

St. Catherine of Siena's Principles of Spiritual Direction

According to Catherine's *Dialogue*, spiritual direction should focus on encouragement, growth in practical love, and each individual's needs.

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AMONG Dominicans of the past from whom we can learn about Dominican spiritual direction, St. Catherine of Siena (1347-80) is a valuable source. She both received direction and provided it for others. Her writings offer us examples of, and guidelines for, counseling others in their journeys of faith. She was, moreover, a remarkable saint, deeply immersed in the mystery of grace and gifted with the ability to speak eloquently about it.

Catherine was not a religious but a member of the lay division of St. Dominic's order of preachers.¹ Her activities seemed so unusual that when she was twenty-seven she was subjected to an official examination by a general chapter of the order. The examining theologians approved her manner of life, provided she receive direction from an official confessor, the distinguished Dominican professor Raymund of Capua. The result was that Catherine became Raymund's own spiritual guide and his inspiration in undertaking the reform of the order when he was elected its head.²

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Around her in Siena, Catherine gathered a group of followers who liked to call themselves "The Family" or "The Beautiful Band" (*Bella Brigata*).³ This surprisingly diversified community of men and women called Catherine their "Mamma," although she lived to be only thirty-three. Among her "family" were some Dominican priests: her childhood confessor, Tommaso della Fonte; Raymund of Capua; the learned Bartolommeo Dominici; and Tommaso Cafarini, three years younger than Catherine, who was to become one of her biographers. Also there was a group of hermits living near Siena in the forest of Lecceto: the English Augustinian William of Flete, himself a master of the spiritual life who early influenced Catherine and was influenced by her⁴; Fra Santi, who said that he "found more quiet and peace of mind, and made more progress in virtue, from being in Catherine's company and listening to her teaching than he had ever done in the solitude of his cell"⁵; and Giovanni of the Cells, who, once imprisoned as a magician, had become the director of a group of Florentine youths. To these can be added the Franciscan provincial Fra Gabriele and the priest Giovanni Tantucci, both masters of theology and once Catherine's bitter critics.

The "family" also included a group of laywomen: Catherine's mother, Lappa (long an opponent of Catherine's chosen way of life); her widowed sister-in-law Lisa Columbini; a noblewoman Alessa Saracini; and Francesca Gori, mother of three Dominican priests who died ministering to the plague stricken. From Pisa came another young widow, Clara Gambacorta and her friend Maria Mancini. After many trials they were to found a convent in Pisa which became a center for the renewal of the Dominican order. Finally, there were laymen: Matthew Ceni, who in penance for a misspent youth had taken charge of the Misericordia Hospital; Francesco Malavolti, a nobleman who kept falling out of grace, but after his wife's death became a hermit; and three younger men who acted as Catherine's secretaries—Neri di Landuccio Pagliaresi, government official and melancholy poet; his cheerful friend Stefano Maconi, of Catherine's own age and especially dear to her; and Barduccio Canignani, son of the head of the Guelph political party, who was to record the events of her death.

In more than 380 extant letters we can see very concretely how Catherine guided many of these friends toward the heights of the

spiritual life, sharing with them her own experiences.⁶ From these letters one might reconstruct her method of guidance given both personally and through conferences which she preached to her "family." What is most evident in these letters is her deep love of her friends, her willingness to suffer for them, her sensitivity to their problems, and her constantly hopeful and encouraging attitude toward each and every one. Some, like Neri di Landuccio, who suffered painful depressions, needed such support badly.

In the present article, however, I will not attempt to analyze Catherine's letters but will comment on the little treatise on spiritual direction which is contained in her one book, the summary of all her doctrine, *The Dialogue of Divine Providence*.⁷

THREE DEGREES OF THE LIGHT OF FAITH

Chapters 88-96 of the *Dialogue*, subtitled "Tears," deal with the affective experiences of spiritual growth. Then comes a section, chapters 98-109, on "Truth." In a transitional chapter (97), Catherine in prayer begs God, the Eternal Father, to answer two troubling questions about her responsibilities as a spiritual guide to those who consult her. She fears that she herself may go astray. She first apologizes for wearying the Lord with so many questions, since she knows that he loves "few words and many deeds." Then she asks her two questions. First, what is she to say to those who ask her counsel? Is it her duty to pass judgment on their spiritual condition or not? Second, by what signs can she judge that they are moving along the right path? Is it not possible that what seems growth in virtue is really disguised self-love?

