the "law of the flesh" (Rom. 7:14-23). St. Paul uses it to refer to the human situation prior to redemption: at enmity with God, slaves to sin, powerless to do good, prone to evil, and

[6]D CXL, 455-462. This quotation touches on a theme in Catherine's treatment of divine providence. That is, that God permits certain experiences in a person's life to bring about a desired good, ultimately their sanctification and salvation, but also their growth in self-knowledge. This theme will be treated at greater length in Chapter Three.

[7]D XCVIII, 56-79. The "perverse law of the flesh" is a component of Catherine's teaching on sin, and so will be given a more detailed study in Chapter Two.

trusting in self.[8] Catherine, however, uses it to address the baptized, who must also recognize and confess their weakness.

There is no implication here that baptism does not make a difference, that people are the same after as before, but rather a suggestion that weakness remains after baptism. Even St. Paul admits that human weakness is not abolished by baptism, cf. Rom. 8:13.[9] The difference is that after baptism people have access to a power that can make them friends of God, free from sin, and give them strength to do good and avoid evil. That power is God's gift of grace.

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[8]See Rudolph Schnackenburg, The Moral Teaching of the New Testament, trans. by J. Holland-Smith and W.J. O'Hara (New York: Seabury Press, 1962), pp. 261-268. In his commentary on Rom. 7:14-23, Schnackenburg does not support a dualistic interpretation of Pauline anthropology, identifying sin with the sensual aspect of human nature. He maintains that "flesh," while it may refer to human corporeality, signifies the weakness of the whole person, inclined to both sensual sins and sins of the spirit (anger, jealousy, etc.). The same point may be argued with regard to Catherine's writings. Sometimes her language hints of a body/spirit dualism, such as in the quotation above, or when she describes sin as "selfish sensuality", or exhorts people to have a holy hatred for their sensuality, or in her emphasis on penance. Upon closer examination though, it is clear that Catherine sees the body as a gift from God, and so it is good. She laments over spiritual sins as much as sensual ones. Furthermore, she insists that bodily penance is undertaken to mortify the selfish will.

[9]In fact, Catherine warns those who have progressed furthest in the way of perfection to remain vigilant with regard to their sensuality. Sometimes, she points out, the attraction to sin seems to be altogether dead and people think it is no longer necessary to have recourse to God or to practice self-denial. They are deceived, for "as long as we live it does not die." See D CXLV, 1302-1325; E 199, III, p. 176; E 332, V, p. 93.

Granted, those who are baptized can still assert their independence from God and fall into sin, but they are never constrained to sin by their weakness, nor are they left without any recourse when they do feel tempted.

Catherine teaches that God has "provided" men and women with this weakness (meaning He did not take it away after baptism) so that they might attain self-knowledge. By means of the tension, the constant tug-of-war between the "flesh" and the "spirit," people can acquire experiential knowledge of their inherent weakness, and of their lack of strength apart from God. Catherine says that reflection on this experience will keep people from raising their head in pride against God on account of their beauty and dignity. Instead, they will humble themselves, conscious of their weakness.

The Experience of Temptation

The inclination to sin can teach people about their ontological poverty, but they usually require the wider context of being tempted in order to discover it. That is why Catherine claims that, of all the experiences that reveal the inherent poverty of human nature, temptation (or "battle," as she calls it) is the best teacher:

> There is no better time for the soul to know herself and that I am within her than in the time of many battles. In what way? I will tell you. If the soul knows herself well, seeing herself in the midst of battle and unable to free herself or resist such that she would not have them...then she knows that she is nothing. If she were something in and of herself she would be able to rid herself

> of those unwanted temptations. In this way she humbles herself with true knowledge of herself and, with the light of most holy faith, she runs to me, God eternal, whose goodness enabled her to preserve her good and holy will from consenting during the time of battles...[10]

Experiences of temptation, like Catherine's own reported in the introduction to this chapter, are permitted by God according to individual needs, strengths, and circumstances so that each individual might come to self-knowledge.[11]

There are two elements in the above quote that explain how people learn from an experience of temptation. The first is that they cannot avoid having temptations and, once they are in the midst of them, cannot rid themselves of them.[12] The second element is that, even though they have no control over being tempted, they find that at times they can resist. The strength to resist must come from a source other than themselves, otherwise they would draw upon it to avoid being

[10]D XC, 308-321. See also D CXLIV, 1125-1148; D XLIII, 1138-1145; D LXX, 3148-3157; O XIX, 84-87; E 23, I, pp. 75-76; E 26, I, p. 88; E 78, II, pp. 27-28; E 83, II, p. 48; E 116, II, pp. 182-183; E 169, III, p. 60; E 189, III, p. 141 (DT LXXXIV, p. 345); E 221, III, pp. 277-279; E 287, IV, p. 215; E 335, V, p. 105.

[11]Catherine consoles others with the reminder that God never tests them beyond what they are able to endure. See E 116, II, p. 182; E 169, III, p. 61; E 287, IV, p. 215; 1 Cor. 10:13.

[12]Lest her disciples become disheartened by their experience of temptation, Catherine reminds them that it is not a sin to be tempted. Rather, sin lies in the will's capitulation to temptation. See E 169, III, p. 59; E 304, IV, p. 276.

tempted altogether. The first experience points to their powerlessness, whereas the second shows God making up for their defect.

There is nothing extraordinary about these experiences. They are everyday-life experiences permitted by God so that men and women might be able to recognize their ontological poverty. They happen to many people, if not all, frequently, some even daily, but they do not always lead to an insight into human nature. An important factor, then, is whether or not those involved reflect on their experience in the light of faith: "Therefore, the weak body, to the one who has the light <of faith>, is reason to be humbled."[13] Catherine teaches that people must reflect on their experiences within themselves, though it is not clear whether this is the mind, or heart, or soul. She uses the image of a house or monastic cell to refer to the locus of the process of reflection, acquisition and interiorization of knowledge gained from experience: the knowledge of self and of God's goodness at work in the person. This image will be discussed in the next section.

Where is Poverty Learned?

Probably due to her association with the Dominicans, as

[13]D XCVIII, 77-78.

a member of the Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic,[14] and under the spiritual direction of Dominican friars, Catherine was all-consumed with the search for truth. For her this search begins with the truth about human nature and God.[15] The starting point for Christian life and perfection, with baptism as a given, is knowledge of self. This knowledge leads to knowledge of God, and gives birth to the virtues of humility and charity, virtues which serve as the basis for all meritorious activity. Therefore, Catherine insists that people should acquire this knowledge of themselves and God, remain in it as if it were a house or monastic cell, and that

[14]The Sisters of Penance were lay women, mostly widows, who continued to live in their family homes while under private vows. As it was the custom for them to wear the black mantle of the Dominican Order, they were more familiarly known as the Mantellate. They devoted their lives to prayer, penance, a simple lifestyle, and to the spiritual and corporal works of mercy according to their ability and means. Catherine's active life as a Mantellate is a classic example of the freedom and opportunities afforded them by their unique status in 14th century society, being neither married women nor cloistered nuns. See L 1, 8, 77-79; Suzanne Cita-Malard, Religious Orders of Women, trans. by George J. Robinson (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964), pp. 16-18.

[15]Giuliana Cavallini proposes that the truth about God and the human creature is the dominant theme of Catherine's writings: "Truth is the substance of the Book, just as it is the characteristic of Catherine's life, thought and style." She differs from Alvaro Grion, who identifies Catherine's mystical personality with her use of blood imagery, see Alvaro Grion, Santa Caterina da Siena: dottrina e fonti (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1953), p. 13. In response, Cavallini points out that while it may be true that Catherine writes much and eloquently about the blood of Christ, it is also true that one of the main functions of the blood of Christ is to serve as a symbol of the "eternal truth": God's love and salvific will for all men and women. G. Cavallini, introduction to Il dialogo, pp. xxvii-xxxii.

they begin with a reflection on their experience in the light of faith.

In the Light of Faith

Catherine's comments on knowledge usually follow a basic progression: to see something is to know it;[16] to know something is to love or hate it, depending on the object and the person's perception;[17] and, the more one knows the object, the more one loves or hates it.[18] A deeper, more intense love is not dependent on personal intelligence or the quantity of information, but on the quality of knowing what is known. The light of faith is what supplies this quality.

Catherine's insistence on the need for the light of faith in no way belittles human reason. She regards the intellect as "the noblest aspect of the soul,"[19] referring to the light of reason as a "natural light"[20] and as the "eye of

[16]E 2, I, p. 5; E 113, II, p. 166.

[17]D I, 8-10; D XLV, 1342-1344; O VIII, 42-45; O XVIII, 28-39; E 2, I, p. 5; E 113, II, pp. 166-167; E 199, III, p. 174; E 263, IV, p. 124; E 304, IV, p. 274; E 337, V, p. 116. See also ST 1a2ae, q. 27, a. 2, responsio: "...some knowledge of a thing is necessary before it can be loved."

[18]E 47, I, p. 182; E 176, III, p. 89.

[19]D LI, 1829.

[20]D XXXII, 471-475; D CXXXVI, 226.

the soul."[21] The emphasis she puts on faith is not to the exclusion of reason, it is only that by itself reason is imperfect. What is needed is a perfect light: reason illumined by faith.[22]

The supernatural light of faith is received at baptism, but really begins to show itself at the age of discernment or reason when people use it to judge between good and evil so that they can act accordingly.[23] Catherine describes the marriage between human reason and the gift of faith by referring to faith as the "pupil" of the eye of the soul (the intellect).[24] The gift of faith does not replace reason, but completes it; the light of faith does not abolish the light of reason, but perfects it. This does not mean that in this life people have perfect knowledge of themselves, or of God in His essence. It does mean, however, that when people

[21] D XLV, 1330.

[22] E 284, IV, pp. 202-203; E 301, IV, p. 264; ST 2a2ae, q. 8, a. 1, responsio; A. Lemmonyer, "Con S. Caterina alle sorgenti della vita," S. Caterina da Siena V <sic>, n. 5 (1954): 11.

[23] D XLVI, 1408-1414.

[24] D XLV, 1330-1336. Catherine draws on a passage from Matthew's gospel (5:17) to form yet another image for the cooperation between faith and reason, comparing reason and faith to the old and new law, respectively: "...there are two lights, and one does not impede the other, but they are joined together, just as the new Law did not take away the old Law, but instead took away its imperfection" E 201, III, pp. 182-183.

reflect on their experience in the light of faith they can come to a more perfect knowledge of their poverty and of God's goodness at work in their lives.[25]

In the House of Self-knowledge

Catherine is concerned that the baptized put the light of faith to good use, judging things in its light, and responding by loving what is good and hating what is evil. In her eyes their first concern is to see and know themselves and God. These are not two different objects for consideration as much as two aspects of one object, for knowledge of God is acquired through knowledge of self.[26] Catherine does not hold that God is altogether knowable in this life, but neither does she take a strict apophatic approach to knowledge of God. Rather, she says that people come to know something of God by means of His activity in their lives. Ultimately, then, the human person is the object under consideration, but in order for self-knowledge

[25] D XCVIII, 38-50; O XVIII, 28-39; E 113, II, p. 168; E 284, IV, p. 203; ST 1a, q.12, a.13, responsio; ST 2a2ae, q. 2, a. 3, ad 3; ST 2a2ae, q. 8, a. 7, responsio.

