

Chapter II

'CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH'

ST CATHERINE OF SIENA was born in no happy time for her native city. The year 1338, the 'peaceful and happy year' of the Sieneſe Republic, declined and ended. The next year the riſing coſt of living, together with an epidemic, drained the city of men and reſources. 'In Siena there was not a ſingle good man left', remarks Angelo di Tura ſententioſly. But from then onwards, until the great 'Death' of 1348, miſfortunes, deſtruction, famine and peſtilence followed one another. The ſeaſons were adverſe and the crops poor, the farmers left the fields untended, the mercenary 'Companies of Fortune' overran and laid waſte the countryside, right up to the gates of Siena; the citizens choſe to pay them ranſom money rather than fight. In the city the famiſhed populace revolted, but their clamours and rebellion were of no avail. Trade ſhrank, induſtry was at a ſtanſtill; the excellent Government of the Nine tried to help, to direct, to control where neceſſary, but it had no longer its old energy or political wiſdom, and had only a few more years to live.

When, in April 1348, there was a violent outbreak of the black plague within the city itſelf, death came to almoſt every door, and thoſe who were unſcathed were 'ſtupified' with grief at the endleſs ſucceſſion of deaths, and whenever poſſible fled terrified from parents, children, brothers, ſiſters, friends.

When we read in the Chronicles the brief vivid deſcriptions of this ſcourge in Siena, or in other cities of Italy, we ſhudder with fear even more than when reading the pages of Boccaccio: fear of fear itſelf, becauſe the ſurvivors were ſo terrified that they committed the moſt cowardly acts. No affection or ſenſe of duty prevailed with men who ſeized upon any excuſe to leave their next of kin a prey to their ſickneſs, and eſcaped from the

house, locking the door behind them. The doctors did not attend the sick, or merely pretended to attend them so as to pocket their fees; the priests, at most, ministered only to the rich, for reward. There must have been acts of charity, unselfishness and courage, but most people thought only of saving themselves. 'The city of Siena seemed almost uninhabited . . . it is not possible with the tongue of man to describe this horrible state of affairs, and he may well count himself blessed who saw it not.'

The reaction that followed such widespread suffering may easily be understood. When the plague ended, men issued forth from the domain of terror. Everything they saw or heard seemed new-born. Was this a dream, or was the dream over now? Were the people one met really the living? And were the houses and streets really the same as a few weeks before? Everything seemed miraculous. The hills green with ilexes or silvery with olives shone with new light. The orchards and fields had a freshness never before observed, the sun was brighter, the air more clear. Life was good and to be enjoyed. The past months had been full of bitter tears; now for laughter and merriment. The suffering had been atrocious, but now was the time to rejoice to the full. Men's eyes, once dilated with despair, beamed with joy, for existence was safe again.

Class distinctions were wiped out, and as before all had shared in suffering, so now all shared in the pursuit of pleasure. 'All the survivors, whether friars, priests, nuns, or layfolk, gave themselves up to enjoyment, and did not hesitate to squander and to gamble; everyone indulged in eating and drinking, hunting, fowling and gambling.'

Life's flame leapt higher. The senses must rule; the dead, suffering, morality, religion—all must be forgotten; life must renew itself in the satisfaction of repressed desires.

A class of 'new rich' had sprung up. Doctors, pharmacists, grave-diggers, poultry-dealers, dealers in cloth and linen to enshroud the dead, woolworkers, those who had prepared plasters and potions of mallows, nettles and herbs, sugar and sweet merchants, priests, friars—all who had survived, and these were less than half the population—had money to spare, for they had been paid for their services or their goods ten times their usual price, and now they were eager to spend their easy profits in

satisfying their every whim. They coveted the pleasures of the rich, their possessions, their way of life, their amusements.

Such moral disorder, however, could not last long. Gradually the turbulent passions subsided, the wasted energies needed calm to recreate themselves, the indulgence of the senses brought satiety. Men went back to reflecting and reasoning; order was restored, life resumed its natural course with its barriers and limitations.

Catherine's family, or most of them, had survived the famine and the plague. Catherine, nursed in her babyhood by her own mother, was cared for and brought up at home. Since October 1346 the family had occupied the house and dye-works in the parish of San Pellegrino, in the Fontebranda ward of the city. The little girl grew up lively, pretty and attractive, rather talkative, and with an understanding beyond her years. The neighbours admired her, and called her Euphrosyne, probably because she often spoke enthusiastically of this virgin, about whom she had heard in a sermon, or in old tales of the Saints—or because she used to say that she wanted to be like Euphrosyne herself. She soon learned her prayers, and showed an awakening piety. As she went up and down the stairs of her house she would recite Hail Marys and genuflect at every step, according to an ancient Irish custom that had spread to Siena.

The churches attracted her; 'when she was still very small she loved to go to the churches and all holy places'. The various services, the incense, music, singing and the sermons worked on her childish spirit; we can imagine her, full of wonder, following the liturgical rites and delighting in the sweet response they aroused in the rhythm of her own soul. In church she must already have felt, even if confusedly, that there was another and loftier life than that of the family, while earth and heaven mingled in her childish imagination. This is an enchanted mood we often find in children of every age, and sometimes it determines their future vocation, but often marks but a passing phase.

Catherine's mind was, however, naturally religious, and what she felt as a little child was not at all a momentary experience, but the natural development of her spiritual life. Soon there were outward signs of her innermost feelings, and at the age of seven she had her first vision: 'It happened one day when she was seven years old that her mother called her, saying: "Catherine, go to your

married sister and take your brother with you"—(this brother was a little older than Catherine) and she gave her an errand. Now one stretch of the road was without houses on either side. As she came back along this lonely stretch, her brother being some way in front of her, she was walking with her eyes raised to the sky when suddenly she saw in the air, not very high above the ground, a "loggia", not very large, full of bright light, in which she seemed to see Christ arrayed in dazzling white, robed like a bishop, with a pastoral staff in His hand. He smiled at the little girl, and there came from Him a shaft of light, like a sunbeam, which fell upon her. Behind Christ stood several men in white, all of them Saints, among them St Peter, St Paul and St John, as she had seen them painted in the churches.

For Catherine this was an extraordinary vision. As we consider it coolly and from a distance, we see how attentively she must have observed her painted Saints, and how constantly her thoughts were set on holy things, but the child who experienced the vision must have been aware of the supernatural flooding into her soul.

It happens sometimes that concrete things actually seen are transposed or superimposed on abstract ideas that have been the subject of thought. The Christ who appeared before her in infinite splendour may have proceeded from her memory of painted Christs that she had seen. So may the bishop, though he may also have been a child's idealised image of a bishop seen during the services in the Cathedral of Siena, his pastoral staff in his hand, and his robes shining in the glimmer of the lighted candles. For us this explanation is possible, but the person who sees the vision, and all the more so when this is a little girl of seven, cannot but believe in a supernatural vision. Which of us, moreover, at the sudden sight of such radiant sunlight, with such dazzling whiteness and far-flung splendour, would not be struck with wonder and believe himself to be affected by some other-worldly phenomenon? We can therefore understand the astonishment of Catherine's soul, and why she could not tear herself away from her vision.

Her brother, seeing that she did not follow him, turned back, called her, went up to her and angrily shook her, to make her answer him. She only said: 'Go away. I will not come.' The little girl looked up to the sky again, but the vision had gone. The childish soul felt a pang at this brusque re-awakening to every-

day life; fear gripped her heart, and she was very thoughtful.

How much influence did this vision have on Catherine's life? Probably she owed to it her first awareness of her future religious life. The child meditated on her vision and on its consequences. Was it good or evil? For some time she mentioned it to no one, but her thoughts were always there. 'And from that hour onwards, she felt pain in her heart, an anxiety, a remorse of conscience, and a fear lest she should sin, as much as was possible at her tender age.' Scruples, vague doubts, fears, hopes, relaxations, all were now felt with relation to her vision. There was something new, something more mature, in her, and the smile of Christ, more felt than seen, had predestined her to prayer and penitence.

At once she sought solitude, the primary need of all creators. In solitude problems are solved, ideals take shape, inspirations are born, in contact with the eternal and the infinite. All sublime poetry, all decisive philosophy, is born in solitude. Catherine felt this instinctively, without being consciously aware of it. She was only a child, she hoped that Christ would appear to her again, would smile again, perhaps speak—but in public she would have been ill at ease, so she wanted to be alone. And she wanted to pray. Prayer did not then mean to her strife, self-control, intimate contrition, but concentration. And concentration only came in solitude. 'And she always contrived to be alone, whenever she could seize a moment to escape from the eyes of her father and mother and other kin, to recite her Paternosters and Ave Marias.'

The solitude she found amid her family was not enough. She wanted every hour for herself, to pray and meditate without end. Had there not been hermits, masters of their own time and entirely dedicated to prayer and holy colloquies? She had often heard of hermits and anchorites. The 'Fathers of the Desert', or their lives in 'The Golden Legend', were the favourite spiritual pasture of the devout of her day, and contained the 'exempla' quoted by the preachers. These lives were attractive, aroused desire, tearful sympathy, enthusiasm. Their obscurities suggested mystery, their disregard of natural laws delighted the imagination. A sense of kindness, of humanity, was not lacking. Their mixture of profane and sacred, of real and ideal, adventurous and contemplative, atrocious and touching, with colour effects now dark, crude or heavy, now light, golden or evanescent, charmed the

mediaeval mind. These Lives often contained praises of solitude, which was just what Catherine was looking for—so she was more and more taken with this idea. The tales heard in sermons or readings become so suffused with her own imagination that she thought of them as her own experiences. She decided to put into practice her ideal of living a hermit's life.

