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## St. Catherine of Siena . . . Doctor of the Church

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St Catherine of Siena has many claims to greatness. Most people will think of her as one of the most outstanding mystics of the Church. Her early biographers put considerable stress on this aspect of her life. They portray her as a woman of deep prayer, often in ecstasy and enjoying numerous visions. In this lay her chief claim to fame. These biographers also show that Catherine played an outstanding part in the political and religious life of the fourteenth century. For a woman of her time who was uneducated she did extraordinary things. Her most significant historical achievement is described as the part she played in persuading Gregory XI to leave Avignon and to return to Rome, thus ending the papal exile in France. The advice and help of the dyer's daughter from Fontebranda was sought not only in Siena, but by its great rival, Florence. She persuaded the brother of the King of France, the Duke of Anjou, to become enthusiastic about a belated crusade, and made the most strenuous efforts to keep the monarchs of Europe faithful to the irascible Urban VI during the great schism. She succeeded in at least modifying the fierce campaigns of the freelance soldier, John Hawkwood, and made a temporary good impression on the unscrupulous Giovanna of Naples. Her strong and magnetic personality is shown above all in the influence she exerted over her

immediate disciples, her *bella brigata* as she called them. A list of these disciples and some knowledge of their very varying backgrounds gives a very clear picture of fourteenth-century Italy. For all Catherine was a leader and guide whose influence lasted long after her death.

### CATHERINE THE THEOLOGIAN

Pope Paul's announcement that Catherine is to be declared a Doctor of the Church calls for a study of another aspect of her greatness. A Doctor of the Church must have contributed in some significant way to a deeper understanding of the Christian message. If St Catherine is to join the company of St Augustine, St Gregory, St Basil, and other illustrious Doctors she must be viewed primarily as a theologian. And her theology has to be examined, not in her biographies, but in her own written works. These works are her *Epistolario*, the four hundred letters still in existence; her *Dialogue*, the divine colloquy of the eternal Father with St Catherine; her *Preghiera*, a collection of twenty-five prayers gathered by her disciples in the final years of the saint's life.

A number of difficulties confront the English-speaking reader in a study of these works. The first is the problem of language. A complete edition of St Catherine's letters has never been published in English. The only source is a selection edited by Vida Scudder in 1905. There is only one translation of *The Dialogue* in English, first published in 1896 by Algar Thorold. This translation does not do justice to St Catherine's lyrical and warm style. There is no edition in English of St Catherine's prayers. So unless one knows Italian (or French) it is not easy to become familiar with St Catherine's writings.

A further difficulty is that very little scholarly research has been done in English on St Catherine's works. There is nothing comparable to the numerous studies in Italian, to the documents about St Catherine edited by H. M. Laurent, O.P.; to the critical edition of her letters published by Eugenio Dupré-Theseider in 1940; to the devoted work of P. Innocenzo Taurisano, O.P.; to the important study of P. Alvaro Grion, O.P., in 1953; to the new edition of *The Dialogue* published by Giuliana Cavallini in 1968. In French R. Fawtier has done invaluable work in his *Essai de critique des Sources* (1920, 1930) and *La double expérience de Saint Catherine de Sienne* (1948).



Apart from these difficulties St Catherine is not an easy author to appreciate. *The Dialogue* in particular needs much more than a superficial reading. It is less spontaneous, less personal than her letters and it must be admitted in some places tedious. For those interested in theology today there is such a wide range of theological books that one might hesitate to give deep study and time to works like those of St Catherine. So it is not enough to show that St Catherine was a theologian, it must also be established that what she has to say has a permanent value for the Church and speaks to the world of today no less than to the world of the fourteenth century. If this point is not made the declaration that she is a Doctor of the Church will be merely an elaborate ceremony in St Peter's, but it will be of little benefit to the Church, the Church for which she said she gave her life.<sup>1</sup>

As a theologian St Catherine shared in the process of faith seeking understanding, this process which has continued since the Christian message was first announced. Theology is concerned with deepening our understanding of God, especially in his relationship with man. The tendency in recent centuries has been to see this understanding in terms of the mind only and to see faith in terms of assent to propositions and definitions. There is a strong reaction in the Church today against this view. Modern man thinks in terms of personal relationships. Understanding of the faith is not merely an abstract knowledge of truth, knowledge of God is seen in terms of the biblical meaning of the word knowledge. This is essentially the knowledge one person has of another. This is the kind of knowledge of God St Catherine describes.

