Chapter X

THE BOOK

IN SIENA Catherine passed some calmer days. She was able to review the results of her labours and rejoice in what had been won for God. Two of her dearest wishes had been fulfilled—at the cost of her tears and blood. She never doubted for a moment that the return of the Papacy to Rome was largely due to her own efforts, and she believed that the peace between Urban VI and the Florentines was God's answer to her insistent prayers. Two other grave tasks remained to be accomplished: ecclesiastical reform and the Crusade; but she had no fear of failure, trusting that Heaven would graciously accept the sighs and longings of her soul. Meanwhile she could permit herself a little time to rest, or rather to plunge deeper into the Precious Blood of Christ, source of all strength, that renews our energies, makes athletes of the weak, heroes of the timid, and reveals to all the secrets of this life on earth and of the life to come. Catherine felt serene. In Florence she had known moments of dismay and bitter sadness at the thought of approaching schism in the Church—but now she was tormented by no sinister fears. She found time to prepare candied oranges which she sent as a gift to the Pope, and she planned to write more pages to add to her 'Book'. She sent someone to fetch it from the house of the tailor Francesco di Pippino in Florence, where she had left it, possibly at the time of her hasty departure.

It may have been during her first week in Siena that she wrote Letter 346 (Tommaseo edition) to Urban VI. The news she had received up to this date was disquieting but not yet catastrophic. This letter shows some signs of anxiety, but she is serene enough to describe with the joy of a delicate 'primitive' painter the gilt and candied oranges she is sending him, and to sweeten the

bitterness of life with honey gathered from the love of Christ, scattering around her thoughts as radiant as light. But suddenly she passes from a more general style, full of images and metaphors, to the mention of a concrete fact: 'the case that has occurred of those wicked and iniquitous men, lovers of themselves, who cause distress to you and your children through their offences against God'. There is a note of sorrow and pain, but immediately afterwards her forthright denunciation gives place to a gentle, forgiving smile, full of trust: 'I hope in the goodness of our sweet Creator, who will remove from us the cause of this sorrow and illumine or confound those who are the cause of it'.

Fawtier maintains that this 'case that has occurred' refers, not to the death of 'several Roman notables' at the hands of the Breton Captain Silvestre Budes, as Burlamacchi asserts, but to the manifesto issued against Urban VI by the schismatic Cardinals, gathered at Anagni, on August 9th, 1378. This is possible, but has not been proved; in fact, judging from the relatively calm tone of Catherine's letter, it seems more probable that the 'distress' caused to the Pope by the 'case that has occurred' referred to the exodus of the Cardinals from Rome, which took place before June 24th. These Cardinals, says Cristoforo da Piacenza, had left Rome 'intending to rebel', which saddened and irritated Urban VI so much that he summoned them to appear before him on a certain day in July 1378, at Tivoli, to give an account of themselves. Catherine may have learnt about this later, and since the Cardinals were intending to rebel but not yet in open rebellion, she may have hoped to be able to smooth out the quarrel. Even the Curia seems to have still hoped for some means of reconciliation. It was therefore quite natural for Catherine, with the incomplete information she had, to trust to God for a settlement of the dispute.

It was impossible for the Pope and his Cardinals to understand one another. They belonged to two worlds far removed from each other, if not mutually hostile. Urban VI was a rigid moralist and somewhat narrow-minded. As an Abbot of reformed monasteries he would have been great; as a Pope he was mediocre. He was right in condemning the corruption of the clergy and their lack of apostolic zeal; but he was deficient in that love that wins hearts and lifts men above themselves. He was austere, honest, dignified; he wanted his priests to follow a simple upright way of

life; he aimed at making the Church pure and exemplary. With all these excellent virtues St Paul would have told him that he was but sounding brass, for he lacked the indispensable Christian virtue: charity. At certain moments his unbending will and unyielding severity gave him an almost monumental grandeur—yet this did not help him to reform others. His wrathful and violent manners alienated most men's sympathies. He sincerely desired, with great enthusiasm and conviction, to reform the morals of his clergy and eradicate simony; but the clergy demanded that Christ's Vicar should first of all reform himself, to give an effective example. The truth is that he desired to dominate others, but he could not control his own choleric outbursts, or his vindictive desires. He was guilty of nepotism, and appropriated church property to get money for his war. He was no psychologist, and lacked tact and finesse. If he had been 'a terrible man' at the right moment, and with intelligence, he would have won great advantages for the Church, but he often attacked the priests unreasonably; he was violent with the Cardinals, he made wrathful accusations, and treated them as filth. 'He began to despise the Cardinals, and heap all sorts of insults upon them, so that after a few days none of them liked him.' As a politician he had no success, and was only able to make peace with the Florentines by giving up advantages that might have accrued to the Holy See. Men said he was very wise in Church matters before he became Pope, when he was Vice-Chancellor to Gregory XI, but probably the merit of this wisdom should be attributed to Gregory, who gave him clear and precise orders which he scrupulously obeyed. Once he was made Pope, he showed neither shrewd intelligence nor grandeur of ideas, and because of his awkward and unaccommodating character he dragged the Church nearer to the greatest disaster that befell her before the Protestant Reformation: the Great Schism. Yet Urban VI thought only of the welfare and greatness of the Church, was most sensitive and conscientious about his duty, loved devout men, admired and listened to Saints, and had just intentions. Unhappily, he set his heart on rigid schemes; his strictness became harshness, his zeal fanaticism, and his sense of duty obstinacy. His hair shirt bit into his flesh, only to render him implacable with those who disagreed with him. He read the Sacred Scriptures

with more evident affection for the Old than for the New Testament. His austerity often led him to cruelty, and his indignation to injustice. He will became his law, and, intolerant of opposition, he thought it was necessary to humiliate whoever would not obey him. It is not surprising that the Chroniclers of that age describe him with scant sympathy: 'He was a learned man and a good cleric; but with an unsteady head, excitable, changeable and arrogant'. One can understand how it was that all forsook him in the end. He was left in a barren solitude, and, after eleven years of unhappy rule, died, as Platina tells us, mourned by very few.

The Cardinals, on the other hand, were *grands seigneurs*, valiant warriors, men of the world. They were used to resorting to compromise in all affairs concerning the Holy See, and they sought for a possible compromise on every occasion. Tolerant with others, they were even more tolerant with themselves, softening Christianity so as to make it easy and pleasant. Why should they insist on a strict morality, when man lives such a brief life here on earth, and is weakness personified? Were there not enough ascetics and Saints in the Church to represent austerity? A Prince of the Church who had a political mission to fulfil, or must command an army, or be a diplomat, may not and must not live a monastic life. These Cardinals loved honours, luxury and pomp, and to acquire these they needed great wealth. How could they procure this except by simony, a practice they were not prepared to give up? Some of them were avaricious, ambitious and vain—delighted in sumptuous banquets, did not disdain the pleasures of Venus, desired to live a life of ease. In Church they prostrated themselves and prayed, but once outside they soon forgot the Gospel, and desired the good things of this world. The sacred and the profane mingled marvellously in their consciences. For them Rome was full of difficulties and dangers, and they longed to return to Avignon. They enjoyed governing their cities, and were interested in festivals, horses, games and armies, wars and reigning dynasties. They were conventional and slaves to etiquette. Pride would not let them allow their prestige to be lessened. In their arrogance they considered themselves the Pope's co-operators, not his subordinates. They were shrewd diplomats and they knew how to use cunning and deceit to achieve their ends and protect themselves.