[26] D I, 5-8; D IV, 72-76; D VII, 360-373; D XIII, 16-17; E 37, I, p. 125; E 244, IV, p. 44. See also P. Vittorio Bassan, La dottrina dell'amore in S. Caterina da Siena (Rovigo: Istituto Padano di Arti Grafiche, 1961), p. 60.

to be complete it must of necessity include the knowledge of God's goodness at work in the person.[27]

When counseling people to apply the light of faith to knowing themselves and God, Catherine frequently uses the image of a house or a monastic cell to refer to the place where this knowledge is acquired. The role of self-knowledge in the spiritual life does not originate with Catherine, nor does her use of imagery to depict where it is acquired.[28] What is perhaps original about Catherine's application of the notion and the imagery is that, while for other authors self-knowledge may be a component of Christian perfection, for her it is the foundation of perfection. This is borne out, not only by the numerous references she makes to self-knowledge, but also in what she has to say about it:

> Every perfection and every virtue proceeds from charity, and charity is nourished by humility, and humility comes from the knowledge and holy hatred of yourself, that is, of your sensuality. If you would arrive at perfection you must persevere and remain in the cell of self-knowledge, through which you will know my mercy in the blood of my only-begotten Son: drawing my divine charity to yourself with your affection; uprooting from

[27]Bassán, La dottrina dell'amore, pp. 66-67.

[28]See, for example, Augustine, De Trinitate, 10, 9 (PL 42, 980); Bernard of Clairvaux, Serm. II De diversis, 1 (PL 183, 542), De grad. hum. et sup. 1, c.7 (PL 182, 952-954), Serm. XXIII in Cant. Cant. 3 (PL 183, 885); Thomas Aquinas, ST 1a, q. 87, a. 1.

> yourself every perverse spiritual and temporal desire; hiding yourself in your house.[29]

In other words, if perfection does not begin in the house of self-knowledge, it does not begin.

Another note of originality might be found in the images Catherine uses when speaking about self-knowledge, and in what she wants to convey by them. The primary images Catherine uses when speaking about acquiring self-knowledge are "house" (casa)[30] and "cell" (cella).[31] These images represent the human soul, the place where she localizes the

[29]D LXIII, 2505-2514. See also Bassán, La dottrina dell'amore, p. 61; Lemmonyer, "Con S. Caterina alle sorgenti della vita," S. Caterina da Siena V, no. 4-6 (1953): 7; Enrico di Rovasenda, Introduzione al dialogo di S. Caterina da Siena (Genova: Biblioteca franzioniana, 1984), p. 21.

[30]D LXIII, 2514, 2576; D LXIV, 2655-2656; D LXV, 2672; D LXVI, 2711-2712, 2740-2741; D LXXII, 3247; D LXXIII, 3285; D LXXIV, 3336; E 26, I, p. 85; E 51, I, p. 197; E 83, II, p. 47; E 87, II, p. 74; E 94, II, pp. 94-96; E 102, II, p. 129; E 104, II, p. 135; E 119, II, p. 193; E 144, II, p. 284 (DT XXXIV, p. 143); E 154, III, p.5; E 188, III, p. 135; E 213, III, p. 228; E 263, IV, p. 124; E 266, IV, p. 136; E 334, V, p. 100; E 351, V, p. 188; E 358, V, p. 228; E 366, V, p. 258; E 369, V, p. 267.

[31]D I, 6-7; D LXIII, 2509; D CLXVI, 113; E 2, I, p. 8; E 30, I, p. 111 (DT I, p. 4); E 37, I, p. 143; E 41, I, p. 169 (DT III, p. 19); E 49, I, p. 191; E 70, I, p. 266 (DT XXI, p. 89); E 73, II, p. 8; E 76, II, p. 22; E 78, II, p. 27; E 82, II, p. 43; E 84, II, p. 58; E 94, II, p. 96; E 104, II, pp. 138-139; E 113, II, p. 170; E 201, III, p. 188; E 241, IV, p. 33 (DT LXXIII, p. 299); E 245, IV, p. 52; E 267, IV, pp. 146-147; E 322, V, p. 69; E 329, V, p. 83; E 353, V, p. 199; E 373, V, p. 290.

process of reflection on experience in the light of faith.[32] It is difficult to speak of the soul as a place because it signifies, not one part, but the whole human person. If anything, it is a reference to the powers of the soul, especially intellect and memory. What is most important, though, is not where the house or cell of self-knowledge is, but the different ideas conveyed by the image.

First of all, her images convey an idea of permanence. The attainment of self-knowledge is not a one-time experience or illumination, a few quiet moments along the way, but a constant awareness of one's own poverty and God's goodness. This is borne out by the image itself (a house, a monastic cell, a cave, etc.) and by her urging that, once people gain entrance into the house or cell of self-knowledge, they must never depart: "Take care that you never leave the cell of the knowledge of yourself..."[33] This is not an isolationist or escapist doctrine, but points to self-knowledge as a base of operations from which a person does all things: remain in

[32]See Michele Fortuna, "Struttura dell'anima nel linguaggio metaforico di S. Caterina da Siena," Rassegna di ascetica e mistica "S. Caterina da Siena" XXIII, no. 3 (Luglio-Settembre, 1972): 253. Catherine uses other images to refer to the place where self-knowledge is acquired, though not as frequently as "house" and "cell." For example: an abyss (E 30, I, p. 111 <DT I, p. 4>); a cavern (E 214, III, p. 240); a well (E 41, I, p. 169 <DT III, pp. 19-20>); a vessel (E 186, III, pp. 129-130); a store (E 37, I, p. 147); a stable (D CLI, 2005-2009); a temple (E 166, III, pp. 48-49); a tomb (E 173 III, pp. 82-83); and, Christ's wounded side (E 251, IV, p. 67).

[33]D CLXVI, 112-113.

house of self-knowledge, or thoughts, words and deeds become confused.

Secondly, by her choice of images Catherine conveys the idea that the knowledge of one's own defects and of God making up for them is acquired in silence, solitude and prayer. In addition to her exhortation to enter this "place" with the light of faith,[34] the images themselves describe places where one goes for privacy, silence, prayer, and to learn or acquire something. In the midst of frustration, weakness, trial or temptation people reflect on their experience with the light of faith, alone with God, silent before Him, listening and responding to Him, open to learn what He wishes to teach them about their poverty and His goodness.[35]

What is Learned?

One person cannot find the time to do what she wants. Another does not have the knowledge or ability to do what he

[34]E 263, IV, p. 124.

[35]"In order to fully understand the truth it is necessary to be recollected in the silence of your own soul...To do this it is necessary to create an atmosphere of silence and solitude within ourselves, with a wholly spiritual freedom, and an openness to the prompting of the intellect illumined by faith, and to the particular revelation God wishes to give us. Therefore, St. Catherine maintains that 'true knowledge' can only be attained in the 'house of the soul'..." Carlo Prestipino, "La Provvidenza divina nel pensiero di S. Caterina da Siena," Congresso internazionale di studi cateriniani, Siena-Roma, 24-29 Aprile 1980: Atti (Roma: Curia generalizia O.P., 1981), p. 383.

ought. People try to make themselves strong or think themselves strong, but they can never escape their weakness tugging at them to give free reign to their selfish desires. These experiences are often the source of great frustration, but they can also introduce a person into the way of perfection. Perfection, according to Catherine, begins with self-knowledge; therefore, if people apply the light of faith to give studious attention to their performance in these experiences, they can learn about themselves, and so begin the journey towards perfection.[36] They also learn about God, albeit limited knowledge, from what they see of His goodness and mercy at work in their lives. Knowledge of self and of God's goodness at work in each person are the essential components of ontological poverty.

The Knowledge of Self

There is both an ontological and moral content to what constitutes knowledge of self: human inadequacy on an ontological plane; and, on a moral plane, human sinfulness. In her comments Catherine concerns herself more with the universal than the particular, though she usually does not hesitate to point out an individual fault or failing when correction is needed. For her, self-knowledge is not an obsession with one's personal sins or weakness, but a

[36] C. Prestipino, "S. Caterina: il conoscimento, fondamento di una vita illuminata": 516-517.

confession of one's nothingness as a creature, and of one's sinfulness as a sharer in fallen human nature.[37]

"You are nothing of yourself"

Catherine's estimation of human nature can be summed up with the statement "you are nothing" or, more specifically, "you are nothing of yourself." Perhaps the most classic formulation of her thought can be found in the maxim: "You are she who is not, and I Am He Who Is."[38] Catherine received this message in prayer as the means by which to attain perfection. Put another way, Catherine learned that if she recognized her nothingness, as well as the fact that God's mercy is continually making up for her defects, she would arrive at perfection. The main concern at present is with the first part of the maxim, "you are she who is not," and with Catherine's understanding of it. She offers a

[37] A. Lemmonyer, "L'umiltà cristiana nell' insegnamento di S. Caterina," S. Caterina da Siena V <sic>, no. 6 (1954): 8.

[38] D XVIII, 390-391; D CXIX, 990-994; D CXXXIV, 3131-3140, 3160-3170; D CLXV, 1500-1503; O VII, 101-102; O XIII, 7-8; E 113, II, p. 169; E 116, II, p. 182; L 1, 10, 92. See E 70, I, pp. 265-266 (DT XXI, pp. 87-88) for a variation on this fundamental maxim: "So it seemed that the mouth of the Lord said: 'I am the fire, and you are the sparks'...just as the spark receives its existence from the fire, so do we receive being from our first principle." Prestipino refers to this maxim as "a marvelous synthesis of the reality of man and God...that in a certain sense contains the whole message of salvation, placing humans in their rightful position as creature..." C. Prestipino, "S. Caterina: il conoscimento, fondamento di una vita illuminata," p. 517.

three-faceted interpretation of human nothingness: the person as creature, as powerless, and as sinner.

