

By the same author

THE SCHOLAR AND THE CROSS
(*The Life and Work of Edith Stein*)

The Light and the Rainbow

A STUDY IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY
FROM ITS ROOTS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT
AND ITS DEVELOPMENT THROUGH
THE NEW TESTAMENT AND
THE FATHERS TO RECENT TIMES

by

HILDA GRAEF

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WOMEN MYSTICS

IN Christian antiquity nothing at all is heard of women mystics. This may seem strange at first glance; but there is probably an historic reason for it. In the second-century Montanist heresy discussed in the chapter on St Augustine, the pseudo-ecstasies of two so-called prophetesses played an essential part. Very likely this is why, in the Patristic age, women were not encouraged to divulge any ecstatic experiences they may have had. Moreover, the austere mystic theology of antiquity, with its 'negative' way on the one hand and its Platonism on the other, did not lend itself to the feminine temperament, which is by nature so much more attracted to the sensible and the personal. But the new medieval devotion to the humanity of Christ appealed to it most powerfully, and so women now began to take their full share in the mystic life of the Church.

The feminine mystic movement began in Germany, where women had always been held in far higher esteem than in the Latin countries, and where even in pagan times they were believed to be endowed with some numinous quality that made them particularly susceptible to divine influences. Thus, at the time when Bernard preached the humanity of Christ, Hildegard of Bingen and Elisabeth of Schoenau began to write down their mystic visions. Then came the great movement of the Mendicant Orders who exercised a profound influence also on women through their Second (contemplative nuns) and Third Orders (men and women living 'in the world'), so that women mystics began to flourish all over Europe.

Catherine of Siena

Catherine Benincasa (b. about 1347) belonged to the Third Order of the Dominicans. She is one of the most extraordinary women of history, an arresting figure both as a human personality and as a saint and mystic. Her life was written by her fellow-Dominican and confessor, Raymund of Capua. It suffers from the defect of practically all hagiography down to very recent times, an inordinate addiction to the extraordinary and 'miraculous'. Ever since Gregory the Great (590-604) wrote his famous *Dialogues*, in which he described the most extravagant miracles and visions of Italian saints, hagiographers worked on the principle repudiated only in our own age, that the more marvellous the experiences and acts of their heroes the greater their sanctity. Though Raymund of Capua certainly wanted to set down only what he believed to be true, we cannot apply our own standards of critical investigation to a medieval author, however learned and sincere. Moreover, the Dominican Order was greatly interested in Catherine's early canonization, hence the marvellous elements in her life, of which there certainly were many, would tend to be exaggerated rather than the reverse. These elements were then unquestioningly accepted as supernatural, whereas today they would be judged more critically, as was done, for example, in the case of a modern saint, Gemma Galgani. During her 'process' the Roman authorities stated explicitly that, by declaring her virtues heroic, they were not making any pronouncement on the supernatural origin of the extraordinary phenomena in which her life abounded.

Catherine of Siena is the first person discussed in these pages who had visions even in early childhood and who was an ecstatic in the sense that her ecstasies were not rare and fleeting experiences like St Bernard's, but daily occurrences lasting, we are told, about six hours. She was the daughter of a well-to-do dyer of Siena, Jacopo Benincasa, and his

capable but somewhat rough wife Monna Lapa, whose twenty-fifth child Catherine was. She is reliably reported to have had her first vision at the age of six, when she was returning home with her slightly older brother Stephen from a visit to her sister Bonaventura. She suddenly stood still in the middle of the road, for she saw a little above the ground a small but splendid balcony on which Christ was sitting, clothed in pontifical vestments and with a crozier in his hand. St Peter, St Paul and St John the Evangelist were with him, 'as she had seen them in the pictures in church', as the contemporary account has it. When her brother saw she was not following him he shouted to her to come on. 'Then she turned round angrily and said: Go away, can't you see that I don't want to come? But when she looked up again the marvel was gone.' This is the story told in the *Miracoli*; in Raymond's account it is turned into a far more elaborate experience, during which Christ blessed her. He also leaves out the significant reference to the pictures in church as well as the irritated remark, so characteristic of the strong-willed Catherine: 'Can't you see that I don't want to come?'