Men of this sort could not be expected to endure the intransigence, the humiliating impositions and the angry insults of Urban VI. By lineage and because of their greater political skill they considered themselves superior to the Archbishop of Bari, whom they had drawn out of obscurity, but who, now he had been elected Pope, intended to impose his will. They had certainly chosen him, not because they thought him fit to exercise such great authority with propriety, but because the circumstances of the Conclave had obliged them to do so. It is well-known that this Conclave had been held amidst the howls and threats of the populace, demanding a Roman or at least an Italian Pope, and that the Cardinals, mostly Limousins and French, had been terrified. They had known but superficially the Archbishop of Bari; when they chose him to be Pope, at the instance of Cardinal Pietro di Luna, it was chiefly because of his birthplace, because of the offices he had held, and his praiseworthy devotion and care in the direction of state affairs. But the truth was that the Pope had no respect for the Sacred College, and the College heartily returned his distrust and scorn.

The mutual incomprehension between the Pope and his Cardinals soon expressed itself in skirmishes and then in open strife. The Cardinals withdrew to Anagni, where they deliberated how best to bend Urban to their will, or overthrow him. Meanwhile even the Italian Cardinals, Corsini, Orsini and Brossano, who until then had remained neutral observers, on July 26th forsook Urban and went to Vicovaro and thence to Palestrina. Here began colloquies and discussions and negotiations between the Italian and the foreign Cardinals, to try to find some measure of agreement and unity. But they could neither agree nor unite. Then the foreign Cardinals sent a latter from Anagni to Urban VI, inviting him to renounce the Papal throne; on August 9th they composed and issued an encyclical letter, the real manifesto of the Schism. They described Urban as an ambitious man who, out of lust for power, had deceived the Church and was destroying its unity; he was the intruder, the anti-Pope, to be shunned, condemned, opposed. It was true that they, the Cardinals, had elected him, but only out of fear of the Roman populace; now that they had re-acquired their freedom of action they considered they had the right, for the good of the Church, to elect another

Pope. The encyclical was the signal for inevitable division in the Church, and struck desolation into the hearts of all true Christians. It was no longer possible to find a formula of agreement or peace, or even a compromise. People began to take sides for the Pope, or for the Cardinals, and the sinister dispute grew rapidly worse.

Meanwhile, Urban VI, with his despotic character and tactless ways, had alienated, among others, Onorato Caetani, the Count of Fondi, and Otto of Brunswick, the husband of Queen Giovanna of Naples. The dissident Cardinals rejoiced at this, and as Anagni was likely to become unsafe they moved, on August 27th, to Fondi, where they were protected by the Count's militia. In the meantime, Urban had been casting about for supporters and defenders, and on September 18th had created twenty-nine new Cardinals. The Schismatics replied by opening their Conclave, two days later. Even the three Italian Cardinals, who had left Palestrina for Subiaco, now went to Fondi, to take part in the Conclave which was held in the Caetani Palace. They did not themselves vote, but hoped the votes of the other Cardinals would be in their favour. Instead, Cardinal Robert of Geneva was elected. This choice seems a strange one, considering the sinister fame he enjoyed in Italy for having been responsible for the massacre of Cesena. The Sacred College, however, did not worry about offending Italian sensibility; its members were anxiously calculating the political advantages that might result for them from this choice. From the purely political point of view the election was well thought out; Robert was still young, only thirty-six, active and energetic. He also was a *grand seigneur*; he came from an eminent and powerful family, and could boast of being related to the chief princely families of Europe. He spoke several languages, understood the art of government, had shown warlike qualities. Although not French, he was a friend of France and a cousin of Charles V. He was agile of body and mind, courageous, and ready to give his life for the safety of the Church. He was an eloquent speaker, generous, adroit and attractive. Having occupied important offices in the Curia, he knew well the constitution of the Church. Because of all these advantages which he possessed he seemed to be a man who could successfully oppose Urban VI. But he was lacking in piety and an absolute moral sense. He has been well called 'the man of liberal conscience', and

from a superior point of view this was a grave defect; but when the Cardinals were planning to create a strong Church State, not a State Church, they considered that Robert of Geneva was more likely to succeed in this than any of the other Cardinals—that he would maintain the splendour and grandeur of the Church, and gather around him all Catholic Europe. So he was elected and proclaimed Pope on September 21st, 1378, with the name of Clement VII, and on October 31st he was solemnly crowned in the Cathedral of Fondi.

During these grave occurrences Catherine was continuing in Siena her work of spiritual and material aid to the needy; she was writing letters of warning to those most deeply engaged in the dispute, and of encouragement and advice to her friends and disciples, such as the letters to Lodovica di Granello, Neri di Landoccio, Monna Agnese and her husband Francesco di Pipino, a 'grumbling Florentine lady', and Tora Gambacorta. She was revising the pages she had already written of her Book, and was immersed in prayer and meditation. She had ecstasies and visions, which she described or commented upon according to the promptings of the divine voice within her. She wished to complete her Book and wanted it to be an organic whole, the fruit of her deepest religious experiences, a sort of testament to guide disciples and friends when she had left the world. It was to be the crystalline mirror of her life and thought, expressing all her joy in contact with divine love, her exaltation when immersed in Christ, her rapture at her own deification; it was to be, as it were, a projection of her own spirit, perhaps for all times and all places.

While she was intent on her Book she found time to follow the vicissitudes of the Papacy, through the news she received from friars, friends and acquaintances, her official source of information being still Fra Raimondo who was a sincere and enthusiastic Urbanite and had become intimate with the Pope. Mortier tells us that Fra Raimondo was Urban's 'strongest support and most prudent counsellor. He sustained his courage and inspired him with such boldness that he could rally his energies even in moments of weariness, to continue the fight against his foes'; other writers say that Urban called Fra Raimondo '*suum caput, oculos, os, linguam, manus et pedes suos*'. However this may be, it seems to us doubtful whether the Pope accepted Fra Raimondo's advice. Their tem-

peraments were too dissimilar; the future General of the Dominicans was a prudent, tactful man, while Urban had no tact at all. Fra Raimondo was a politician, the Pope most impolitic; Fra Raimondo was calm and knew how to bide his time, while Urban was violent and impulsive. They may have found themselves in agreement in their dislike of the French Cardinals, and in wishing the Papacy to be Italian and remain in Rome; but we are not convinced that the Pope accepted Fra Raimondo's counsels. Moreover, if we were to attribute to the efficacy of the advice given by the Dominican the results of Urban's pontificate, these would hardly redound to the glory of Fra Raimondo, since they did not succeed in averting the Schism. It is more probable that Urban would not listen to any of his counsellors, however wise they might be, because in important matters he always wanted to decide for himself; he availed himself of the help of others only to further his own designs. Fra Raimondo's support was probably limited to encouraging him to be manly in his struggle, and, above all, he must have begged him to surround himself with pious and holy prelates, and to seek the aid of Catherine of Siena. And, in fact, he did seek her aid.