The Person as Creature

First of all, human nothingness refers to the fact that people do not receive existence from themselves, but from God: "Know that no one can escape my hands, for I Am He Who Is and you are nothing of yourselves, but are made by me, the Creator of all things that exist..."[39] Human beings are nothing, non-being, until God gives them existence, doing for them what they cannot do for themselves. So, self-knowledge begins with the understanding that existence itself is a gift. Based on this fact, and as a reminder to people of

[39]D XVIII, 390-393. See also D IV, 79-80; D IX, 560-564; D XLVI, 1428-1431; D LX, 2285; D CXIX, 990-994; D CXLIV, 1132-1134; O VIII, 103-104; O X, 84-87; E 1, I, p. 3; E 2, I, p. 8; E 4, I, p. 16; E 5, I, p. 21; E 13, I, p. 46; E 16, I, p. 54; E 17, I, p. 58; E 27, I, p. 92; E 29, I, p. 103 (DT XVIII, pp. 71-72); E 82, II, p. 43; E 102, II, p. 127; E 108, II, p. 147 (DT XLIX, p. 189); E 109, II, p. 151 (DT LI, p. 197); E 114, II, p. 175; E 145, II, p. 286 (DT XL, p. 161); E 150, II, p. 306; E 151, II, p. 308; E 166, III, p. 49; E 177, III, p. 91 (DT LXI, p. 253); E 183, III, p. 109 (DT LVI, p. 225); E 185, III, p. 123 (DT LIV, p. 213); E 189, III, p. 138 (DT LXXXIV, p. 343); E 199, III, p. 175; E 223, III, p. 283; E 241, IV, p. 33 (DT LXXIII, p. 299); E 282, IV, p. 196; E 325, V, p. 72; E 334, V, p. 99; E 337, V, p. 115; E 362, V, p. 238; ST 1a, q. 45, a. 5, responsio: "...creation is the proper action of God himself."

their origins, Catherine refers to human beings as "the work of God's hands,"[40] and as God's reasoning creature.[41]

The Person as Powerless

Secondly, Catherine interprets human nothingness as a reference to powerlessness: of themselves, apart from God, people are incapable of always doing what they want to do, when they want to do it, and in a way they would like to do it. This powerlessness becomes evident when people find the events of their life beyond their control. While powerlessness is evident in the whole of a person's life, perhaps the clearest example of this level of human nothingness is a person's inability to avoid the uninvited and unwelcome experience of temptation: "We will know we are nothing especially during times of battle and temptation, for if we had been something we would have rid ourselves of those unwanted battles."[42] There is no amount of cleverness or brute strength that people can draw upon to shield themselves from temptation. Also, human powerlessness is revealed in

[40]D CLXVII, 127, 184-187; O IV, 117-118; O XIV, 12; E 177, III, p. 94 (DT LXI, p. 256); E 223, III, p. 283.

[41]D CXXXIV, 3112; D CLXVII, 212-217; O I, 64; O IV, 13, 105; O X, 17; E 254, IV, p. 77.

[42]E 78, II, p. 27. See also D XLIII, 1141-1142; D XC, 314-315; D CXL, 460-462; O XV, 2-4; E 23, I, p. 76; E 26, I, p. 88; E 221, III, p. 277; E 335, V, p. 105; E 353, V, p. 202.

the fact that, of themselves, people cannot keep from consenting to the temptation. That people are powerless by themselves to resist temptation does not mean they are determined to sin, but that they are weak-willed. For Catherine, powerlessness or weakness has moral connotations because the presence of physical strength or weakness is irrelevant to the question of doing good and avoiding evil. With this powerlessness in mind it is easy to understand why Catherine uses terms like "lowliness"[43] and "littleness"[44] in reference to human nature.

The Person as Sinner

Thirdly, Catherine interprets human nothingness in terms of sinfulness: of themselves, without God's strength, people become "doers of that which is nothing," sin.[45] Self-knowledge reveals one's past and present sins against God.[46]

[43]D XIII, 100-102; D XIV, 170-171; D XV, 274-275; D CLI, 2002-2004; O IV, 17-21; O XII, 1-13; O XXII, 14-16; E 47, I, p. 183; E 75, II, p. 12 (DT LXII, p. 259); E 79, II, p. 29; E 114, II, p. 175; E 152, II, p. 310; E 178, III, p. 96; E 342, V, p. 138; E 345, V, p. 159.

[44]O IV, 23-24; O XII, 1-2.

[45]E 23, I, p. 76; E 32, I, p. 121; E 52, I, p. 202; E 60, I, p. 225; E 95, II, p. 99; E 101, II, p. 125 (DT XXIII, p. 101); E 110, II, p. 158; E 144, II, p. 284 (DT XXXIV, p. 143); E 149, II, p. 299 (DT XXII, p. 93); E 214, III, p. 240; E 342, V, pp. 139-140.

[46]E 234, IV, p. 7 (DT LXXXII, p. 335); E 279, IV, p. 189.

In addition to revealing particular sins against God's goodness, self-knowledge brings to light the general sinfulness of human nature. Catherine expresses this with a pithy saying: "To sin is human, but to persevere in sin is a thing of the devil."[47] This is not a pessimistic view of human nature, but rather a realistic one. Human nature was wounded by original sin, leaving it weak and frail of itself. Catherine uses the term weakness as a reference to the effect of original sin on human nature: the inclination to sin, identified with sensuality, which men and women are too weak to resist when left to themselves.[48] It is not a pessimistic view because it is not hopeless. Human beings are not created to sin, are not constrained to sin, and have recourse to God for the means to resist sin. God gives them strength, making up for their defect.

The Person as a Vessel

Conscious of the effectiveness of an image to convey a message, Catherine seeks one to express the nothingness of

[47]E 173, III, p. 80; E 313, V, pp. 20-21; E 348, V, p. 171. It may have been an awareness of her sinfulness gained in self-knowledge that inspired Catherine to pepper her prayers with the confession: "I have sinned against the Lord. Have mercy on me" (cf. O I, 45; passim).

[48]D XIV, 210-232; D XXX, 372-375; D XXXI, 426-431; D XCVIII, 55-79; O VII, 40; O IX, 3-10; O XII, 68-80; E 64, I, p. 238; E 148, II, pp. 294-295 (DT XXXVI, p. 149); E 169, III, p. 60; E 171, III, p. 66 (DT LX, p. 245); E 195, III, pp. 157-158 (DT LXXXVII, p. 352); 1 Cor. 15:43.

humanity.[49] Men and women cannot bring themselves from non-being into being, or sustain themselves in being, or protect themselves from temptation, or call up the strength to resist sin because they are nothing in and of themselves. Therefore, they must receive existence, protection and strength from another. The other, of course, is God, from whom human beings receive all they are and have. The image that Catherine uses to signify poverty of humanity and their utter dependence upon God is a vessel.[50] Just as a vessel was made to receive an object, so with men and women: they receive all from God's goodness.

In self-knowledge people learn that they are nothing of themselves, which is one component of ontological poverty. In other words, people learn that of themselves they lack what is desired, desirable or adequate and that, unless they receive assistance, they will remain nothing or return to

[49]Foster refers to Catherine as a "natural poet" who "habitually thought with an abundance of images." Kenelm Foster, "St. Catherine's Teaching on Christ," Life of the Spirit 16 (1962): 319.

[50]Catherine is quite free in her use of "vessel" as an image for humanity. She uses it one place to refer to free-will, and in another to refer to memory, or the heart, or the body, or the soul, or to an individual person. Her use of this image is not evidence of a misconception of the human person as a confederacy of individual parts, but rather of her understanding that the whole person was made to receive. The following are some examples of her use of vessel: free-will as a vessel E 164, III, p. 37 (DT LVIII, p. 234); memory as a vessel E 331, V, p. 88; the heart as a vessel E 87, II, p. 74; the body as a vessel O XXVI, 2-7; the soul as a vessel O VIII, 181-185; the person as a vessel D CXXXIV, 3273-3277.

nothingness. Catherine refers to this body of knowledge as "night": the night of self-knowledge.[51] Self-knowledge is not total darkness, however, but is compared to the faint light of the moon. There is enough light in self-knowledge for people to recognize their nothingness and, in particular, to recognize the "darkness of their sensuality."[52] Catherine states that before people can arrive at the "day of the knowledge of God" they must first pass through the night of self-knowledge. It is an effective image, for just as night precedes the day, so does self-knowledge precede knowledge of God's goodness; and just as night does not stand alone, but forms a cycle with the day, so does self-knowledge join with knowledge of God's goodness to form a whole, each completing the other. In fact, Catherine counsels to leave neither the night of self-knowledge nor the day of the knowledge of God, but remain between the two, as it were, conscious of one's nothingness and of God's goodness.

The Knowledge of God

Knowledge is followed by love, sometimes. The knowledge of one's nothingness or poverty is not one of those times, for it does not offer anything to attract or elicit love. On

[51]E 104, II, p. 137.

[52]E 184, III, p. 117.

the contrary, Catherine maintains that the proper response to the knowledge of one's nothingness, particularly as it shows itself in sinfulness, is holy hatred for one's sensuality, in self-abasement and penance. However, as people were created to love, and cannot live without love, they must find something within themselves to love. This need is supplied by the knowledge of God's goodness at work in each person: "...love the goodness and immeasurable charity shown to you by God which you find in the cell of self-knowledge. In this cell you find God."[53]

This situation offers the first instance of God's goodness making up for human defect: in and of themselves people cannot find anything lovable, but God makes them lovable by His love. God supplies the basis for love of self, others and for God Himself by means of His goodness at work in each person. Knowledge of self is not meant to stand alone, for of itself it paints a rather bleak picture of the human situation: creature, powerless, sinful, lowly, little, dust and ashes (see, for example, Ps. 78:39; Ps. 103:14-16). That is not the whole human picture. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, ontological poverty is composed of two elements: knowledge of one's own nothingness and the knowledge of one's dependence on God to make up for that defect. God's goodness fills in the rest of the human

[53]E 241, IV, p. 34 (DT LXXIII, p. 300). See also E 96, II, p. 106; E 263, IV, p. 124.

picture: God meets each instance of human nothingness with His goodness.

God's motivation for what He does is love: "...the fire of divine charity is discovered in the knowledge we have of God, when with the light <of reason illumined by faith> the soul finds herself loved by God inestimably."[54] Catherine could hardly find words to describe God's love for men and women; that is why she often refers to it as an ineffable, inestimable, unsurpassed love. The images she does use suggest a love that is indomitable, describing it in terms of a mother's love for her child;[55] or, from a human point of view, a love that is irrational, painting God as someone drunk or crazy out of His mind in love with humanity.[56]

God's love for human beings began even before they

[54]E 154, III, p. 8. See also O XIV, 1-8; O XXII, 51-52; E 9, I, p. 31; E 307, IV, p. 286. Catherine was evidently impressed with God's love for her from very early on, for in Raymond's account of the vision Catherine received at the age of six God's affection for her is a noted element: "Entranced and rooted to the spot, she fixed her eyes on the sight. Wide-eyed she looked upon her Savior, lovingly contemplating him with the eyes both of body and of soul. And he who was so wonderfully showing himself to her on purpose to draw to him her love, fixed her with his majestic glance, and smiling on her with surpassing affection stretched out his hand over her and made the Sign of the Cross..." L 1, 2, 29.

[55]D CXLI, 703-704; D CLI, 2175-2177. See also Is. 49:15; Mt. 23:37; Lk. 13:34.

