

Chapter III

FIRST SOCIAL AND APOSTOLIC ACTIVITY

CATHERINE'S mystical ideal had been realised. Safely united to God, overflowing with love, she could now contemplate, rejoice, pray, praise to her heart's content. Ecstasies came at every moment, apparitions seemed the necessary synthesis of her desires. Vigilant and adoring, she was made free of infinity and felt the impulses of infinite love within her—a wonderful, unearthly state—but she was a creature of the earth, and so could not and must not withdraw from it entirely. She had passed out of herself, choosing the life of heaven, but she must concede something to earth and mankind.

All mystics who have experienced the spiritual marriage pass through a period when they desire to live in God and for God only, and the least glance elsewhere seems to them a shadow thrown over contemplation, or a deviation from the state of union. The earth signifies the Fall, human weakness, inferiority, impurity; one must therefore keep well away from its contamination. This is a time of spiritual absolutism, and even, in a sense, of egoism, but an understandable egoism because the supernatural inspiration of the mystics is so great and powerful that they can think of nothing else. They are, as it were, prisoners of a vivifying central idea that does not permit any secondary activity to the various human faculties. It is the hey-day of love; but when this love has reached its highest degree it re-establishes equilibrium between the finite and the infinite. The mystic who at first has felt only the need to abandon himself to God, refusing all else, now begins to understand, through this love at its highest potency, that his contact with God has taught him that earth is not to be despised, and that man must be the object of his interest. So, after a period of intimate and exclusive union, during which God and the soul are his whole world, he finds that the cosmos, and not



St Catherine kneeling before the Crucifix, by Lorenzo di Pietro, called Vecchiotta.  
Siena, Accademia No 204. 1445

only the cosmos as an abstraction, but the earth and mankind, are the loving handiwork of God, and therefore require our thought and demand our care.

Love itself, athirst for the divine, turns of its own accord towards men. Here is the conflict between contemplation and action—not an intellectual problem that must be, or can be, resolved by reason. The mystics themselves are not clearly aware of this problem, but it arises as a need, and is resolved as a necessity, or often in obedience to a command. After the mystic has enjoyed the infiniteness of the Absolute, and has tried to contain it in himself, he becomes aware that it overflows on every side and needs a varied activity and a continual development. Why, and in what way, he wonders, must love overflow?—an enquiry that leads him to consider men in their pain, unhappiness, and separation from God. Man is wretched and suffering, because he does not possess love, that same love that he, the mystic, possesses, or by which he is himself possessed. From the heart of this love arises an imperative command: he must save others, bring joy to the joyless, and make men share in the Good that he enjoys. And so he begins to consider mankind and the earth as objects of the love that operates in him, and he feels himself a herald, an apostle; he needs to act, to share his ardour with others. Little by little the problems of others become fused with the problem of his own experience of the divine, and they become one to him. God lives in us and possesses us in as much as we sacrifice ourselves for others, and share with others the truth that we have found in Him.

Thus the mystic feels so strong an impulse towards action, formerly abhorrent to him, that no power can now hold him back, and he becomes as ready, decided and absolute in action as he had been in his quest for God, when he had seen nothing but himself and love, and the conquest of love. Then he was extended vertically, straining upwards; now he begins a horizontal and circular action that desires to reach the greatest possible number of people, over the greatest distance.

St Catherine was no exception to this law of mysticism. We have already noted how, during her spiritual espousals, Christ had warned her to hold herself ready for new and harder tasks. But there was as yet no clear conception of activity. The warning might have been interpreted as referring to spiritual difficulties,

warfare with devils, and so on. But she knew that the soul can soar no higher than the spiritual marriage, and therefore her future must be one of action. Tommaso da Siena says that while Catherine was praying in her cell 'and longing for the friendship of Christ, as she was uttering the words: "Kiss me with the kiss of Thy mouth", the Lord appeared to her and kissed her, so that she rejoiced exceedingly. She asked our Lord how she might keep Him for ever with her; He answered that the way was simple: she must never tire of doing good. In this colloquy He spoke to her so sweetly that she begged Him to withdraw her from the world, but He replied that it was not yet time for this, and insisted: "No, I want you to look after certain other people. Your life must be a guide and example to many".'

Fra Tommaso was writing after Catherine's death, and may even have added the last sentence to make the vision prophetic; but its content is psychologically true, and represents Catherine's new state of mind, so rapt in the contemplation of her Betrothed that she begged for death so that the contemplation might be endless, and so full of the thought of having God all to herself that she did not even hear His invitation to action.

Her passionate love was still for Christ alone, and she did not yet conceive the importance of action for her neighbour. This period is described by Raimondo da Capua as one in which she never willingly left her cell, and if she had to do so, and entered into conversation with anyone, 'she felt such great pain in her heart as if it were breaking'. Therefore, when she heard the order, and an explicit one, to act for others, even for her nearest relatives, she did not know, there and then, what to make of it; she was astonished, and resisted.

Raimondo da Capua, who, as usual, softens and embroiders the Saint's experiences, leaves in its integrity, beneath his embellishments, the essential moment of her passing from pure contemplation to action. Catherine had been reciting the Psalms, and reading the Hours, feeling so near to Christ that it was as if He recited and read with her. All at once she heard: 'Go, it is the hour for the mid-day repast. Your family are about to sit down to table; go and join them, and return to Me later.'

What could this mean? She did not understand this command. Had she perhaps committed some grave fault, or did her own

nothingness make her unworthy of Jesus? The words she heard were new, unexpected and cruel; she wept and rebelled. 'O God, dost Thou drive me away? If my body has sinned against Thee, I myself will inflict upon it the most atrocious penance, but I beg and implore Thee not to remove me from Thy presence.'

It is clear that she did not realise the close relation between the love of God and the love of her neighbour, and so naturally she did not see the necessity for returning to family life, and she objected: 'What does a meal matter to me? The food I need is unknown to my own kin. Thou knowest that I have withdrawn from the world, and from my own family, to be Thy bride; and now that Thou art my All, Thou tellest me to return among men—but in so doing I shall certainly lose the light I now possess, and little by little I shall become a sinner in Thine eyes.'

She feared to lose the contemplation of God, and could not yet understand that action must follow contemplation. She wished to enjoy to the full the spiritual joys, so numerous and so intense, of contemplation and union with God. Anything else would surely be inimical to this enjoyment. Courageously, even imperiously, she pleaded her own desires: 'Far be it, O Lord, from Thine immeasurable goodness to command me, or anyone else, to detach the soul from the contemplation of Thine own infinite perfection'. Her perturbation was so great that she cast herself at the feet of Christ, sobbing and imploring to be enlightened. But soon the distress of her soul was calmed, the apparent conflict resolved, and serenity returned. 'The act that I should perform today will certainly be different from my acts before I belonged wholly to God; and, besides, will not my Lord remain with me, to give me the energy needed to perform the duties He requires of me?' Perhaps the Gospel verse: 'Love God above all things, and your neighbour as yourself', came to her mind. In fact, she heard the Lord's voice in reply: 'Have no fear; you must act for the needs of others; but I do not in the least intend to detach Myself from you—rather to draw you even closer to Me through charity to your neighbour'.

It was probably at this moment that she thought out what we read in the 'Dialogue': 'When the eternal Truth has been conceived in man's soul through affection of love, he must at once pass it on to his neighbour; otherwise it would not be the Truth that he has

conceived. But as in very truth he loves Me, so he ministers to the needs of his neighbour; and this cannot be otherwise, for love of Me and love of his neighbour are one and the same thing, and the more a man loves Me, the more he loves his neighbour, because his love for him proceeds from Me.'

This is a true description of divine love in action—needing a richer experience to express itself more exactly. This experience was to be Catherine's later, but the first germ of this conception must have been born in this moment of her life.

After a little reflection she recognised that Jesus' command was just, and must be obeyed; yielding her will to Him, she said: 'Thy will be done, O Lord!' Action, however, was a grave task. The Saints and mystics had performed extraordinary works among men, but they were Saints, and great ones: how could she presume so much? She saw that action would be difficult, although she no longer objected to it in principle. She heard God repeating within her soul: 'The soul that is in love with My Truth is never tired of ministering to the needs of the whole world'. She still demurred: 'That is all very well for men, but where and how can I, a wretched woman, be useful to others? Also, it is not fitting for women to teach and preach; men have no esteem for them and, moreover, it is unseemly for a woman to have to do with men.'