Catherine, for her part, was a faithful interpreter of the political thought of Fra Raimondo. The letters he sent to her were not merely informative; they contained advice, judgments, proposals for action. The events themselves had to be presented to her in such a way as to induce her to enter the struggle on Urban's side. Who better than Catherine could try to isolate the schismatic Cardinals and work for the victory of the Urbanite cause? She did not enter into the whys and wherefores of the quarrel, did not weigh carefully the actions, circumstances and intentions of the Cardinals, or admit that there had been attenuating circumstances; it was enough for her to know that the Cardinals had rebelled against the Pope they had themselves formally elected; therefore they had sinned against God, and transformed themselves into devils. Had they elected him because they were frightened? This motive could not be proffered as an excuse. According to Catherine, Christ's priests must never act out of fear—in fact, they must not know what fear is. Besides, having elected him they had crowned him and sworn allegiance to him; Urban VI was therefore the true Vicar of Christ, and they were

proved to be liars and persecutors of the just and the good.

Urban VI, as the Vicar of Christ, had the right to demand all things of all Christians, who, without exception, were bound to submit to him and obey him. Here was Onorato Caetani, for example, quarrelling with the Pope: in Catherine's eyes a deplorable act of rebellion. What did it matter if Urban unjustly refused to restore to the Count of Fondi the florins the Count had lent to Gregory XI? Was it a sufficient reason for rebelling against Urban simply because he had been deposed by the Government of Campania? To the Vicar of Christ we owe nothing but obedience: 'Even if he were such a cruel father to us as to hunt us in shame from one end of the world to the other, making us suffer every imaginable pain, we must still neither forget nor deny this truth'. Here also Catherine does not consider man as a citizen or politician, but only as a Christian, judging every action according to an absolute spiritual principle. Was Onorato Caetani not a Christian? Therefore it was his duty to obey the Pope on every occasion. By his rebellion he had descended to the level of a beast, and was bringing about his own spiritual death and that of others. For this reason she wrote to him in indignation and sorrow. In her letter accusations and rebukes spring out abundantly amid the allegories and images. She wanted to pierce the Count's conscience and humiliate him, but to save him too; she struggled to convince him of the injustice of his revolt, and of the necessity of repenting his sin and seeking his salvation. He had become too closely connected with the schismatic Cardinals, 'those who had contaminated the faith and denied the truth'; now it was time to detach himself from them and to become once more a faithful subject of Urban. He must make haste to subdue all self-love, assume the yoke of humility and obedience, and try by every means to avert God's terrible impending judgment. But this letter, even if it reached the Count of Fondi, had no effect whatever.

Towards the middle of September 1378 the state of the Church had become wretched indeed. Most of the clergy had abandoned Urban VI. The anti-Pope was about to be chosen. The news that came from Rome or from Fondi to the various Christian centres was about divisions, unrest and struggles, and brought dismay. The bonds that held ecclesiastics together began to loosen, while order in the hierarchy became confused. The bishops were uncer-

tain whether to follow Urban or the Cardinals; in the monasteries and convents, and among the secular clergy, all were taking sides. Everywhere was uncertainty for the morrow, diminution of authority, confusion, demoralisation. In Siena Catherine observed all this and suffered. The whole world seemed topsy-turvy, and there was no longer a corner where one could find peace: 'As it is here, so it is everywhere else, and especially in this city of ours where in the temple of God, which is a house of prayer, they have made a den of thieves—and caused such wretchedness that it is a wonder the earth does not swallow us up'. So she wrote on September 18th to Urban VI, agitated and weeping with emotion. But the bitterness she felt did not weaken her courage; the words of encouragement to the Pope flowed vigorously from her pen. For her Urban was an innocent target for the treacherous blows of vicious and furtive men: he was the champion of truth and justice, while they were the sons of iniquity. There was no time to be lost—the dangers that were threatening were many, and very grave; resolute action was necessary. He must be a manly Pope—he must wield the knife of the hatred of vice and strike without pity: 'O most holy and most sweet Father' (that 'most sweet' addressed to Urban VI strikes a discordant note), 'now is the time for you to draw this sword so that Your Holiness may put an end to their disorderly living and wicked ways and conduct'. He must not 'countenance their corruption' but be a severe judge and strike hard. 'May the starry flower of holy justice shine fearlessly in your heart!' She told him she suffered for the Church and for him and wished to be near him, to exhort him to fight, and to share with him the sufferings and the joy of battle. The idea of battle excited her spirit and made her thrill with desire: 'I want no more words, but to find myself on the field of battle, suffering and fighting by your side for truth, even unto death, for the glory and praise of God's name and for the reform of Holy Church'.

The news she receives is more and more disquieting: at Fondi the schismatic Sacred College has elected the anti-Pope. On October 5th she writes again to Urban, inspired by holy wrath, but curbing her indignation as well as she can. Their enemies strike grievous blows, but in the long run what can they hope to achieve? Holiness, truth and light will always triumph, and since

the Cardinals and their allies are the negation of these 'the blows of the wicked, wretched lovers of themselves will not wound you; they will not destroy the affection of your heart, nor the Bride, Holy Church. You, the true Pope, are Christ-on-earth and in truth no one can harm you.' She urges him, however, to plunge into the thick of the fight. Fear must not weaken his action: 'God fights for His Church, which you represent; you will see that Christ will turn against your foes the poisoned darts they hurl against you. But you must take refuge at once in the wounded side of Christ, because only there can you find the strength and the counsel you need to overcome those devils. . . . Let your soul expand in the sweet joy of charity without any fear, and victory will be yours.' Human help is always unsure and ineffectual, and never more so than at this moment. Our times are tragic, but nevertheless we shall win through: 'if we hope in God with all our heart, all our love, all our strength'. He must beware: the enemy is powerful, and uses every means to conquer him. 'I know that people plot against you; be prudent; observe every precaution with regard to yourself.' He must provide himself with a bodyguard of good and virtuous priests—she also would like to be with him. 'I shall know no peace until I find myself in the presence of Your Holiness; because I want to give my blood and my life, and consume the marrow of my bones for Holy Church.' She is seized once more by a strong desire for martyrdom; she feels she was born to fight and suffer; she wishes to be a warrior in Urban's cause.

She wrote to the Pope to fortify him in his purpose and strengthen his courage, but she felt impelled to write also to the three Italian Cardinals who had taken part in the Conclave during which the anti-Pope had been elected. So she wrote them a long letter, rebuking them but at the same time trying to recall them to their duty. She could not understand the motives for their conduct; even setting aside the religious principles involved and judging them from a purely human standpoint, she could find no justification for their actions. In the case of the French Cardinals she could find some sort of explanation, if not excuse, in their love for their own land, but what love could have induced the Italian Cardinals to revolt, except self-love? 'Humanly speaking, with Christ-on-earth an Italian and you yourselves Italians, you cannot