It is not impossible to attribute this first vision at least partly to a natural psychological cause, the well-known 'eidetic' gift of small children, whose imagination makes pictures they have seen come to life. However that may be, Catherine was an exceptionally devout child, though it would be difficult to ascertain how far the reports of precocious penances and long contemplative prayers found in so many lives of saints are exaggerated. She certainly does seem to have made a vow of virginity at the early age of seven, and that her life must have been very different from that of ordinary small girls is evident from the crisis that occurred when she was about twelve years old, an age when Italian girls begin seriously to think of suitors. Her married sister Bonaventura persuaded her to take more interest in her appearance, to put on a pretty dress and take part in the

popular dances. It was a very brief period of 'worldliness' which she never ceased to regret in later life. It was cut short by Bonaventura's sudden death in childbirth, which brought home to Catherine once and for all the vanity of all earthly pleasures. Despite the resistance of her family she later (probably in 1364) joined the *Mantellate* as the Dominican women tertiaries were then called; this action gave her a religious habit and the comparative freedom for women that went with it, without tying her to a convent—a life which would have been quite unsuited to her independent character.

At this time she was about seventeen years old. She now adopted an even more penitential way of life than before. She continued to occupy a tiny room at the top of her parents' house, where she kept the shutters of the window closed; but a light that was burning before the sacred pictures painted on the wall lit up another world, the only one to stir her imagination. She hardly ever went out except to church, and she scarcely spoke to anyone except her confessor. She reduced food to less than the indispensable minimum: a few herbs and water, sometimes supplemented by a little dry bread, had to suffice to preserve her life. On her own testimony she had to struggle hard to do without sleep; but at last she succeeded in sleeping only about half an hour every other day, and that lying fully dressed on a plank. To these ancient penances of fasts and vigils carried to extremes she added the new medieval practices of inflicting acute pain on herself. She imitated St Dominic, the founder of her Order, by scourging herself three times daily, often till blood began to flow; she also wore a chain studded with nails round her waist; this she never took off.

About this time, we are told, her long ecstasies began to attract attention. As soon as she had received Holy Communion she would drop to the floor and stay unconscious for hours; often the other Mantellate had to carry her out of the church when it was closed at midday. Once a young

Dominican tried to prove that she was an impostor and pierced her foot with a needle while she lay motionless. She gave no sign of pain at the time; but later, when she had regained consciousness, she began to feel the wounds. This was taken to be a proof that her ecstasies were truly from God.

These external phenomena are frequently considered certain evidence of the mystic life. Nevertheless it should give us pause that, though short occasional ecstasies were well known in the Church from the beginning (St Paul is the most authoritative example), these long-drawn-out states of unconsciousness—we might almost call them trances rather than ecstasies—are, apart from the Montanist heresy, first met with in the Middle Ages, and, a very important feature, mostly in women. Nor is that all. In Catherine's life they appeared when she was leading the extraordinary existence just described. In the traditional biographies this is taken as a proof that her exceptional fervour, manifested in her austerities and prayers, drew down corresponding graces in the form of prolonged ecstasies. But is this the only possible explanation?

Many of Catherine's contemporaries reproached her for her 'singularity' and pointed out that both Christ and his Mother had taken food and sleep in the ordinary way. Would she be better than they? Assuredly, nothing was farther from Catherine's mind than such a thought. But she was cast in a larger than life-size mould, and once she had resolved to conquer her 'lower nature' so as to belong entirely to God, she not only went the whole way, but carried things to extremes. She not only buffeted her body and brought it into subjection, as did St Paul, but she raged even against the divinely appointed limits of human existence, grudging to 'pay the debt of sleep to the body', as she called it herself, and to pay other debts as well. Even though her motives were perfectly pure, such high-handed action against physical life has its natural consequences. A

body that is subjected to fasts and vigils beyond endurance will tend to 'get its own back' in one way or another. Hence it is very probable that the constant trance states of Catherine and certain other mystics are due to their complete physical exhaustion rather than to direct divine action. The intense emotion caused, for example, by the reception of Holy Communion, would in a person of normal physical constitution lead only to a state of profound absorption, during which the senses, though oblivious of their surroundings, would yet feel the prick of a needle or see a flash of lightning. But in someone like Catherine, whose physique was weakened by lack of sleep and food and whose nerves were overstrained by scourgings and chains as well as almost complete solitude, religious emotion would lead to a complete lack of consciousness in which, moreover, the prostrate body might make up for some of the necessary sleep withheld from it. Similar considerations would apply to the many imaginary visions Catherine had during these years of complete retirement. It seems almost psychologically impossible that, with the outside world rigorously excluded by shutters and religious pictures lit up by the flickering flame of an oil lamp, the personages that peopled the walls of her small room as well as her consciousness should not have come to life in her imagination and begun to move and speak to her.