This was the last flicker of resistance. The thought of an apostolate was already taking possession of her mind, and growing stronger. Divine love had been working in her without her knowledge; she now felt her soul so full of it that it must needs overflow. She could no longer resist. 'But the soul that is in love with My Truth is never tired of ministering to the needs of the whole world.'

Now she heard God's voice with all her former joy, and her sense of His presence grew no less. 'Thy will be done, O Lord', she repeated, and this time she bowed to Christ, once more present to her eyes. Then at once she quickly left her cell and went to join her family, and seated herself at table with them.

She had obeyed the call of love; the conflict between action and contemplation had been resolved, and she could no longer distinguish between them. There was no longer anything but one mighty operating Spirit, who worked through her and all things else.

Her biographers do not describe the effect on her family of Catherine's unexpected appearance at table, nor do they tell us what influence her confessors had over her, but as the Dominicans did not conceive of a purely and solely contemplative life they must have approved of her action.

Raimondo da Capua says that her first spiritual directors did not understand her. One must however remember that this was the period of the heretical 'beghine' and it behoved them to stand on their guard. Catherine might be deceiving herself in her visions, and in her confident sense of the immanent presence of God. Her experiences were certainly out of the ordinary, and her mortifications excessive; she was very imaginative and very eloquent. There had been among the Tertiaries many visionaries, of exemplary life and apparently possessing extraordinary gifts, who had none the less been condemned by the Church. It was better to withhold judgment. And among the Preaching Friars, accustomed, in general, to close reasoning and much study, some were sceptical about her, some uncertain, some followed her doings with interest, but without giving a verdict one way or another.

Tommaso della Fonte ought perhaps to have known her state of mind better than the others; but he was not a man of great gifts, or even of shrewd perceptions. A commonplace Friar, he devoutly performed his duties as a Christian and a priest, but could not discern the originality of a spirit like Catherine's. We must suppose that his advice was of mediocre value. When Tommaso began to write the 'Miracula', that is, an account of the Saint's extraordinary actions, he did so under the influence of his confrère Bartolomeo Dominici, who from 1368 onwards was the real discoverer of the genius and spirituality of Catherine. Encouraged by the judgment of this young but learned Dominican, who understood mysticism, Tommaso then became an attentive observer of Catherine's experiences, and began to understand her intellectual and religious superiority, openly admiring her.

Did Catherine find any support among the Mantellate? Raimondo da Capua tells us flatly that the Sisters understood nothing about her, in fact they opposed her, and caused her many vexations. How could these mediocre Christians understand the Saint's outbursts and ecstasies? Their religious world was made up of prescribed devotions, limited duties and ritual formalism—

such as satisfy ordinary folk. They did not feel the overpowering need to soar above all heavens to reach God, nor did they know the bitterness of spiritual conflict. Most of them were probably good women in the current meaning of the word, but the good they did was the small change of charity that satisfied their conscience. They must have wondered why Catherine lived in such absolute seclusion, and mortified herself so mercilessly. It was surely unnecessary to overstep the limits of ordinary humanity. For Catherine, who broke all barriers and soared above humanity, there could be no sympathy from her fellow Mantellate. However, there were among these Tertiaries some who listened attentively to what was said about the virgin of Fontebranda, and desired not only to speak to her but to remain with her, so as to be sharers in her graces; a desire that was fulfilled as soon as Catherine entered the world.

In religious circles in Siena there must have been talk about this Tertiary who left her cell only to go to church, ate nothing, drank very little, slept very little, and yet spoke beautifully about divine things, was always cheerful, and experienced visions and frequent ecstasies. Opinions about her must have been very varied, some considering her a Saint, others even calling her an impostor.

Siena was a city of intense religious life. In the thirteenth century, aware of its danger on the eve of the Battle of Monteperti, the city had offered itself to the Blessed Virgin, invoking her aid. After the victory, it had in gratitude added to its motto '*Sena vetus*' the words '*Civitas Virginis*'. Every generation had produced at least one saint, whose extraordinary works or miracles or visions were narrated and discussed in the town. Andrea Gallerani, who died in 1251, had instituted the charitable Order of the Brothers of Mercy; Ambrogio Sansedoni, who died in 1287, had laboured long for peace in his city, praying with the poor, tending the sick, aiding pilgrims. The people loved to remember Agnese di Montepulciano, who died in 1317, relating how fresh flowers sprang out of the earth where she prayed, and how she had made rise from the ground a miraculous spring of water, which is still to be seen today: the well of Sant'Agnese. The Augustinian Friar, Agostino Novello, had performed many miracles and works of mercy before he died in 1309; many still remembered

the first Constitutions he drew up for the Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala, and his great love for the poor and sick. Was not the great Abbey of Monte Oliveto, that became more celebrated every year, the creation of Siense ascetics in 1319? And who did not recall Francesco Patrizi, the Servite whose life of penance, humility and charity had ended in 1328? Selva di Lago, or Lecceto (the ilex wood) was spoken of with great respect, for there were gathered ascetics, prophets, contemplatives, and religious enthusiasts who studied the ways of God and did penance for the sins of men. Monasteries flourished in Siena; in 1310 there were twenty-eight, with 651 Friars, subsidised by the Commune.

When a famous preacher came to the city he was welcomed enthusiastically, and the whole population turned out to meet him. The Siense interest in religion was shown also by the incidence of heresy, which was fairly lively during the fourteenth century. In 1321, for example, a great theological dispute took place. A man of high position, Baroccino Barocci, a follower of the Nine, had arrayed against him all the Doctors of Theology of the city, who declared him heretical. He was shown his error, and many attempts were made to induce him to retract, but he was obdurate. Finally the Inquisitor and the Bishop condemned him to death by burning, and he perished in this way, without retracting any part of his opinion, and refusing to be shriven. He had many fellow heretics in the city. In fact, Bishop Ruggero was always harrying them without much success. Later on came the persecutions of the heretics undertaken by the Inquisitors, who exploited their power so much that in 1340 the Commune was obliged to pass a law against Inquisitorial abuses.

But we find the greatest expression of Siense religious feeling in Giovanni Colombini, and most of the talk in the city in Catherine's time must have been about him. He had died a few years before she began her social work, and shortly before his death he had been commended and helped by Pope Urban V, on his return to Italy. Because of rumours current about him, he had been examined by the Inquisitors, who had declared him entirely orthodox, thus increasing his fame. A strange man, but full of faith, ardour and charity, he was becoming one of the glories of Siena. Untaught, he had acquired for himself the wisdom of love, spontaneous, immediate and proved. He lived for God and



for the salvation of souls, doing good wherever and whenever he could. Those who had known him formerly as a rich business man, elegant and self-indulgent, and now saw him working as a street sweeper, scullion or grave-digger, bearing firewood or turning the spit before scorching fires—all for the love of his fellows—were deeply moved; some knew that one day he had placed a leper in his own bed, laying him in linen sheets, and had washed and perfumed him, and then, as if caring for him as a brother were not sufficient mortification, had drunk the water with which he had washed him. They may have found this gesture exaggerated, but none the less denoting an unusual fervour of charity.

He was called 'the charitable Giovanni', and whoever met him when he was crying out: 'Long live Christ throughout all the world in the hearts of all His creatures!', may have taken him for a simpleton; yet that cry, coming from such depths, must have stirred the hearts of those who heard it. Sometimes he would be seen crossing the scorched fields under the blazing sun, drunk with love for Jesus, or bare-footed and bare-headed, singing hymns to his Creator in the rain. And cheerfully, at all times and in all places, he offered his services to his fellow-men.

Who knows the thoughts of those who saw him, by his own desire, dragged half-naked, bound with a halter, through the streets of San Giovanni ad Asso, sweeping the ground with his body, and making open confession of his former cheating in that place—for he had robbed the peasants by lending them maggoty corn and then demanding the best in return? Besides being amazed, the onlookers must have been deeply affected spiritually, because in these actions, that sometimes resembled madness, he always observed a certain measure, and was inspired to perform them by sincere repentance and true humility. In Siena there was such dismay when he was banished that when the plague broke out shortly afterwards, the people thought that it was a punishment for having exiled him unjustly, and they forced the Twelve to recall him at once.

His admonitions, speeches, letters went all round the city. His disciples, and the Abbess and Nuns of Santa Bonda, waited eagerly upon Colombini's burning words, and many other devout folk zealously sought after his letters, to have fervid spiritual reading

that might help them to progress in the way of Christ. All was centred in the love of Christ—for man was here to love Him. 'For what more can we do for Him than love Him? You know that He has no need of our services, and does not consider them, except in so far as they are rendered with loving charity, and when He is loved with purest charity, He gives Himself to our soul. Then the soul feels such wealth and such well-being as no tongue can express, for Christ transforms the soul entirely into Himself, causes it to dissolve in tears, to melt, to writhe with devotion.'