have been moved by love for your country, like the other Cardinals, and therefore I can only see self-love in all this.' In her fierce condemnation she found words that bit, and thrusts that drew blood. The three Cardinals had loved the body more than the soul; therefore they had preferred corruption to the fullness of life; a real darkness of the soul had fallen upon them—indeed, a mental and spiritual decay. What was our body? Here she re-echoed the words of Innocent III in his *De Contemptu Mundi:* 'Our corporal life is so ugly that as long as we live we stink all over. We are merely sacks full of excrement, the food of worms, the food of death.' The three Cardinals had made themselves a bed for worms: her disgust was so great that she started attacking them at the beginning of her letter—while usually she began in a more general way, with forewords and spiritual prefaces, meditations or remarks, leading up to reproofs or accusations. 'I write to you', she said, 'because I hope you will come forth from the shadows and disassociate yourselves from death; I have called you "Fathers", not because you are such now, but because I hope you will once again become "Fathers" when you return to be united in faith and perfect obedience to Pope Urban VI, in whose obedience remain all those who have light by which they recognise the truth, and, recognising it, embrace it.' Having forsaken the Pope, they have become contaminators of the faith and have spread abroad such a stench that they have made the whole world stink. 'Now then—do not tell me stories about that Conclave; you have deliberately chosen and crowned Urban VI and you have promised allegiance to him; either you elected him in all sincerity, in which case you are now reprobates to deny him, or you elected him falsely, in which case you have always been liars and idolaters. The truth is that you could not bear the Pope's reproaches and corrections, and so you have rebelled. I should like at least to enlighten your consciences a little; I should like to persuade you to acknowledge your fault, and I should like you, in all humility, to return to the obedience of the true Vicar of Christ. The fold is open; it awaits you—go in. Why do you run away from it? Draw close, instead. You will be received with mercy by Christ-in-Heaven and by Christ-on-earth, in spite of the wicked sin you have committed.'

But it was not enough to write to the Italian Cardinals—it was

necessary to try to prevent Giovanna, the Queen of Naples, from supporting the Schismatics. Catherine had as yet no certain information about the Queen's decision, but she considered it was her duty at least to warn her not to enter into a league with Urban's enemies. The Count of Caserta and Niccolò Spinelli had represented Giovanna at Fondi, but there had been no formal adherence, and she could not therefore be openly accused. The rumours that circulated in Rome, which Fra Raimondo passed on to Catherine, were still unreliable. Had the Queen really wanted the election of the anti-Pope? Was she seriously supporting the Schismatics, or was her attitude merely a feint to gain time, so that she could observe the turn of events? Statements and denials followed each other in quick succession in those days, and Catherine could not openly rebuke the Queen, as she would have done if her information had been sure. She wrote diplomatically, saying little, making general observations and attacking the schismatic Cardinals 'to make the Queen understand', as Tommaseo observes; she did not accuse her directly; in fact, her whole letter was one of courteous persuasion; if she hinted at disapproval, that was for the future in case the Queen should choose to side with the anti-Pope. Her rebukes were gentle, her threats closely veiled. She meant to prevent Giovanna from declaring herself Urban's enemy, and she asked of her, if not allegiance, at least neutrality, and attendance on God's enlightenment of her soul. She wrote to her because she was fond of her and wanted to satisfy her own conscience. It was the Cardinals who were poisoning souls, and against them she hurled her darts. She would willingly have been even more violent, for she wished to resort to 'deeds rather than words' against them; but not being able to resort to deeds she took up the weapon of prayer, which she hoped would dissuade the Queen from her intention of protecting the Schismatics, and induce her to remain loyal to Urban VI and support him in the grievous conflict of the hour.

This external activity did not draw her away from her religious meditations, and if she suffered moments of bitterness, or even of dismay, she very soon regained her serenity and confidence. The deeds of men, even the gravest and most scandalous, not only did not disturb the peace of her spiritual life, but in certain moments seemed of trifling importance compared with those eternal truths

that God revealed to her in the depths of her soul. She detached herself from the external world, whenever she could, to lose herself in the warmth and light that welled up in her soul and restored all to harmony. Here she found true wealth, and power, and communion with the divine; here was the highest bliss. As soon as she began to meditate, her meditation changed to contemplation, and this to ecstasy: ecstasies of Paradise, which thrilled her with joy.

How could she impart to others, in a lasting medium, her visions and ecstasies? How could she give permanent form, for her own benefit and for the benefit of others too, to the sweetness and grandeur of God's words, which she heard so clearly uttered within her, but which, when she tried to repeat them, seemed to fade and lose their power? Her friends and disciples were continually asking her to teach them, and she had nothing of greater worth to leave them than the faint echo of the words spoken to her by Christ. In moments of doubt or dryness, would it not be well, for her own sake too, to be able to re-read, gathered together in a volume, the sum of her spiritual experiences? The compilation of this book became a necessity for herself and for others. It was true that in her letters she had often given free play to the exuberance of her feelings, but many of these letters had been written, not in response to her own need for self-expression, but for special occasions, and in spite of their efficacy—naturally, she knew that her letters exercised a profound influence on those who received them—they were, for the most part, neither planned nor well-constructed. She now desired to compose a book that should contain and hand down to future generations the message of words that she believed God had spoken to her. It must be a book of solid doctrine, for the use of all the faithful. She thought of it as a new presentation of traditional Christian *motifs*, the centuries-old teachings of the Church, as these had re-echoed in her soul with a resonance peculiarly her own.

We do not know for certain when she first thought of composing this volume. We find the first draft of the book, a 'Dialogue', in Letter 272 (Dupré-Theseider edition) which Catherine sent to Fra Raimondo when she was in the Valle dell' Orcia during October 1377. Eugène Dupré-Theseider has very carefully studied the genesis of the 'Dialogue', and, basing his research on

Fawtier's well attested conclusions, has clearly proved that Catherine had begun to work on her book in October 1377, and that it was completed before she heard of the election of the anti-Pope Clement VII, that is, before the end of September, 1378.

It was a great labour that Catherine undertook. She had to amplify and modify the structure of the original 'Dialogue'. She had to compile and to compose: to gather together the best material from her own letters, select with care, concentrate some passages, expand others, and co-ordinate the whole. By herself she could not do all this, and therefore she availed herself of the help of her disciples, particularly of those who were men of letters or theologians. It was a collaboration controlled by herself, and when, as often happened, she perceived that new sections must be added, then the task was hers alone. Some of her experiences were recalled and found useful for her book; her daily intercourse with men and women suggested various and original ways of instruction; the political and ecclesiastical events of the day offered her a pretext for new reflections; her prayers revealed new meanings and analogies, her raptures included visions that could usefully be related. But before adding anything she felt the need to read over again, or have read to her, what she had written and compiled in the preceding months. Therefore at the beginning of 1378 she sent to ask Francesco di Pipino for her book, adding: 'because I want to write certain things'. She wanted the book to be a complete whole, and so, in fact, it is. Every now and then the style halts a little, the colouring fades, and the inspiration seems to flag; but the purposefulness of the entire work never fails, and if we read all the 'Dialogue' without a break we have the impression of a homogeneous whole. It is true that some passages are long and monotonous; yet they grip our attention by means of some revealing words that echo in our soul lovingly and clearly. The 'Dialogue' has not the fascination of some works written by profound mystical writers; it does not strike fear into our hearts, or cast us wretched suppliants to the dust. There is a gentle enchantment in it that makes us despise the life of the senses, and draws our souls towards the mystical life. In the pauses of her starkest and most vigorous passages we overhear a melody sung by an entrancing voice. The whole book has a calm and a serenity that suggests visions of spring landscapes, lit by silvery-gold

sunlight, in which the green trees and the fields of corn have the freshness of springing life. Her world is this world of men, and her eloquence is the result of burning experience. Catherine loved men, every man and all men, and gave herself wholly for their well-being.