Do we then assert that Catherine's mystical life was unreal, that she was a neurotic, subject to trances and hallucinations? This would be ludicrous. But in the light of modern psychological knowledge it can scarcely be denied that there are in her life, as in that of many other ecstasies, elements which are due to natural physical and psychological reactions rather than to divine supernatural action. It seems to us that, if Catherine had been leading a more normal life (as her confessors as well as her parents would have preferred), her mystical life, while no doubt equally exalted, would have been far less spectacular. For spectacular

it was, not only in its outward manifestations, but also in the colourful events that took place in her visions.

The three years' period of her retirement ended in what is generally described as her 'spiritual espousals'. It was the last day of the carnival when nearly all Christendom, and Italian cities in particular, gave themselves up to a last 'fling', an orgy of eating, drinking, dancing and love-making before the stern forty days of the Lenten fast. Even though the window of her room was shuttered, Catherine could hear the noise of what was going on outside and had certainly enough memories of her earlier years to fill in the picture. She had been subject to the sensual temptations of which we hear so much in the lives of other saints, beginning with the fourth-century hermit St Anthony. She had resisted them stoutly for the love of God. While the Sienese carnival was in progress under her window, a colourful pageant suddenly invaded her own bare room: she saw Christ and his Mother, St John the Evangelist, St Paul, St Dominic, David playing the harp, surrounded by a host of angels. The Blessed Virgin took Catherine's right hand and asked her Son to make her his spouse. Thereupon Jesus placed a ring on her finger, telling her that 'he espoused her to himself in faith'. Soon afterwards she realized that her retirement was to end, that she was from now on to take part in the life of her family and of the world.

Catherine's experience of a 'mystical betrothal' was not entirely original. It was fashioned on the legend of her namesake, Catherine of Alexandria, adorned with such obvious additions as the appearance of St Dominic. Was it therefore an illusion? We have here the mingling of the supernatural with the natural so characteristic of genuine ecstasies. Catherine's later life, her unique mission of helping to bring back the Pope from Avignon to Rome and her strikingly successful apostolate bear out the deep significance of the experience just related, which in some way resembles the inaugural visions of the prophets. The supernatural con-

viction of belonging entirely to Christ expresses itself in the imagery most natural to a woman, that of a betrothal feast in which even the precious ring is not missing, which was, moreover, familiar to her from the story of her patron saint. Catherine's surrender to God's call was the work of divine grace; the form in which it presented itself to her imagination would seem to have come from herself. The same interplay of the natural and the supernatural is evident in many famous events of her later years, including her invisible stigmatization and the so-called 'exchange of hearts' between Christ and herself. An intense experience of union with God expressed itself in images that lay near at hand. The transformation into Christ crucified had been the culminating experience of St Francis, whereas devotion to the heart of Jesus had been a characteristic of many great mystics before her, St Bernard, St Bonaventure, and in particular St Gertrude, whose revelations were popular reading at the time.

The amazing activities on which Catherine embarked after her mystic betrothal are reflected in her *Letters*; the spiritual doctrine she evolved from her contemplation and reading in her *Dialogue*. The *Letters* show a highly complex, yet paradoxically very simple personality. Here is a child of the people, more, a woman, suddenly writing to the highest dignitaries of Christendom, to cardinals and even Popes, to princes and kings as well as to men and women of her own middle class, in terms not only of authority but of what in anyone else would be called downright impertinence. Without the slightest hesitation she tells a Pope (Gregory XI) to abdicate if he will not follow her advice to use more authority to reform abuses (*Letters* p. 234). She calls cardinals liars and idolaters (*ib.* p. 280) and tells William Flete and other hermits much older than herself that they are 'ignorant sons', falling into the snares of the devil (p. 64). She lectures all and sundry, again including Popes and bishops, on theological subjects, expounding to

Gregory XI the mystery of the Incarnation (p. 126) and to Urban VI the effects of charity and the qualities of a good shepherd (p. 245) in the tone of an authoritative teacher. Indeed, she frequently associates herself directly with God: 'You could do nothing more pleasing to the highest eternal will of God and to mine' (p. 228); 'You will fulfil the will of God and me' (p. 171), this to the King of France. More, on one occasion, when a fierce mob attacked her and her friends in a garden at Florence, she evidently deliberately used the very words of Christ in the garden of Gethsemani (Jn. 18: 8) and told them: 'I am she. Take me and let this family go' (p. 258). When her mother and her friends complained that she was so often away from them, she would exhort them to take as an example Mary and the disciples when Christ had left them (p. 187). How is this to be squared with the humility generally associated with an intense mystical life?