The devout are induced to meditate on this 'transforming' and 'melting' and 'writhe' and find in them a synthesis of asceticism. Colombini knew, and preached to all, that the soul, when inflamed with love, almost loses itself in Christ, and, despising the world, yearns to perform great things for love, thinking only of perfection, which is loving all, doing good to all, and, more especially, blessing and helping those who are hostile.

No contemporary writer tells us whether Catherine knew of the life and work of Colombini, or read any of his letters, but although she had lived until now as a recluse, she must have heard of this godly man that all Siena was talking about, and who had been in touch with the Dominicans of Camporegio.

We have no proof of Catherine having read any of his letters, but when we examine the writings of both, we are led to believe that many of the same, or similar, expressions, and certain conceptions common to both, cannot be accounted for merely by the similarity of their religious experiences. They are typical and personal phrases: 'He who loves has Christ, who is Love'; 'Love leads to Love'; 'Wash your lamps, that is, clean your hearts and fill them with the oil of humility and all the virtues, and then light the flame of charity within, so that when the Bridegroom appears, you may follow Him and go to the nuptials with Him'; 'The greater the affliction the greater the consolation'; 'Setting the whole world beneath your feet'. There are many of such phrases which Catherine seems to have borrowed from Colombini, which leads us to suppose that she had read his letters, or had listened attentively when someone expounded their contents.

She called the devil 'Malatasca', and many, including Raimondo da Capua himself, have expressed their admiration for this nickname which they thought to be her own invention, a Dan-

tesque fancy—but the name can be found in the 90th letter of Colombini, addressed to the Abbess and Nuns of Santa Bonda: 'And so you must pray, and you know how necessary that is, because Malatasca the devil will not sleep, and will do all he knows how to, and can'.

Moreover, sharing so many affinities of character and faith, Catherine must have felt drawn to study his work and writings. She may even have recognised in him a forerunner, or a loving teacher, and a soul that had passed through spiritual and apostolic experiences that were one day, enriched with so much more emotional and mental power, to be her own.

Accustomed as Catherine was to solitude and soliloquy, she found all companionship, even that of her own kin, irksome. When torn away from her spiritual colloquies and precious visions, she was irritated by ordinary conversation, so superficial and insignificant. At table her family talked about business, about events in the neighbourhood or city, or of gossip. She felt alien to these subjects. Here at hand were her first untried weapons in the struggle to adapt herself to living, voluntarily, with people who spoke and thought differently from herself, but she had not yet discovered that other souls may throb in unison with ours if we show sympathy for their world, and that to fit in with a mood alien to our own is an exercise in humility that increases love. Certainly, the many hours of blissful joy passed in ecstasies were still too recent, and her thoughts too much accustomed to remaining within their central source of light, so that to remove herself from it was for her like plunging into darkness, and like emptying her soul of life. Therefore the hours spent with other people seemed to her like months and years, and as soon as she had an excuse she would leave any company to flee to her cell, with ever more ardent zeal to adore Christ there and invoke His appearance. During these months, in which contact with others was so burdensome, she went more frequently to Communion, to find a closer sense of union with the divine—to have Christ more often present to her senses.

But even if she was still uncertain about the efficacy of her work among those of her own family, and still instinctively sought to withdraw, she yet felt the impulse of love within her—urging her to act for others' good. In a house like her own, how could she busy

herself except in domestic matters? So the frail Catherine began to sweep and clean, beat carpets and clothes, make beds, help in the kitchen, make the bread and do the washing—to lend a hand here, there and everywhere. One day the servant fell ill, so she insisted on taking her place and doing all her work. She was seized by a sort of mania for work; besides doing all the servant's work herself, she waited on her and tended her with loving care. She began to feel the joy of action, and the happiness of dedicating herself to others. Once before, after her sister Bonaventura's death, she had waited on her family, but how different her state of mind was then! At that time she was undergoing punishment, and obeying her family's orders, and, in spite of her cheerful appearance, she was sad and wistful; now, instead, she was working of her own accord in obedience to an inner voice, and she knew that all her sacrifices were useful and pleasing to Christ. Her heart exulted and her face shone with joy.

The harder she worked the more closely she felt her union with the divine. She began to understand the reason for this command to action that her soul had received, and to realise that action is never divorced from contemplation. Even when sweeping or washing dishes, or turning the roast on the spit, all at once she would feel herself seized and rapt in an ecstasy, almost as if this were the reward of her obedience. At those times an ignorant onlooker must have felt perturbed. One can imagine the dismay of Lapa, who felt her daughter's way of life as a personal calamity, when one day she saw her 'with her hands and feet numb, all twisted, and her fingers pressed as hard into the palms of her hands as if they were nailed there, so that no strength could detach them. Her eyes were closed and her neck quite stiff'; indeed a terrifying spectacle for Lapa. And as Catherine's neck was awry, she wanted for pity's sake to straighten it, and who knows what might have happened if one of Catherine's fellow Tertiaries had not warned Lapa in time of the danger of forcing her daughter's limbs during an ecstasy—and she was always falling into ecstasies. Once she was turning the roast on the spit when all at once she dropped everything and fell over the fire; only by a miracle did she escape being burnt.

Action leads to action, and Catherine's generous and enterprising character could not be restricted to working within the

confined circle of her own home. The need for greater scope led her to succour the poor and the sick. Whether in this she was advised and guided by the Dominicans, or acted on orders from the Prioress of the Mantellate, or on her own impulse, we are not told. The Tertiaries had merely the duty of looking after their own sick or needy Sisters, but we know that in Siena they visited hospitals and prisons, enlarging the obligations of their Rule. They may have entrusted to her some works of mercy, and it may be that her first companions were in this way drawn to her in affection and admiration—but we cannot be sure of this. According to Raimondo da Capua, the wish to help the poor came to her spontaneously, in obedience to the ever more imperious voice of her conscience, and as a result of the devout sermons and conversations she had read or heard.

As soon as she began to work for her family, she found that Christ was still with her, as close as He had been in her solitude; indeed, her ecstasies became more frequent. She remembered the delightful legends of St John the Almsgiver, and of St Nicholas, and was inspired by St Francis' total renunciation of the goods of this world, and by the thought of Colombini, who had given all his wealth away—but what could she do? She possessed nothing, either of her own or in common. It was true that a disciple of Francesco Patrizi, Rosa Berardi, who died in Siena about 1348, had given away in charity everything she could find in her house, pots and pans as well as clothes, and has been severely scolded by her parents for so doing—but Catherine did not want to irritate her family. So she thought of asking her father's permission to give to the poor and needy what in their house 'the Lord had granted to him and his family'. Permission was generously given. She enjoyed her charity, and it was open-handed. But it was also subtle and wary. She set aside the professional poor, to help those who suffered without begging. Those who appealed to her had to endure her sweet but heart-searching glance, that discovered any deceit. She preferred to find out for herself the real needy, to choose her own poor. Once, for example, when she learnt that some neighbours were in great poverty, but ashamed to ask for help, she collected in her own house corn, wine, olive oil, and other necessities, and the next morning, as soon as she could go out, hastened to carry everything to their home. She very softly

opened the door—it is the habit of poor folk to leave doors ajar—and put the food inside the room, then hastened away so as not to be seen.

Another time she was told that a widow with many little children had nothing to eat. Catherine was in bed, because her limbs were swollen and she could not stand upright. Painfully she rose, gathered together what she could find at home, a bag of corn, a flask of wine, a jar of oil, and as soon as the bell rang at dawn, before which no one was allowed to be in the streets, she went rapidly to the widow's home. She was laden, holding things with both arms, on her shoulders, tied to her girdle—Raimondo da Capua says the weight was about two hundred pounds. After the first swift joyful steps she began to feel over-burdened; then the load became intolerable; she stopped for a moment, drew breath, and prayed. She gathered her strength together to arrive at her goal, and just reached it. The door was ajar; she pushed it a little to put down the food, just inside, but in ridding herself of her burden she made some noise and the poor woman awoke. Catherine tried to flee, but the strain had exhausted her. Her nerves were stretched to such a point that she was incapable of movement, and her will seemed powerless. Still not wishing to be seen, she prayed to God, then turned on her own body with a 'You shall walk, even if you die of it!' Almost on all fours she dragged herself away, but not before the widow, who had risen and run to the door, had seen and recognised her.