At times, her outpourings of prayer affect us more than the dialectic she attributes to God, but the former is but the consequence of the latter, with which she fed and formed her mind. There is in the 'Dialogue' a sort of duel between the cold, logical reasoning of God and the loving impulse of the soul, but this apparent contrast is due to Catherine's desire for equilibrium, which finds its solution in a harmony between the mind and the heart. Gardner found something abrupt and abstract in the words attributed to God, as if they were mysterious syllables dropping from above the clouds through a great silence; in listening to Him our attention is strained, and this leads to a certain monotony. There is an element of truth in this, but it is also true that the colder tones offset the warmer, and that in a well conceived composition both are necessary. In the 'Dialogue' the word of God is didactic and explanatory, expressed with logical precision; nevertheless, it unites and merges also with the longing and anxiety of the soul that seeks Him. There is therefore an alternating rhythm of serene theological thought and imperious impulses which seek to break the bonds of earthly life to plunge the soul into the mystery of God.

We have at the same time the close reasoning and equilibrium of a positive intellect that deals with virtues and vices, with the significance of this earthly life and with theological and ecclesiastical questions, and outbursts of feeling expressed in words which they endow with new meanings, to understand which one must share in that world in which Catherine lived: a world syllogistically unknowable, but one that can be experienced through an impulse of the spirit, and whose light and heat pervade our souls as soon as we abandon ourselves to it. It is the kingdom of grace, the realm of our deification. No precise or definite words can describe it because it is vision beyond all sight, and feeling that eludes definition. When experienced it produces an extraordinary state of mind, which is often expressed in terms of wonder, trembling, enchantment—just as exclamations and interjections

are at times the only appropriate means of describing an experience that is not linked with the world of the senses: 'that the eye that sees does not see, the ear that hears does not hear, the tongue that tells does not tell—the hand that touches does not touch, the feet that go there do not find'. The mystics try hard to express the world they have experienced with such transports of joy, but all they can do is to endow their words with a breath of life, which enables them to be immediately understood by mystical natures while remaining meaningless for all others. For this reason, it seems useless to apply aesthetic theories, however brilliant, to the writings of mystics; if it is at least partially true that poets are wholly understood only by other poets, it is even more true that mystics are understood only by mystics.

Catherine takes us with her 'Dialogue' to the threshold of the Unknowable, pausing on the way to consider man and his nature, trying to arrive at an understanding of various religious, moral, theological, political and social problems of her time—some of them problems of all times.

God created man by an act of love, and therefore we are all 'trees of love', and, if we wish to live, we must love. But the natural effusion of love may be poured out either on ourselves or on our neighbour. One love excludes the other. In the former we have self-love, which is a perversion of real love, and the root of all evil. 'All the scandals and hatred and cruelty and all evil proceed from this perverse root of self-love. It has poisoned the whole world, and sickened the mystical body of Holy Church and the universal body of the Christian religion.'

True love, instead, is directed towards God, but actually it is poured out to our neighbour because, however much we love God, we can never love Him enough. So the degree of our love for our neighbour represents our degree of love for God: 'To Me you cannot render the love that I require of you; so I have given you this means of loving your neighbour so that you may do to him what you cannot do to Me; that is, you may love him fearlessly, freely, and without expecting any reward'. This identification becomes even closer because it becomes one thing with divine love: 'love of Me and love of your neighbour is one and the same thing; and as much as the soul loves Me it loves him, because the love of him comes from Me'. It is natural, therefore, that the soul

enamoured of God should try to be of service to the whole world: 'In common and in particular, little or much, according to the disposition of him who receives and the burning desire of him who gives'.

Love is the central spring of human life, and when it becomes purified so as to be totally disinterested, and learns to love for love's own sake, it is charity: that is, a fire that comes from God and takes possession of heart and mind, and produces all the virtues. These are the foundation of life; philosophers have extolled them, Saints have practised them to a heroic degree; there can be no solid social construction without them. The virtues are alive and give life, because they are rooted in charity; just as our love is of worth in so far as it is directed towards our neighbour, so virtues also become perfect only through our service to our neighbour. Thus there is formed a circle through love, charity, our neighbour and the virtues, a circle fed and vivified by love, that renders man pleasing to God: 'just as with the woman who has conceived a child within herself—until she brings him to birth before the eyes of creatures, her husband will not believe that he has a son; so I, God, am the Husband of the soul, and until the soul brings to birth her child, virtue, in charity towards her neighbour, showing it to all, in general and in particular as is necessary, as I told her to do—until she does this, I say, she has not conceived virtue'.

But charity, although given a pre-eminent place among the virtues, is only acquired through the use of the intellect. This is to some extent Thomist intellectualism, but it is also a conception that springs naturally to Catherine's mind. 'The intellect is the noblest part of the soul.' It is superior to the will and has direct knowledge; nevertheless it does not dominate of itself: 'the intellect is moved by affection and nourishes affection'. Here one sees Catherine's innate desire for harmony. She considers the life of man as the result of carefully measured faculties; repeating the Augustinian conception of the soul as formed of intellect, will and memory, she balances the powers in such a way as to produce a useful mutual interchange and support. Thus the intellect sees the will of God; love is the substance of man; the memory retains the fruits of both. When life is conceived of in this way we no longer find a contradiction when she affirms that man can only live by love, and then goes on to say that love follows knowledge, because the two faculties necessarily supplement each other; thence she concludes that 'he who knows most loves most, and he who loves most receives most'. This is knowledge of a theological-moral character, at times psychological, never philosophical: a knowledge that is completed by the increase of charity; that is, knowledge in God through the eye of the intellect, which is of no worth unless it expresses itself in virtue: virtue that means renunciation, self-sacrifice, dedication to others. In giving all of ourselves we find ourselves, and through a spiritual process we rise from others to God, just as before we had descended from God to others. In any case, man needs to act: 'whether he wishes it or not, he can accomplish nothing except by expressing charity in action'. Alas! generally our activity is wholly directed towards our personal gratification; thus it is changed into self-love, and this prevents us from raising ourselves to God, because self-love 'is a cloud that steals the light of reason', and of faith also, since faith is bound to reason; if one is lost the other is lost too. But real love teaches discretion: that is, 'the real knowledge that the souls must have of itself and of Me (God)'. Since the activity of man on earth is directed by charity, it follows that all the virtues are included in this. We have, in fact, patience, 'the Queen who rules over all the virtues because she is at the heart of charity', and patience, accompanied by perseverance, is linked with humility. Humility is the nurse of obedience, and the foster-mother and nurse of charity. The need to establish the close interdependence of the virtues and to bind them to each other in one whole makes Catherine fall into contradictions, as when she says that charity is the mother of all the virtues (therefore mother of patience and humility among these) and then says patience is the heart of charity and humility the foster-mother and nurse of charity. But these are contradictions soon lost sight of, when considered symbolically, and it is possible, with but slight adjustments of the sense, to preserve intact the unifying bond between all the virtues. Catherine's desire to unify all, and to include every good thing and every perfect thing in the unity of God, is what makes the greatness of her conception. The virtue, she says, without which it is impossible to live an individual or social or political life, is justice, the animating soul of divine and civil laws, the arbiter of all relations between men, and between states.