There is, however, another side to Catherine's character. Not the least puzzling feature of her letters are her frequent unmeasured self-accusations and the intense conviction that her own sins and shortcomings are a cause, if not *the* cause, of the evils that have befallen the Church. 'In all possible ways', she writes to Raymund of Capua, 'I have committed measureless faults, on account of which, yes, on account of my many iniquities, I believe that he (the Pope) has suffered many persecutions, he and Holy Church. Wherefore if he complains of me he is right, and right in punishing me for my defects. But tell him that up to the limits of my power I shall strive to correct my faults, and to fulfil more perfectly his obedience' (p. 239). Criticism, too, she meets with humility: 'I reprove thee, dearest . . . daughter . . . , Not to answer anyone who should say to thee anything about myself that seemed to thee less than good. . . . I wish both of you to reply to anyone who narrated my faults to you in this wise—that they are not telling so many that a great many more might not be told . . . I confess truth-

fully that I have found little success in myself; but I have hope in my Creator, who will make me correct myself and change my way of life' (p. 75f).

Humility is the touchstone of sanctity. For all her self-assurance and her readiness to upbraid others for their faults, Catherine is acutely conscious of her own weaknesses. Indeed, it would hardly be credible that her correspondents should have taken her criticism in such good part, that she should have inspired an unquestioning devotion in so many sincerely religious people and that she should have converted innumerable sinners, if her union with God had not been deep and real. But she was an extremely forceful woman with an iron will and an unshakable conviction of her own mission; she suffered intensely from the unprecedented corruption of the Church in her time, she towered high above her entourage as a personality, in natural courage and intelligence as well as in supernatural insight; it was inevitable that the Christian virtues should express themselves in her differently from the way they appear in other women. Perhaps the most surprising feature in her astonishing career is the attitude of the Church authorities. These are not as a rule inclined to look kindly on a woman going about with a band of devoted followers of either sex, causing sensation in church by falling into trances and meddling in ecclesiastical policy. But far from persecuting her they actually supported her.

Two factors were responsible for this. First, her high virtue was evident to most; secondly, this quite uneducated tanner's daughter who learned to read only late in life possessed the most astounding theological knowledge, which had been severely tested both by theologians of her own Order and by others who had doubted her orthodoxy. It was certainly inspired by her Dominican entourage, but she developed the teaching she had received in her own individual way and applied it with great acumen to the needs of her time. Its main characteristics appear already in her

Letters, but are worked out more fully in the *Dialogue*.

In her mystic life and teaching emotion and reason are inextricably intertwined. She is truly medieval in her intense devotion to Christ crucified and especially to his precious Blood. In fact her stress on the Blood can sometimes be almost repulsive to modern readers. Her letters open with a more or less elaborate formula invariably containing the words: 'I Catherine write to you in his precious Blood', and many of them are full of exhortations such as these: 'drink deep of the Blood, and therein consume thy self-will' (p. 151); 'For in the Blood man sees God humbled to his own level, assuming our humanity . . . so that it flows from the wounds of the body of Christ crucified, and pours over us the Blood . . .' 'Like a vase, fill yourself with the Blood of Christ crucified' (p. 222). 'Drink deep, then, in the Blood of the spotless Lamb' (p. 238).

This preoccupation with blood reaches its climax in her famous letter to Raymund of Capua on the execution of Niccolo Tuldo, a young Perugian who had been condemned to death for a political offence against the Sienese government. Catherine had induced him to accept his sentence with submission to God's will and accompanied him to Mass and Holy Communion. He then asked her to be with him at his last hour, and she had actually knelt with him at the scaffold and received his head into her arms, while his blood spurted over her clothes. It is hardly surprising that this experience should have stirred her to the depths of her being. Still evidently trembling with emotion she describes the scene to Raymund; beginning with the 'desire to see you inflamed and drowned in that his sweetest Blood' she bursts out into exclamations: 'Blood and fire, immeasurable love!' and continues: 'I have just received a head in my hands, which was to me of such sweetness as heart cannot think. . . .' Before his execution, after Holy Communion, she had 'held his head upon my breast. I heard then the rejoicing, and breathed the fragrance of his blood; and it

was not without the fragrance of mine, which I desire to shed for the sweet Bridegroom Jesus.' Later, when he was beheaded: 'I received his head in my hands. . . . Then was seen God-and-Man. And he stood wounded, and received the blood; in that blood a fire of holy desire. . . . When he had received his blood and his desire, he also received his soul, which he put into the open treasure-house of his Side. . . . When he was at rest, my soul rested in peace and quiet, in so great fragrance of blood that I could not bear to remove the blood which had fallen on me from him' (p. 110ff).