One day, pitying a poor man who was asleep in church, she began to pray for him. All at once she felt inspired to go and slip something under his head. While she was on her way to him the poor man arose and came towards her, saying: 'I beg you for the love of God, to give me something to cover me'. She at once took off her cloak and gave it to him; then she led him home with her and gave him a shirt. These were loving deeds graced by delicacy of feeling. She put her whole self into her actions, and the useful material gift acquired a meaning of its own because it was vivified by her generous spirit. In those moments Christ, her soul, and the recipient of her charity were fused in one; she suffered for the needy as much as they did themselves, even more, because of her lively and sensitive imagination; and while she prayed for them she enfolded them in a mantle of generous sympathy, and never



caused them the slightest humiliation. She said, it was they who helped her. She was a sinner, a great sinner—hence the cause of their suffering. It was they who benefited her; in fact, they received nothing from her; it was Christ who received, He to whom she owed all.

Her visions still continued. The little silver cross she believed she had given to a poor man in church appeared again in her Bridegroom's hands, but enriched with precious gems. And the tunic she had given to a poor woman was seen again, beautiful and adorned, worn by Christ Himself. There was no doubt about it: the poor *were* Christ: charity took on a mystical meaning. Her industry never flagged; she began to visit the hospitals and tend the sick. Her fame spread through the poorer quarters of Siena, and around her gathered a clientèle of unfortunates. She was good to all, and helped them to the limit of her power. She was said to perform miracles, and was sought after. The miserable begged for her prayers, knowing her to be a friend of God. 'This young woman has so much glowing charity that she receives very lovingly all who beg her to pray for them, and promises to do so very willingly. And then when she sets herself to pray for all her petitioners, usually at night, she not only prays most fervently for them, but often for their sakes gives herself such strokes of the discipline as to draw blood.' And when once she was asked how she could remember in her prayers all those who had petitioned her, especially when she did not know them and their number was almost infinite, she replied: 'When a servant of God prays His Eternal Majesty most piteously and with exceeding ardour and fervour of holy charity for the welfare of sinners, God of His grace allows her to see with the eye of her soul all those for whom she prays'.

One of her miracles struck the popular fancy. It has its remote origin in the wedding at Cana, and Bartolomeo di Domenico describes it thus:

'It happened that Catherine's father forbade his family to decant wine from a certain cask in his cellar, because, as this was the best wine, he wanted to keep it to the last. When Catherine, who never drank wine, but only pure water, heard this, she reflected that the best wine ought to be given to the poor; and as she had full permission from her father to distribute, for the love of God,

whatever she wished, putting her trust in the Lord she began to give away flask after flask of that wine to her poor sick folk. When her father wished to drink this special wine he sent the servant to decant it, and as the servant did not return he sent his married son to scold her and bring it. But the servant came back to say that without doubt the cask was empty. The father and son, and others of the family, grumbled at her, and the son insisted on going himself to get the wine. He stayed a long time and then returned empty-handed, saying that the cask was indeed empty. The father was very cross with the whole family, demanding who had presumed so impudently to disobey his express command. The holy virgin heard her father's angry words and saw the whole family upset. Knowing what had happened, her conscience was stirred, and trusting in God, she came forward to calm the angry scene: "Why are you so angry, my good father?" Hearing the reason, she replied: "Have patience, my father; I will go myself to decant the wine". Going down into the cellar, she knelt down by the cask and prayed to God very trustfully: "O Lord, Thou knowest that the wine has been used to help the poor—and Thou knowest that I have done this in Thy name. Do not permit me, O Lord, for this to be made a cause of scandal to my father and all the family." She rose, and made the sign of the Cross over the cask and behold! the wine came pouring from the spigot. First she thanked God, then took the wine to her father, saying nothing of the miracle; and all those who had tried in vain to draw the wine were struck dumb with amazement.' The wine lasted for more than two months, for the use of all Catherine's family as well as for her poor folk, instead of lasting a month for the family alone. When the vintage season came round, and they wanted to empty the cask, to fill it with new wine, they were all amazed to see that it was bone dry, as if it had stood empty for many months.

Catherine's father, the only one of her family who had shown some understanding of her religious fervour, fell gravely ill in August 1368. Throughout his illness Catherine was his loving nurse, and prayed for his recovery; but when she was sure that he would die very soon, fearing he might have to pass through Purgatory, she offered herself in sacrifice, so that her father might be spared all future punishment. She prayed with such conviction that suddenly she felt a sharp pain in her side, and

it was revealed to her that this pain, that she was to bear all her life, was her father's ransom. Sure now that he would not suffer in the world beyond, she went to his bedside to reassure him, and then assisted him as he breathed his last. As soon as Giacomo di Benincasa died, Catherine's face became cheerful and smiling, and she told those present that she envied his lot. When she had washed him and laid him out, she watched by him all that day, and spoke comfortingly to her disconsolate mother and grieving family, giving them courage and serene resignation.

For what was death, if not life itself? And why should we weep for those who leave us, when we are sure they are better off than we are? It is true that here below all tends to bind us to an existence that, in the long run, brings us more hardships than pleasures. From childhood on, our education is at fault, fostering in us vain desires and notions of the necessity of money, of possession, of power, of attachment to things and creatures, to honour and fame. And all seems lost if any of these things fail us. We believe ourselves to be necessary to others, as they to us, and we form attachments without which life ceases to have any meaning. In this way we lose the sense of absolute liberty, and build up a whole world of bonds and chains amounting to spiritual slavery. Man's breathing space has been restricted by his own desire, and he no longer enjoys the vast realms of the spirit in which all can find grandeur and joy. Our eyes are no longer raised towards the lofty heavens, and we have no part in their immensity. Our interest is all concentrated in material possessions and in attachment to creatures: infinite poverty. But Catherine, detached as she was from this way of living, judged things very differently. She considered everything in its relation to eternity, and to salvation in this life and beyond. Integral Christianity: the creation of a life that had love for its constructive element, serenity for its atmosphere, the infinite for its aspiration. In the immense depth and fullness of love, our affections, attachments, joys, even doubts, uncertainties, hesitations and griefs still throb with life, but their power is neither decisive nor tyrannical. What we normally consider as necessities, and strive after, or wear ourselves out in attaining, are really nothing and should be regarded with indifference. Once we admit that our lives are continued and perfected in infinity, the existence of our dearest ones cannot be thought of as

broken off by death. There are no breaches of continuity: life is one and eternal. Every day, in every hour, we must strive to win for ourselves a future, and become worthy of the great love in which we are to merge. So death is destroyed and only life exists.

Every now and then Tommaso della Fonte brought some fellow priest to see Catherine. These visits gave her pleasure and satisfied the curiosity of her visitors, and Tommaso was able to gather various judgments and impressions about her, for as he was her confessor he was in a certain sense responsible for her conduct to the Order, to the city, to God. One day in 1368 he took Fra Bartolomeo di Domenico to see her. Fra Bartolomeo was about the same age as himself, and had been his fellow novice. He had a liking for literature, was intelligent, alert, observant, and had a special fondness for theology. He gave himself much to the study of religious problems, was reflective and calm in his judgments, and of a humility that set his teaching in stronger relief. Anxious to understand ascetics and mystics, he was interested in their problems, maintaining a slight scepticism about some of the extraordinary events of their lives. He was of upright character, and a generous and affectionate nature. He already enjoyed a certain esteem in the Order. Little did he think that his visit to Catherine was to his future teacher, and that he would have a real Saint for friend.

On first entering the cell he was struck by the narrowness and darkness of the place—doors and windows always closed, and only one lamp burning before the images of Christ, Mary, and some Saints. He was shocked to see the planks that served for the recluse's bed, but still more touched by her gaiety and purity. It was the first time he had felt such a sensation in the presence of a woman. Until then, with all women, even those of advanced years, he had always been aware of their sex, but now, instead, no impure thought entered his mind. He saw something angelic in Catherine, and at once became her devoted admirer.