These virtues, animated by love, are power and perfection, but do not of themselves permit a man to pass beyond the state common to all Christians. When they are active, they make people, families, cities and States what they should be; but they do not constitute a final goal. The human spirit has far greater powers, for it may reach out to the divine light, and be so filled and purified and enflamed by this as to feel possessed by grace, which enables it to share in the divine life. But unhappily this state, that should be normal to all, is shunned or despised by the majority of men; and, even if it is true that 'the soul by its own nature always desires the good', it often strays from nature or is violently torn away. When in this way the soul is estranged from the life of love, and prefers to sail alone on a stormy sea that has no shores or points of reference, all sense of direction is lost, and the soul suffers shipwreck and is drowned in sin, or rather, according to what Catherine has learnt from St Augustine and St Thomas, it is drowned in nothingness which, being null and void, annuls the soul. It is not surprising that when we are estranged from love we are beaten by furious and adverse waves, and become a prey to anxieties, pains and sorrows, so that the whole earth, because of sin, is plunged into sadness. Instead of virtue men have chosen fleshly lusts, envy, avarice, pride, cruelty, arrogance—in fact, all the vices that cloud the clear light of the soul; we follow a wretched, bloody way of life, and when we laugh it is but to hide the spasms of pain caused by the cancer that gnaws our vital parts. Earthly life has been made corrupt, and even the Church has fallen under the dominion of self-love, so that she has lost her pristine beauty and now shows a leprous countenance.

Catherine shudders when she considers the corruption of the Church, and when she sees the depravity of the priests she trembles with indignation. Christ has been betrayed, nature has been perverted; purification by fire is needed, reform *ab imo*. She examines the Church's sores and diagnoses them mercilessly. There is something of Michelangelo's sublime wrath in her gesture of condemnation. It is true that in her pages it is God Himself who is speaking, and therefore strictness and severity are *de rigueur*; but in this Dialogue it is her own thought that God is approving: His verdict is hers. There is no other way: either the whole extent of the evil must be shown, to be cured, or the Church will perish.

But the Church cannot perish: therefore its salvation must be sought; its ministers, mostly corrupt and wicked, must be converted. God wills this, she wills it. One way is to intercede in prayer for them and for all men: she must suffer and pray. Her anguish is for their salvation, and must in the end persuade God. Has He not promised the renewal of His Church? His voice has been heard: 'Take then your tears and sweat and bring them to the fountain of My divine charity, you and My other servants; and with these cleanse the face of My Bride, for I have promised you that by this means her beauty shall be restored'.

The terrible judge has become a victim, longing for the sacrifice. She feels upon herself the entire responsibility of the Church, whose salvation will depend on her own efforts. No one else must judge or condemn. The priests, even if wicked and corrupt, are sacred because they belong to the Church. Only Christ and His Vicar on earth may punish them. They are the workers in the Christian vineyard, and depend on the supreme eternal Worker; if they do not work, or if they spoil the vines, God alone can punish them. The Church is the earthly image of life in Heaven, and He who reigns in Heaven rules the Church. The Church must spread continually until it has gathered together the whole world: in this way the unity and continuity of the world of men would be united to the divine world. Has Christ not made of Himself a Bridge between earth and Heaven, so that men may share in both worlds?

But the reality is far otherwise; men seek to gratify their senses and care nought for perfection. Beneath this Bridge flows a rushing river, and the great majority of men have preferred and still prefer to go down into the river and trust themselves to that fickle stream. 'The water knows no pause, everyone is drowned that enters it.' The Bridge rises like an apocalyptic vision; our imagination sees it soar higher and ever higher till it is lost in the infinite, then bend down to reach the earth again, like a great celestial Way, coloured grey and russet; it is solid and yet aerial, it has the constancy and the vibrations of the stars. It arouses wonder and trembling fear; it is the Bridge thrown across the abyss by God, for the salvation of men. Its stones are the virtues, cemented with the Blood of Christ. There is nothing dangerous or treacherous about it: 'for all the faithful may cross it easily,

and without any servile fear'. We contemplate it in awe; over it pass a few wayfarers, glowing in azure light; beneath it swarms the crowd, lost in the grey, tossing river waves.

All those who aim at a certain degree of perfection cross over the Bridge, which leads to a door and ends with three enormous steps. Christ awaits them there; Catherine's image of Him is of extraordinary grandeur, far larger than those gigantic Byzantine Christs which, in the apses of some churches, fascinate us so much that once we have seen them we cannot detach our gaze from those faces or those eyes. The three steps lead to the feet of Christ, then to His side, then to His mouth: this last step must be climbed by whoever would arrive at 'great perfection'.

Real knowledge begins at the feet of Christ. This is religious and mystical—not philosophical knowledge. Catherine's God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—not the God of Aristotle or of St Thomas Aquinas. When Père Deman writes that she 'is moved and thrilled by those conceptions that other minds can hold with indifference', he is right if by conceptions he means the truths of faith that she learns in God. To her might be applied St Anselm's '*credo ut intelligam*' in its strictest sense. She attaches importance to the intellect, not because it is itself capable of discovering truths, but because it can, to a certain extent, understand the Christian faith as accepted by the soul. Truth dwells in God, not in the human brain, and man is allowed to raise his mind to God to know in Him what he has already himself begun to believe through revelation. 'She encourages us to acquire knowledge', certainly, but one must beware of confusing her knowledge, which is mystical, with that of a closely reasoning theologian. She accepts the teaching of Christ and believes that the love of virtue and the hatred of vice will lead us to the 'house of self-knowledge', and that prayer raises us 'so that the intellect may receive the light'. This is true knowledge, Catherine tells us, but is it not perhaps a divine illumination granted to our intellect? There are no syllogisms here, no logical and strict deductions. God gives us knowledge of the truth, and according to this we must regulate our conduct in this life. It is always faith that is supreme; we are far from philosophical reasoning, far even from the intellectual world of the theologian. Catherine agrees with the theologian in her principles, which are after all common to

the whole Christian world—she is opposed to him both in method and in her general conception. Père Deman draws a clever portrait of Catherine as an eager thinker and reasoner, but when we study her writings it is her love and fervour that strike us most and her salient characteristic is her tireless spiritual creativeness. Her thought is certainly active and lively, but it serves to clothe the warm throb of her religious feelings, or is the expression of her mystical experiences judged with a calm mind. For her, knowledge is the experience of the divine, from which we deduce that perfection gives birth to knowledge, which in its turn inspires and produces perfection, which has no limit in this earthly life. 'There is no one in this life, however perfect he may be, who may not grow to greater perfection.' It is not enough to accept the Blood of Christ as the means of purification, and to acquire virtues and experience love; it is necessary for the soul to be endlessly striving to spiritualise itself and at every moment to try to burst out of the limits of this earthly life. Union with God, when it is achieved, is by progressive degrees, so that an earlier degree of grace is considered an imperfection when compared with that which is to follow, and growing grace finds all previous degrees insufficient. In its God-ward flight the soul must not loosen the bonds that hold it to its neighbour; it must bind them closer and stronger. The straining of the soul after God refreshes the faculties and leads to a still more loving union with all mankind. Prayer, which is the inner impulse of the soul, seeks to maintain contact with both extremes: Man and God. Therefore real prayer is not a piling of words upon words, and although vocal prayer also is necessary, it is not sufficient in itself to comprehend the whole world of man and God. For this is needed that holy desire which is continual prayer: that is, mental prayer.