One day she took a little bread and set out again on the road to her sister Bonaventura's house, and went on beyond the Gate of Sant' Ansano. In her little head was the notion that out there was the desert, and that one might live there as a hermit. When the buildings ceased and she found herself in the open country she walked a little further, and behold! 'certain little dells and grottoes as if hidden from people's gaze'. For her this was the desert, and here she must stay. She went to an overhanging cliff, and entered a sort of grotto. Now she was happy! With 'a fervour of measureless love' she prayed to Christ—but the vision did not return. She prayed and prayed again: still solitude and silence—no vision. She appealed to the Virgin, the gentle Madonna whose image on the altars she had so often venerated, who can obtain from God all that she wills—still no answer to her desire. Her love found still more powerful expression, her pleadings became more insistent. Why did Christ not appear? Why could she not rejoice in that smile that still lingered in her memory? Where was that radiance that had shone in Vallepiatta but a short while ago? She had moments of absolute faith, others of discouragement. Prayers gave place to meditation, then to a consideration of her own state, then to hope and prayer once more. Between her prayers she ate her bread, seated on the ground. Her burning ardour was followed by an imploring appeal to be allowed to see Christ again, radiant as before. But instead of the vision something quite unexpected happened. Little by little Catherine felt herself raised above the ground, and, according to Raimondo da Capua, up to the roof of the grotto. Why? What did this mean? It was a phenomenon of levitation that she could not possibly understand; in fact it aroused her diffidence and fear. She thought it was the work of the devil. When she returned to the ground her simple childish confidence had gone. The reality of living seized her once more. It was evening, she was hungry, far from her parents; terrified, she decided to return at once to Fontebranda. She left

her grotto and ran swiftly, as on winged feet, to Porta Sant' Ansano, and thence to her home. Her mother asked her no questions, which leads us to suppose, knowing Lapa's watchful anxiety, that on leaving the house she had said she was going to her sister Bonaventura.

Catherine was rather unhappy and very disillusioned when she re-entered her home. The hermitage experiment had not succeeded, she thought, through her own fault. Had she not loved God enough, or not been sufficiently pure, or perhaps not yet suffered enough for Christ? Moreover, she found herself for the first time confronted by the devil's work, and she decided she must defeat him by subduing her own body.

She had certainly heard about the mortifications of the Saints, she knew that monks and friars scourge themselves, she may have known some *Disciplinati*—several companies of these were in Siena—who alternated their Lauds with flagellations. And had she not seen paintings of the scourging of Christ, bleeding and patient under suffering, so extolled by the preachers? She determined to scourge herself.

She began by whipping herself with a little cord; then she persuaded some other little girls to join her, and they used to meet in the most hidden corners of the house to pray and to discipline themselves. She directed the little group, decided how many *Paternosters* and *Avemarias* they should recite, and how many blows they should inflict. Scourging and prayers that for most of these children were a game—an earnest and painful game, it is true—that left hardly any serious trace in their souls. Probably most of them later on fell in love with some young man, and the fervour for Christ cooled and the mortifications were soon forgotten; for Catherine instead they were a necessary means to further her own dedication to God, and to win back the longed-for vision. She scourged herself, ate less, prostrated herself and prayed very much—and, in an impulsive outburst, said to Christ: 'My Lord Jesus Christ, I promise Thee and give Thee my virginity, that it may ever be Thine alone, and that Thou mayst ever be guardian of my purity.'

Padre Taurisano thinks that this vow was uttered during her first Communion; this may be so, but no document proves it. We observe however that, after this vow, Catherine's abstinences

increased methodically, which may mean that she found a guide in her pious practice, possibly Fra Angelo Adimari, mentioned as her first confessor in the Chronicles of Santa Maria Novella of Florence. Of this Dominican we only know that he was in Siena in 1352. Perhaps Catherine began going to confession when she was five or six, but not always to the same priest, and if Adimari heard her confessions sometimes he probably paid no greater heed to them than to those of other little girls, all in love with Jesus. He may have given her some practical advice, which she carefully followed. In any case, from this time onwards her asceticism became more systematic, and she seems to have entered the Dominican sphere of action. She was most frequent in attending the church of San Domenico in Camporegio and learnt about the life and work of St Dominic, while her love and veneration for the Preaching Friars were such that she would kiss the ground where they passed. She was fascinated by the Order's apostolic work; she also wished to save souls, and so she desired to become a Dominican. Remembering Euphrosyne who entered a monastery disguised as a young man, she tried to think how she could follow her example; but she made no attempt to do this, knowing already how to curb her impulsive nature.

The child's religiosity either escaped her family's notice, or was considered a childish infatuation that would disappear as soon as she became a woman. Catherine neither told her experiences nor divulged her thoughts, and her parents did not bother to enquire into the state of her soul. It was quite right and proper that she should spend a lot of time in church, and her natural goodness was something to be thankful for. Her family saw her little, but observed that she was merry and content, did what she was told, gave no cause for complaint and seemed to be growing up satisfactorily. What more could they expect? Every now and then she showed a wisdom beyond her years, but they did not pay much attention to that. We learn that only once was her mother surprised at Catherine's answers. One day Lapa sent her to take a Mass offering to the parish of Sant' Antonio, and instead of returning immediately she remained there to hear the Mass. When she re-entered her house her mother met her with: 'Cursed be the evil tongues that said you would never come back!' A pause, and then her daughter replied: 'My lady mother, when I do

less or more than what you require of me I beg you to beat me as much as you will, so that I may be more careful another time; this is your right and your duty; but I beg you not to let your tongue curse other folk, whether good or bad, for my shortcomings, because that would not befit your age, and would grieve me too much.'

This is Catherine's first real success in her family, perhaps a modest one but indicating considerable moral strength. Raimondo da Capua makes a great deal of it: 'Her parents are surprised, her brothers and sisters wonder at her, the whole family is astounded to hear such wisdom at such a tender age.' We may smile at this 'astounded' but the fact remains that Catherine replied in no common manner for a little girl of ten. She must by this time have already reflected on the souls to be saved, all worthy of our love, and therefore not to be scandalised. Her first success was based on a simple reference to our common humanity, uttered firmly and energetically.

Nothing new occurred in Catherine's life until she was twelve, at which age Sieneese girls were kept at home while their parents busied themselves in the search for their future husbands. A time of anxiety for the mothers, of rosy dreams of love for the young maidens. All their thoughts were of a man who should bring them happiness and be endowed with the best material and moral qualifications. They awaited with trembling joy their future bridegroom, and thinking of him their hearts beat more quickly and their awakening senses quickened their blood. The mothers observed these changes in their daughters, their new desires and the unfolding of their life, and rejoiced: their own mission was being fulfilled according to the natural law: new families were soon to be created, and the generations would follow one another in their monotonous yet varied rhythm.

Lapa, like other mothers, began to instruct Catherine about preparations for marriage. She must wash her face more frequently, arrange her hair prettily, dress gracefully and present herself with a certain coquetterie. Women were born to become mothers of families, they must strive to please the bridegroom of their parents' choice, and this they could not do if they were untidy or illkempt. Catherine listened tranquilly and continued to live as before. Her disappointed mother must often have repeated her counsel about

caring for her looks, making herself attractive, thinking of her future as a bride and as the joyful mother of children. Lapa was brusque and impetuous, but for her daughter's sake she found a mother's gentle words and continued patiently in her instructions. All to no effect. Lapa became more and more disappointed, anxious, bewildered, not knowing how to enter her daughter's confidence or move her or convince her. She had no natural gift for understanding other natures different from her own, and no persuasive power. Her insistence only made Catherine more impassive, for she neither argued nor contradicted, just listened and remained unchanged. Even Lapa herself realised her own powerlessness.

But in family life a daughter's marriage is too important a project to be abandoned so soon, and Lapa, in fact, would not give in. Where she had not succeeded another might, so she enlisted the help of her daughter Bonaventura, of whom Catherine was very fond. As a newly wedded wife herself she might more easily gain her younger sister's confidence, and succeed where Lapa had failed.

The affectionate relations between the two sisters became more close. Her mother had been begging Catherine to dye her dark chestnut hair the blonde colour so much admired by young Sieneese men, but it was Bonaventura who persuaded her finally to tinge it gold; Lapa had talked to her about clothes, embroideries, rouges, hair styles and adornments, but it was Bonaventura who got her to use powder and rouge, follow the fashion and, as the preachers say, cultivate the 'vanities of women'. She succeeded, Raimondo da Capua tells us, 'in various ways, both by example and by word'. He tells us no more, and we must guess the rest. What is certain is that the younger sister's religious fervour declined, and very probably Bonaventura was rejoicing in the thought that, sooner or later, she would persuade her to get married. But in 1362 Bonaventura died in childbirth.

This was a dramatic moment in Catherine's life. Her sister's death gave her a sense of loss, then inconsolable. Bonaventura was the only person who had understood her, in whom she could confide, and with whom she found herself in sympathy. What was she to do now? In such cases, amid uncertainties and suffering, grief is overwhelming, and the mourner feels abandoned in the

void. Outer life has lost its meaning; worse still, the inner life is clouded over. Reasoning is rendered helpless by a sort of spiritual paralysis. Where, or to whom, was Catherine to turn? Silence and solitude within her and without. But in solitude and silence Catherine had found Jesus in her childhood. Why should she not find Him again? She was now fifteen and could raise herself to God with more fervour, and experience Christ again. Her biographers do not tell us whether the vision of Vallepiazza now returned to her mind.