[56]D XXV, 709-720; D XXX, 364-365; D CLIII, 2253-2262; O III, 9-11; O IV, 17-18; O X, 16-28; O XIX, 71-79; O XX, 7-10.

existed.[57] Catherine teaches that God looked within Himself and saw the beauty of His human creation. Even though God has no need for human beings, and even though He knew they would sin against Him, He fell in love with them and manifested this love by creating them, and later by redeeming them. Creation and redemption, however, do not represent the consummation of God's love, for He created and redeemed them so that they may participate in and enjoy His goodness forever in heaven.[58] Catherine refers to this as the "eternal truth" which is learned in the cell of self-knowledge. This is the most basic, fundamental truth learned about self and God's goodness: God desires nothing more than to bestow His love on men and women for all eternity, to receive their love in return, and to fill up their longing to love what is good. Indeed, this is the end toward which all is ordained and subordinated.[59] God's goodness at work in

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[57]D IV, 78-84; D XIII, 80-109; D CXXXV, 15-17; O IV, 10-13; E 9, I, p. 31; E 29, I, pp. 108-109 (DT XVIII, p. 78); E 317, V, p. 42.

[58]"...looking within Himself, God fell in love with the beauty of His human creature and, moved by His inestimable charity, created her only for this end, that she might have eternal life and enjoy the infinite goodness of God" E 28, I, p. 95 (DT XVII, p. 62). See also D XXI, 490-493; D CXXXV, 28-30; D CLXVI, 78-82; E 9, I, p. 31; E 48, I, p. 185; E 102, II, p. 127; E 204, III, pp. 197-198 (DT V, p. 26); E 259, IV, p. 101; E 305, IV, p. 277; E 307, IV, pp. 286-287; E 308, IV, p. 291.

[59]D I, 29-41; D LXXXI, 3996-3999; D XCVI, 886-894. See also ST 1a2ae, q. 3, a. 1, responsio: "...man's ultimate end is uncreated good, namely God, who alone can fill the will of

people, then, is His love creating them, redeeming them, and providing for all their needs so that they may have eternal life and happiness.

God's Goodness Shown in Creation

In response to the poverty of non-existence, God in His goodness bestows being. Catherine confesses before God that she is nothing of herself, and that if she claimed to be anything of herself, she would be a liar. Rather, the fact that she is anything, that she even exists, is a tribute to God's mercy: "We were created in your mercy."[60] God certainly has no obligation to create, as in the repayment of a debt, and human creatures do not satisfy any need in God, for He Is Who Is. On the contrary, moved by love and drawing from the abundant store of His goodness, God removes the defect of non-being and creates humanity.

It is true that self-knowledge reveals that, of themselves, people are nothing. They also learn, though,

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man to the brim because of his infinite goodness...a creaturely reality in him, for what is it but his coming to God and his joy with God. This end defines his happiness."

[60]D XXX, 345. See also D CXXXIV, 3113-3118; O XIX, 71-72; O XXIII, 31-36; E 71, I, p. 272; E 133, II, p. 251 (DT XXXII, p. 135); ST 1a, q. 21, a. 4, responsio: "It must be that in every one of God's works justice and mercy are found, so long as you take mercy to mean removing any kind of defect...We might say, for instance, that to have hands is man's right because of his rational soul, so also to have a rational soul in order that he be human, yet to be a man is just because of God's goodness."

that God's goodness meets their nothingness and gives them existence. Catherine takes almost every available opportunity to remind people that they are nothing, but in the same breath she adds that in His goodness God has made them something.[61] And she repeats the Church's traditional teaching that God created human beings out of nothing,[62] and that He sustains them in existence lest they return to nothingness.[63] In the present context, however, these truths also serve to reinforce her comments on the nothingness of human nature and the goodness of God: if God were to withdraw His creating love, people would return to the nothingness from which they came.

Catherine makes a distinction between the creation of human beings and all other existing things, pointing out that while all things are created by God, only humans are created in His image and likeness: "...not saying 'let it be made' when you created humanity, as when you made the other creatures, but you said: 'let us make man in our image and likeness'..."[64] This is by no means a physical resemblance,

[61]See the references listed in note 39 above.

[62]D CXXXIV, 3273-3274; O VIII, 51-52; ST 1a, q. 21, a. 4, ad 4.

[63]D LXXXII, 4037-4042; D CXL, 497-500; E 16, I, p. 53; ST 1a, q. 104, a. 1, responsio.

[64]O I, 3-5. See also D CX, 15-18; E 254, IV, p. 77; Gen. 1:26-27.

but a likeness to God imprinted on the faculties of the human soul: memory, intellect and will.

Even before human beings were created, God saw them within Himself, and Himself within them, and so fell in love with their beauty. Desiring to share His goodness with them for all eternity, God resolved to capture their beauty and create them according to the form He saw within Himself.[65] In doing so God created the human person in His image and likeness, for the beauty He saw was His own being reflected in the faculties of the human soul.[66] Therefore, Catherine interprets "image and likeness" as a spiritual resemblance between God and rational creatures: the power of the Father seen in the memory's ability to recall the blessings of God's goodness; the wisdom of the Son reflected in the intellect's ability to see what is truly good and bad, what God loves and hates; and the love of the Holy Spirit is seen in the will's

[65]See Michele Fortuna, "L'origine dell'anima in S. Caterina da Siena," Rassegna di ascetica e mistica "S. Caterina da Siena" XXIII, no. 4 (Ottobre-Dicembre, 1972): 323; and, ST 1a, q. 45, a. 6, responsio.

[66]Foster sees Catherine's comments on "image and likeness" as a meditation on Genesis 1:26 and her own adaptation of Augustine's teaching on the soul as an image of the Trinity. Kenelm Foster, " St. Catherine's Teaching on Christ": 316. There is also possible influence from Thomas Aquinas, ST 1a, q. 45, a. 7, responsio: "...we take the comings forth of the divine Persons after the model of understanding and willing; the Son issues as the Logos of the mind, and the Holy Ghost as the Love of will. So that in rational creatures, endowed with mind and will, we find a likeness of the Trinity in the manner of an image when they conceive an ideal and love springs from it."

choice to love the good and hate the bad, to love what God loves and hate what God hates, as it is proposed by the intellect illumined by faith.[67] In an attempt to describe what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God, Catherine refers to human nature as heaven: "...it is called heaven (cielo) because it hides (cela) God within it..."[68]

Men and women, then, are able to acquire some knowledge of God when they perceive His image and likeness imprinted on the powers of their soul. More specifically, they acquire knowledge of God's goodness to them, for though they are nothing of themselves, God has made them lovable by creating them, and creating them in His image and likeness. This is the basis for the beauty and dignity of the human person: "Open the eye of your intellect and look in me, you will see

[67]D 1, 29-39; D XIII, 70-84; D XXI, 490-493; D LI, 1827-1836; D LIV, 2027-2037; D LXI, 2417-2427; D LXXIV, 3333-3361; D LXXXIX, 184-186; D CX, 15-18; D CXII, 311-319; D CXXXV, 15-30; D CXL, 517-519, 547-555; D CLXVII, 177-183; O I, 4-23; O XIII, 37-52; O XX, 33-43; O XXI, 59-78; O XXII, 24-38; E 55, I, p. 211; E 94, II, p. 95; E 158, III, pp. 20-21; E 166, III, p. 49; E 203, III, p. 192; E 244, IV, p. 45; E 254, IV, p. 77; E 259, IV, pp. 103-104. See also Giuliana Cavallini, La verità dell'amore (Roma: Città Nuova Editrice, 1978), p. 50; Alvaro Grion, Santa Caterina da Siena: Dottrina e Fonti, pp. 22-23; Roberto Moretti, "La Trinità e l'uomo nelle "Orazioni" di Caterina da Siena," Congresso internazionale di studi cateriniani, Siena-Roma, 24-29 Aprile 1980: Atti (Roma: Curia generalizia O.P., 1981), pp. 326-327.

[68]E 26, I, p. 84. See also D XXXIII, 529-532; E 353, V, p. 198.

the dignity and beauty of my rational creature."[69] On account of the reflection of the Trinity in the powers of the soul, which enables them to arrive at the goal for which they were created, human beings are accorded a great dignity and are to be considered beautiful. The beauty of men and women is a surpassing beauty as well, for even though God saw that they would offend Him through sin, their beauty far exceeded the ugliness of their sin, and so God made as if He did not see their sin and, instead, fixed His eyes on their beauty.[70]

God's Goodness Shown in Redemption

Beauty and dignity are accorded rational creatures by virtue of their being created in the image and likeness of God. Anyone can lose these gifts, though, by means of the free and informed choice to offend God with serious sin. Without losing existence, people guilty of mortal sin mar the beauty and dignity that makes them lovable, reducing themselves to the nothingness of sin.

The nothingness of sin is another way of referring to separation from God as a consequence of mortal sin. Sinners are nothing because they have separated themselves from the source of all they are and have: "he is nothing...being deprived of me because of his sin he returns to nothing,

[69]D I, 29-31. See also D LI, 1846-1848; O IV, 10-15; E 21, I, p. 65; E 28, I, p. 95 (DT XVII, p. 62).

[70]O IV, 101-118.

because only I Am He Who Is."[71] In other words, when people use the powers of their soul to love evil and hate good, to love what God hates and hate what God loves, then the reflection of the Trinity in the soul is no longer discernible, and they are not able to attain their goal. The beauty and dignity of the rational creature, then, is not based merely on the possession of memory, intellect and will, but also on the condition that these powers are used to love God above all else, to love what God loves, and to conform the person to God through love.

Catherine is not kind when discussing sin and its effects. She describes sin as ugliness or filth.[72] She says that sin makes a person weak in a moral sense, which she illustrates by comparing human beings after original sin to a little child too weakened by illness to take the medicine needed to get well, and remaining weak after recovery as a result of illness. In other words, the children of Adam are too weak to make satisfaction for their sin, and are left weak or inclined to sin even after redemption as a consequence of sin.[73] She describes how contact with the ugliness of sin makes one ugly, for through sin those who were created "a sister to the angels" have lost their dignity

[71]D LIV, 2010-2015. See also D XIII, 85-88.

[72]O I, 31: "la bruttura del peccato."

[73]D XIV, 214-232.

and become like brute beasts.[74] She also understands sin as a form of poverty, leaving the sinner bereft of grace, described in terms of a wretched state of cold, nakedness and hunger.[75]

As great as the offense of sin may be, especially in light of the goodness of God creating humanity in His image and likeness, He does not abandon sinners. On the contrary, God once again meets the nothingness of human creatures and, out of mercy, makes up for their defect: "...in your mercy we were re-created in the blood of your Son."[76] Because sin frustrated His will for the sanctification and salvation of the human race, God, moved by the same love that inspired Him to create, sent the Second Person of the Trinity to become incarnate and redeem them. For Catherine, the love motive is clear both in the incarnation and in Christ's suffering and death: "If God had not created us to enjoy the beatific vision, and if He did not love us inestimably, then He would not have given us such a redeemer."[77]

[74]D XXXII, 465-466. See also E 21, I, p. 66; E 276, IV, p. 182.

[75]D CXXXV, 81-85.

[76]D XXX, 345-346.