To rise above oneself and commune with the divine—even this is not yet full perfection. There are joys produced by almost sensible proofs of a world beyond; there are spiritual consolations that fill the soul, there are celestial visions that bring their own bliss. Even these, however, do not bring about the state of intimate union with God; it is a lofty and most dangerous state, because in it the soul may easily love God, not for Himself, but for the joys that come from this union, that is, love God for its own sake. 'It happens as to that man who works in a garden,

and as he delights in this garden he rests from his work there. He thinks he is just resting from his work, but he is really resting in the joy that the garden gives him.' Real union, instead, is often barren of delights, and sets up such a delicate balance of joy and sorrow that both become indifferent to the soul; when a man reaches this perfection 'he holds all things in equal reverence, the left hand as much as the right, tribulation as much as consolation, hunger and thirst as much as eating and drinking, cold and heat and nakedness as much as clothing, life as much as death, honour as much as dishonour, and affliction as much as recreation. In all things he is solid, firm and immovable, because he is founded on the living rock.' So, having overcome the desire for earthly goods and events, the soul finds satisfaction and joy everywhere: 'It enjoys all things and finds in all the fragrance of the rose'. Hence the imperative command: 'Rejoice even in tribulation'. This state is reached by transcending the senses, not by destroying them; the soul acquires a more intense sensibility which is shown on a higher level; 'where the soul feels both bliss and pain; bliss because of the union with Me and the joy of divine love; pain because of the injury it sees done to Me'. Thenceforth the trembling soul will be living in Christ: 'Dwelling in Him you will follow His teaching; following His teaching you will share in the substance of this Word, that is, you will share in the eternal Deity united to humanity, drawing from this union a divine love that will intoxicate the soul'.

But still greater heights may be reached: 'the souls arrive at the door, raising their mind to Him, bathed and inebriated with the Blood, burnt with the fire of love; they enjoy in Me the eternal Deity which is for them like a peaceful sea, where the soul finds such union with Me that the mind can make no movement save in Me'. Here occurs that mystical phenomenon which the writers of tracts call the '*legamento*'. 'When all those powers (intellect, memory, affection) are gathered and joined together, and the body, immersed and drowned in Me, loses all feeling . . . all the limbs are bound and held by the bond and feeling of love'. In this way love takes possession, invades, holds, enflames and consumes the soul, so as to reduce it to a flaming brand 'all burnt in the furnace'.

Nearly all gross material has been burnt away; nevertheless, an

eternal contrast remains between the soul and body, and the soul can still control bodily phenomena: 'When she felt her soul renewed in the eternal Deity, the holy fire of love within her flamed so hot that she sweated water because of the straining of the soul against the body . . . she scorned this because she desired to see her body sweat blood instead'. For blood had the power to ransom, and brought her nearer to the sacrifice of Christ, and by sharing in this sacrifice she would play a more active part in the salvation of men: 'And therefore I want you now to seek a remedy by sweating blood'. Thus God replies to her when in her distress she accuses herself of being the cause of all the evil in the Church and in the world. But there comes a moment when the soul loses this control over the body. It becomes etherealised, frees itself from all that would weigh it down, rises above the body, as light as air; no force now can hold it back. The ecstasy becomes more intense; God, like a fiery breath, draws out to Himself the innermost soul; there is a violent shock of severance, and the soul becomes still more enflamed with love. Nevertheless it is still able to remember the body, and can glance at it and see that 'it lies motionless, overcome by the power of the spirit'.

The soul now takes wing and soars to the divine, and enters an atmosphere of flame, so remote from life on earth that it sees it now but dimly, as in a dream, faint and far away. Reality is now fullness of ardour and joy, and the almost invisible thread that still binds soul and body is forgotten. The soul contemplates new worlds and is never weary of contemplation; it wants to draw ever nearer to God. Although it does not see the life beyond as clearly as it will see it after death, yet it experiences as it were the beginning of deification, because true servants of God 'arrive at My eternal vision, where they see and enjoy Me in truth, the soul separated from the body, as I told you when I spoke of the bliss the soul received in Me. This is that excellent state that the soul, while still mortal, enjoys with the immortals. Hence it often happens that it arrives at such a union that it does not know whether it is in the body or out of the body, and enjoys this foretaste of eternal life, because of its union with Me, and also because its own will is dead. It was because its own will was dead that it was able to reach union with Me—for otherwise it

could not have had perfect union. Now such souls enjoy eternal life, saved from the hell of their own will, which gives a foretaste of hell to those who live according to their own fleshly lusts, as I have told you.'

It would seem that the height of bliss to be enjoyed on earth has been attained; but this is not true, because the soul proceeds in its self-deification and no end can be assigned to this process. The divine light becomes ever clearer to the eye of the mystic, and the heat is ever more intense. Such an infinite perfectibility is almost inconceivable for us, and so we feel the need to set pauses or definite limits, but the mystic who wants to achieve the closest possible union with God considers all in terms of the infinite; he knows he can never pause, and his thirst after perfection does not allow him a moment's rest. The dynamic of mysticism consists in this incessant concentration of power for continual progression, and the effort to arrive at an ever greater deification produces drama in the soul. In fact, those who think to find only milk and honey in the writings of mystics, and hopefully seek in their words an all-accommodating optimism, are disappointed. The reader often experiences dismay or disillusionment in his study of mysticism; where he has hoped to find heavens of azure and rose he finds instead dramatic and tragic conflicts of the soul; instead of resting in cheerful flowery gardens he finds himself among barren rocky mountains. The mystical state is austere, and often hard and harsh. There are no doubt moments of sweetness, but even these are the result of vigorous action or of suffering endured. Catherine says very truly: 'Who loves much suffers much; as love increases, so does suffering'—a suffering that gives birth to happiness and joy. The synthesis of mysticism is composed of the thesis and antithesis: love and pain.

In his pursuit of the infinite the mystic annihilates himself to what seems an almost impossible extent, and as the infinite he pursues is an ideal that eternally recedes, the soul is granted neither absolute rest nor lasting peace. There are continual new births of spiritual longing, which keep the soul in continual movement, and produce at times an overflowing sense of satisfaction and joy, and at other times lesions of dramatic suddenness. These dramas are due to the infinite quality of divine love, whose inexhaustible wealth produces ever more abundance and whose

power inflicts suffering that is full of bliss. Ecstasy is not the achievement of a single state of mind, nor can it be concentrated in a single word; it is rather a complex of states of mind, some of which merge together, while others conflict with one another.

Giacomo Devoto has made a careful study of Catherine's ecstasies from her own references in her letters, and has tried, with much scholarly acumen, to isolate the specific phenomenon by analysing her linguistic expression—arriving at the conclusion that ecstasy 'centres in one essential word that holds in itself, alone, all the irradiating power of contemplative action. Around this word all her concrete affirmations are gathered in ordered subordinate ranks, insistent like echoes. The rhythm of her phrase adapts itself to this word, and becomes more and more excited till it reaches or barely touches the climax—then interrupts itself in a sudden awakening, or returns gradually to its normal tranquil pace.'