Gradually her grief for her beloved dead sister turned to remorse. She felt guilty of having prayed less, of having drawn away from God, desiring the good things of this world and consenting to enjoy some worldly pleasures. She *was* guilty. Her sister was good, affectionate, kind, lovable, but she, Catherine, had loved her more than Christ, and this was not right. She had preferred the teachings of Bonaventura to those of God, and her guilt was therefore great. She needed to weep, to pray, to see clearly in her own mind, to resolve these painful doubts. The 'Miracoli' say it was now that she asked her mother's leave to confess to Fra Tommaso della Fonte, and this is psychologically possible. Tommaso della Fonte became a connection of Catherine's family when their daughter Niccoluccia married Palmerio di Nese delle Fonti. Born about 1337, he became an orphan during the 1348 plague, was brought up in Giacomo Benincasa's family and considered by them as one of themselves. He chose the religious life and in 1357 or 1358 was accepted as a Dominican novice, and later became a priest. He had therefore been familiar to the household of Giacomo di Benincasa since his youth, and on an occasion as sad as this of Bonaventura's death he must have done all he could to console his dear friends. Catherine, inconsolable and prostrate with grief, wished perhaps to open her heart to this friar who, besides being one of the family, was also devout and might understand; and 'the friar strengthened her much in her scorn of the world and her resolve to draw nearer to God', and to make his advice more effective, did not hesitate to point the moral lesson of Bonaventura, who had died because she was vain and had drawn her sister away from her devotion to God. Perhaps Catherine immediately applied to herself the idea of vanity, death, and chastisement, for 'when the friar departed she remained

lost in thought'. In this state of mind the idea of guilt, already strong in her, may have taken possession of her conscience and made her feel a great sinner, while her imagination led her to liken herself to Mary Magdalen, seen in the paintings in church, prostrate at the feet of Christ, weeping and imploring.

Her family guessed nothing of this intimate drama. Her father, a good hard-working man of scrupulous piety, had no interest in searching the hearts of others, or talent for so doing. Her mother was still hoping for her daughter's marriage, to console her for the loss of Bonaventura. Moreover, in that household they needed a son-in-law with a certain position in view, both for the sake of the dyeing business, which was faltering uncertainly and for the sake of Catherine herself, who was good, intelligent, wise and devout, and could not be given just any man for a husband. Busied with such thoughts they could not be expected to bother about Catherine's feelings, and in any case, thanks to Bonaventura's help, the maiden had yielded to her family's wishes and was behaving well, painting and adorning herself—according to Lapa, well on the way towards marriage. At last they found the future son-in-law they had looked for so persistently and circum-spectly; he was just what they wanted and the whole family rejoiced. Catherine would form a model family and be the joy of her parents. At once Lapa began to urge her daughter to consent to the marriage, but this time also the girl resisted her mother, not passively as before but openly and decisively, referring to her own religious vocation. Neither her mother's insistence nor the intervention of her father, brothers and sisters was of the slightest use. Catherine was determined not to marry, and would not budge from her resolve.

They then appealed to her confessor, the good family friend Fra Tommaso della Fonte. He accepted the delicate mission and spoke to his new penitent as a family friend, and as a priest in the confessional, trying to sound the depths of her soul.

By means of objections and rebukes he tried to test the genuineness of Catherine's vocation, but after several interrogations and conversations he could only, in conscience, give her this advice: 'Go and cut off your hair'—excellent advice which the girl hesitated to put into practice. She thought of her mother's grief and astonishment at seeing her shorn of her shining braids, but at

the same time she believed that, once her hair had been cut off, her mother would cease tormenting her about marriage. 'So, after debating inwardly for some days, at last one day with all the strength of her soul she took the scissors and cut off all her locks, and arrayed her head as best she might, so that her mother would not notice anything.' But although she stayed apart from her family as much as she could and tried to avoid Lapa, her mother noticed that Catherine, contrary to her custom, always kept her head covered; she asked her the reason and her daughter, murmuring something incomprehensible, went up to her and uncovered her head. At the astonished Lapa's cries of rage and imprecations the whole household ran to see what had happened. There was a great commotion; everyone was furious with the rebellious daughter, who under cover of the general confusion fled to her accustomed retreat.

Did anyone ever hear of such a thing as a simple girl setting herself against her parents' and brothers' will? Not Paternosters but a husband was what she needed. And there the husband was, only waiting for the day when he would meet Catherine and speak to her, while she chose this moment to cut off her hair at the roots, thus robbing herself of one of woman's finest adornments—almost dishonouring herself and bringing shame upon her family. Lapa, beside herself with these angry thoughts, shouted at her: 'Wretched girl, do you think to evade our purpose by cutting off your hair? It will grow again and in spite of you, and you shall take a husband even if your heart breaks.'

Lapa imposed her will on the whole family; all were to treat Catherine harshly until she understood that because of her the honour of Giacomo di Benincasa's family was at stake, and she must yield—by force if not for love. A family council was held and decreed that in the future Catherine should no longer have a room of her own for prayer and meditation, and should wait upon them all. Her family did not understand that the maiden might have been won over with gentleness and tact, but never with rebukes, insults, mockery. Their opposition stiffened her resolve and their insults drove her with greater ardour to her faith. Mockery aroused her energy to resist while her imagination became more fervent when she was humiliated. She decided that every member of her family represented a character of the heaven-

ly court: her father was Christ, her mother the Blessed Virgin, her brothers, sisters and other kin Saints or disciples. What suffering may not be borne for Christ and His disciples, for the Virgin and the Saints? So she endured the mockery without resentment and in her heart replied to insults with prayer. Scorned on earth, she felt exalted in heaven. But although her resistance was often strong she yet had disconsolate moments when she feared her own weakness, and then with desperate urgency she begged Christ to make her purpose inflexible.

She did her cooking cheerfully, thinking of the sufferings of Christ, and served calmly and attentively at table. If her parents and brothers wounded her deeply with their biting sarcasm and jests, she turned to Our Lady and the Saints for strength to endure. As she was not allowed a room of her own to pray in, she took refuge in the room of her brother Stefano, which was free all day, where once she was discovered by her father, kneeling in a corner earnestly at prayer.

Catherine struggled on gallantly but she feared for the future. How was she to escape the incessant family persecution, how dedicate herself entirely and exclusively to the religious life? She remembered Euphrosyne and her own desire to become a Dominican. What had been the pleasing fancy of a child became now a serious consideration.

Her thoughts were so concentrated on this and her desire so intense that in a dream she saw a 'certain place outside this world, where a multitude of folk were doing all kinds of different work, and engaged in a confusion of diverse trades, the purpose and nature of which she could not understand. She wanted to pass through the midst of these folk but she did not dare. As she stood there timid and frightened she heard a voice saying: "If you want to pass through the midst of all these folk you must hide under something white". And raising her eyes towards that voice she saw St Dominic just as she had seen him painted in the church, and he said to her: "Come and receive my habit". And as she went towards him she saw coming after her two dishonest women, very beautiful and richly attired, who looked like sisters, and they caught her from behind by her clothes, holding her and pulling her back with all their strength. She turned on them and beat them and at last forced them to let her go, and escaped out of

their hands. And passing on alone she saw that those people had taken the two sisters—but she passed on safe and sound.'

A psychologist, analysing this dream, would find in it all the elements of Catherine's state of mind at that time—the perplexity and broken reflection of her thoughts, and the kernel of her life's desire. There are her own kin who oppose her way of life, that is, the busy multitude, undefined and incomprehensible, that frightens her; there is her confessor in whom she confides, who advises and helps her, that is, the 'white thing', the Dominican robe. We find St Dominic, the central inspiration of the dream, who calls her to himself and orders her to become a Dominican—which corresponds to the realisation of her longing desire, and to her habitual vision of the figure of the painted Saint. The two richly dressed sisters, beautiful and voluptuous, who seize her by her clothes—notice 'by her clothes', not by her body—are Worldliness and Human Beauty that had in the past attracted her soul, wanting to possess it, but that Catherine had striven against and beaten off. Once free from these two sisters she saw that the multitude came to her aid, and the people seized Worldliness and Human Beauty. This referred to her own family, who would help her to win the victory once they understood that she was right.

But Catherine did not make such an analysis. When she awoke two things must have impressed her most: the apparition of St Dominic and her own escape from the struggle 'safe and sound'. She understood her own future and rejoiced. Just as the vision of Vallepiazza had inspired her childhood and as Bonaventura's death had revealed to her the sense of sin in all its profundity, so, at this decisive moment, she knew in her heart what she must be. She felt strong again; no more doubts or hesitations: St Dominic wanted her as a daughter. She made light of obstacles, opposition, struggles, firmly believing that she would get the better of them. Until then timid with her parents, she now became courageous; her prudence became audacity. She demanded a family council and before her entire family she spoke openly of the vow of virginity she had made to Christ, of her desire to live with God and for God, and not at all for the world and with the world. Her words were eloquent because of her conviction and she made a sure stand because her spirit was full of the warning and revelation of her great dream. 'Do you want me to be your servant?

I will willingly do so provided you will leave me a little time for myself alone. Do you want to drive me away from home? Very well, I will go—and the Lord will take care of me. Will you let me live freely with you? I do not want to cost you anything. You need give me nothing but bread and water, but leave me free to live as I please.'