There is more than a hint here of the primitive reverence for blood to be found in Judaism as well as in many pagan cults. The Blood of Christ and the blood of the young man whose head had rested on her breast only a short while ago mingled in her thoughts and almost seem to have intoxicated her; for she fell into a trance and later could not bear to remove the stains of blood from her clothes. Supernatural desire for the salvation of his soul and natural emotion roused by the sight and touch of the warm, flowing blood amalgamated into one intense experience in which the two elements could no longer be distinguished. We are far not only from the intellectual mysticism of a Gregory of Nyssa or a St Augustine, but also from the restraint of St John and St Paul, who frequently speak of the Blood of Christ but only soberly, as a means of redemption and in the Eucharist, from which the emotional appeal which It, and blood in general, had for Catherine is entirely absent. This also appears in passages like the following from a letter to Raymund of Capua: 'Ah, sweet Blood, thou dost dissolve the shadows that darken the minds of reasonable creatures and dost give us light! Sweet Blood, thou dost unite those who strive, thou dost clothe the naked . . . Oh, holy Blood, who shall receive thee amiss? the lovers of themselves, because they do not perceive thy fragrance' (p. 257).

This devotion to the Blood of Christ and the wounds from

which it flowed was closely linked to the growing devotion to his heart which has already been considered in the chapter on St Bonaventure and which also holds a prominent place in Catherine's spirituality. It is developed especially in her *Dialogue*. There she places it in the context of her meditation on Christ's Body on the Cross, which is the bridge that joins man to God. This simile, in its turn, is called forth by her consideration of man's creation and fall. In chapter 21, where the simile of the bridge is explained for the first time, Catherine links it with the doctrine of man's creation in the image. We may remark in passing that we shall always attribute the teaching given in the *Dialogue* to Catherine herself rather than to God the Father who is the Person purporting to be speaking. It is very probable that some of the principal ideas of the work were first conceived in ecstasy; but it cannot be assumed that the lengthy explanations given in it should have emanated from the eternal Father himself. These, in addition to bearing an unmistakably Dominican imprint, are manifestly Catherine's own favourite topics including the most violent denunciations of the 'demons' and 'she-devils' peopling ecclesiastical premises.

'This truth is', writes Catherine, 'that I have created man to my own image and similitude, in order that he might have eternal life and might partake of me, and taste my supreme and eternal sweetness and goodness'. Catherine does not discuss in what this image consists nor does she develop its implications. But she mentions it so frequently both in her *Letters* and in the *Dialogue* that she evidently regarded it as the basis of the spiritual life, for in the passage just quoted she makes it the foundation of eternal life. Through Adam's sin the direct 'road' from man to God was destroyed, sin 'closed heaven and bolted the doors of mercy, the soul of man produced thorns . . . and my creature found in himself rebellion against himself. . . . And so, wishing to remedy your great evils, I have given you the

Bridge of my Son, in order that, passing across the flood you may not be drowned, which flood is the tempestuous sea of this dark life'.

The 'bridge' is Catherine's homely expression of the dogma theologians call the hypostatic union, for she continues in the next chapter (22): 'So the height of the divinity, humbled to the earth and joined with your humanity, made the Bridge and reformed the road'. She ingeniously joins her own simile of the Bridge to the medieval Crucifix and the traditional teaching on the threefold spiritual way: 'Now learn that this Bridge, my only-begotten Son, has three steps, of which two were made with the wood of the most holy Cross, and the third still retains the great bitterness he tasted, when he was given gall and vinegar to drink. In these three steps you will recognize three states of the soul. . . . The feet of the soul, signifying her affection, are the first step, for the feet carry the body as the affection carries the soul. Wherefore these pierced feet are steps by which thou canst arrive at the side, which manifests to thee the secret of his heart, because the soul, rising on the steps of her affections, commences to taste the love of his heart, gazing into that open heart of my Son with the eye of the intellect, and finds it consumed with ineffable love. . . . Then the soul is filled with love. . . . Having passed the second step, the soul reaches out to the third, that is to the mouth, where she finds peace from the terrible war she has been waging with her sin' (26).