Fra Bartolomeo does not tell us about his first conversation with Catherine, but we know that although he revered her for her faith, her purity, sincerity, austerity and charitable work, he did not at first believe in her supernatural manifestations. One day he was in her cell, talking with her and Fra Tommaso, she suddenly asked him: 'What were you doing last night, during the

second and third hours.' The two Friars asked her: 'What do you think we were doing?' 'Who knows better than you?', answered Catherine. Then her confessor, in agreement with Fra Bartolomeo, ordered her, under obedience, to tell them what they were doing at that time; but she humbly refused to reply, excusing herself again. When her confessor then insisted that she should speak, she replied humbly: 'You know well that there were four of you in the Sub-Prior's cell, and you were speaking nearly all the time about the salvation of our souls, intermingling other subjects from time to time.' When asked who were these four, she gave their names. Fra Bartolomeo was dumbfounded, but still clung to the idea that one of the Fathers might have told her of this. The next day he went to her and asked her if she knew what he had been doing the evening before at a certain hour. She told him calmly that he had been writing, and moreover told him what he had written. The Dominican had no more doubts about her: Catherine had the gift of second sight, and so those stories of her prophecies or visions at a distance, current in the city, must be true. He became an assiduous visitor to Catherine's cell, and she, for her part, was glad to have found a learned Friar who understood her, and with whom she could speak of theological questions about which she desired to meditate, but which she feared, in her ignorance, to have imperfectly understood. Thus began a mutual exchange of help. Fra Bartolomeo instructed her in religious knowledge, and discussed grave ecclesiastical questions, and she, with her tact and intuition, made of him 'a soul enamoured and strengthened in the blood of Christ'.

Fawtier believes, I think mistakenly, that the Order of Preaching Friars added Fra Bartolomeo to Tommaso della Fonte as an extra confessor, the better to supervise the Tertiary and maintain her within strict orthodoxy. The friendship between Catherine and Fra Bartolomeo, however, arose quite spontaneously, through a mutual spiritual sympathy fostered by his admiration for her sanctity and her admiration for his learning. It is true that all the Dominicans watched over the faithful lest they should fall into heresy, and in Catherine's case also the supervision was no doubt attentive, but always through the Friar's own initiative, not in obedience to a command. Before long the Order was to busy itself with Catherine, but at the moment of which we speak her

fame was still restricted, and the Order saw no need to intervene.

The mutual affection of this intellectual friendship is expressed in the letters that Catherine wrote to Fra Bartolomeo. She writes as one sure of being understood, and her thoughts flow impulsively and richly; she does not need to explain or simplify, but lets the fullness of her spirit overflow. On the contrary, when she writes to Fra Tommaso della Fonte, it is with great respect and care, and if every now and then even with him she lets her overflowing love have its way, she corrects herself at once, lowers her tone, calculates how far she can be understood, and tries to adapt herself to his upright but somewhat pedestrian soul. Fra Bartolomeo, besides being her spiritual father, is always her 'brother and most beloved and dearest son', while Fra Tommaso remains merely her 'dearest and most beloved spiritual father'.

We find a mark of Catherine's tenderness towards Fra Bartolomeo in the Supplementum of Tommaso da Siena: 'Fra Bartolomeo, who was the virgin's second confessor, was once conversing with her and her first confessor, when during the conversation he told her he felt a strange and unendurable malaise, his head full of heaviness and strange fancies. She was sorry for him, and placing her hand on his brow, said: "I do not want those things to be here within". Then, raising her eyes to heaven, she added: "O Lord, I do not wish any to remain here", and she made over him the sign of the Cross with her hand. Fra Bartolomeo at once felt relief in mind and body, as if he had never known and felt that discomfort and pain in his head.'

A little circle of admirers and friends were forming around Catherine: Dominicans, Tertiaries, recipients of her bounty or petitioners for it. Among the religious the 'case' of the Sister of Fontebranda was variously judged; the people knew only that she was good, very good, and worked miracles. Those who spoke with her were amazed at her eloquence; Fra Bartolomeo di Domenico, himself a student of literature and fine speech, said she was 'wonderfully eloquent when she spoke of the honour of God and the salvation of souls', and Tommaso da Siena, perhaps quoting from Tommaso della Fonte, wrote that 'she was very attractive, and all who came near her, men or women, of whatever rank or profession, were made better by her, and led back to God'.

It was natural that some pious women on discovering her extraordinary gifts should at once approach her and desire to become her companions. They were of no exceptional intelligence, and left no trace in her history except as having been her faithful followers, or having helped her in her practical activity. One of her first companions was Francesca (or Cecca) di Clemente Gori, a widow, who had three sons in the Order of Preaching Friars, and a daughter who was a Dominican nun at Montepulciano; Cecca was a Tertiary, and there was a great affection between her and Catherine. Later came the noble Alessa Saracini, also a Tertiary, who was to receive Catherine into her own home later on, and who, as well as Cecca, sometimes acted as her secretary.

In her own family Catherine found herself admired by her sister-in-law Lisa, a Colombini by birth, but not of the family of the Blessed Giovanni. She was a gentle pious girl who observed Catherine's spiritual development, knew of her struggles and victories, was present during her ecstasies, and shared some of her ideas. Lisa believed in her sister-in-law's miraculous powers; she 'knew her well and loved to talk with her, and put great trust in her', says Tommaso da Siena, so much so that she insisted on having her with her twice during childbirth. The second time the Saint's help was necessary, and miraculous—as also was her intervention after the child was born, for Lisa had no milk to feed him, and through Catherine's prayers her milk returned.

Among those who visited Catherine in her cell, taken there by Fra Tommaso della Fonte, was Tommaso da Siena, generally known as Caffarini. He was very young, sixteen or seventeen, when he saw her for the first time, and was at once filled with admiration. From then on he observed her constantly, whenever he could, in church, in conversations, prayers, social activity, raptures, ecstasies. He was practically-minded, and more amazed at the blood shed by Catherine in her scourgings than at the wisdom with which she solved spiritual problems. Her miracles impressed him enormously, and he made a collection of them, accepting even the most fantastic and ludicrous versions. He was so fond of the extraordinary that nothing that others told him about her seemed extraordinary enough. Instead of warming himself at the flame of her inner life, he preferred to excite his fancy with

astounding external facts. Besides being a man of action he was himself an eloquent preacher, but his actions and his eloquence had nothing in common with those of the Saint. Catherine was out to transform hearts and minds; he was bent on amazing his hearers, transporting them to an atmosphere of miracle and keeping them there. He could not penetrate the human and divine mysteries of the soul; but he wanted others to recognise her obvious virtues and piety. He was sure that Catherine was a great woman, without being able to understand her real greatness, or its source. When preaching or saying Mass he was pleased to see her present, attentive and devout; he was much impressed at the sight of the marks of her teeth on the silver chalice from which she had drunk the Communion wine; but he never cast a glance at her soul, often suffering torments to win another victory over life, for she mortified her spirit more than her body to grasp the eternal. Perhaps because of his lack of understanding of profound spiritual life there was never between Catherine and him a close and enlightened friendship such as she enjoyed with Bartolomeo Dominici and later with Raimondo da Capua. In a letter that Catherine sent him in 1379 there is no sign of any particular affection or affinity of spirit, and if the letter sent him in March 1374 was more loving and ardent, this is because it had not been written for him alone, but also, and especially, for Fra Bartolomeo. The letter that Fra Tommaso da Siena sent to Catherine contained the correction of an interpretation of the Psalm '*Domine, non est exaltatum cor meum*' given her in a conversation, for which he now wished to substitute an explanation he had found in the works of St Augustine. It was a cold scholastic letter, showing no interest in the spiritual meaning of the Psalm, or of St Augustine's words, that would have been of great interest to Catherine. The letter is dated 1374, when Fra Tommaso was twenty-four, an age when enquiry into the possibilities of interior life generally exercises great attraction. His chronicler tells us that he knew more about divine than about human things, and often went into ecstasies, but there is no sure proof of this, and we do not find in his writings, even about Saints and holy women, any profound ascetical or mystical knowledge, either drawn from his own experience, or that of others. The relations between Catherine and Fra Tommaso da Siena were friendly, even coloured with a gentle



maternal and filial affection, but with no sign of intimate understanding, or the mutual devotion that leads to spiritual progress.

Nevertheless, this Friar was the chief assertor of Catherine's greatness and worked harder than anyone else to have her canonised. And his praise of her implies a glorification of her inner life even if he was unable to enter into it. This is no small merit of his, and we must praise his constancy in pursuing his chief aim for so many years. Catherine's sanctification was no doubt expected to add more glory to the Dominican Order, and so to rival the glory of the Franciscans. Nor must we exclude a little personal ambition. But it is not for us to submit the Friar to a somewhat harsh examination, as Fawtier has done, with arguments, sometimes valid, sometimes exaggerated, at times quite erroneous. It is enough for us to know that Tommaso was from his early youth Catherine's admirer and disciple, and certainly never spoke of her to her followers or acquaintances without great admiration.