[77]E 9, I, p. 32. See also D XIII, 89-94, 106-108; O XI, 44-67; E 253, IV, p. 73. To illustrate the fact that God was motivated by love, Catherine used a phrase borrowed from Domenico Cavalca (or so Dupré Thesieder suggests, see letter VII, n. 10, p. 36 of his edition of L'Epistolario), saying

The incarnation is important to Catherine's explanation of how God's mercy makes up for the poverty of sinful humanity. Catherine expresses the union of divine and human nature in Jesus with an image she develops from 2 Kgs. 4:18-37. Just as Elisha stretched his body over the body of the dead child and breathed life into him when all other attempts failed, so Jesus did the same when the law of Moses could not restore fallen humanity:

> ...He conformed Himself with this dead child through the union of His divine nature with your human nature. With all His members, that is, with my power, with the wisdom of the Son, and the clemency of the Holy Spirit-all of me, God, the abyss of the Trinity-He conformed and united this divine nature with your human nature.[78]

By means of the incarnation, God makes satisfaction for sin possible. God Himself is incapable of suffering and finite human nature, in and of itself, could never atone for sin because it is incapable of satisfying justice for an offense against the infinite goodness of God. However, suffering capable of making satisfaction for the punishment due sin was

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that nails would have been powerless to hold Christ to the cross if love had not held Him there first. See O XVIII, 18-20; O XXIV, 17-21; E 29, I, p. 104 (DT XVIII, p. 72); E 82, II, p. 43; E 95, II, p. 101; E 102, II, pp. 127-128; E 241, IV, p. 36 (DT LXXIII, pp. 301-302); E 256, IV, p. 89; ST 3a, q. 47, a. 2, ad 1.

[78]D CXL, 534-555. Catherine uses other images to refer to the union of divine and human nature in Christ, such as comparing it to the union that is effected when a cion is grafted onto another plant (O X, 16-28; E 27, I, p. 91); or saying that the union of the two natures is as complete as when flour and water are kneaded together to make dough (D XIV, 200-203).

made possible by virtue of the union of divine and human nature in Christ.

Catherine attempts to explain the mystery of Christ's redemptive suffering by comparing Him to a wet-nurse. A wet-nurse administers medicine to a sick child through her own milk, after drinking the medicine herself, thus enabling the child to receive the healing benefit of a medicine too strong for it to take directly. In like manner, Jesus became man and endured suffering and death, in order to give sinners the healing benefit of the medicine of infinite punishment, due their sin against the infinite God, that they were unable to bear themselves. Through the flesh and blood of Christ, united to His divine nature, God's justice and mercy are fulfilled, and sinners are healed.[79]

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[79]D XIV, 175-221. The union of divine and human nature in Christ also served to "trick" the devil, and thereby free humanity from slavery to the devil: "...and you manifested your wisdom to us, that with the bait of our humanity you covered the hook of Godhead, conquering the devil and taking away the dominion he had over us" (O IV, 30-33. See also D CXXXV, 50-55). Jesus is God and man, but this can only be seen by those who have eyes to see, and only as far as Jesus Himself reveals it. The devil could not recognize the divinity of Jesus because his vision was clouded over by pride, and because Jesus would not reveal it to him. Recognizing only the humanity of Christ, the devil tempted Him and plotted for His death as he does for other mortals, but in doing so he unwittingly brought about his own destruction in the passion and death of Christ. This, then, was the trick: to invite the devil's malice with the bait of human nature, and catching him on the hook of divine nature, to cause his undoing. Humanity had been subject to the devil's power when they succumbed to his deception, but now they are freed from his slavery by the Truth, Jesus Christ. See also ST 1a, q. 64, a. 1, ad 4; ST 3a, q. 49, a. 2, ad 1.

By means of the incarnation of Christ and the satisfaction for sins He made on the cross, the beauty and dignity of human nature were restored. The restoration was made in part by the fact that God took on human nature and became man. Catherine says that while God gave His image to humans when He created them, leaving a reflection of the Trinity in the powers of the soul, He took their image (referring to human nature) when He became incarnate: "We are your image, and through your union with man, you are our image, veiling your eternal deity with the wretched cloud and corrupt clay of Adam."[80] By taking on human nature God did more than simply restore humanity's lost dignity, He raised it to an even greater level. Catherine says that rational creatures are made kin to the angels at creation, but by virtue of the incarnation and redemption they are given a dignity higher yet than the angels, for God took on human nature, not angelic.[81] The love poured forth in the incarnation and redemption makes human beings God's own relatives,[82] enabling them to call upon God as father, brother and Lord.[83]

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[80]D XIII, 102-105. See also D XII, 856-857; D CLXVII, 188-189; O XVII, 9-12.

[81]D CX, 19-26; E 21, I, p. 69; E 44, I, p. 177.

[82]O XI, 120-122.

[83]O I, 58-59.

The restoration of human dignity and beauty was completed by Christ's blood shed on the cross, making heaven accessible once again and giving people the ability to attain it. For Catherine, the blood of Christ is a powerful and multi-faceted symbol. In the present context, the blood of Christ is the key that opened the gates of heaven that had been closed by sin;[84] it is a bath that "washes the face of the soul" and restores its beauty;[85] it is clothing that covers the nakedness resulting from the loss of innocence due to sin;[86] it is a source of warmth (the fire of love) that melts the heart frozen by sin;[87] it is food for pilgrims on the way to heaven, strengthening them for the journey;[88] it is what holds together the stones of virtue used to build the bridge from earth to heaven.[89] These images convey the idea that Christ not only restored the means to attain the goal of

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[84]O XIII, 58-70; E 83, II, p. 50.

[85]D CXXXV, 94-97; O XII, 135-137; E 76, II, p. 21; E 308, IV, p. 291.

[86]D CXXXV, 92-97; O XII, 51-53; E 102, II, p. 129.

[87]D LXXV, 3467-3484; D CXXIV, 1538-1544; D CXXXV, 101-107; O XII, 38-42; E 112, II, p. 164; E 262, IV, p. 118.

[88]D CXXXV, 108-112; E 358, V, p. 228.

[89]D XXI, 481-517; D XXVII, 88-102; D CXXXV, 112-114. The image of the bridge will treated more fully in Chapter Four.

heaven, but also that He is the means: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn. 14:6).

God's Goodness Shown in His Providence

God is in love with His human creation and desires to bestow His goodness on them forever. Therefore, God created them in His image and likeness, giving them the wherewithal to reach the goal of heaven. When their sin foiled God's original plan for them, He went out of Himself yet again and became man, thereby making satisfaction for their offense through His passion, and restoring the means to attain heaven. God did all this because He is madly in love with His rational creatures. This is not the extent of God's love. On the contrary, His love is eternal and cannot be exhausted. The same love that moved God to create and redeem, also moves Him to provide men and women with whatever they need for their journey to heaven.

Recall Catherine's comments about human weakness, how human nature is debilitated by original sin: people are too feeble, in and of themselves, to resist the temptation to sin; and they are too decrepit to apply the powers of their soul to love and hate what God loves and hates, whereby they are to attain the goal for which they were created. In this light it is easy to describe human ability as poor or nothing. As always though, God's eternal love meets human weakness, and out of mercy He makes up for their defect,

providing them with whatever they need to overcome their weakness and reach heaven:

> ...I have done and do the things I do with providence for the sake of your sanctification and salvation: everything given to you who have existence, I give for this goal...seeing to the material and spiritual needs of the just and sinners alike.[90]

Therefore, the experience of human weakness is not a reason for despair, but for boasting, for it enables people to witness the different ways God's providence makes up for their defects (cf. 2 Cor. 12:10; Phil. 4:13).

First of all, then, Catherine teaches that God provides people with the strength needed to resist temptation and to love what God loves.[91] She describes this in terms of human generation, basing her explanation on the premise that children receive their nature from their father.

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[90]D CLII, 2208-2218. See 1 Cor. 4:7: "Name something you have that you have not received. If, then, you have received it, why are you boasting as if it were your own?"

[91]See the references listed in note 10 above. Catherine teaches that the knowledge of one's inability to avoid and resist temptations, coupled with the knowledge that God can, knows how and wants to supply the strength needed to resist them, is the basis for prayer. Inspired by the experience they have of their own weakness and by their faith in God's love for them, people cry out to God and wait for His aid; they know they have no other recourse, and that God will always help them if they ask in faith. Catherine's own prayer was rooted in this knowledge, for Raymond recounts that her favorite prayer was the opening invocation from the Liturgy of the Hours, which she love to repeat: "O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me." See D LXV, 2675-2680; D LXVI, 2710-2712; D CLIX, 791-780; O VIII, 192-193; O XXII, 127-128; O XXV, 1-5; E 26, I, p. 89; E 169, III, p. 60; E 315, V, pp. 30-31; E 353, V, p. 202; E 373, V, p. 288; L 1, 11, 113; Ps. 40:14; Ps. 70:2.

Accordingly, human beings are weak and inclined to sin because they receive their nature from Adam who, on account of his sin, was separated from God's strength. The children of Adam can receive strength in baptism, though, whereby they are incorporated into Christ and share in the nature He "received" from the Father. Therefore, by virtue of their baptism, it is <u>almost</u> as if they lose their weakness.[92] Of course, as long as human beings are human they will be weak, but Catherine's point is that, if they are baptized and choose to live according to the teachings of Christ, they can draw upon God's strength: "...a child needs its father's help; whatever virtue or strength the child has is not its own, but is from God."[93]

Secondly, when people fall into sin, because they did not cling to God's strength and walk according to His ways, they still have access to God's mercy in the sacrament of penance. For Catherine, this sacrament is another manifestation of God's eternal love: knowing the weakness of the human race, knowing that they would sin and lose grace,

[92]O IX, 5-41.

[93]E 171, III, p. 67 (DT LX, pp. 245-246). See also E 148, II, p. 294 (DT XXXVI, p. 149); E 189, III, p. 141 (DT LXXXIV, p. 345); 2 Cor. 13:4: "It is true he was crucified out of weakness, but he lives by the power of God. We too are weak in him, but we live with him by God's power in us." Catherine places considerable emphasis on the choice to live according to one's baptism, saying that while God created human beings without their help, He will not save them without their help or cooperation with grace. See D XXIII, 556-557; D CXXXIV, 3269-3270; O VIII, 27-28.

God provided them with "the continual baptism of blood."[94] This is, of course, figurative language which Catherine uses to describe the nature of the sacrament of penance. It is called a <u>baptism</u> because it cleanses the sinner from the stain of sin, and because each time it is used the sinner is born again.[95] It is <u>continual</u> because people can and should avail themselves of it whenever they desire or are in need, even daily, whereas the sacrament of baptism itself may only be received once.[96] It is a baptism of <u>blood</u> because sinners are absolved by virtue of the blood shed by Christ once and for all, for even though His suffering and death ended in time, the fruits of His passion are infinite.[97] Finally, it

[94]D LXXV, 3424-3434; O VII, 19-27; E 101, II, p. 122 (DT XXIII, p. 97). This should not be confused with the traditional understanding of martyrdom as a baptism by blood, referring to a non-baptized person who suffers a martyr's death and is, in effect, baptized even though he or she did not receive sacramental baptism, by virtue of the union of martyrdom with the passion of Christ. Catherine makes specific mention of martyrdom as a baptism of blood. See D LXXV, 3416-3418; E 189, III, p. 137 (DT LXXXIV, p. 341). In addition to referring to the sacrament of penance as a baptism of blood, she also calls it a "continual baptism of fire" (E 148, II, pp. 296-297 <DT XXXVI, p. 151>), and a "baptism of blood and fire" (E 189, III, pp. 137-138 <DT LXXXIV, pp. 341-342>).