Linguistic study applied to ecstasy can give nothing more, but does not succeed in setting forth its real greatness. When carefully considered, ecstasy presents a complexity whose essence eludes a purely philological analysis. As Devoto characterises it, it is a supreme effort of the soul, which on reaching its highest point of tension, finds its true expression in one sovereign word. This description is not true of ecstasy alone, for it could be applied to all the affections when they are expressed with fervent emotion; in fact, in all the phrases that man utters or writes there is always a central, synthetic or dominating word—around which are grouped the concrete affirmations that pay it court. Ecstasy also may have this character, but this is not what constitutes an ecstasy. The mystic only shares in this common experience in so far as he seeks to express in language common to all what he has felt during ecstasy, and so, up to a certain point, the process of expression is the same for mystics as for non-mystics, where these are in a state of profound emotion. But in the phrases of mystics we find peculiar vibrations which impress on them a special and singular character. In these vibrations lies the secret power of mystical expression.

Giacomo Devoto, continuing with strict method his deductions, points out that one essential word characterises ecstatic expression, just as essential words are uttered also in love, and at

the approach of death; therefore there must be two ecstasies parallel to the religious ecstasy, and so, at least philologically speaking, the states of the mystic, the lover and the dying man may be considered as on the same plane. But this is to detract from the religious ecstasy. When we compare the power and the results of religious ecstasy with those of the other ecstasies asserted by Devoto, the differences are not only quantitative but substantial. Devoto himself, who in the development of his theory has felt some qualms about the parallelism he has suggested, affirms that 'here we are concerned always with ecstasy as *expressed* within the limits and laws of a concrete language', but as this method does not bring out the fullness and supremacy of the religious ecstasy we may conclude that linguistic studies are as insufficient to determine it as anatomical studies are insufficient to determine the life of living beings. So, if we wish to find the whole meaning of ecstasy, we must have recourse to other methods.

It is apparent that in ecstasy a vital current is produced that takes possession of the soul, empowers it, thrills and moves it; a current that does not flow into a single word, but endows entire phrases with equal fervour and power. It is uncircumscribable, indeterminable, and gives spiritual life to all who yield to it. Ecstasy produces states of mind both abysmal and celestial, inspiring timorous awe and all-conquering audacity; bliss is mingled with pain, wild joy with humble prostration. The most varied states follow one another, mingle, develop or overtake one another without a pause; in the midst of tumult comes serenity, and in a serene moment the outburst of the storm. There are no lines of demarcation—only loose, flowing, irregular contours, often concentric circles in continual expansion. No single point marks a pause, but there are various floating points of reference in the endless upward surge. The degrees of intensity reached are expressed in intense and manifold shades of colour, never to be described with a single word. Hence the mystics' use and abuse of contraries, with infinitely varied gradations: light-darkness, health-sickness, love-hate, weeping-laughter, perfection-baseness, Paradise-Hell, grace-damnation, pride-humility and other extremes that rule the mind like two fiery principles, impossible to define in one term.

It is true that the soul of the mystic tries to free itself from multiplicity to achieve unity, but it is an infinite and therefore continually creative unity. It is true also that at a given moment during the *ascesi* the mystic utters a single essential word, the supreme achievement of his soul: God. But if materially God can be expressed in a single word, spiritually He holds concentrated in Himself a multiplicity of meanings: activity without rest, peerless light, ineffable might, and the idea of concrete worlds and an infinite number of other possible worlds. God means life, present, past and future; substantial unity implying innumerable diversities; the Trinity in operation; vision without end. In truth, God is the only word that can be called essential to the mystic, the only word that includes within itself alone all the irradiating power of contemplative action; when the mystic utters this word the whole world opens before the eye of his soul, and he feels as if he were soaring into a spiritual infinitude 'which words cannot describe'. God is a single word, but it contains in itself, and surpasses, all other words. In contact with the Triune God the creature feels one need only: to lose himself in the Divinity, to find himself again therein. 'A deep sea art Thou, Eternal Trinity! The more I search Thee the more I find, and the more I find Thee the more do I seek Thee. Infinite art Thou, for the soul that drinks of Thy waters is ever athirst, ever hungry for Thee, thirsting for Thee, O Eternal Trinity, ever longing to see Thee in the light, by Thy light.'

In ecstasy knowledge remains alert to observe the deification of the soul, and would wish this deification to increase for ever, knowing that it may never be complete. The spirit becomes almost disassociated from the flesh, and yearns for absolute freedom; nevertheless, the body still weighs upon it. 'O Eternal Trinity, fire and fountain of love, dissolve me this cloud of flesh!' To become pure spirit means uniting oneself with God. This union is truly an attachment—not the annulment of knowledge, nor the dissolving of the soul in God—because the creature, however lofty its flight, never exhausts the divine within himself, nor can become merged with it; hence the mystic's constant and insatiable longing, which produces mingled joy and pain. The soul continues to drink deep of the divine life at every moment, and this fills it with joy, but all the time it knows itself a poor

suppliant for grace. 'Thou, Eternal Trinity, art the Maker, and I am the work of Thy Hands.' Here we are at the impassable barrier, yet it is drawn so faintly as almost to disappear when a great wave of God's love breaks in overwhelming streams over the creature's head: 'Thou art in love with the beauty of Thy creature'.

The power of God's light now exalts and enraptures the soul; all becomes light to it, all is like a transparent sea: 'Thou lightest all'. 'Truly Thy light is a sea, because the soul is nourished in Thee. Thou art a peaceful sea, O Eternal Trinity! The water is not muddy, and therefore the soul has no fear, because it sees the truth; the water is clear, so that in it all hidden things are seen . . . it is a mirror wherein Thou, Eternal Trinity, grantest to me to know myself, for when I look into this mirror, holding it in the hand of love, it shows me myself in Thee, for I am Thy creature, and Thee in me, because of the union Thou madest of the Deity with our humanity.'

She is enraptured with wonder, and her being is poured forth in praise; all contrasts fade, antitheses vanish; only sweetness reigns, and the sweetness is God. 'O Trinity, Thou art all sweetness; there is no bitterness in Thee.' What can the soul do now but languish of love in the sea of sweetness, and, feeling its own life flow out into its Lover's being, become a part of love, and light within the Light?

All the soul's desire seems fulfilled. Yet the climax is still far away, and will ever be so. The light that seemed to have reached its greatest splendour grows in intensity and irradiates new light in new heavens. The soul's gaze clings to it. Prayer becomes a thing of fire. Once more the soul gathers its strength; again it overcomes the self. It yearns to be filled with even greater outpourings of divine power. There seem to be no barriers left. The blissful soul soars aloft. But now, when it believes it has reached the Ineffable a shadow falls across it and it trembles. The barriers are still there across its path. Mortals are we, and after having tasted for a moment of the life of the immortals we must needs re-enter our mortal flesh. Cold and darkness return. The treasure we had found seems lost. A moment of discouragement, almost of bewilderment—then the soul takes courage and soars again. The body is still stiff; at the soul's touch it trembles, as if it

St Catherine. Codex Casanatense 292, Rome, XVth century

could no longer endure the bursting life of the spirit, but little by little the memory of what the soul has seen returns and is so vivid and full of joy that there breaks out a cry of faith: 'Robe me, robe me with Thyself, Eternal Trinity, that I may pass through this mortal life in true obedience, and in the light of the most holy faith, for my soul seems ever athirst for that light'.