This was Catherine's second success with her family, and not just a passing surprise like the earlier one. This time she convinced them, and got her own way. Her family could make no objections, and had no arguments to bring forward. If she did not want to marry she had the right to refuse.

Raimondo da Capua describes the family conclave as dramatic and moving, ending with a general flow of tears. We prefer to believe the version in the 'Miracoli', that they all understood her desire and 'decided to leave her alone'. Most probably her father was the first to understand his daughter's mind. He was a devout man, he had been astonished to find her in Stefano's room praying so earnestly, he had seen her fervour on other occasions, and admired her humility in her menial tasks. When he heard her now, so calmly and clearly defending herself and speaking of her vow, which she evidently intended to keep, his heart was softened and he had to admit that his daughter had a superior nature, or, at least, was different from other girls. Therefore he turned to her approvingly, entrusted her to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and asked for her prayers, ordering the family to cease all persecution and not to venture in any way to oppose her spiritual activity. 'Have we lost a valuable son-in-law here below? We shall acquire a better one in God.' The most delicate point of the whole question was thus resolved, and the father's authority, affirming his own confidence, could not be withstood.

Catherine rejoiced, not at her victory but at her liberty won. She asked for a room for herself and got it—at last a cell of her own! Already, during her persecution, she had tried to construct a spiritual cell in her soul, as a refuge in the darkest or most painful moments. But to be able to shut oneself up within four walls, to think and contemplate at will, is much more. In our cell our time is our own. A vision does not suffer interruptions, colloquy with the divine flows without check. If we succeed in animating our cell we are peerlessly rich, and we are miracle

workers when we can create a new and loving atmosphere within the four walls between the ceiling and the floor. Seclusion means infinite expansion of the powers of the soul, the escape from self and from everyday life. It is miraculous for the Saint, a paradise for the ascetic. But to seclude oneself is a hard business. We must acquire that absolute control over our being of which the great majority of men seem incapable. The elimination of the superficial ego, to set free the ego that needs only itself, is a task requiring the greatest heroism. And all this must be accomplished without impairing the sense of humanity, of superior beauty, of sacrifice. The soul that finds expansion and sublimity in the cloistered cell is no less great than the soul that expands and soars in the forest, under the broad sky, or among the fields or mountains or God's creatures. A wonderful light illumines the man who loves nature in God, but a no less enchanting radiance pervades the dark cell of the solitary who passionately calls upon the divine. It is the 'shining dark' of the mystics of all places and all times.

Catherine wanted her cell to be a sanctuary full of divine inspiration, where she could kindle herself at the sacred flame. Since her first contacts with the Preaching Friars she had begun to practise a methodical and progressive asceticism, which now she intensified and perfected.

She was not tortured by the formidable sensuality of Suso, to subdue which, until forty years of age, he continually thought out fresh instruments of self-torture; but she knew that the flesh is weak even if the spirit is willing, and so this solitary maiden of Fontebranda set out to eliminate all influence of her body over her soul. She did not go to extremes. We do not find in her that harsh and gloomy poetry that the tortured piety of Suso inspires, nor even the religious anguish that the brilliant but hard and extravagant imagination of Grünewald expressed in his paintings.

Catherine, scourging herself so as to draw blood, training herself to eat almost nothing and to sleep very little at night, and on a hard bench, does not make us shudder. This daughter of the people is aristocratic in her restraint, even when chastising her own body.

But still her mother could not understand her. At the bottom of her heart had remained a grudge for having failed to bend her to her own will, and she grieved over the loss of such a fine opportunity for marriage. A woman was made to marry and

bear children—the rest was nonsense. Religion was necessary, but when one went to church and heard Mass and said one's morning and night prayers and made the sign of the Cross when meeting an ugly figure along the road or during a storm or on seeing an accident—that was enough. Anything else was bad for the health, and what use could it be? When she saw her daughter pining away, perhaps she listened at the keyhole of her cell, and hearing her scourge herself with an iron chain she could control herself no longer, calling out: 'My daughter, my daughter, I see you already as one dead, alas! Do you want at all costs to kill yourself? Woe is me! Who has bereft me of my daughter? Who has brought this grief upon me?' She bewailed so much, scratching herself with her nails and tearing the hair from her head, according to Raimondo da Capua, that the neighbours rushed in and the whole house was in uproar. But Catherine went on with her mortifications and prayers.

Lapa thought one must at least sleep well at night, and not ruin one's health, so one evening she entered Catherine's cell like a Fury and pestered her so much that the poor girl, to avoid something worse, consented to sleep with her mother, but as soon as Lapa was asleep she slipped out of bed and went to her room to weep and do penance. After some nights Lapa noticed her daughter's absence and renewed her reproaches and scoldings which Catherine avoided for the next few nights by sleeping in her mother's bed, first placing some pieces of wood under the sheet. The trick was discovered, and Lapa, convinced that there was nothing more she could do with her daughter, let her sleep in her cell again.

Catherine may have hoped to be left in peace to purify and refine her spiritual life without further hindrance. Her dream of St Dominic was ever in her mind, and the promise received filled her with joy, but she was in a hurry for its fulfilment. If she had been a pure contemplative she would have waited for events to concur to make her a Dominican, but it was not in her nature merely to wait, hope and contemplate; she was practical and interpreted her vision in a practical way. What did it mean, to receive the Dominican habit?

Many times in the Dominican church she must have seen the Tertiaries entering the Cappella delle Volte for their services, and

longed to be one with them; now in 'the room assigned to her in the upper part of the house' she identified this promise with the Third Order of St Dominic, and the 'Come and receive my habit' meant she should try to be a Sister of Penitence. In this way, perhaps following a suggestion of her confessor, she personally interpreted the dream, and desired its fulfilment. But it was not easy to become one of those ladies, some of whom belonged to great Sienese families, who did so much good for Christ's sake. The promise of her dream made it quite clear that she would be a Tertiary one day, but it would take time, so she began at once to consider what requests, entreaties, recommendations might help.

Lapa continued most anxiously to watch over her young daughter, whose health declined every day. She decided to take her to the hot springs at Vignone, not far from Siena, to recuperate her strength. The cure was for the stomach, liver and nerves—just what Catherine needed. Once she had recovered her health she would surely lessen her penances, and might even give them up altogether and be like any other girl. Her daughter's odd ways, although of a religious nature, were Lapa's obsession, but she still hoped to get the better of them. She was almost as obstinate in her plans as Catherine. The girl obediently accompanied her mother.

Then, as now, the summer bathing resorts were centres of amusements and pastimes. 'The elegant society of Siena and the countryside, with wealthy folk and prelates from beyond the City State, met at the baths of Petriolo, Macereto, Vignone, Rapolano and Ofano. From all around, on horseback, on foot, in litters and coaches, in carts drawn by buffaloes, with children "in salmis sive cistis", people flocked to the various baths, to where they might enjoy the greatest liberty, together with the benefits of the water. The nobles and their ladies brought with them a great train of squires and pages and pack-wagons; the rich brought their servants; all went as best they could, but none with weapons of offence or defence.' For some weeks a brilliant gathering of idle, thoughtless, gay folk met together. Most of them wanted to forget the fights, the tedium, the monotony of their own castles, villages and towns, and find refreshment in the brilliant company. The ladies displayed their silk robes, gleaming jewels, elaborate headdress, and elegant carriages; the men rode or walked, escorted

the ladies to the balls, banquets and receptions where all met every day. There was plenty to eat and drink. Conventional restrictions were laid aside and even the ecclesiastics abandoned their habitual reserve in the gay and festive society. The cure of the waters served as an excuse to live in an exciting and sensual atmosphere, and pass the time more happily than usual among new and varied acquaintances.

We do not know what Catherine thought about Vignone when she arrived, nor her impressions of the life of the place. The old biographers showed no interest in this and passed it over. But Giacomo Benincasa's daughter must have noticed at once how much freer were morals there than in the city, and when this shocked her deeply she withdrew into herself still more and intensified her harsh mortifications. The 'Leggenda Minore' reports that it was noticed that 'all the time while returning from the baths she never lifted her eyes, as if she were absent from her body, with her mind raised to God'. Probably she did so to escape the general merry-making, and to keep herself quite apart from the worldly gaiety that surrounded her. By contrast, her thoughts at Vignone were always with the souls in purgatory or hell, and amidst such enjoyment she felt herself the worst of sinners, worthy of the pains of the damned or of the souls in purgatorial fire.

The bathing took place in a common 'piscina'. At Vignone the Commune of Siena had had a wall built in the middle of the bath to separate the men from the women, but there were no single cabins. Catherine, seeing the jets of boiling water, thought of going under them and so 'afflicting her body in a new way, even in the midst of enjoyment'. Raimondo da Capua himself, in reporting this, emphasises this contrast which reveals the maiden's state of mind and her search for intense suffering to counter-balance opposing forces. It was difficult to put her plan into execution as she took her bath with all the other women and under Lapa's watchful eye. She wanted to bathe alone, and obtained her mother's permission to enter the water when all the others had left the baths. She did so, and, going under the jets, scorched her flesh with the sulphurous water, rejoicing in suffering for her sins, and praying God that this suffering might be considered her purgatory.

These baths were a great disappointment for Lapa. On returning with her daughter to Siena she gave up hope of bringing her round to her own will and could only vent her ill-humour with grumbles and complaints. Catherine, instead, had won a victory over her own body, by which she felt better prepared to be a Dominican Tertiary. All her energies were now concentrated, her will inflexible. She must be a Tertiary, or God would punish her.