On the other hand it must be stressed that although she expressed her knowledge of God in personal terms, St Catherine's writings are not merely the expression of her own subjective piety, nor do they contain extraordinary mystical doctrine, unintelligible to ordinary people. She wrote of the mysteries of the Trinity, creation, the incarnation and the redemption. But these were not abstract terms for her. They were mysteries in the Pauline sense: they were mysteries, not because they could not be understood, but because their meaning was inexhaustible. They were a unified whole because they were expressions of God's love. They were part of God's plan to divinize man. These doctrines were an inadequate

1. Blessed Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St Catherine of Siena*, translated by George Lamb (Harvill Press, London, 1960), p. 333.

expression of a much deeper reality, a reality which had to be experienced by man in his whole being and not in his mind only. But St Catherine was not anti-intellectual. For her 'the intellect is the noblest part of the soul'. But it was not only intellect but man's whole being, his person that gave him knowledge of God.

#### GOD IS LOVE

The central and unifying fact of St Catherine's experience and understanding of God was that 'God is love'. Love is the very essence of God and his relationship with man is seen in terms of love. His plan for man arose from a generous and spontaneous wish to share his life with him. It is the agape of St John, God's gift of himself to man, the self-giving gift of one person to another person, the desire for communion. She explains to one of her disciples: 'This I have just now found anew - not that the sea is new - but that it is new to me in the feeling of my soul, in that word "God is love". And in this word as the mirror reflects the face of man, and the sun its light upon earth, so it is reflected in my soul, that all his works whatsoever are love alone, for they are not wrought of anything save love.'<sup>2</sup>

God's relationship with man begins with creation and it is in terms of love that St Catherine sees this action. 'Why, O eternal Father, did you create us? O adorable and incomprehensible mystery, you had no other reason than love for your creatures.'<sup>3</sup> The purpose of creation was the desire for communion with man, the desire to share his life with him. 'He loves us unspeakably and loved us before we were; nay by his love he created us; this was and is the truth; in order that we might have life eternal and enjoy his highest and eternal good.'<sup>4</sup> She continually repeats that God made man for his own greatest good. This desire for communion with man was all the more wonderful when the abyss that separated

2. Vida Scudder, *Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in her Letters* (J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., London, 1927), p. 81. [Numbers of letters refer to the edition of Niccolò Tommasco, *La lettere di S. Caterina da Siena* (Firenze, 1860), four volumes, and to the critical edition of Dupré-Théseider (Roma, 1940). This latest edition contains only eighty-eight letters.] (Tom. Lett. CXLVI equals Dupré-Théseider XXVII.)

3. *L'Opere della Serafica Santa Caterina da Siena*, vol. iv, ed. G. Gigli (Siena, 1707), prayer v.

4. Scudder, *op. cit.*, p. 285 (Tom. Lett. CCCXVI!).

man from God is considered. This abyss St Catherine understood very clearly and often expressed. 'You are she who is not, whereas I am he who is.'<sup>5</sup> Her whole life was a witness to this basic attitude. It was not merely a philosophical understanding about the being of God and man's participation in that being. It was an acknowledgment that man owes his existence to God, and this existence is the gift of a loving Father. It is the psalmist's recognition: 'It was you who created my being, knit me together in my mother's womb.'