[95]E 305, IV, pp. 277-278.

[96]E 103, II, pp. 131-132.

[97]D LXXV, 3456-3483. Catherine sees this truth revealed in what she calls the secret of Christ's pierced heart. After Christ had already died on the cross, God allowed His heart to be pierced by a lance (Jn. 19:34). The blood and water that poured forth from Christ's heart revealed its

is a baptism of fire because the forgiveness of sin is motivated by God's eternal love, and because it is regarded as the particular mission of the Holy Spirit, both of which are symbolized by fire.[98] Therefore, moved by sorrow, the sinner "vomits up" the poison of sin and is cleansed by the blood of Christ, either through the ministry of a priest in the sacrament of penance or, if no priest is available, through the mission of the Holy Spirit, the "hand of God's clemency."[99]

Thirdly, mindful of human weakness, God gives people time enough to work toward their perfection, always dealing with them patiently and mercifully regardless of their sins. God's estimation of His human creation does not fall with

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secret, that God's infinite love for humanity could not be adequately expressed, nor exhausted by His suffering, death or any finite action.

[98]E 189, III, pp. 137-138 (DT LXXXIV, pp. 341-342). Fire is one of Catherine's favorite images, generally used to refer to divine love. In the present context, the use of fire as a symbol for the Holy Spirit is a possible allusion to the Pentecost event (Acts 2:3) or to the baptism of Jesus (Mt. 3:11; Lk. 3:16). It becomes even more involved, though, when she assigns the forgiveness of sin to the mission of the Holy Spirit, referring to the Spirit as God's mercy (cf. D XXIX, 216-220; O XXIV, 2-4), or referring to the unforgivable sin, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mk. 3:28-29; Mt. 12:31-32; Lk. 12:10), as the refusal of God's mercy (D XXXVII, 707-709). It would seem, then, that calling the sacrament of penance a "baptism of fire" or the "continual medicine of the Holy Spirit's fire," refers to God's love for sinners, being poured out through the agency of the Holy Spirit and by virtue of the blood shed by Christ, which purifies and melts the heart frozen by sin.

[99]D LXXV, 3434-3442.

their fall into sin, for He focuses on their beauty, not their sins.[100] Nor does God exchange mercy for strict justice when people offend Him with sin. On the contrary, His mercy never diminishes, but rather mitigates justice such that sinners are never dealt with as their sins deserve.[101] Catherine calms sinners floundering in confusion by showing them how God's mercy exceeds even their most grievous sin: how He is patient with them, lending them time to convert before He calls them to an accounting;[102] how God places them in the hearts of others who pray for their conversion;[103] and how He mercifully sends suffering as a punishment for sin during the finite time of earthly life, which is only as long as the present moment, instead of the infinite punishment that an offense against God's infinite goodness deserves.[104]

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[100]O IV, 105-115. Catherine exclaims that once sinners confess and return to God, He covers over their fault and says, "I will not remember that you ever offended me" D XXX, 333-337.

[101]Even those in hell enjoy God's mercy, says Catherine, for they are not punished as much as an offense against the infinite God deserves. See D XXX, 360-362; O XX, 100-101.

[102]D XXXIII, 522-525; D XLVI, 1456-1458; D LI, 1848-1850; O XIX, 73-79; O XX, 98; E 21, I, p. 66; E 173, III, p. 81.

[103]D XXX, 365; O I, 87-94; O III, 54-58; O VIII, 118-120; O XIII, 11-12; O XIV, 63-66; O XX, 56-60; O XXVI, 9-14.

[104]D XLV, 1374-1382; E 13, I, p. 46; E 17, I, p. 58; E 264, IV, p. 130.

Given the nothingness of human ability, and God's desire for the sanctification and salvation of all human beings, His attitude and all His dealings with them are seasoned with mercy.

Lastly, lest there be any doubt concerning the scope of God's providence, Catherine says that rational creatures owe all they are and have to God. As mentioned earlier, creation and redemption are God's responses to human nothingness, but Catherine makes it clear that God not only gives existence and grace, but every gift besides; in response to the nothingness of human ability God gives people "grace and an almost infinite number of gifts, given to them out of benevolence and not obligation."[105] She insists that everything is attributed to God, even knowledge of self and of His goodness is a gift from God: "...no one can fully know or understand You except inasmuch as You give them knowledge, and You give us as much as we dispose the vessel of our soul to receive."[106] There is only one thing that Catherine does not list among God's gifts; only one thing,

[105]D XVII, 365-367. See also D CXXXIV, 3116-3118; E 116, II, p. 181; and the references listed in note 39 above.

[106]O VIII, 181-185. See also D VII, 367-373; D IX, 557-559; E 95, II, p. 99; A. Lemmonyer, "Con S. Caterina alle sorgenti della vita": 14.

therefore, that people can claim as their own without having to give thanks to God: their sin.[107]

Catherine knows who she is and who God is; she is aware that the difference between her human nature and God's divine nature is like night and day. Without hesitation she confesses that she is death and God is life; that she is darkness and God is light; that she is foolishness and God is wisdom; she is finite and God is infinite; she is sick and God is the doctor; she is a repulsive creature and God is beautiful; she, a sinful creature, and God is goodness itself; she, bitterness, and God is sweetness; she, twisted, and God is upright. In short, Catherine knows that she is nothing and that God is He Who Is.[108]

Catherine knows well her own nothingness, but for fear that this awareness may cast her down in "confusion,"[109] she

[107]E 101, II, p. 125 (DT XXIII, p. 101); E 116, II, p. 183; E 133, II, p. 250 (DT XXXII, p. 135).

[108]D CLXVII, 126-134; O I, 63-68; O X, 22-25; O XX, 82-85; ST 2a2ae, q. 161, a. 3, responsio: "All that is defect is of man, all that is health and perfection is of God..."

[109]Confusion is a state of mind in which people doubt God's love for them, and His ability or willingness to pardon their sins, and the usefulness of their prayers, penance or works. Confusion is a sickness that results from the knowledge of self apart from the knowledge of God's goodness to the individual; if left unchecked it leads ultimately to despair. The only remedy for the sickness of confusion, says Catherine, is the knowledge of God's inestimable love for each person, and of His desire for their sanctification and salvation. See D LXVI, 2773-2788, 2832-2834; D LXXIII, 3286-3288; D LXXXVI, 4339-4347; E 23, I, p. 76; E 51, I, pp. 197-198; E 56, I, p. 216; E 73, II, pp. 7-9; E 123, II, pp.

never acknowledges her nothingness without also confessing that God makes up for her defects. She counsels others to do the same: people should never admit their own nothingness or poverty without also acknowledging that God gives and sustains them in existence, redeems them, and provides for all their needs so that they might reach heaven.

The reverse is equally as hazardous, though, and so Catherine advises people never to consider God's love and mercy for them, nor the countless gifts He gives them, without conceding the fact that He does so to make up for their defects. The danger is that, without the sobering truth of their own nothingness to keep their feet planted firmly on the ground of humility, they would otherwise fall into presumption.[110] Rather, knowledge of one's own nothingness and God's goodness go together to constitute what Catherine understands as ontological poverty: in and of themselves human beings are nothing but, moved by love and mercy, God makes them something, creating them in His image and likeness; redeeming and restoring them by the incarnation and blood of Jesus; and, providing everything they need to attain the goal for which they were created.

208-215; E 154, III, pp. 5-13; E 178, III, pp. 96-97; E 213, III, pp. 227-238; E 314, V, p. 26; E 366, V, pp. 257-261; ST 2a2ae, q. 129, a. 3, ad 4.

[110]See the references listed in note 58 above.

Ontological poverty is learned in the cell of self-knowledge and in the cell of the knowledge of God's goodness. These are not two separate cells but one and the same, because one is not complete without the other.[111] Catherine's reference to the cell of self-knowledge as a stable is a good illustration of this point:

> You see this gentle and loving Word born in a stable, as Mary was on a journey, to show you pilgrims that you must continually be born again in the stable of self-knowledge, where you will find me born within your soul out of grace.[112]

By means of reflection on their experience in the light of faith people acquire knowledge of themselves, and what they learn about themselves is symbolized by the image of a stable: poor, lowly, of mean estate. In the same stable of self-knowledge, however, people also learn of God's goodness to them represented by the child, born of Mary, who is God. Just as the birth of Jesus transformed the stable in Bethlehem into a place of beauty and reverence, so the goodness of God encountered in the stable of self-knowledge makes rational creatures new, giving them beauty and dignity.

What are Some of Its Consequences?

Ontological poverty is comprised of the knowledge people have of their own nothingness and of God's goodness to them.

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[111]E 23, I, p. 76; E 49, I, p. 191; E 94, II, p. 96.

[112]D CLI, 2005-2009.

This is true knowledge of self, and so it can be said that ontological poverty is akin to humility; the truth about human nature constitutes both.[113] But neither ontological poverty nor humility is knowledge for its own sake, for according to Catherine's schema, knowledge leads to an act of the will; preferably, loving what God loves, hating what God hates. Ideally speaking, then, the knowledge that constitutes ontological poverty conceives a love that is expressed in virtue, the first and most fundamental of which is discernment. Catherine illustrates this process with the image of a human person as a "tree of love."[114]

The Tree of Love

Catherine paints the picture of a tree with a limb growing from its side, and on the limb there are three fruit-bearing branches. The tree's root is planted in soil contained within a circle traced on the ground, from which it draws its nourishment.

The tree itself is a symbol for the human soul, or person. The root of the tree stands for human affection, for the human person was created out of love in order to love, and so cannot live without love. Just as a tree is nourished

[113]See ST 2a2ae, q. 129, a. 3, ad 4; ST 2a2ae, q. 161, a. 6, responsio.

[114]D IX, 545-556; D X, 595-638; E 113, II, pp. 168-172; E 213, III, pp. 228-229.

by means of its root, so human beings are nourished by love. To love is an intrinsic part of human nature, but the desire to love what God loves is acquired in the knowledge of God's goodness: "...when the creature sees itself loved, immediately it loves."[115] The soil from which the tree draws its nourishment is humility. Humility is acquired through true knowledge of self, knowledge of one's nothingness and utter dependence on God, and also from the knowledge of how God humbled Himself to save fallen humanity.[116] Therefore, humility nourishes love because it is a constant reminder of God's ineffable love for those who are nothing of themselves.[117] The circle traced on the ground represents the knowledge of self joined to the knowledge of God's goodness. Together they form a circle which contains humility within, in which love is nourished. If they are not joined together there is no humility, and the tree of love dies for lack of

[115]E 29, I, p. 103 (DT XVIII, p. 72). See also E 50, I, p. 193; E 113, II, p. 171.