In Catherine's thought the heart of Christ is above all the manifestation of his love, which, as in St Bernard, belongs not to the highest but to the intermediate stage of the spiritual life, generally called the illuminative way. Man is not to rest in it emotionally, but to understand 'with the eye of the intellect' the great love revealed by it and thus himself to be spurred on to greater love, so that he will arrive at the mouth, where he will find peace.

In another passage she connects the heart of Christ with

baptism: 'I wished thee to see the secret of the heart, showing it to thee open, so that thou mightest see how much more I loved than I could show thee by finite pain. I poured from it blood and water, to show thee the baptism of water, which is received in virtue of the blood' (ch. 75). This is in the ancient Patristic tradition on the Side of Christ from which flowed blood and water, signifying the sacraments. Baptism plays an essential part in Catherine's spirituality; she frequently refers to it as the beginning of the spiritual life, because through it 'the pupil of faith was placed in the eye of men's intellect' (ch. 46), a favourite metaphor of hers. In a later passage her tone becomes more intense: 'Dwell and hide yourselves in the cavern of his side, where you will taste through love for his humanity my divine nature. In that open heart you will find love for me and for your neighbour, for it was for the honour of me, the Eternal Father, and to fulfil the obedience which I have laid on you for your salvation, that he ran to the shameful death of the holy cross' (ch. 124). Resuming the image of the first passage, she writes that Christ's body became a staircase for man, 'that his side should be opened that thou mightest see the secret of his heart, which I gave you as a hostelry always open that you might see and taste the ineffable love which I had for you, finding my divine nature united to your humanity' (ch. 126). These passages have been cited at length because they show the specific traits of medieval mystic devotion to the Sacred Heart, so closely connected with the doctrine of the Incarnation. The heart of Christ will teach men to love his humanity; but this is not an end in itself: for through this love man will arrive at the properly mystical experience of 'tasting' the divine nature, which will give him not only peace but an increase of love for his neighbour.

This love was one of Catherine's most urgent concerns; she practised it herself to an heroic degree and throughout her life urged others to do the same. It is closely connected

with her teaching on the interior cell, which she developed during her period of complete retirement preceding her active apostolate. Her *Dialogue* opens with a short exposition of this doctrine. The soul that has a great desire for God's honour and the salvation of others 'begins', she writes, 'by exercising herself, for a certain space of time, in the ordinary virtues, remaining in the cell of self-knowledge, in order to know better the goodness of God towards her. This she does because knowledge must precede love. . . . In no way does the creature receive such a taste of the truth . . . as by means of humble and continuous prayer, founded on knowledge of herself and of God . . . because prayer . . . unites with God the soul that follows the footprints of Christ crucified and thus, by desire and affection, and union of love, make her another himself.'

Two main ideas stand out in this passage: the Thomist axiom that knowledge precedes love, and the Augustinian teaching that self-knowledge and knowledge of God are reciprocally connected: *Noverim me, noverim te*. There is little doubt that the unlettered Sieneese girl owed these ideas to her Dominican directors. She herself makes it quite plain that they gave her a sound theological grounding, by means of letters and certainly also by the spoken word, for she writes in the second chapter: 'She had understood this the better from a letter, which she had received from the spiritual Father of her soul, in which he explained to her the penalties . . . caused by offences against God'. What is original in her is that she combined this concept of the knowledge of God and oneself with the idea of the interior cell. As she was not called to the conventual life where she would have lived in a material cell, she felt the need to make good this lack by building up in herself a sphere that would remain untouched by the cares of family life and the external agitation which were increasingly invading her existence. This was a region into which she trained herself to withdraw at will, and where she would find only herself

and God. This withdrawal, however, had nothing to do with morbid introspection. This could have been the case if the soul rested in her own knowledge, and Catherine was well aware that this might become a temptation. She writes to her intimate friend Alessa: 'Make two homes for thyself, my daughter. One actual home in thy cell . . . and another spiritual home, which thou art to carry with thee always—the cell of true self-knowledge, where thou shalt find within thyself knowledge of the goodness of God. These are two cells in one, and when abiding in the one it behoves thee to abide in the other, for otherwise the soul would fall into either confusion or presumption. For didst thou rest in knowledge of thy self, confusion of mind would fall on thee; and didst thou abide in the knowledge of God alone, thou wouldst fall into presumption' (*Letters*, p. 27).