The Order of Penitence of St Dominic was about a century old. Associated with the first Dominicans of the thirteenth century we find lay folk living in confraternities, but without fixed and general Orders. Without official recognition, they were men and women gathered together under the guidance of the Preachers and following their leadership but bound to them only morally. To make this bond closer and their activity more efficacious, and to avoid the danger of heresy which was making many proselytes among the laity, in 1285 the General of the Dominicans, Muñoz da Zamora, drew up a Rule, thus giving a juridical and permanent character to the Third Order of St Dominic.

The Preachers were the most learned Order of the Middle Ages and the hammer of the heretics. In the thirteenth century they had preached a new and revolutionary philosophy with a sound kernel of Catholic dogma; in the fourteenth century they had modified the narrow Aristotelianism, accepting various current interpretations; but even with this greater freedom and variety of interpretation Thomism remained the foundation of their thought. The Pope made use of the Preachers for the defence of the Church, and they were admired for their attachment to ecclesiastical institutions and their zeal for souls. They were the great Inquisitors, whose appearance sometimes struck fear, but whose faith was never questioned. The investigations, examinations, judgments and verdicts that they conducted or delivered were generally believed and approved in official circles. Heterodoxy, let alone heresy, was inconceivable with the Preachers. A lay Order could therefore flourish under their protection and direction, even when the Third Order aroused the Papal diffidence and apprehension, and 'begardism' and 'beghinism' were somewhat suspect.

The whole Dominican Order made itself guarantor for its

own Tertiaries. Before being received the postulant had to be diligently examined, to see whether 'she be of honest life and good fame, and in no way suspect of heresy or error; but instead, as a true daughter in Christ of Messer St Dominic, a zealous follower of the Catholic faith, according to her knowledge and power'. And the Order's supervision of its Tertiaries was so careful that more than forty years after the institution of its Third Order, Pope John XXII, in the 'Clementine' Bull which condemned the 'beghine' because almost everywhere they had fallen into disobedience, error or heresy, nevertheless commended the Dominican 'beghine' of Lombardy and Tuscany because, living virtuously, they devoutly attended the churches, obeyed their superiors, refrained from erroneous opinions or dangerous discussions, and, in family life or in the 'beghinaggi', observed the rules of chastity and holy stern simplicity. 'They have lived until now, and they still live in such a praiseworthy manner that no suspicion has ever arisen, or arises, about them.' So the Third Order flourished, well defined by the Rule and kept within its prescribed limits by the Preachers. If the Dominicans did not feel the need of asking the Popes for an approval of their own Tertiaries like that granted by Nicholas IV to the Order of Penitence of St Francis, it was because this faith and vitality had been preserved intact. A prosperous activity has no need of special recognitions; if living it thrives by its own strength. When, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, through the assiduous labours of Fra Tommaso da Siena, every effort was made to obtain an official approval of the Dominican Third Order, it was a sign that its own interior energy had declined, and that, while boasting of its past glories, it felt the need of exterior supports.

Already in the first years of the fourteenth century, according to Laurent, we find groups of Dominican Sisters of Penitence, living either alone or in communities in Florence, Lucca, Arezzo, San Gimignano and Siena. They were Tertiaries, dedicated to prayer and works of mercy, who received no special mention, but did good within their possibilities. They were humble but aspired to heavenly things; without any remarkable spiritual gifts, but devout. Many of them had mediocre minds and souls that could not soar aloft, but they understood the extent of human misery and how much men need justice and love. Pope John XXII's

statement meant that the Dominican 'beghine' of Tuscany had no intellectual curiosities and felt no special need to analyse and explain to themselves the foundation of their faith, or to discuss arduous dogmatic problems. They were, for the most part, simple pious souls who were glad to have a limited but definite task to perform, and rejoiced to work for the good of others, by the side of the Preachers. They were in this way proud of their communities and observant of their rules. They always wore the Dominican habit and, like the other Tertiaries who wore an ample cloak or 'mantello', they were called 'mantellate'. At Siena they met every first Friday in the month. They met in the Cappella delle Volte of San Domenico in Camporegio to attend Mass, hear their Rule read and explained, and be exhorted by their spiritual director, or admonished and reprovved if there had been any transgression of the Rule, of the Commandments of God and of the Church. Their social activity was serving in the hospitals, visiting the prisons, consoling the afflicted, mourning with the disconsolate, and interceding for sinners and those who had been led astray.

The work of the Mantellate (or 'pinzochere' or 'beghine'), or Tertiary Sisters of St Dominic, was Catherine's ideal. Once she belonged officially to the Order she would be free to hear the learned conversations of the Preachers, and at least in part satisfy her longing to know her faith more deeply. Some time had elapsed, and various difficulties and obstacles had been overcome, since her dream of St Dominic; now she could brook no further delay. Once she had taken the habit of a Tertiary her good but obstinate mother would surely stop tormenting her with grumbings and recriminations; moreover, in her dream she had received a command, which it might be dangerous to ignore. Her longing strengthened her resolve. She appealed to her mother to help her in begging the Mantellate to receive her. Lapa, who had at last realised her daughter's determined character, reluctantly consented. We do not know what she told the Sisters, but, knowing her expansive, emotional and talkative nature, we incline to believe that she drew a somewhat dramatic portrait of her daughter, so much so that the Tertiaries chose not to meddle in the matter and put forward the pretext that they accepted only widows of a certain age and of good reputation.

We do not know why Catherine's confessor, Fra Tommaso della Fonte, did not support his penitent's request. Knowing her desire he was surely the most suitable person to further it successfully. Perhaps he did not wish to support a cause unpopular with her family, to whom he owed a debt of gratitude, or perhaps he failed to understand his penitent's mind, taking her for an 'exaltée' who must be led back to normal life. This latter hypothesis may find confirmation in the words that Raimondo da Capua uses with reference to the 'very indiscreet directors' of the future saint, 'who did not understand her at all and blindly wanted to lead her along the ordinary road of ordinary maidens'.

The Tertiaries' negative reply did not discourage Catherine, for her faith in her supernatural dream made her confident of reaching her goal. Meanwhile, however, she fell ill with chickenpox. Not a grave illness, but her face, hands, skin were covered with pustules. Catherine feared it might be divine chastisement, and her fever rose. Lapa was terribly worried. It was an illness common to children, but Catherine was nearly eighteen years old, and for an adult it might be fatal. She was afraid, moreover, that a body so weakened with fasting and penance might not hold out against the high fever. In great agitation she sat by the sick girl's bedside, became her devoted nurse, tried to find comforting words. Catherine was not worried about the chickenpox itself—what did that matter to her?—but about her unfulfilled desire. She must have smiled with gentle pity at seeing Lapa always there, so distressed because her face was unrecognisable and her life in danger. Her mother could not grasp the spiritual reasons for her illness, but she herself, always remembering most vividly her dream of St Dominic, knew that it was a punishment for not having yet answered the call, or at least it was a warning to answer it as soon as possible. She used her illness to touch her mother's heart. 'Dearest mother, if you want me to recover and be well, help me to fulfil my desire to receive the habit of the Sisters of Penitence of St Dominic—else I am much afraid that God and St Dominic, who call me to their holy service, will see to it that you have me no longer, either in this or the other dress.' And she repeated many times her gloomy prediction that she would die if she did not become a Tertiary. Lapa was frightened. All she could do now was to try to further the fulfilment of her

daughter's desire. She went back to the College of those venerable women who call themselves Mantellate of St Dominic, of whom there are a great number in Siena, and told them of her daughter's insistent and fervent petition'. The fear of losing Catherine for ever now gave Lapa eloquence; she could guarantee that her daughter's vocation was certain; it was willed by Heaven; and she argued and pleaded so much that the Tertiaries promised to take her daughter's case into consideration, and to visit the postulant themselves so as to ascertain her physical and spiritual condition. The visit took place; the Dominican Sisters observed, enquired, learnt; the impressions they received were edifying and were communicated to their fellow Sisters and to the Dominican Friars 'so that they gave the College such a report of her that all with one accord, as if inspired by God, willingly accepted her in their Congregation'. Catherine heard with joy that at last she would be received as a Dominican Tertiary. But meanwhile she did not know how long her illness might last. In her perplexity and impatience she prayed to God with extraordinary vehemence to heal her, so that she might go before the altar in San Domenico to receive the longed-for habit.

The illness ran its course, and at the end of 1364 or the beginning of 1365 Catherine, still perhaps convalescent, went to the Cappella delle Volte for her clothing. There were present the Prioress with the Sisters of Penitence, the Master of the Tertiaries and the family of Giacomo Benincasa. The rite was that established by the third article of the Rule. The postulant kneels at the altar before the Master, and when he asks her what she desires replies: 'God's mercy and yours'. The acceptance follows; then the Master blesses the robe which the aspirant puts on 'apart'; she returns to the altar and the 'Veni Creator Spiritus' is intoned; after some prayers of thankfulness and praise the postulant is sprinkled with holy water and is received with the kiss of peace by all her fellow Sisters.

It is easy to imagine Catherine's joy and enthusiasm at the fulfilment of her dream, and at finding herself welcomed among the numerous family of the Mantellate. She rejoiced also at having a new director, the Master of the Tertiaries, to whom she might open her heart, of whom she might beg explanations of obscure

points in the Gospel, and whom she might hear speaking of God and religion.