Catherine's women companions would not allow her to conduct her own apostolate, and they began taking her here and there, wherever they thought was a case for her compassion. They did not realise that she needed an activity quite out of the ordinary, so that her soul might expand and reach out towards God. It was not really her mission to say a kind word to those afflicted with the usual ills of life, to incite to the love of God those not possessed by evil spirits, to minister to every-day needs, observe puny and trifling passions, and suffer for those who had not been ground down in the mill of life. She did all this, in obedience and humility, but could not put the whole of herself into it. Were not there other kind and charitable people who could in such cases obtain almost the same results? She must have thought in her heart that she was on the wrong road; her energy for action flagged and dwindled, so that her spirit shrank accordingly; in fact, when she found herself unwillingly brought into contact with so many people her soul seemed drawn away to Himself by Christ. Considering this as a warning, she began to complain to her confessor: 'You see, Father, I cannot stay talking with people. I feel drawn away, even sensibly, to my Bridegroom Jesus Christ. I beg you to forbid me to go about.' Tommaso da Siena, perhaps repeating a remark of Tommaso della Fonte, explained: 'She begged him to do this, because her companions took her here and

there doing good; she was very persuasive in her speech, and at her words people were wonderfully seized by the fear and love of God.'

In the absence of sure indications, we judge on psychological grounds that it must have been at this time that she began to care assiduously for those in direst need—*les grands malheureux*. She chose her own needy, avoiding mediocrity. She visited, fed and consoled a prostitute whom everyone else avoided, fearing to soil themselves by approaching her. No one would even toss her a piece of bread. Catherine saw the wretched woman's forsaken condition, understood the despair in her soul, and forced herself to care for her, and to kindle in her heart a fire of love very different from that which, mingled with pain and humiliation, she had known in her life. She knew that earthly love may lead to divine love, and her own loving protectress, Mary Magdalen, had experienced this sublime transition. A prostitute may understand what is meant by a passionate outburst of love towards God, and may cry out in her enthusiasm more fervently than many wise and devout folk, who are incapable of entering deeply into the human soul, with its miseries and grandeurs. The maiden of Fontebranda understood this and spared no pains, perhaps to the scandal of some, in nursing and helping the abandoned prostitute. She was sure she would find in her a light, dimmed but not quenched by sin, that the careless, scornful passers-by never suspected in the sick and famished outcast.

After this, she tended a leprous woman. She had heard that in the hospital of San Lazzaro, beyond the Porta Romana, there was a certain Cecca eaten up with the disease, and so disgusting that no one could bear to look at her. In fact, she was to be removed from the city. Catherine insisted on visiting her and caring for her. She may have remembered the lepers that St Francis kissed and Colombini tended, but her chief motive was certainly to force herself into familiarity with what is repulsive to all. The spirit must overcome the body. Joergensen does not consider this act as one of self-conquest, but as natural and spontaneous, and contrasts it with that of St Francis which implied a real victory of the spirit. One must remember, however, that when St Francis kissed the leper he was at the beginning of his ascetic self-conquest, while Catherine was now in her spiritual maturity, and therefore

her acts had less apparent significance. However, even for Catherine, the care of the leper represented a forcing of her own nature which, never wholly tamed, needed constant discipline; we shall have proof of this later on when she was tending her fellow Tertiary Andrea.

Here another victory over herself awaited her. There are physical acts of great merit: stooping in loving care over a rotten stinking body, caring for the soul of a prostitute, eagerly nursing a leper. These are heroic acts requiring self-abnegation, and confidence in the power of the spirit, but they are not out of the ordinary. Rarer is that self-control which is exercised when our hearts are wounded by a subtle insult, or an ironical phrase, or by words full of poisonous intent. Then a wave of indignation sweeps over us, and even if we refrain from crying out against those who insult us, we needs must defend ourselves hotly. Catherine is hailed insultingly by Cecca, whom she has come to nurse: 'Here comes the Queen of Fontebranda, after having been all day in church with the Friars! She never seems to get tired of those Friars!' Catherine may have felt a rebellious impulse or even an instinct of revulsion, immediately checked and banished. The spirit must be conquered, even if this is harder than conquering the body. To be one with Christ, our moral suffering must be purified by total acceptance, total humiliation. So Catherine tended her insulter with redoubled love. Her hands became infected with leprosy—no matter, she must obey and serve. Her mother Lapa objected to her risking her life for a leper, and did not want the danger of infection in the house, but Catherine continued to serve, to bless, to love until the sick woman died and she could compose the poor worn-out body in its coffin, and bury it with her own hands, then disfigured with disease. But after this act of piety her hands returned to their normal health and beauty, becoming even more beautiful than before, as Raimondo da Capua and Bartolomeo Dominici inform us. Catherine's moral sufferings were, however, only at their beginning.

Among so many friends and enthusiastic admirers there were naturally some slanderers and evil tongues. The fact that the maiden stayed so many hours in church, the innocent familiarity with which she treated the Friars—even going so far as to embrace them—her outspokenness and liberality: all this irritated many

folk. She was purity itself—but those who saw her in fervent prayer or in ecstasy, and afterwards engaged in close insistent conversation with some Dominican, did not suspect that she had grave spiritual problems to decide, or needed counsel. She was a woman and young; might she not be in love with one of the Friars? Or, worse still, might she not have yielded to her senses? A commonplace mind cannot think otherwise, and those narrow-minded 'beghine', so easily scandalised and prone to gossip, were astonished at Catherine's singular way of life; and so they whispered disapproval, delicately insinuated some evil, and not content with this, passed on 'in confidence' accusations they had heard, so that at last she was arraigned and denounced.

Even among the Friars there were some who disliked Catherine and believed her to be (as we should say today) a hysterical woman; and they were harsh and hostile to her. She felt this and understood, accepting their gibes meekly, glad to be slandered, so that humiliation might better purify her soul and bind her more closely to the eternal. But the malevolent tongues did not cease. When Cecca insulted Catherine she was but repeating what a group of avid, envious, malicious folk went about saying all over Siena, a small city of about thirty or forty thousand inhabitants, in which petty gossip easily became accusation, calumny or scandal.

Among the Tertiaries, Palmerina at once believed these rumours that were circulating, and contributed others, showing open dislike of her fellow Sister, and ordering her out of her house. Catherine was saddened by this. She did not wish to cause trouble to anyone; she was ready to serve her, tend her, help her in any way—but the more humble she was the more Palmerina despised and calumniated her. A struggle took place in Catherine's heart. At all costs she must win over her enemy's soul. But why did Palmerina scorn and hate her? Was it perhaps her own fault that she had not been able to arouse love in her companion's heart? Was it because of her own wretched sins that Palmerina hated her? For when others do evil the fault is ours, because we are so cold or so tepid in doing good. The people we mix with become what we make of them, and if we find no love in them it is because we are ourselves so poor in love. Just as metals cannot resist intense heat, so it is with souls and the soul's heat. We have

but to increase the living impulse and ardour of our love, and those who hate us will find their hatred turned to love. Catherine felt that a still more radical sacrifice was needed now. Just as she had given all to Christ, and love had triumphed, so now she must give herself entirely to her neighbour, and in that loving dedication she would achieve the total annihilation of self, beyond the limits reached in the cell of Fontebranda. She prayed that the soul of Palmerina might vibrate in harmony with her own. Her fellow Tertiary fell ill and was near to death, but Catherine would not let her die with hatred in her heart. She must be saved from Hell, held back from death. Catherine prayed. The burden of that soul would be upon her if she failed. It was a struggle in the infinite. Catherine imposed her will on God: 'she never ceased praying, and so, as it were, conquered the Unconquerable', says Raimondo da Capua expressively. Because Palmerina disdained, repelled, offended, dishonoured her she gathered all her strength in love and strove to penetrate her adversary's soul. With the piercing eye of love she saw therein, half-concealed under the incrustations of sin, a wondrous and enchanting light, before which she could not remain insensible or inactive. Even if it cost her life itself, she must dissolve the crust of sin so as to reveal the beauty of that soul. She asked for God's help, and received the certain knowledge that Palmerina would be saved; and this in fact came to pass, as the biographers tell us. Catherine's experience was now new and enriched. Until now she had been conquering herself, and doing good to others in obedience to an interior command, but she had not made direct contact with the human soul; now, through suffering, she had discovered the sublime power that is lodged therein. It was therefore imperative to enlarge her sphere of missionary activity, and save from sin as many souls as she could. She had experienced an unprecedented joy in seeing the mysterious light in Palmerina's soul, but every human being had such a light, which, once freed from its dark crust, could unite with others to form an immense arc of light that would return triumphantly to its radiant spring.