Because Catherine's questions are so much to the point, God is quick to reply. But he cautions her that his answers can be understood only by those who really yearn to hear the truth and open themselves to hear it. Divine truth is light itself to the eye of human intelligence, but the pupil of that eye is faith, without which the eye is blind. In baptism every Christian has been illuminated by the light of faith, but this light shines with three different degrees of clarity.

The first degree is common to all Christians and leads them to begin their spiritual journey (98).⁸ By this light they see the dignity of the human person created in God's image, but they also must

recognize the vanity of all human ambitions, the depths of their sinfulness, and the struggle between spirit and flesh within them. "Your sin consists simply in loving what I hate and hating what I love," the God of Love says to Catherine (98).

The second degree of faith is found in those who realize that, as pilgrims, they cannot tarry on their way to God but must make haste (99). Spiritual growth involves two processes. On the one hand, no progress can be made without the consistent practice of ascetic discipline to break through selfishness and open the self to the true love of God. On the other hand, the greatest discipline is not self-imposed but comes from the humble, patient, and persevering acceptance of the trials of life permitted by God's providence. Here, as throughout the *Dialogue*, Catherine insists, on the basis of her own experience, that although asceticism is absolutely necessary for spiritual growth, it must always be used as a means and never as an end in itself.

The third and brightest light of faith begins to shine when the Christian is ready to accept the will of God with gratitude and praise (100). To do so is to enter a state of union with God in which all selfishness is burnt away in the fire of love, so that one lives wholly for others in obedience to the Father as Jesus himself lived—one lives in the sacrificial love of Christ. Such Christians have wills overflowing with love of God and neighbor, memories filled always with God's presence, minds illuminated by the vision of God's providential plan for his creation. These enlightened ones no longer judge others but only feel compassion for their sufferings, while they are convinced that whatever they themselves suffer is God's purifying love at work in them. Although they still have not reached their journey's end in ultimate peace and glory, they already receive a pledge of that victory in the deep inner peace they now experience. In this world they are like Christ on the cross, "whose flesh was sad and tormented, but his soul was happy because of his union with the divine nature."

Reflecting on these chapters we note that they provide the fundamental general principle, or rule, of spiritual direction, as Catherine understood and practiced it, namely, that the first responsibility of the director is to see that the person under guidance is properly instructed in the great central truths of the Christian faith

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and that they are motivated by love of God and neighbor. Without this foundation, no true Christian spiritual life is possible.

In the following chapters the Eternal Father provides Catherine with three specific rules of direction.

THREE SPECIFIC PRINCIPLES

The first of these principles (which answers the first of Catherine's original two questions) is "Do not judge" (Matt. 7:1-5) (102). The Father warns Catherine that it is all too easy for directors to set themselves up in judgment over those whom they counsel. Only God can judge anyone's true spiritual state. Unless directors have the humility to dwell in self-knowledge, accepting those they counsel without judging them, they will soon be deceived by the devil and become blind guides. If, however, directors refuse to judge, simply encourage their clients to grow in virtue, and point out the paths which lead to futility, then clients will soon learn to trust their directors. "When you think you discern vice in others, put it on your own back as well as theirs, acting always with true humility. Then if the vice is truly there, such people will change their ways all the sooner, seeing themselves so gently understood" (102). Those familiar with the modern theory of counseling will immediately recognize that Catherine had already discovered that the counseling relation is based on a trust engendered by the counselor's unconditional acceptance of the client.

The Father next turns to Catherine's second question about how to ascertain whether those she counsels are on the right path, but in answering it he gives her a second and a third rule. In explaining the second of these he takes it for granted that directors should pray constantly for those they direct, so that they may be sensitive to their feelings and states of mind (103). Hence, sometimes a director will realize that one client is experiencing a time of light and joy, while another struggles in darkness, loneliness, and great confusion. Nevertheless, directors should not make the mistake of thinking that the former are doing well and the latter badly. The process of spiritual growth requires such periods of trial and apparent absence of God. "I make the person who is praying for this soul feel the pain as well. I do this because of the gracious love I have for the soul who is being prayed for, so that

the one who is praying may help disperse the cloud that hangs over that spirit" (103).

We might formulate this rule by saying that directors should encourage and support those who are struggling. They should not judge their progress merely on the basis of subjective experiences, but rather on their realistic growth in humble self-knowledge and the other virtues. Modern counselors also recognize that healing and growth do not take place in clients who are unwilling to face the pain of "working through" their problems and who refuse to tolerate apparent regression in order to progress.

Another aspect of Catherine's second question is answered by a third rule which the Father explains (104-5). Everyone is led by God's providence along his or her own unique path. Some directors themselves practice severe penance (as Catherine did) and have seen some of their clients profit by similar practices; they are tempted to enforce such practices on all. This is a bad mistake because not all people have the same kind of bodies, the same temperaments, or the same conditions of life. What helps one, harms another. Ascetical practices, since they are only means and not the goal of the spiritual life, must be proportioned to the needs and stage of progress of the individual.