Joergensen and Padre Taurisano believe this Master was the gentle and conscientious Bartolomeo Montucci, no great scholar, but loyal to his apostolic duty and a lover of the writings of St Bernard. We cannot be sure of this, but in any case the bonds between Catherine and the Preachers became more intimate, so that gradually she came to consider the Dominicans as her brothers and felt bound to them in a spiritual fraternity.

After her clothing she went joyously back home and into her cell, which she intended for some time to come never to leave except to go to church. She was to complete a year's novitiate, under the guidance and supervision of the Friars and Sisters. She wished to observe the Rule scrupulously—indeed, to surpass it in severity. No one now would weary her with worldly conversation; she could henceforth pray, meditate, implore all day and all night; she was free to stay as long as she liked in the company of God. She must have felt an overwhelming joy at being mistress of her own time, after overcoming such grave difficulties, and at being able to dedicate herself to the life of the spirit and the progressive realisation of ever loftier ideals.

In solitude the most varied thoughts flock to us and our memories become more distinct. By the side of future purposes arise images of the past, and even far-off events of our life pass before our mind in clear and decided colours. Both present and future—we see them side by side, now overlapping, now mingling, now emerging each in its own luminous clarity, and then fading away. Our hearts beat more quickly, and we feel a vague sweetness and an indefinable longing. Although we have reached a longed-for goal we are not satisfied: something is still lacking. There is an emptiness we wish to fill, we do not know how or why. All our thoughts are wistful and melancholy. Then there comes once more a dance of lights and shades, joys and sorrows. Far-away memories we thought were buried return to life, and wring our hearts. Have we chosen wisely, or ill? Are we really on the road God wishes us to tread? Words that relations, friends, even strangers have said to us at the most diverse moments, sound again insistently in our mind and seem to condemn our life and our works.

That Catherine passed through a similar state of mind after the immense joy of becoming a Mantellata seems suggested by her vision of the silken robes. Her sister Bonaventura with her worldly counsel, her sudden death, the advice given by Tommaso della Fonte, her own admiration and occasional desire for beautiful stuffs and elegant dresses, her mother's incitements to marriage, her childhood and girlhood—all this must have passed swiftly through her mind. But this was the past and she must break away from it; in the present there could only be Christ. Fragments of her old nature yet persisted, and tormented her. She prayed before the crucifix and strove with herself. The past must die, and still it lived. Her nature must be subdued, but it rose again. It was a drama of the soul. As she strove with herself there appeared to her a magnificent silken dress, offered her by a devil, possibly young, possibly very alluring. Catherine made the sign of the Cross and the vision disappeared, but the longing to have that beautiful dress remained in her soul, and with it was associated the idea of being a bride. Yes, a bride: human nature had re-asserted itself. But she had already given herself to Christ, she was His alone. She turned to Him imploringly: 'O my sweet bridegroom, I have never desired any other bridegroom but Thee, help me to overcome these temptations in Thy name; I do not beseech Thee to remove them from me, but mercifully to grant me strength to overcome them.' The prayer calmed her; her thoughts became luminous and a majestic vision enchanted her; the Blessed Virgin appeared to her, and drew from the side of the crucified Christ, to whom Catherine had turned with such hope during her struggle, a dress more wondrously beautiful than the other, covered with gold and jewels and shining like a heavenly thing. The Virgin robed her in it. What more could she desire?

According to her biographers she remained in her cell for three years, going out only to Mass and to the services in San Domenico, and speaking with no one except her confessor. Perhaps the biographers exaggerate, but certainly during these three years she passed hours that were delightful, joyous and peaceful mingled with others that were dark and stormy, even sometimes desperate and tragic. Meanwhile she acquired a knowledge of her gifts and of her mission, deepened her soul, fixed the main lines of her thought, strengthened her will, developed her intuition

and second-sightedness and soared above herself. Her activity later on, even if apparently new and diverse, had its psychological or religious foundation in this time of solitude and silence; a preparation that was difficult and fiercely contested, but which revealed to her the substance of her future masterpiece, 'The Book of Divine Doctrine', and taught her to fight to the end for God and the Church. Her own unyielding character was formed during these years, she meditated on the human soul during her ascetic practices, and in subduing her own nature she had a foretaste of the power of God. Her spiritual strength was more evident now than when, later on, she was to dominate princes and peoples, dignitaries of the Church and Popes, and her conquests of virtues at this time more admirable than her later conquests of souls—disciples, followers, admirers. Raimondo da Capua tells us that in these years she 'found the desert within her own house and solitude in the midst of people', but it is truer to say that in the desert of her cell she found the Holy Spirit, and in solitude the secret of self-mastery.

Her solitude and silence were often transformed into joyful companionship, passionate colloquies or bitterly fought duels. At moments a vast and mighty radiance surrounded her, she was enraptured with cosmic harmonies. At other times she was terrified at the sight of dreadful abysses, or saw herself standing like a column in a spiritual temple that threatened to fall. In her cell were solitude and silence, but within her worked Christ, that is, the fullness of life. When Catherine felt the attacks of the devil desirous to possess her, her solitude became inflamed with the ardour of battle because she was determined to win, at all costs—and it was full of the splendour of Paradise when she felt herself sustained by the master of her spirit, Jesus. She felt intensely the dualism of soul and body, and longed for an association that would mean a real unity. The body is heavy, loves material things and obstructs the liberty of the spirit which is light, aspires to the heights, longs for purity, is made for union with God. How can they be separated, so closely linked as they are? And where is the point of release to be found? All the saints sought for this, and found it in the suppression of the body. 'Mortify your earthly members', St Paul lays down as a law. Since her childhood Catherine had practised asceticism, through imitation, or on the

advice of the Church, or because of her own natural bent. She had achieved good results, but now she went deeper into the meaning of asceticism and perfected her technique. She discovered that mortification leads to the discovery of our real being, and frees the infinite spirit from the bonds in which the body seeks to hold it. Realising that mortification was necessary, the newly accepted Mantellata reduced her food to a handful of raw herbs, almost denied herself sleep, ploughed her flesh with scourgings and tortured it with a hair shirt, mortifying the body so that the spirit might grow free and great, suppressing it to subdue the perverse will. The mortification and suppression were not an end in themselves. 'Works of penance and other corporal exercises shall be set as a means, and not as a chief end', she said later on in the 'Dialogue', but it was at this time that she experienced and formulated this truth. She was far from rejoicing in mortification for its own sake. Her thought was fixed in Christ who had already appeared to her in Vallepia; she thought of Him and loved Him so intensely, she invoked Him so often with tears, that she saw Him, felt Him near her, heard His voice; Christ was present to her 'whether she prayed, or meditated, read, watched, or slept'. He protected her and was her guide. But the dreams, the sensible or intellectual apparitions, began to follow each other in great number; some were gentle, with reflections of the divine, uplifting her soul; others were dark; some were attractive and repulsive at the same time. Which was she to trust? Devils may appear in the guise of angels—St Paul had taught her this; how could she be sure of the holiness and truth of these apparitions?

Her spiritual directors must have spoken to her of divine and diabolic visions, and told her how to distinguish them. But she did not always remember the sources of her thought and everything seemed to her to spring up in her soul through the direct inspiration of Christ. Now also, God answered her doubt: 'My vision begins with terror, but then becomes sweet; the bitterness gives way to sweetness. The contrary is true of the fiend's vision, because of its origin. At first it gives a certain pleasure; it seems true, it is attractive, but later on it causes bitterness and tears.' A traditional but unconvincing and unsatisfying answer. Catherine also felt this; in fact she was taught another criterion for distinguishing: 'But I will give you an even more certain and infall-

ible sign. Be sure of this, that as I am the Truth My visions must give the soul a greater knowledge of the Truth, a knowledge of the Truth about Me and about herself, which is indispensable to the Soul—that is, the soul must know Me and herself; through such knowledge the soul must come to despise herself and honour Me, and this is really the work of Humility. Through my visions, then, the soul must become more humble; she must see herself as nothing, and despise herself. The contrary occurs with visions of the fiend. . . . Examining yourself therefore diligently, you will be able to know whence proceeds the vision, from Truth or from falsehood, because Truth makes the soul humble while falsehood makes her proud.' Two hundred years later St Teresa was to say the same thing. This is the traditional teaching of the Church.

It is necessary for the ascetic to distinguish good inspirations and visions from evil ones, but when he suffers from apparitions which seem to do violence to his whole being, and hurl him into darkest hell, where his soul feels torn to pieces, although it is easy for him to distinguish the source he is none the less stricken with horror. After sublime visions Catherine also experienced such apparitions from the underworld and apparently was so terror-stricken as to be frightened of their re-occurrence. Strong-willed and valiant as she was, she doubted her powers of resistance and appealed to God 'insistently for many days', to give her strength to bear them. She heard the answer in her soul: 'My daughter, accept for love of Me the sweet for the bitter, and the bitter for the sweet; and then have no fear, for you will certainly be strong in all things'. She received the teaching with joy, and folded the promise to her heart, and from then on rejoiced at every tribulation.