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In September 1368 Catherine saved her brothers' lives. The

anonymous author of the *Miracoli* tells us: 'It happened in one year, when there was a revolution in Siena, that Catherine's brothers were contrary to the party that had won and come to power, and their enemies were looking for them to kill them or maltreat them as they did with others. A dear friend of theirs came to their house and said hurriedly: "A band of your enemies is on its way here to do you harm. Come away at once with me and I will place you in safety in the church of Sant' Antonio", which was near at hand, "where others of your friends are sheltering too." At these words Catherine, who was present, arose and said to that friend: "My brothers will not take shelter in Sant' Antonio and I am very sorry for those who are there now". And she sent their friend away with God's blessing. When he had gone she put on her cloak and said to her brothers: "Come with me and do not fear". She took them out with her and they passed right through their enemies' territory, and those of their enemies whom they met on the way bowed low to Catherine, and they all passed through safe and sound. She took them to the hospital of Santa Maria a Siena, and there she handed them over to the Master of the hospital, recommending them to his care, and said to them: "Stay hidden here for three days, and at the end of that time you may come safely home". And so they did. At the end of three days peace had been restored. All those who had taken shelter in the church of Sant' Antonio were killed or taken prisoner. And when the excitement died down, these brothers of Catherine's were fined 100 gold florins, which they paid, and so remained in peace.'

This is not an event which reveals a stage in the spiritual development of Catherine, but it proves how much loved and venerated she was already in Siena, and how lively was her prophetic sense.

As the number of people helped materially or morally by Catherine daily increased, and her fame grew apace, a group of hostile Religious, men and women, abhorred and persecuted her. She was excluded from the meetings of the Third Order, and, to her great grief, forbidden frequent Communion. One Dominican insulted her with vulgar abuse whenever he met her, and once drove her roughly out of church. Another, Pietro di Maestro Landro, pricked her repeatedly with a needle while she was in

ecstasy; a third robbed her of the money she had received in alms. Many people, one of them a woman, vented their rage by kicking her while she was unconscious. They insisted she should leave the church as soon as she had received Communion, which she could not do, because almost immediately she entered into ecstasy. One day during one of her trances in San Domenico, some Friars lifted her bodily and 'flung her out of the church, stiff and unconscious as she was, as if she had been an unclean person; and under the burning midday sun her women companions, weeping, stood shielding her till she came to her senses'.

She suffered from the blows and prickings she received during her ecstasies, but ever patient, sweet and loving, she prayed for her persecutors, and did not cease from her charitable work. As soon as she heard of some wretched woman with an infectious disease she ran to visit her, and if she were without anyone to care for her she looked after her herself. It was thus with a certain Andrea, a Tertiary, suffering from cancer. She was the widow of a certain Antonio, and died on May 23rd, 1371, according to Valli's probable conjecture of her identity. We have three versions of this episode, that of Raimondo da Capua, built up on witnesses' remote memories, that of Bartolomeo Dominici written in his old age, and that of the *Miracoli*, written down shortly after the events described, on October 10th, 1374. This last version is as vivid as a first-hand account, and even if (as often happens with oral accounts) it lacks absolute precision, the author of the *Miracoli* must have listened to a witness who knew all about this story of Andrea, perhaps even from Andrea herself, and the account corresponds to a certain extent with that of Bartolomeo.

It happened as follows. The widow Andrea hated Catherine and 'did all she could to blacken and slander her' with the other Tertiaries, declaring she was not a virgin. This insistent and explicit accusation caused such dismay among the Mantellate that the Prioress, as the Nineteenth Chapter of the Rule commands, called the accused before her to defend herself. Catherine's reply was simple: 'In truth, Mother, I am a virgin. I would rather die than offend my God, and especially in that way of which you accuse me.' Her humility and warmth of conviction were enough to persuade the Prioress of her innocence, and she dismissed her in peace. But Catherine's soul was much distressed by this. For

many days after she searched her conscience to see whether she had committed any trifling fault, or whether in act or word she might have given some cause for such a shameful accusation. She could find nothing. Yet Andrea had defamed her in no hesitant or uncertain manner. How was it possible for the heart of a woman, a Religious, to harbour such a precise, slanderous and baseless accusation? She could understand her enemies' attempts to blacken her, in a general way, as Palmerina had done, and this did not perturb her much because anyone was free to observe her way of life and ascertain its purity; she accepted such detractions as a means of preserving her humility before men; but she could not understand why she should be publicly subjected to this precise and shameful accusation.

The treachery here was evident, and came from a fellow Tertiary. Catherine knew herself to be a great sinner, but what had she done to Andrea except offer her what help she could? She meditated long—on herself, the human heart, evil tongues—and prayed with intense fervour. In these meditations, begun with a sore heart, she gradually found interior calm, realising that accusations, even the most atrocious, are necessary for spiritual progress. Our hearts must be torn asunder for us to understand our own nothingness and the completeness of God. Hatred drives us to seek for shelter under the great wing of Love, and there our soul is purified. In tribulation Catherine grew aware of the justice of her own actions, and this awareness was to become even clearer and inspired her reply, some years later in Florence, to a friend who warned her that she was being slandered. 'This is my glory, this is what I want, to be bitterly assailed in my life. And do not worry about it; let them say what they like. I am sorry for them, not for myself.'

Meanwhile she did not slacken her loving care of old Andrea, who grew steadily worse. When her cancerous tumour burst, the Tertiaries who were nursing her fled, unable to bear the stench of her wound. Catherine stayed by her side, giving her food and drink, and dressing her wound, even when her stomach revolted at the smell, caring for her like a daughter. One day, while attending to her, she noticed 'a new stench, more abominable than any she had ever known before. It was such that she could not endure to finish her dressing of the wound and fled to another



part of the house. She stayed there, deep in thought, and with her conscience reproaching her for having left Andrea in that way. Suddenly she went back to her, and pouring into a glass the wine with which she was to wash the wound, she took a splinter of wood and caught on it some of the stinking pus that flowed from the wound. Adding this to the wine in the glass, she said these words: "So you ran away, Catherine, and abandoned the sick helpless woman, and you abhorred the stench of her wound? Well, I will pay you out now with that stench." And putting the glass to her lips, she drank it all. Then she finished dressing the sick woman's wound and, without feeling any more abhorrence, she tended her as before, or better.

A complete victory over the body. Today this act fills us with profound repugnance, but if we consider what strength of mind was needed to perform it, we are forced to admire. Catherine, nursing the leper, thought she had reduced her body to total submission and could use it as a docile instrument. Instead, here it was, still sensitive and reluctant; hence the necessity to subdue it with violence.

We are nowadays very far from understanding asceticism; we merge body and spirit in one whole, and are as considerate of one as of the other. It was not so with the great ascetics, for whom the struggle between body and soul was resolved by suppressing the body and, if necessary, mutilating it. Is it not extraordinary that the pus which the Saint drank, and which would have killed the strongest man, had no ill effects on her—indeed left in her a sweet memory, so that years afterwards she declared she had never drunk so delicious a beverage? This miracle of self-conquest and physical immunity could only proceed from the power of Love. Andrea, confronted with such an extraordinary act, was dumb-founded and began to believe she was nursed by a real Saint.