[116]Catherine refers to Christ as the model of humility, and recommends people follow His example. See D CLI, 2002-2004, 2042-2043; O XIV, 8-11; E 75, II, pp. 12-13 (DT LXII, pp. 259-260); E 79, II, p. 29; E 345, V, pp. 159-160; ST 2a2ae, q. 161, a. 1, ad 4; A. Lemmonyer, "L'umiltà cristiana nell'insegnamento di S. Caterina": 9-10.

[117]In this sense, humility is referred to as the "wet-nurse" of charity. See D IX, 548; E 51, I, pp. 196-197; E 82, II, p. 43; E 95, II, pp. 99-100; E 112, II, p. 164; E 159, III, p. 23; E 263, IV, p. 120.

nourishment.[118] Living by love and nourished by humility, then, the human person begins to grow.

The Limb of Discernment

The first sign of growth generated by the charity acquired in knowledge of God's goodness and by the humility acquired in the knowledge of one's nothingness is the virtue of discernment, depicted as a limb growing from the trunk of the tree. Discernment is not only the product of the knowledge of self and God's goodness, but "is nothing more than the true knowledge the soul has of herself and God."[119]

In a general sense, discernment is the act of judging something from a certain perspective. Catherine further qualifies her understanding, though, by describing it as a prudential judgement made in light of one's own nothingness and God's goodness.[120] From the knowledge people have of themselves and God they learn that they are indebted to love God in return for His love, and to love their neighbor as themselves. The virtue of discernment, then, regulates how

[118]Without humility the tree of love becomes a tree of death: the human person does not produce the life-giving fruits of virtue, but the death-dealing fruits of sin. See D XXI, 437-454; D XCIII, 468-580.

[119]E 173, III, p. 78. See also D IX, 541-543, 554-556.

[120]D IX, 556; E 213, III, p. 228; ST 2a2ae, q. 47, a. 8, responsio. Lemmonyer refers to discernment as "the mystical name for Christian prudence." A. Lemmonyer, "Con S. Caterina alle sorgenti della vita": 8.

much and how the debt of love is repaid to God, neighbor and self.[121]

The Three Fruit-bearing Branches

The three fruit-bearing branches that sprout from the limb of discernment represent the ones to whom the debt of love is owed, and the fruit these branches bear is what is given to each: an infinite and varied number of virtues.[122] These branches, with their fruit, come from discernment because it is the task of discernment to order a person's love: loving what God loves, and giving to God, for example, what belongs to God. It would certainly not be a discerning or prudent judgement to give to God what belongs to oneself, or vice-versa.

The Blossom of the Glory and Praise of God's Name

On any fruit-bearing tree a blossom or flower is the first thing to appear. Similarly, in Catherine's image of the tree, the first fruit of discernment is "the flower of the glory and praise of God's name."[123] In other words, conscious of their nothingness apart from God, people know

[121]D XI, 744-750.

[122]E 213, III, p. 229.

[123]E 113, II, p. 169. See also D IX, 557-559; D X, 631-635; D XXXIV, 543-546; D CXXI, 1215-1226; D CXXXI, 2740-2753; E 213, III, p. 228.

that, before all else, they owe honor, praise and glory to God for all that He has given them. The blossom symbolizes the primacy of the honor of God, for God must be first in line for any praise and thanks from humanity. It also represents the pre-eminence of the honor of God, for as a blossom precedes the fruit, so must the honor of God be first in the order of intention. Finally, it indicates that praise is meant for God, not for creatures, because in the same way that people would die if they only fed on the tree's flower, so would they die spiritually if they were to take the honor due God for themselves. The blossom of praise belongs to God, and the fruit of virtue belongs to neighbors and oneself.

The Many and Diverse Fruits of Virtue

Another consequence of ontological poverty is the recognition and rendering of the debt of virtue to one's neighbors. Recall Catherine's contention that the desire to love is acquired in the knowledge of God's goodness: when people see how generously God loves them they want to respond in kind. In actual fact, though, regardless of whether or not people want to love, they still have a duty to return the same love to God that they know themselves to be loved with by Him:

> I ask that you love me back the same way I love you. You are not able to love me this way, though, because I loved you without ever having been loved. You love for me, on the other hand, is not a grace, but an obligation. You are obliged to love me, whereas I love you gratuitously, and not out of duty.[124]

God's love for humanity is gratuitous, unwarranted and disinterested. People have a duty to return the same quality of love to God. The very fact that it is a duty, though, makes it impossible to fulfill: how can people love God gratuitously when they are duty-bound to love?

This apparent impasse is resolved in the person of one's neighbors:

> You must love with the same pure love with which I love you. You cannot do this for me because I love you without being loved and without any self-interest. And because I loved you without being loved by you, even before you existed...you cannot repay me. But you must return this love to others, 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, and because I love them.[125]

People return gratuitous love to God by means of their neighbors. The duty to love one's neighbors exists on account of the duty and the impossibility to love God in return. Catherine refers to this as loving God with and without a medium. To love God without a medium (senza mezzo) refers to the quality of the love: loving God because He is

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[124] D LXIV, 2620-2626. See also D XI, 721-726; D LXXXIX, 180-181; O XXI, 79-83; E 299, IV, p. 258.

[125] D LXXXIX, 181-191. See also O XXII, 51-59; E 29, I, p. 103 (DT XVIII, p. 62); E 113, II, p. 172; E 134, II, p. 254; E 145, II, p. 287 (DT XL, pp. 162-163); E 213, III, p. 229; E 245, IV, pp. 49-50; E 279, IV, p. 189; E 292, IV, pp. 229-230; E 299, IV, p. 258.

worthy of love, and not for any personal gain. To love God with a medium (con mezzo) refers to the means: loving God through the medium of virtuous actions performed for the good of one's neighbors.[126]

As mentioned earlier, one of the functions of discernment is to regulate how the debt of love is repaid; in other words, to order love. Ordered love for God is unlimited and unconditional, but love of others is qualified or conditioned (con modo) by discernment.[127] On the one hand, ordered love sets no limit to the virtues exercised out of love for and for the good of one's neighbors. Ordered love seeks only the good of others, directing people to bear any pain or torment, even death for the sake of their salvation. It also sets no limit to what one person places at the disposal of another: prayer, teaching, good example, counsel, and one's material possessions.[128] On the other

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[126]D VII, 373-379.

[127]D XI, 721-726, 745-750; E 49, I, pp. 189-190; E 126, II, pp. 224-225. Suzanne Noffke, commenting on loving God senza modo and loving others con modo, says that "God alone-in himself and in Jesus and, analogously, in the Church-is deserving of unqualified love (senza modo). Everyone and everything else is to be loved only con modo-with love that is qualified and conditioned and limited by its relationship with God...When we are in love, all things are relative to the one we love." Suzanne Noffke, "Catherine of Siena: Mission and Ministry in the Church," Review for Religious 39, no. 2 (March 1980): 185.

[128]D VI, 251-286; D VII, 395-415; D IX, 579-587; D XI, 735-743; O VIII, 95-106; E 113, II, p. 172; E 213, III, pp. 230-231; E 254, IV, pp. 80-81.

hand, ordered love draws the line as to what one person can do for another at sin. It would be wholly lacking in discernment for people to bring the guilt of sin down on themselves in the course of doing good for another. If that which is done for another is an attempt to return love to God, then it makes no sense to do something that would offend God and deprive oneself of grace, regardless of how another might seem to profit from it.[129]

The Fruit of Hatred for One's Sinfulness

Yet another fruit of discernment is conceiving a holy hatred for one's own sinfulness:

> And to themselves they give what they see they have deserved. They know that of themselves they are nothing, that existence itself they have by my grace and favor, and they attribute every other gift they have to me, and not to themselves. They consider themselves worthy of punishment for their ingratitude in the face of so many favors, and for their negligence in their use of the time and graces I have given them. So they repay themselves with hatred and sorrow for their sins.[130]

This holy hatred for one's sinfulness is the debt people owe to themselves. The debt, though, can only be discovered in the light of discernment, for knowledge of one's sins alone does not inspire hatred.

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[129]D XI, 729-735, 755-762.

[130]D IX, 559-568. See also D II, 78-81; D IV, 56-61; D XI, 689-699; D LXIII, 2560-2569; D LXXXIX, 87-89; D XC, 252-264; O X, 48-50; E 49, I, p. 191; E 173, III, p. 83; E 199, III, p. 175.

Self-knowledge reveals that people are nothing of themselves, and one component of that nothingness is weakness or an inclination to sin. They also learn of God's goodness continually at work in their lives, making them beautiful, lovable, and giving them grace and gifts beyond counting. Seeing themselves so loved by God they conceive, first of all, love for themselves: "Well have you loved me, sweet Jesus love, and in this you have taught me how much I should love myself and my neighbor, whom you love so deeply..."[131] Catherine goes even further to say that people owe a love that is concerned for the holiness and salvation of their neighbors, first of all to themselves, for they are their own most proximate and "chief neighbor."[132]

The same knowledge of God's goodness, though, also inspires holy hatred for sin. Catherine explains this by describing God's goodness to men and women as a mirror:

> Just as someone can see the blemish on his face better by looking in a mirror, so the soul, who with true knowledge of herself rises up with a desire to look at herself with the eye of her intellect in the gentle mirror of God, knows the stain on her face better because of the purity she sees in Him.[133]

[131]E 147, II, p. 293 (DT XXV, pp. 107-108). Emphasis mine.

[132]D VI, 248-249. See also D VII, 403; D XI, 750-752; O VIII, 28-32. The reasoning behind this statement is that a person's primary concern must be for his or her own sanctification and salvation, before busying themselves with the correction and counsel of others. Also, people must first be converted themselves in order to be a more effective instrument in the Lord's hands for the conversion of another; hence "charity begins at home." Catherine attributes this phrase to St. Paul, possibly an allusion to 1 Tim. 5:4.

People know they are guilty of sin, symbolized by the blemish on the face of the soul, but they only have holy hatred for sin when it is held against the backdrop of God's goodness. In that light, therefore, people take another look at their ingratitude toward what God has done for them, their negligence in making use of His gifts, the gravity of returning hatred or indifference to a God who loves, and the end product is holy hatred for their sinfulness.

Catherine makes it quite clear that people owe hatred, not to themselves per se, but to their sinfulness and its cause. She does not mean to infer that the human person is made up of autonomous parts, or that sinfulness can be divorced from the person as an element foreign to human nature. Rather, people are directed to hate only their sinfulness because, even though they are weak and sinful, they are not defined by their sinfulness alone.[134] God's human creatures are good, attracted to the good, and dependent upon their reason illumined by faith to point out that good which is worthy of their love. Sometimes, though, the search is misdirected when their sensuality does not operate under the control of reason, leading them to what

[133]D XIII, 24-30. See also D CLXVII, 212-217; E 226, III, pp. 297-298.