The mystery of the redemption is also for St Catherine primarily a manifestation of God's love for man, it was the greatest revelation possible of this love. Redemption was not seen as an abstract doctrine, but a deeply personal act of God, the act which expressed more than any other God's offer of love to mankind. 'O depth and height of love unspeakable, how didst thou love this bride, the human race.'<sup>7</sup> Because of Christ's death on the cross the realization of the divine agape is immeasurably increased, the knowledge of God's gratuitous self-giving love, is more easily grasped and experienced. In this one act was concentrated all the love that God had offered man since creation. It was the same love which inspired both. 'You saved him by the same love which caused you to create him.'<sup>8</sup> St Catherine's own reflection on this mystery shows how she understood and yet longed to understand more. 'Charity, sweet above all sweetness! Who would not be influenced by such great love? What heart can help breaking at such tenderness? It seems, O abyss of charity, as if thou wert mad with love of thy creatures, as if thou couldst not live without him.'<sup>9</sup>

#### FAITH

The only possible response to God's love was for St Catherine a response of love. 'Seeing ourselves loved we cannot do otherwise than love.'<sup>10</sup> But first this love of God had to be understood and experienced. This for St Catherine was faith. Faith was not merely the intellectual apprehension of knowledge. The purpose of faith

5. Blessed Raymond of Capua, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

6. Ps. 138.

7. Scudder, *op. cit.*, p. 164 (Tom. Lett. CCXXI).

8. Prayer x.

9. *Dialogue*, translated by Algar Thorold (Burns, Oates and Washbourne Ltd., London, 1896), chapter xxv.

10. Scudder, *op. cit.*, p. 90 (Tom. Lett. L).

was to grasp the reality of God's love and respond to it. Faith is described as 'the eye of the intellect'. She often repeated the advice 'to open the eye of the intellect and gaze upon the abyss of my love',<sup>11</sup> and again 'open the eyes of the intellect, see how much thou are beloved of God'.<sup>12</sup> Realization of this love, true knowledge of God's personal offer of divine intimacy was not possible without love. Knowledge and love go together, so they are inseparable and mutually enrich each other. 'Knowledge must precede love, and only when she has attained to love, can she strive to follow and to clothe herself with the truth.'<sup>13</sup> As St Catherine saw knowledge of God in terms of a personal relationship she knew that the more one loves the deeper the knowledge. She knew that she could never grasp the reality of God with her mind, not even the reality that God is love. What she tried to deepen was her knowledge that she was loved by God. In this way came the realization of how mankind shares in the being of God, how he becomes 'another myself'. Faith then was the acceptance of God's offer of love.

#### MAN

The basic reality about man for St Catherine was that he was destined to have a personal, loving relationship with God. She repeats many times the description of man given in Genesis, 'God made man in his own image and likeness'.<sup>14</sup> This is his infinite dignity. She marvels that 'the whole Trinity concurred in our existence and imprinted its form in the powers of our soul'.<sup>15</sup> These powers are the memory, understanding and the will. Each of these powers is associated with a person of the Trinity. They are the vestiges of God in us. Their purpose is to increase our knowledge of God and to grow further in his likeness.

But St Catherine was keenly aware that this image had been defaced, that man is in a state of sinfulness before God. She had a keen sense of the tendency within man to give a negative response to God's love, to rebel against his creator. She recognized that all men are sinners before God, that the relationship between man and God is often a painful and unhappy one. 'It seems as if people

11. *Dialogue*, chapter cxi.

12. Scudder, *op. cit.*, p. 95 (Tom. Lett. CLXXVIII).

13. *Dialogue*, chapter i.

14. Gen. 1:27.

15. Prayer i.

sought nothing except in what way they could wrong God and their fellow creatures, in contempt of the creator.<sup>16</sup> One of her most ardent prayers was 'I have sinned, have pity on me'. She described the effects of sin in terms of all that was most unpleasant in medieval life, stench, sickness, filth, cruelty, wounds, blindness, rottenness. *The Dialogue* contains some vivid, extremely unpalatable passages on sin and hell. She sees sin as harm that man brought upon himself. 'Why, O God, when you are so good is man so cruel to himself?'<sup>17</sup>

Generally speaking, however, St Catherine's vision of man is a very positive one. If she stressed his sinfulness, she stressed even more the possibilities that are in man and the glorious destiny that can be his. This was her approach especially in her letters. Instead of condemnation, she assured the recipients of pardon and put before them the beauty and holiness of a loving response to God. The remedy for those who had sinned was easy and was given to all. 'Bathe thee in the blood of Christ crucified.'