Until now Catherine's sensual temptations had not been very evident. There was only a slight hint of sensuality in the vision of the silk dress. She was not subject to those powerful impulses of the blood that set the whole organism awry, nor to those implacable desires of the flesh crying out to be satisfied. She certainly knew about the generation of men and animals, from her mother's and sister's instructions, or through her own observance of nature, or the reading of the sacred scriptures. But these were thoughts or observations that had neither led her astray from her strict conception of life nor insidiously entered her mind to arouse morbid

curiosity. Her constant purpose to be the bride of Christ made her avoid not only men, but even the thought of men. But this spiritual and moral integrity had not prevented words, observations, thoughts and sensual stories from entering her consciousness and remaining there harmlessly for many years—always ready to show themselves if this consciousness were explored or disturbed. In fact, one of the merits of asceticism consists in causing hidden desires to rise to the surface, and in rousing the passions in all their strength, so as to be able to recognise and subdue them. Catherine, who sounded the depths of her own soul, and examined herself every day to arrive at self-knowledge, aroused those sensual thoughts that had lain hidden in some fold of her being. Once aroused they seize hold of the imagination, try to possess the soul and become powerful. With Catherine sensuality was at first very subtle, hardly noticeable. An affectionate word or term of love overheard, the glimpse of a kiss given or received, a love song, the radiant face of a bride-to-be, or even a vaguely licentious conversation—to which there and then, many years before, she had paid no attention—these must all have meant at first merely a fleeting thought. But this thought came back, and gradually grew more insistent, and took on consistency. It drew attention to itself, worked slowly but continuously in the imagination, became importunate; banished, it returned in brighter hues and a more winning and insinuating form. Catherine was perturbed. Even her dreams contained sensual images, and worse still, she had genuinely and completely erotic visions. Believing her body to be the cause of these, she scourged it pitilessly and watched and prayed without rest. She did not want even the smallest particle of her being to be contaminated, and so she felt horror, pain and indignation.

According to Raimondo da Capua, the devils assumed aerial bodies and were very numerous. They represented amorous themes of every kind, and every now and then, turning to the maiden, they said pityingly and with a sort of good-humoured irony: 'Poor little thing, why do you torture yourself so much and for nothing? What use is all your suffering and grief? Do you think you will be able to go on wasting your body in this way? If you do, you will kill yourself, and it will be your fault. Leave such foolishness alone, if you don't want to die. You are at an age for

enjoyment; you are young, and can soon recover your health and strength. Live like other women, take a husband, bear children for the increase of mankind. You wish to please God? Didn't the holy women take husbands? Think of Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel. What is your purpose in choosing a way of life which you will be quite unable to continue? This sounds like one of the sermons Lapa delivered to her daughter before she became a Tertiary; at that time the words were meaningless for Catherine: now they have acquired character as a spiritual seduction, and they torment her. But she is determined to be victorious, and how better can she succeed than by abandoning herself to God? Resistance and struggle wear out her strength; therefore, instead of wrestling with her thoughts and trying to answer these questions in a long exhausting interior struggle, she entrusts herself to God. She has offered herself as a bride to Christ, she is His, it is for Him to defend her.

Even in calmer natures the temptations of the senses are not soon allayed. When passion is neglected it thrusts itself forward; when repelled, it reappears in more violent form. Catherine may well close her eyes, stop her ears, hide her face in her hands—the sensual images are none the less vivid to the soul, indestructible, inescapable. Obscenities take bodily form; the strangest embraces, the most unthinkable fantastic unions, make her shudder. The more she denies them, the more they persist; she cannot shake them off. It is an oppression, an obsession, an indescribable suffering. She feels alone, bereft of Christ, until now her sweet companion. What use is her own strength to oppose such powerful and numerous enemies? The shadows thicken, the impure words multiply, the atmosphere becomes abominable. She feels her own solitude and an aridity never felt before, a dreadful emptiness in her inmost soul. She would prefer to be torn to pieces and tortured in all her limbs, or cast into the fire, rather than engage in such treacherous and disheartening conflict, with foes as changeable as the wind. In her loneliness and desolation she has moments of depression, almost of despair. But suddenly she rebels determinedly against her own flesh, and her own blood.

'Vile creature, do you think you are worthy of any consideration? Have you forgotten your sins? Who do you think you are,

wretched sinner? Would it not be worth while to bear this darkness and torment all your life and be spared eternal damnation? Why are you disconsolate and weary? If you are dispensed from the pains of Hell, Christ will be your eternal consolation. Did you choose to serve Christ so as to be able to enjoy consolations on earth, or in eternity? Arise, then, and do not weaken in your efforts—add something more, instead, to the praises you normally offer to God.'

She feels strengthened and encouraged. Moments of silence and tranquillity return and she renews her strength. She feels capable of passing through her trial. 'We must bear with joy even the worst tribulations.' She smiles and rejoices. The cell, so lately infested with monstrous apparitions and resounding with sinister words, is suddenly filled with the purest radiance, in the midst of which she sees the crucified and bleeding Christ, who says to her: 'My child, see how much I have endured for you; do not grudge this suffering for Me'. And another voice, nearer but mysterious, assures that she has won the battle.

Whoever is familiar with the lives of the Saints will find the fundamental lines of these temptations in the Life of St Anthony in the 'Fathers of the Desert', and will assume that Raimondo da Capua, working on indications given him by Catherine, reconstructed her dramatic battle of the senses, which he knew would interest his contemporaries, after the model of St Anthony's. It may also be assumed that in her solitude Catherine lived again St Anthony's experiences, which she had heard read or narrated since her childhood, and that in a psycho-physical state characteristic of the ascetic she re-lived them in unconscious imitation. But we may also believe that her experience was genuinely her own, and that its similarity to St Anthony's was due to a faith and conception of the religious life similar to his. Certainly the resemblance of subject is striking: in both the devils tempt to sin, the senses are excited, the will resists, the spirit is tormented but finally triumphs over temptation. There is light after darkness, and in the light Jesus, who speaks to the soul and praises its victory. But a great part of Christian asceticism is but the application and development of a single principle to arrive at the same end. With all Saints and ascetics we find similar practices; what is important is to find out how sincerely and intensely the various ascetics have

felt these experiences, and how much each has contributed to the progress and perfecting of ascetic practice. This vision of Catherine's, that bears certain resemblances to St Anthony's, and indeed to those of many other ascetics, has nevertheless its own peculiar colouring and contains nothing alien or contrary to her character. As we have already noticed, one of the devil's little speeches might have been one of mother Lapa's sermons to Catherine before she became a Tertiary; but even the frank impurity or obscenity in the maiden's vision has a simplicity proper to her nature. We do not find any violent eroticism such as we find in Suso, or even in St Francis when he casts himself naked into the snow to subdue his senses; however painful these impure visions were to her, still they did not overwhelm her calm and reflective nature. As she was never dominated by her senses, so even her visions are lacking in that furore that we find in other ascetics. They are generally 'intellectual visions' due to memories of words heard or facts learnt. Making a close comparison between her visions and the terrible visions of St Anthony, we find that in the latter there is rebellion against impure possession of soul and body, while with Catherine there is horror for impurity seen only as something external. In all Christian ascetic literature we see the soul resisting, tortured and finally triumphing over sin, but Catherine's experience is clearly not taken from literature but lived and experienced in full, and for one who felt so intensely the contrast between spirit and body and longed so much for integrity, even the least stain on her purity and simplicity was a heartrending grief.

The difference between the two visions is clearer in their conclusions. When St Anthony sees Jesus in the midst of the light he asks Him where He was while he, Anthony, was beaten, tortured and suffering. Jesus replies that He was there, watching to see how he would bear himself in the battle, and that as he has shown himself to be a valiant knight He now promises to come to his aid in the future. Catherine also asks the Crucified in the midst of the light where He was while she suffered so much, and why He has thus forsaken her, and Christ tells her that He was in her heart, not as a mere onlooker, but as the source of the sadness and aversion she had felt in the presence of sensuality. In St Anthony's account there is a marked distance between God and the soul,

but in Catherine's there is union and co-operation. Christ was working secretly in her soul, and the aridity and emptiness which she felt were but momentary or illusory. There is evident progress between the two visions, and Catherine's shows the experience of God always present to the spirit even when we seem to be abandoned to our weakness. The divine spirit works eternally in us without our knowing it, and it is necessary to dig deep into our inmost soul to discover Him at His secret work, even if, as in Catherine's case, this search requires efforts, mortifications, terrors, spiritual and physical suffering.

When the vision faded Catherine's cell was not completely filled with the light of God. The devils still came and went, uttering really devilish words, and seemingly amused to see her praying to be rid of them. The maiden, feeling Christ within herself, was not frightened, but those grotesque faces and the sudden appearance of changing shapes disturbed her, so that she preferred to take refuge in church, where the devils were fewer, and did not always follow her. She began to spend longer hours in church.

Her ecstasies became frequent. Tommaso da Siena, quoting from the 'Miracula' of Tommaso della Fonte, tells us that in her ecstasy Catherine heard the angels chanting in heaven—a nameless song, a strange unearthly harmony. Richard Rolle had heard a similar music, but more continuous, during his ecstasies, and the followers of Pythagoras had imagined such strains: the harmony of the spheres. Catherine was so much affected by this singing that when, a long time afterwards, she spoke of it, she heard it again and wept for joy.

At this time occurred another event of great importance for her. Constant in her attendance at religious services and prayers, she had tried to learn by heart as much as she could of the Psalms, Gospels, St Paul's Epistles and the Canonical Hours. She listened carefully to sermons and drew much benefit from these and from the conversations of her confessors—but it was a grief to her that she could not read for herself. One day a companion taught her to spell, but for many weeks she made no progress. She turned to prayer, imploring God that she might at least be able to read Lauds and the Canonical Hours. After her praying she knew that knowledge had been given her, and in fact when she tried to read

she could do so, at first stumblingly but later on with great rapidity, though almost more by intuition than by direct and tested knowledge.