The knowledge of self is fundamental; not, indeed, a psychological, but a theological knowledge, for in the cell of self-knowledge as understood by Catherine, the human being knows itself as a sinner, a prey of its own evil inclinations (*ibid.* 54 and elsewhere), by which it has dimmed the image of God in which it was created (*ib.* 218), but above all as a creature: 'In self-knowledge, then, thou wilt humble thyself, seeing that, in thyself, thou dost not even exist; for thy very being . . . is derived from me' (*Dial.* ch. 4), or, even more pithily: 'I am he who is, and thou art she who is not'. This self-knowledge is the root of all virtue, on which Catherine lays the greatest stress because it is the prerequisite of union with God. From self-knowledge springs discretion as its 'only child', to which she devotes the first part of the *Dialogue*. Discretion is needed particularly for the practice of penance and is closely connected with humility, the foster-mother of charity (*Dial.* 9). The virtue most extolled by Catherine is patience—perhaps because her own fiery temperament found it difficult to practise. Patience is 'a very queen standing on the rock of fortitude. She conquers, and is never conquered. . . . She

is the marrow of charity. . . . All virtues can at one time or other hide, appearing to be perfect when they are imperfect, but to thee, O patience, they cannot be hid. For if this sweet patience . . . be in the soul, she proves that all the virtues are living and perfect'. Patience is conceived at 'the table of the holy cross . . . in self-knowledge and in knowledge of my goodness to the soul, and brought forth by means of holy hatred and anointed with true humility' (*ib.* ch. 95). Its full flowering belongs to the last stage of the spiritual way, when the soul has attained to perfect union with God.

This cannot be achieved without great trials. St Catherine's teaching on man's attitude towards such spiritual sufferings foreshadows that of St John of the Cross. Like him she considers attachment to one's own satisfaction in prayer and penance a grave imperfection. 'In order to exercise them in virtue and raise them above their imperfection, I withdraw from their minds my consolation and allow them to fall into battles and perplexities. This I do so that, coming to perfect self-knowledge, they may know that of themselves they are nothing . . . for which purpose I treat them thus, withdrawing from them consolation indeed, but not grace' (ch. 60). The proper conduct for the soul in this state of darkness and temptation is to persevere 'with humility in her exercises, remaining barred in the house of self-knowledge, . . . for this should be the end and purpose of all her self-knowledge, to rise above herself . . . digging up the root of self-love with the knife of self-hatred and the love of virtue' (ch. 63).

Catherine has no time for fine feelings and pleasant devotions unless they are accompanied by solid virtue. She is equally chary of extraordinary phenomena. Though her own life abounded in them, her attitude is one of complete detachment. The whole chapter 106 of the *Dialogue* is a discussion of this subject. In a former chapter (71) she had given as the sign by which to distinguish divinely caused

visions from others one that is frequently considered valid even today: 'If it is the devil who has come into thy mind in a form of light . . . thou wilt suddenly feel in his coming great joyousness, but as he stays thou wilt gradually lose joyousness, and thy mind will be left in tedium or excitement, darkening thee within. But if the soul is in truth visited by me . . . she will, in the first sensation, experience holy fear, and with this fear joy and security.' In the later chapter, however, Catherine is even more cautious, and her psychological insight is astonishing. Having asked God whether even this joy may not be deceiving, she receives the answer: 'Delusion may occur in this way: . . . When a rational creature possesses the object which she loves, and has longed to have, the more she loves the object, the less she sees it, and the less she endeavours prudently to examine it, so absorbed is she in the delight and consolation she has received from it. So do those who take great delight in mental consolations and seek for visions, placing their end rather in the delight of these consolations than in me. . . . Such as these may be deluded in their joy. . . . If this joy exist without a burning desire for virtue, and be not anointed with humility, and on fire with my divine love, that visitation . . . which that soul may have received comes from the devil, and not from me, in spite of the sign of joy . . . Then they humiliate themselves with true self-knowledge, despising all consolation . . . and holding fast the doctrine of my Truth' (ch. 106).

The one certain sign, then, whether a person who experiences visions and other unusual phenomena is under the influence of God or not, is a complete detachment from its own desires and an ardent love of virtue. The crowds, even at times her spiritual guides, admired Catherine's extraordinary experiences. She herself accepted them, but she did not set her heart on them. As her life proves, her only desire was to conquer her own imperfections and to serve God in her neighbour, the only way in which a

person's love of God can really be proved, as she says herself: 'She (the soul) . . . can in no way repay me that pure love with which she feels herself to be loved by me, and therefore endeavours to repay it through the medium I have given her, namely her neighbour. . . . This love you cannot repay to me, but you can repay it to my rational creature, loving your neighbour without being loved by him' (*Dial.* 89).