The Father then qualifies this rule by reminding Catherine of the Christian duty of fraternal correction (Matt. 18:15-18) which arises when a director sees that a client is falling into behavior that is objectively seriously sinful. Then it is necessary to confront the client with the norms of the gospel, first privately, then, if necessary, before two or three other Christians. If this admonition fails, then the Christian community should insist that its members live by its moral standards. The *Dialogue* again and again returns to the theme that Christians live in the Christian community and have responsibility for it.

SIGNS OF PROGRESS

After giving these three specific rules of direction, the Father turns to the final part of Catherine's second question: What are the signs of true progress? (106-7). In an earlier part of the *Dialogue*, the Father had already told Catherine about the sign of spiritual prog-

ress which he now describes as “the gladness and hunger for virtue that remain in the soul after my visitation, especially if she is anointed with the virtue of true humility and set ablaze with divine charity” (106). Catherine, however, has noticed that sometimes this sign is ambiguous; consequently, the Father explains it.

God tells Catherine that when humans are in love with something, they tend to lose their ability to judge it objectively. Consequently, when they experience some spiritual pleasure, they very humanly incline to immerse themselves in it and cling to it as if it were the reality they are seeking, mistaking the shadow for the reality. When they fall into this trap, they abandon serious prayer and find themselves under the direction of an “angel of light” who is really the devil. The only remedy is to seek, not the experience of God, but God himself.

The best proof that a Christian is truly seeking God is growth in humble knowledge of self and practical service of God and neighbor. Pleasant spiritual experiences sought for their own sake will soon fade and leave behind only “pain and the pricking of conscience, without any desire for virtue” (106). False joy is really an expression of selfish love, while true joy is the fruit of the service of God and neighbor. It is an overflow from that service, not an end in itself, for God alone is our goal.

The Father concludes his answer to Catherine by encouraging her and those she may guide to persist courageously in prayer: “I do not spurn my servant's desires. I give to those who ask, and even invite you to ask. And I am very displeased with those who do not knock in truth at the door of Wisdom, my only begotten Son, by following his teaching. Following his teaching is a kind of knocking that calls out to me, the eternal Father, with the voice of holy desire in constant humble prayer. And I am the Father who gives the bread of grace through this door, my gentle Truth” (107; cf. Matt. 7:7-11). Thus Catherine could not doubt that the call to the heights of holiness is given not only to an elite but to all.

So delighted was she to hear this that she concludes this part of the *Dialogue* with an ecstatic prayer of praise and thanksgiving (108). Why has God condescended to flood her with such light? “What moved you to this? Love. For you loved me without being loved by me. O fire of Love! Thanks, thanks to you, eternal

Father." She prays that she may keep to the straight path shown her. Then at once she begins to pray for the priests of the church, especially those who are of her "family," including in particular her own two spiritual guides (probably della Fonte and Raymund) that they may be true pillars of the church. Finally, she begs for still deeper understanding that she may be able to work, not only for the renewal of her "family" and her order, but for the reform of the whole church and the salvation of the world (109).

The general themes of this treatise are in no way original. They reflect the classical tradition of spiritual direction which goes back to the Desert Fathers. The practical application of the gospel to the guidance of ascetics made by these hermits and cenobites was probably known to Catherine through the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, translated into Italian by Dominic Cavalca (d. 1342) of nearby Pisa,⁹ as well as through Dominican preaching and, perhaps, William Flete. This tradition was later to receive a new and powerful formulation by St. Ignatius Loyola in his *Exercises*.¹⁰

What, then, is Catherine's originality, if any? I believe it is to be found in certain themes familiar to her from childhood from the preaching in her home parish of San Domenico—themes into which she achieved a profound, personal insight through prayer and meditation. In Catherine's day, the thought of St. Augustine and St. Bernard still dominated Dominican preaching, as we can see from Cavalca's popular works.¹¹ The Scholasticism of St. Thomas Aquinas is still not prominent in the *Dialogue*, although Catherine refers to him with pride (158), and there is little in her teaching with which a Thomist can find fault.¹²

For both Thomas and Catherine the holiness which is the goal of spiritual direction is a transformation, not a destruction, of human nature. This transformation is also a restoration of the image of the Trinity according to which we were created. Holiness consists in a union with God in faith, inspired by hope, and achieved by love, a love which is nothing less than a share in God's own love for his creatures. Such love can flourish only if supported by all the other virtues. We can grow in love only by the service of our neighbor, in obedience to God. Such obedience is a cooperation with God's own loving, providential care of the world. We cannot, however, obey God by our own strength, but only by his

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grace, for which we must continually pray. God has given us all grace through Christ crucified, the Word incarnate. We live in him only when we also live in his body, the church, the living witness of his hidden presence.