#### CHRIST

Christ realizes the perfect relationship between God and man. Catherine sees the incarnation as bridging the abyss between God and man. The theme of Christ as 'the bridge' is developed elaborately in *The Dialogue*. 'I also wish thee to look at the bridge of my only begotten Son, and see the greatness thereof, for it reaches from heaven to earth, that is the earth of your humanity is joined to the greatness of the deity thereby. I say that this bridge reaches from heaven to earth and constitutes the union which I have made with man.<sup>18</sup> In order to experience a loving relationship with God, in order to restore the defaced image of the Trinity in the soul, man had to cross this bridge. Knowledge of God in the personal sense was developed by contact with Christ, the bridge. In this bridge Catherine distinguishes three steps, corresponding to three parts of Christ's body, the feet, the heart, the mouth. Meditation on what each of these signify are the three stages in the development of one's relationship with God, purification, illumination, union.

16. Scudder, *op. cit.*, p. 141 (Tom. Lett. CCXIV).

17. Prayer viii.

18. *Dialogue*, chapter xxii.

At the feet of Christ the soul is purified. At this stage the infinite distance between God and man is contemplated. Thus man learns to know himself, especially his state of sinfulness and his need for conversion. This self-knowledge is one of St Catherine's most important themes. It is the first and absolutely necessary stage in the development of a good relationship with God.

The second stage is the one which St Catherine develops most fully. Illumination is described in terms of personal experience of God's love. This is achieved through contemplation of the heart of Christ. It leads to the great theme of the blood. This blood Catherine saw as the great revelation of love. She sees a close connection between the blood of Christ and charity. 'Blood and fire immeasurable love!<sup>19</sup> and again 'with the flame of love that blood was shed'.<sup>20</sup> The intellect, the power dominant at this stage, is illumined to know and understand more fully the depths of the infinite love of God. Contemplation of the blood of Christ led to the perfect response to God's love. 'You shall find yourself kindled and clothed with fire.'<sup>21</sup>

Thus the soul has arrived at the third stage which is a state of complete union with God. This union is seen as a union of wills. 'The soul has made so great a union that she has no movement except in me.'<sup>22</sup> It is the stage of peace and tranquillity. 'And burning with the fire of love they taste in me, the eternal deity, who am to them a sea pacific.'<sup>23</sup>

Christ then was the great revealer of the Father, he made known to man the mystery of God, especially the mystery of his love. 'He manifested me to you.'<sup>24</sup> The reality of God is shown to man in a human and personal way. Catherine was more concerned about this aspect of the God-man than in the ontological mystery of the hypostatic union. Anyone writing a treatise on revelation today might well quote St Catherine. 'God, therefore, seeing that man is so ready to love, throws the book of love straight at him, giving

19. Scudder, *op. cit.*, p. 111 (Tom. Lett. CCLXXIII) equals Dupré-Theseider XXXI.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 51 (Tom. Lett. XXVI).

21. *Ibid.*, p. 81 (Tom. Lett. CXLVI) equals Dupré-Theseider XXVII.

22. *Dialogue*, chapter LXXXIX.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, chapter LXII.

him the Word, his only-begotten Son, who takes our humanity to make a great peace.<sup>25</sup>

#### LOVE OF MAN

St Catherine's soaring mysticism, her intense awareness of the transcendence and love of God was balanced by her equally clear perception of the second great commandment of the law. She saw that love of others was the natural outcome of the love of God 'from knowledge of me, to knowledge of self, and from love of me to love of others'.<sup>26</sup> Very early in her life she solved a problem which is much discussed today, the seeming dichotomy between the vertical and horizontal aspects of the Christian life. As a young mantellata she lived a life of solitude and prayer. Then she realized that God wished her to return to life with her family and to mix with others. At first she was reluctant and fearful of losing the relationship she had established with God, of losing her peace of soul. But she learned to understand that this was a selfish attitude which showed a lack of understanding of God's plan for mankind. 'I have placed you in the midst of your fellows that you may do to them that which you cannot do to me, that is that you may love your neighbour of free grace without expecting any return from him.'<sup>27</sup> Her writings and her life reveal a strong sense of the unity of mankind and a feeling of solidarity with the whole human race. Love of God created a bond between men: 'we shall find ourselves united in the fire of divine charity'.<sup>28</sup>

Catherine often repeated that love of God can only be expressed and proved by love of neighbour. This love of others was to be warm and human. It gave rise in Catherine's own life to deep friendships, and gathered around her a joyous and happy group of disciples who were always glad to be in her company.