Starting with recollection in the cell of self-knowledge Catherine followed in 'the footprints of Christ crucified' and, having served God in her neighbour, arrived at the union of love in which the soul becomes another Christ, 'another himself' (ch. 1). This is the final stage of the spiritual life, which is identical with the old concept of 'deification', when the soul becomes truly the mirror of God (ch. 13). Indeed, God says to Catherine, 'if anyone should ask me who this soul is, I would reply, "She is another myself, become so by the union of love"' (ch. 96). At this point men have become completely dead to themselves, whereas 'I remain continually both by grace and feeling in their souls, so that at any time they wish they can unite their minds to me, through love. They can in no way be separated from my love, for, by love, they have arrived at so close a union. Every place is to them an oratory, every moment a time for prayer, their conversation has ascended from earth to heaven' (ch. 78).

In this description of the permanent union between God and the soul Catherine makes strikingly little use of the bridal imagery so dear, for example, to St Bernard. Throughout her treatise her language is extraordinarily sober, and even the highest mystic experiences are expressed with a restraint and a theological accuracy truly admirable in an unlearned woman. In her, as in St Bernard and St Bonaventure before her, the old mystical tradition of the restoration of God's image in the mirror of the soul has been merged with the new medieval elements of devotion to the

suffering Christ, and, as she was a Dominican, with emphasis on knowledge as the prerequisite of love.

Julian of Norwich

It would be difficult to imagine two more different women than St Catherine and her contemporary, Mother Julian of Norwich, who received her famous 'Revelations' on 8th May, 1373: Catherine, the fiery Italian living in the world of ecclesiastical politics, travelling up and down the country surrounded by a band of devoted men and women, upbraiding Popes and kings without mincing her words—Julian, the gentle English anchoress of whose life we know next to nothing, but who appears from her book as a very lovable, retiring person, whose favourite terms are 'homely' and 'courteous', and whose heart was so tender that she could not bear the idea that any human being should be condemned to eternal punishment.

Much has been written about the strange circumstances in which she received her revelations. She was thirty and a half years old at the time and so ill that it was thought she would die. The priest was already there holding the crucifix before her eyes—when the figure on the cross came to life and she had fourteen separate visions lasting from 'early in the morn, about the hour of four . . . till it was nine of the day overpassed' (ch. 65). She herself had desired this illness, for, as she writes in chapter 2, she had asked three gifts from God: 'The First was mind of his Passion, the Second was bodily sickness in youth, at thirty years of age; the Third was to have of God's gift three wounds . . . the wound of very contrition, the wound of kind (natural) compassion, and the wound of wilful (ardent) longing toward God.' She explains that the first two desires vanished from her memory, whereas 'the third dwelled with me continually'.

The relations between physical illness and psychological states have only recently begun to be investigated, but

even in our present state of knowledge it seems a well-established fact that subconscious influences can bring about physical changes. Julian 'forgot' her first two desires of 'a bodily sight wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily pains of our Saviour and of the compassion of our Lady' and of 'sickness so hard as to death, that I might in that sickness receive all my rites of Holy Church' (2), but this very fact would suggest that they penetrated all the more deeply into her unconscious sphere and produced the desired events when the time—thirty years of age—had come. The sickness involved partial paralysis: 'my body was dead from the middle downwards' (ch. 3), then her sight began to fail 'and it was all dark about me in the chamber . . . save in the Image of the Cross whereon I beheld a common light'. Soon afterwards all her pains ceased, and she remembered that she 'should desire the second wound of our Lord's gracious gift: that my body might be fulfilled with mind and feeling of his blessed Passion'. Then the revelations began.

It can scarcely be denied that there are very strong reasons for assuming that both the mysterious illness and the visions were at least partly psychologically caused. This means that all the psychological elements for a natural explanation are present, but that it may well be admitted that they served to convey a supernatural illumination; for through her experience Julian certainly received a deep understanding of the love of God and of the meaning and effects of the Passion of Christ. At the same time, her personal preoccupations as well as ideas agitating the minds of her contemporaries are also clearly reflected in the 'Revelations', as will be seen in the following discussion of her teaching. Thus we shall probably be justified in regarding her work as a fascinating amalgam of natural and supernatural elements.

Julian herself describes her experiences as presented in three different ways: 'that is to say, by bodily sight, and by