Thus Catherine would not have dared to direct others, if she had not been entirely ready to be directed herself by the church. Nor did she seek to direct them by any other principles than the gospel which she had heard preached and on which she had daily meditated. What she heard in ecstasy from the Eternal Father was the same message, only deeply understood by one who had learned to listen in the deep humility of self-knowledge achieved by constant prayer and much suffering. Catherine was original, therefore, only in her practical appropriation of the gospel truth, which is ever new.

Catherine's principles for spiritual guides can be summed up conveniently as follows:

1. *General Principle:* Be sure the one you are to counsel is well instructed in the Catholic faith, and that he or she is motivated by a desire to grow in the love of God and neighbor.
2. *Specific Rules:*
 - A. Do not judge, but accept and encourage your client to follow Christ in daily living.
 - B. Do not measure a client's spiritual progress by his or her subjective experiences, pleasant or unpleasant, but by steady growth in humble self-knowledge and practical service of God and neighbor.
 - C. Help your clients to achieve a disciplined way of life and prayer suited to their individual needs.
3. *Signs of Progress:* True obedience to God brings an abiding joy and peace, but feelings of joy and peace are not to be trusted unless they are accompanied by growth in self-understanding and unselfish service of neighbor.

NOTES

¹ The best biographies of St. Catherine in English are: Johannes Jorgensen, *Saint Catherine of Siena*, trans. Ingeborg Lund (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939), and Arrigo Levasti, *My Servant, Catherine*, trans. Dorothy M. White (Westminster, Md.:

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- Newman Press, 1954). The main source of *Leggenda Maiore* of Raymund of Capua is also available in English: *The Life of Saint Catherine of Siena of Blessed Raymund of Capua*, trans. George Lamb (New York: P.J. Kenedy, 1960). Unfortunately none are in print.
- 2 This is evident from her sixteen extant letters to Raymund. See *Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. Lodovico Ferretti (Siena: Tipografia S. Caterina, 1930), with list and summary in vol. 5, pp. 413-17. Only 88 of Catherine's letters have been critically edited by Eugenio Duprè-Theseider, *Epistolario di Santa Caterina da Siena*, vol. 1 (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo, 1940). Some are available in translation in Vida D. Scudder, *St. Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters* (New York: Dutton, 1927). A new and complete translation is in preparation under the editorship of Suzanne Noffke.
 - 3 I have made use here of an unpublished paper, "La Famiglia: The Fellowship of the Disciples of St. Catherine of Siena as a Model of Evangelical Community," by Vivian Gilbreth.
 - 4 See M. Benedict Hackett ("Guillaume Flete," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. 6, cols. 1204-8) who thinks the letters show that Catherine had arrived at her spiritual orientation under Flete's influences before 1376 and Raymund's direction. However, Giacinto D'Urso ("Il pensiero di S. Caterina et le sue fonti," *Sapienza* 7 [1954]: 335-88) points out she had been under Dominican influences since childhood.
 - 5 *Raymund's Life* (see note 2 above), pt. 3, chap. 1, pp. 311-12.
 - 6 See note 3 above.
 - 7 The best edition is that of Giuliana Cavallini, *Il Dialogo* (Rome: Edizioni Catheriniane, 1968), which has been translated by Suzanne Nofke in the Classics of Western Spirituality series (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).
 - 8 The numbers in parentheses here and in the following pages refer to the chapters of the *Dialogue*.
 - 9 I hope soon to publish a paper on Cavalca. See the brief article by I. Colosio in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. 2, cols. 373-74.
 - 10 A very helpful study on the sources of St. Ignatius's theory of spiritual direction is Piet Penning de Vries, *Discernment of Spirits according to the Life and Teachings of St. Ignatius Loyola* (New York: Exposition Press, 1975).
 - 11 Cavalca's work *The Mirror of the Cross* is typical of Dominican preaching of this time. It probably influenced St. Catherine; see the study of D'Urso referred to in note 4 above.
 - 12 The most commonly cited difference is that Catherine uses the Augustinian triad memory-intelligence-will to explain the image of the Trinity in the soul, while St. Thomas (*Summa theologiae*, I, ques. 93, art. 7) teaches that the most proper analogy is to be found in the acts of knowledge and will as they proceed from the soul.