[134]T. Deman, "La teologia nella vita di S. Caterina da Siena," Studi cateriniani XI (1935): 54.

only has the appearance of good, but which is not really good. Consequently, they end up loving what God hates and hating what God loves. This choice and its cause, then, is the object of holy hatred.[135]

The light of discernment also regulates how the debt of love is to be repaid. Holy hatred for sin is an expression of true love of self; therefore, just as when one person loves another, it must be put into practice. Holy hatred for sin is put into practice by means of penance, both interior and exterior.[136]

Exterior penance. By exterior penance Catherine intends such practices as fasting, abstinence, forgoing sleep in order to keep vigil, mortification of the flesh, and the like. She is insistent though, that the practice of exterior penance be regulated by discernment, and only then will it be pleasing to God.[137] What Catherine means by this is that, ideally, corporal penance is inspired by a humble recognition of one's sinfulness in the light of God's goodness, and is

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[135]D VII, 360-366; E 95, II, pp. 99-100; E 264, IV, p. 127; E 380, VI, pp. 37-38.

[136]Prestipino states that Catherine sees hatred for sin as the logical response to the continual assault of selfish love, and that penance is inspired by and is the natural outgrowth of holy hatred for sin. C. Prestipino, "S. Caterina: il conoscimento, fondamento di una vita illuminata": 524-525.

[137]D IX, 518-525; D XI, 670-673; E 213, III, pp. 231-233; E 340, V, p. 128.

used as an instrument to kill one's selfish sensual will from which sin issues.[138] Therefore, when the "perverse law of the flesh bound up in your members" rebels against the guidance of reason illumined by faith, Catherine advises people to be "cruel" to their sensuality and "compassionate" to their reason. By "cruel" she means to deny sensuality satisfaction by turning away from the things it wants to love, that is, that which God hates. By "compassionate" she has in mind to then turn toward the things that reason shows to be worthy of love, that is, that which God loves.[139]

Corporal penance is an expression of holy hatred for sin and a means, taken up according to an individual's needs and ability, to rid the will of selfishness and bring it more into line with God's will. It is clear, then, that it would be undiscerning and an obstacle to spiritual growth to make penance an end in itself, or to practice it as a source of

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[138]D IX, 531-539; D XI, 674-701; L 1, 10, 101. In this context Catherine refers to the virtue of discernment as a double-edged knife of hatred and love. The knowledge people have of themselves and God, which forms the basis for discernment, generates hatred for sin and love for virtue; in other words, hatred for what God hates and love for what God loves. Hatred for sin and love for virtue work together to kill one's selfish will and then to conform the will to God's. See D XI, 699-701; D XXIII, 588-597; D XLVII, 1491-1493; E 28, I, p. 97 (DT XVII, p. 64); E 80, II, p. 38; E 99, II, pp. 116-117 (DT VII, p. 35); E 183, III, p. 111 (DT LVI, p. 227); E 185, III, p. 123 (DT LIV, p. 213); E 265, IV, p. 133; E 314, V, p. 25.

[139]O VIII, 80-90.

pride, or to continue denying oneself when physical health is threatened.

Interior penance. Interior penance is another expression of holy hatred for sin. The terminology is not Catherine's, but is used as an adequate expression of her thought regarding the more interior, spiritual aspect of penance. The difference between interior penance and corporal penance is the means by which it is practiced. Corporal penance attempts to kill the selfish will by means of fasting or some such practice, whereas interior penance tries to do the same by means of humbling oneself or self-abasement.[140]

By its very nature interior penance, or self-abasement is principally concerned with the sin of pride: an inordinate esteem for oneself based on who one is or what one owns. This form of penance is regulated by discernment as well, for people conceive a holy hatred for their pride when they see their own nothingness contrasted with God's goodness, especially as His goodness is manifested in the self-emptying of the incarnation. In light of the fact that everything is a gift from God, and seeing how God humbled Himself for their sakes, people should realize how ludicrous pride is and how futile it is to try and make a name for themselves. They express their holy hatred for sin,

[140]See C. Prestipino, "S. Caterina: il conoscimento, fondamento di una vita illuminata": 524.

especially pride, by regarding themselves as lowly or small: "...they are made small out of true humility."[141] They also practice self-abasement, which Catherine calls a sister or servant of humility: esteeming themselves as poor, as nothing in and of themselves, and submitting themselves to others as superior to themselves, but without losing their self-respect or sense of worth in God's eyes.[142] In fact, Catherine teaches that the posture of a true Christian is that of a disciple, seated below the chair of the Master, in the lowliness of true humility, learning the meaning of humility from the example of Christ Himself.[143]

These are only some of the fruits of virtue produced on the limb of discernment. The list could go on indefinitely, for any action done out of a love nourished by humility, that gives glory and praise to God and benefits one's neighbor,

[141]E 295, IV, p. 240. Catherine describes humility as the "little virtue" by means of which people make themselves little, or put another way, by means of which they become aware of and confess their littleness. See D LXXVII, 3596-3604; O XIX, 84-87; E 23, I, p. 75; E 24, I, p. 81 (DT X, p. 46); E 47, I, p. 182; E 58, I, p. 220; E 112, II, p. 164; E 150, II, p. 304; E 174, III, p. 84; E 202, III, p. 189; E 273, IV, p. 174 (DT XXXI, p. 127); E 295, IV, p. 240; E 380, VI, p. 38.

[142]D CLIX, 620-622; E 41, I, p. 169 (DT III, p. 20); E 49, I, p. 192; E 61, I, p. 227 (DT II, p. 15); E 101, II, p. 124 (DT XXIII, p. 100); E 165, III, p. 45 (DT LIX, p. 242); E 187, III, p. 131; E 190, III, p. 143; E 203, III, p. 196; E 355, V, p. 214; E 358, V, p. 227; ST 2a2ae, q. 161, a. 1, ad 5; St 2a2ae, q. 161, a. 5, ad 2; Rom. 12:3, 16; Phil. 2:3.

[143]E 216, III, p. 253; E 223, III, p. 284; Phil. 2:5-11.

can be considered the fruit of discernment and so lead to perfection.[144] Or put another way, once people learn of their ontological poverty it seasons all they think, say, and do. The knowledge of one's ontological poverty does more than influence certain actions or generate new behavior. It is primarily a new world view that impacts one's whole life: everything is done in light of and in response to the knowledge of God's goodness making up for the defects of human nothingness. If an action falls outside its sphere of influence it is neither discerning nor virtuous, but is a sin.

Conclusion

Human nature can be considered truly poor (that is, lacking what is desirable or adequate) for a number of reasons. First of all, human beings, in and of themselves, lack the wherewithal to bring themselves into existence or to sustain themselves in existence, indeed they would not exist at all if God had not given them being. Secondly, of themselves, people are unable to make satisfaction for their sins against God, nor can they attain the goal for which God created them. Thirdly, apart from God, men and women lack the wherewithal to resist the temptation to sin. Fourthly, left to their own resources, they lack the strength, talents and abilities needed to live a godly life. Lastly, just as

[144] D X, 632-634.

those who are materially poor depend on others for help, and are enriched by the mercy shown them by others, in like manner human beings are dependent on God for absolutely everything, and are enriched when in His mercy he gives them what they need and more.

Unlike some other forms of poverty, though, ontological poverty is not a matter of personal choice, but of discovery and acceptance of what is already an established fact: all human beings are poor, in an ontological sense, simply because they are human beings. Ontological poverty is discovered by means of reflection on different everyday experiences, especially on one's experience of temptation. Examining experience from a faith perspective, in silence, solitude and prayer within the cell of self-knowledge, people discover their nothingness: creature, sinner, weak, helpless. That is not all, though, for the vacuum of human nothingness is filled up by the goodness of God. Rational creatures also learn that they are the "darling of the deity"; that moved only by love God creates, sustains, redeems, provides; in short, that God makes up for all their defects.

The awareness of one's ontological poverty is not merely knowledge for its own sake, but requires a response. Therefore, the next good step people take is to accept the fact of their nothingness and utter dependence on God, and to manifest that acceptance in their attitude and manner of

life. The knowledge of their ontological poverty elicits certain responses, such as giving praise to God and charity to one's neighbors, or loving in oneself what God loves and hating what God hates, that is, one's sinfulness. And because they know their nothingness against the backdrop of God's goodness, they humble and abase themselves before God and others. Ideally speaking, every thought, word and deed is seasoned by ontological poverty. In other words, for those who have discovered and accepted the poverty of human nature, it becomes their stance before God, others, self and the world.

People are poor and will remain poor regardless of whether or not they discover and accept it, but to discover and accept this poverty is the greatest treasure one can ever find:

> This is true knowledge...that enriches the soul because it gives to her the greatest wealth she could ever receive, that is, knowing that she is nothing, which goes hand in hand with the knowledge of God's goodness to her. From this knowledge is born profound humility which is like a gentle water putting out the fire of pride. The gentle water of humility also stirs up the blazing fire of divine charity, which the soul receives from the knowledge of God's goodness to her. The soul cannot help but to love, then, when she sees how God's love for her is beyond measure. And because all love takes its lead from God, as soon as we have seen ourselves and the divine goodness, we therefore love and hate what God loves and hates. We would not be able to participate in the divine grace without the knowledge of our nothingness and God's goodness.[145]

[145]E 145, II, p. 286 (DT XL, pp. 161-162). The image appears a bit confused when Catherine says that the water of humility kindles the fire of divine charity, but she is merely following through with her notion of humility nourishing charity.

In other words, when people discover and accept the fact of their ontological poverty-that they are nothing apart from what God in His goodness bestows on them as a gift-they will love like God, share in God's life and, ultimately, enter into union with God. Hence, in ontological poverty people find immeasurable wealth; in lowliness they find exaltation.

The only thing that could possibly stand in the way of their acquiring this wealth and of being exalted is themselves, or more specifically, conceiving a selfish love for themselves. Selfish love blinds people to the truth about themselves and God: they do not know their own nothingness or that they receive all that they are and have from God's goodness. Therefore, they are nourished by pride instead of humility, and they feed their pride with avarice, which in turn stirs up lust. As a consequence their souls are left impoverished because they have stripped themselves of the wealth of grace.[146] The only remedy for those who have blinded themselves by selfish love is to discover and

[146]"The great enemy in the spiritual life, according to Catherine, is selfish self-centeredness, self-complacency, self-opinionatedness, selfish sensuality. All these terms denote the same thing, namely the soul's departure from the foundation truth that God, not the human being, is the center and goal of the universe." Sr. Sandra Schneiders, "Spiritual Discernment in The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena," Horizons 9/1 (1982): 53. See also D XLVI, 1426-1445; E 190, III, pp. 142-143; C. Prestipino, "S. Caterina: il conoscimento, fondamento di una vita illuminata": 520.

accept the fact of their ontological poverty.