She also believed that one's own holiness, one's own prayer was part of charity to others. Likewise sin was depriving them of something, it was a 'great cruelty' to them. 'A man therefore, who does not love does not help him . . . and injures his neighbour by depriving him of the benefits of the prayers and of the sweet desires

25. Scuddar, *op. cit.*, p. 126 (Tom. Lett. CXCVI equals Dupré Theseider LXIV).

26. *Dialogue*, chapter XI.

27. *Ibid.*, chapter LXIV.

28. Scuddar, *op. cit.*, p. 76 (Tom. Lett. XCIII).

that he is bound to offer for him to God.'<sup>29</sup> She was very much aware that spiritual benefits were given by God through others, that man was for man the way to God. It was a lack of love to deprive another of knowledge of God and divine things.

She did not see this commandment of love of others in spiritual terms only. Her whole life is a witness to the importance she attached to helping others in a material way and of becoming involved in the world's problems. She was so generous in giving food, drink and clothing to the poor that her own family had to protest. She spent long hours nursing in La Scala hospital, and she lovingly attended patients whom no one else would approach. She did not shrink from accompanying a young man, Niccolò Toldi, to his execution and staying so close to comfort him that she received his severed head in her hands. She took a keen interest in politics and never lost an opportunity of playing a part if she believed in a cause. She did not need to look for an 'inner city'. She was in the midst of turbulence, war, scheming, misery, death. She adapted herself to each need as it presented itself. She was 'involved', 'committed', in fact everything that a modern apostle could wish to be. She would have little patience with those who would fear for their union with God in such an environment. 'They will often times see their neighbour in necessity, spiritual or temporal, and they will not succour him under pretence of virtue saying: 'If I do so, I shall lose my peace and quiet of mind, or I shall not be able to say my hours at the right time'! Therefore in failing to love his neighbour, a man offends me more than if he had abandoned his ordinary exercise and lost his peace of mind; and moreover he would truly find me in exercising love towards his neighbour, whereas in seeking delight in his own consolations he is deprived of me, for nor succouring his neighbour, immediately his love for him diminishes. . . . My affection for him also diminishes.'<sup>30</sup>

St Catherine's teaching has much to offer the Church today. Our present thinking is characterized by a critical attitude to the certainty of previous centuries. There is a strong tendency to doubt the validity of absolute and universal truth, to question the very possibility of its existence. But the search for truth, the strong desire to understand reality, the reality of God, man and the world is still an agonizing problem. It is agonizing because the clear-cut, abstract

29. *Dialogue*, chapter VI.

30. *Dialogue*, chapter LXIX.

statements of the past no longer satisfy. Phenomenological philosophies condition the thought patterns of today. Men want the Christian message expressed in these patterns, in a personal and concrete way, rather than in abstractions. Modern man does want certainty, but in terms which are meaningful for him. Certainty must be concrete rather than abstract. This is what St Catherine has to offer. She is the incarnation of absolute certitude. There is a compelling force about her, it is impossible not to be affected by her divine energy. Her whole person is involved in her conviction of the reality of God, of God's personal love for man, of man's call to holiness, of the solidarity and unity of the human race. Catherine proves that it is possible to be a great mystic and yet be totally involved in the world. Lastly there is her love for the Church and her firm conviction of its divine mission. She could call its cardinals 'devils incarnate' and yet be totally devoted and loyal. She could reprimand the pope for being 'unmanly' and yet look upon him as 'the Christ on earth'. She did not believe in remaining silent when convinced that reform was needed. Yet she never doubted that the Church was 'the dispenser of the blood upon earth', the way that Christ has left us to recognize and experience the love of God for man, the mystery of the plan of his salvation.