How far her readings helped her in her spiritual development is hard to say, but besides the joy they gave her they were of use in providing her with copious material for reflection and meditation—and brought her into direct contact with the thought of the Saints and the Church.

The three years of seclusion were drawing to an end. She had prayed very much, and wept more, had learnt man's weaknesses and his capacity for resistance, had sought in her innermost self strength and power, and had meditated on the excellence of virtues, on human life, on God. She had experienced an extraordinary love for Christ. She had succeeded in her desire to become mistress of herself and God's slave. Harsh penances had filled her with spiritual vigour, and her judgment had become clear as spring water. In her fight against evil and evil will she had passed through the terrors of hell, but had also soared in ecstasy to the throne of the All-Highest. She knew the meaning of men's passions, their wealth, goods, pleasures and lusts, and how much the intellect is darkened by sin.

Detaching herself from all else, she had not slain love. All else was in a state of instability and dissolution, but Christ, Love, the Church endured eternally. And Christ, Love and the Church were the only foundations upon which a better world might be built. She admitted of no compromise. Where Love was lacking, where Christ did not rule, where the Church did not guide—were misery, injustice, desolation and death.

She felt herself to be a daughter of the Church, overflowing with love, and a bride of Christ, and with intense sadness she thought of the majority of mankind, without love, without Christ. She would pray for them. But this was not enough; she must do more, perhaps even sacrifice herself for them. Even as a child she had tried to do good to her neighbours, and now the idea of an apostolate, at first vague and ill-defined, caused her to reflect.

Until now she had been working to purify her own soul, and, at most, she had felt some responsibility for the souls of the Dominicans: 'She had set herself to watch and pray every day

while the Dominican friars, whom she called her brethren, were asleep. Then, when the Friars rang for Matins, after the second bell and not before, she would say to her bridegroom: "Behold, Lord, my brethren, Thy servants, have slept till now, and I have kept watch for them, before Thee, so that Thou mightest keep them from all evil, and from the snares of the fiend; but now that they have risen to praise Thee, do Thou watch and I will rest a little". But she could no longer ignore the spiritual needs of so much of mankind, and it was probably at this time that she had the vision of the tree, that Tommaso da Siena sets, instead, at the beginning of her novitiate as a Tertiary. He takes it from the 'Dialogue', but robs it of all grace and spontaneity.

The Saint dictated her own account of it: 'Know, then, that I then showed you Myself in the form of a tree, whose beginning and end you could not see, but you saw that the root was joined to the earth, and this was the divine nature joined to the earth of your humanity. At the foot of the tree, if you remember well, there was a thorn, and at the sight of that thorn all those who loved their own sensual nature ran away, and hastened to a mountain of chaff; in which form I represented to you all the delights of this world. The chaff looked like corn, but was not, and so, as you saw, many souls died of hunger in it, and many others, realising the deceitfulness of the world, returned to the tree and got past the thorn, that is, the will's decision. This decision, before it is made, is a thorn that man finds on the way to truth. Conscience and sensuality are always at war with him, but as soon as, full of self-hatred and scorn, he makes a manly decision saying: "I desire to follow Christ crucified"; immediately he breaks the thorn and finds inestimable sweetness—some more, some less, according to their disposition and eagerness.

'You know that then I said to you: "I am your unchangeable God, for I do not change; I do not draw back from any creature who desires to come to Me; I have shown them the truth, making Myself visible to them, I who am invisible; I have shown them what it means to love anything without Me. But they are as if blinded by the mist of their disordinate love; they know neither Me nor themselves; see how they deceive themselves: they would rather die of hunger than pass the thorn. They cannot escape suffering, for no one passes through this life without a cross,

except those who take the higher road; not that they pass without pain, but their suffering is their refreshment. And since through sin, as I told you above, the world brings forth thorns and tribulations, and this river flows like a stormy sea, therefore I have given you the bridge, so that you may not drown. I have shown you how those deceive themselves with disordinate love—and how I am your unchangeable God, and that I am not an acceptor of persons but of holy desire. And I have shown you this in the figure of the tree which I told you of." "Those who are blinded by the mist of their disordinate love' are a multitude. How is this? And what is being done to help them? These are questions that remain, latent, in Catherine's conscience, to rouse themselves later on and receive a clear reply.

At this time Catherine was desirous of effecting a closer union with God. She had offered herself as a bride to Christ, and had considered herself as His bride; but Christ, although so close to her, speaking to her, advising her, reciting prayers and psalms with her, had not yet given her His word of consent. It was a betrothal. She wished, instead, to be wholly possessed by the Spirit, to feel herself, as it were, seized by an all-absorbing force, by a will that should subdue and take the place of her own. Rapt in this desire, she soared above herself and pleaded insistently to be accepted as a bride.

The spiritual marriage has remote origins. In embryonic form it is found in the pagan mysteries, it is hinted at in neo-Platonism. Among Christians, the fact, if not the name, is already found in some Fathers of the Church, but it is St Bernard who gives it a terminology and a development which, later on, with intellectual and practical mystics, become more and more copious, acquiring psychological exactitude with St Teresa, and theological exactitude with St John of the Cross.

The marriage marks the highest grade of spirituality that the mystic can achieve. The soul feels in every moment united to God, and there is not the slightest movement of the human being that does not harmonise with the divine. There is a permanent state of communion: two wills, one higher and one lower, are fused in fullness of joy. From the mystical phase known as 'operative quiet' they pass to the 'marriage', freeing themselves from the last vestiges of earthly attachments to live in the realm of the Absolute.

Sometimes the mystics describe only the externalities of this marriage, as it were the ceremony; one must go deeper to understand its character. 'It is a total transformation of the soul in its delight' and a merging of oneself with the divine, says St John of the Cross. Thirty years before Catherine experienced this state, Ruysbroek wrote that the spiritual marriage 'is an immersion by which we disappear in essential nakedness, where all divine names, all forms, all living thoughts, that are reflected in the mirror of eternal truth, are plunged into the sheer abyss, nameless, formless, thoughtless. Here is nought but eternal rest, a joyous embrace in which one is lost in love. . . . It is the shadowy silence in which all loving spirits are lost.'

In the 'Dialogue', when Catherine wants to describe her own immersion in the Trinity, she uses almost the same words—her own are simpler and more concrete—to describe the same fact. After all, the expressions may vary: be simple or complicated, rough or refined, clear or dark, concrete or abstract; what matters is that they should spring directly from an intensely lived experience and that through them we may get a glimpse of this experience ourselves, and feel, even from so far away, the glow of that purifying fire that burns in the breast of the mystics during their state of transforming union.

Catherine was naturally anxious to reach the highest degree of union with the divine, and implored God incessantly for this grace. One day she heard the Lord's voice, promising to espouse her. Her heart rejoiced, and she waited in trembling expectancy.

At the end of the Carnival season of 1368 Catherine was full of sadness. Her ear caught the echoes of the festivities of the Siene people. Everywhere were dances, songs, masquerades, and bold jests. It was carnival: all must be merry, and some licence was allowed. Every family that had the means to do so gave parties and invited guests. The banquets were merry. The thought of the approaching austerities of Lent sharpened the appetite for immediate enjoyment, and everyone was gay and ate and drank more than was necessary.

Catherine's family also showed the gaiety that comes with a well-laden table. Catherine heard, reflected and suffered. It was the festival of the belly: men had not yet understood the teaching of Christ. She may have meditated on the enormous

gulf between the hard self-denying life of those who wished to live in God, and the general self-indulgence of men in those days. She turned to prayer again and implored Christ with increasing fervour, for the hundredth, thousandth time, to make her His bride, as He had promised her. During her passionate prayer she received this reply: 'Because you have cast away from yourself all vanities, and have fled from them, and, scorning the pleasures of the flesh, have placed the desire of your heart in Me alone; now, while the others of your family enjoy themselves at table or in worldly pleasures, I have resolved to solemnise My spiritual marriage with you, and, as I promised you, I take you to Myself in the faith'. And in a vision she saw the Virgin Mother, St John the Evangelist, St Paul, St Dominic and David. While David played an affectingly sweet melody on his psaltery, the Virgin Mother gently took her hand, presented her to her Son, and asked Him to take her as His bride in the faith, and Jesus, consenting, took from His robes a gold ring adorned with four precious stones and a diamond, and placing the ring on Catherine's finger, said to her: 'Behold, I, your Creator and Saviour, take you as My bride in the faith. Keep this faith pure until you celebrate the eternal espousal with Me in heaven. Act then, my daughter, henceforth manfully and without hesitations in all those things My providence will give to you do. Armed as you are with the strength of the faith, you will successfully overcome all your enemies.'

The vision disappeared, but Catherine felt 'such joy that she could hardly bear it', and, adds Raimondo da Capua, 'the ring stayed always on that finger, and although no one else could see it, Catherine always had it before her eyes, and many times she has confessed to me, blushing, that she felt it always on her finger, and there was no moment when she did not see it'.

The vision has such delicate, pure and naive colours that analysis would but spoil it. It matters little if we see in it the remembrance of a legend, such as that of St Catherine of Alexandria, or possible the memory of a wedding ceremony she may have observed in some church. What matters is what Catherine saw and heard, and even more, that beyond the ceremony was a profound experience that later on she described for us in the 'Dialogue'.

If Catherine had been content with the vision alone she would have been a poor sort of mystic, and we might consider her as led astray by an inflamed imagination; but, going through and beyond the vision, she went forward to meet God, to be invested with His power, with which, later on, she was to perform acts that required a supernatural strength.