Such a complete victory delighted Catherine, who cheerfully returned to her cell, where she resumed her meditation on the physical sufferings of Christ. Andrea's wound, visible to her eyes, reminded her of her Bridegroom's wounds, which she now saw more vividly—especially the wound in His side. When bending over the tumour in Andrea's bosom, almost touching it with her parted lips, she had imagined she was tending a wound of Christ's; now, in a vision, He showed her His pierced side, and

she felt drawn to kiss it, almost to bury her mouth in it. Did not this wound, ever bleeding for the salvation of men, lead to the heart of Jesus, source of all power and love? Athirst with love, she drank greedily of the fountain, and felt so filled with divine life that her heart seemed likely to burst. At other times she had felt the fullness of love as an unbearable pain in her heart, but never as in this moment. Now her heartbeats were so quickened, so excited, that she could not control them. Perhaps the words of the Psalm came to her mind: 'Create in me, O God, a pure heart'. Then she felt as if her heart were taken out of her breast, and she went on living without a heart. She asserted this ingenuously to her confessor, who laughed at her mockingly. Catherine was non-plussed. She reflected, she meditated. To be sure, one cannot live without a heart. Then another vision came, during which Christ bestowed on her another heart. As this exchange of hearts took place in a vision, inspired by ardent desire, Bartolomeo Dominici does not mention it, and we must consider it as having a symbolical meaning, and as a preparation for her mystical death. We find the same event recorded in the life of St Lutgard, but here also the exchange of hearts is the symbolical fulfilment of desire. Catherine, concentrating her desire in the Psalmist's prayer for a new heart, and thinking at the same time of the Man Christ, brings into being a reality of her own soul, so vivid that she feels Christ piercing her breast, emptying it of her own heart, and then substituting another; her desire and thought are so powerful that they produce an actual scar on her breast. The symbolical event is necessary in the life of mystics, because it is with this and by this that new spiritual experiences are rendered possible.

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From her mystical experiences Catherine derived the energy necessary for her life of charity, and to arouse in whoever approached her a real love for, and serene trust in God. Her manner was always humble, her smile, according to her contemporaries, enchanting, and she was always ready to make the greatest sacrifices for others. Her speech was cordial and clear, coming straight from her impulsive heart, and her own profound conviction communicated itself to her listeners. By her prayers she was

able to work good even in souls that were hostile to her. This happened to Fra Lazzarino da Pisa, the Franciscan philosopher and theologian who had acquired a considerable reputation in Siena as a preacher. Close in his reasoning, and gifted with eloquence, he knew that he deserved the esteem of his colleagues and the admiration of the people. He was ambitious, and wanted to be the only Religious talked of in the city, and when he found that this maiden of Fontebranda was mentioned insistently and very reverently, he was envious, as Bartolomeo Dominici tells us. He tried in vain to slander her in private; he attacked the Dominicans who visited her, perhaps thinking that Catherine was, intellectually and spiritually, a creature of theirs, and that by striking at them he could strike her too. Every time that Franciscans and Dominicans met for their customary theological disputations, Fra Lazzarino attacked the Dominican Lector, Fra Bartolomeo Dominici, trying to discredit him amongst the students as a disciple and admirer of Catherine. But when her fame grew apace he had recourse to preaching against her.

In the Middle Ages sermons played to some extent the part that newspapers play today, and polemics from the pulpit resounded far and wide. If the preacher were learned, his addresses were discussed and admired among ecclesiastics and intellectuals; if he were a Saint, there was a constant stream of conversions, or there arose religious movements, like fresh waves of Christian life; if he were an eloquent or fiery speaker, he incited the crowds, sometimes even to serious or bloody disturbances. Most of the battle against the heretics was waged from the pulpits, whence also the Crusades were preached, rulers were attacked or extolled, and politicians or Religious praised and blamed. The commentary and judgment on the events of the day were pronounced from the pulpits, and thence also proceeded propaganda for war or peace. Public opinion was guided in this way. With the sermons came the message of hate or love, destined to excite the passions or unite men in brotherly love—and the preachers were correspondingly respected and feared.

Fra Lazzarino was well aware of the powerful effect of his sermons, and therefore was sure of waging successful war against Catherine. But his diatribes had no effect and his thunderbolts fell to the ground. Disappointed but undeterred, he decided to visit

this young woman, find out the weak points in her thought and conduct, and so, with new and first-hand information, cleverly elaborated in his own dialectic, he would at last achieve his purpose. He begged Fra Bartolomeo to take him to Catherine's cell, and here is the Dominican's own account of their first encounter: "Going into the Tertiary's cell, Fra Lazzarino sat down at once on a small chest, and the maiden sat on the floor at his feet; I seated myself a little apart, facing them. They were both silent for a while; at last he began to speak: "I have heard praises of your sanctity, and also that you have received from the Lord the gift of understanding the Scriptures; for this reason I have come to you willingly, in the hope of hearing something that will be edifying for my soul". Catherine replied at once: "I rejoice at your visit, believing that the Lord has sent you to me—you who have the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, with which you daily nourish souls, and I believe that, acting on an impulse of love, you have come to find me to comfort my poor little soul. I pray you therefore, for the love of Jesus Christ, to deign to do so." The time passed in such conversation, and when darkness fell, Fra Lazzarino, without any mockery, such as he had intended, but also without any great esteem for her in his heart, rather considering her as a woman of no great consequence, said: "I see that it is late, and I must go now; but I shall return another time, at a more suitable hour". And he rose to go away. Catherine followed him, and kneeling with her arms crossed on her bosom, begged him to bless her, which he did. After this she asked him to pray for her. Moved more by shame than by devotion, he asked for her prayers in return, and she promised to pray for him very willingly. So Fra Lazzarino went off, thinking that Catherine was at heart a good woman, even if she did not deserve the fame she enjoyed.

During the night, as was his custom, he arose to prepare the lesson he was to read to his students in the morning—when suddenly he was seized by a fit of weeping. What could this mean? Had he perhaps drunk a little more wine than usual during the evening, or had he slept with his head uncovered? These reasons did not convince him. Time went on; the hour for his lesson came, and the tears still streamed from his eyes. He was still lingering when his students came to call him; then he forced him-

self to go with them, but he had to interrupt his lesson almost at once because his weeping would not stop. Going back to his cell, he pondered and pondered, furious with himself, wondering whatever might be the motive of that uncontrollable flow of tears. The following night he slept little, and as soon as he awoke, he began to weep again. Discounting all physical causes, he asked himself whether, perhaps, he had in some way offended God. While he was reflecting, and examining his conscience, he thought he heard a voice saying: "Is your memory so weak that you forget that the day before yesterday you arrogantly scorned My faithful servant, Catherine, and hypocritically begged for her prayers?" This inner voice was a revelation; the irritation and dismay in his soul vanished, giving place to calm and contentment. He stopped weeping and felt an ardent desire to visit Catherine. As soon as the dawn broke he left the monastery in haste and went to knock on the door of her house. She herself opened to him, "aware of what had been stirring in that man's soul, through her Bridegroom's operation". Fra Lazzarino threw himself at her feet, and as she could not bear such an act of humility on his part, she also knelt down, begging him to rise. He refused, but in the end they agreed to rise together. The Friar entered her cell, and they both seated themselves on the straw matting that covered the floor. After a long spiritual colloquy, Fra Lazzarino, with profound peace in his soul, offered himself to her as her disciple, and begged her to consider him as one of her sons, and as such to guide him in the ways of God. And when she replied that the ways of God are laid down in the Scriptures, which he knew much better than she did, he confessed to her that he knew only the outer rind while she knew the fruit. When he insisted that she should accept him as her son in Christ, and form him spiritually, she said to him: "The way of salvation for your soul lies in despising the pomp of the world, and worldly pleasures; clinging no longer to money, and giving up everything superfluous, in nakedness and humility follow Christ Crucified and your Blessed Father Francis".

Lazzarino da Pisa then experienced that spiritual revolution of the Christian religious life in which the things loved and esteemed until yesterday become today the objects of our scorn, and the soul, stripped of all earthly attachments, turns spontaneously to the things of God. Catherine had read deeply in his soul, and dis-

covered its nobility, although obscured by vanity, ambition, and the lust for power and fame. She saw that it could become once more free and beautiful, and therefore, with her prayers and words she had brought him at first disquiet and then serene peace.

Fra Bartolomeo Dominici considers this conversion a replica of that of St Paul. There is certainly a resemblance, but it is slight. After his colloquy with her, Fra Lazzarino gave up his precious books and went to live in the hermitage of Colombaio and San Processo on Monte Amiata—as Fra Angelo Salvetti testifies, in his deposition at the Processo Castellano—and left his cell only to preach. His preaching was now reformed, being no longer based on knowledge learnt in the Schools and in books, but on a living experience, born of contact with love. He had now at his command 'words as powerful as fiery darts to pierce the hearts of his listeners'. We have no way of knowing whether Fra Lazzarino remained in correspondence with Catherine, or sought her advice, or belonged to her spiritual family. One letter from him to her, and one letter to him from Catherine—all that we have left—tell us nothing of this. His letter is cut in half, from top to bottom, and it is impossible to reconstruct it entirely; Catherine's letter, dictated towards the end of her life, shows affection, understanding, unity of spirit. A certain wistfulness pervades it all, as with the presentiment of approaching death she turns to the man whom she had initiated and directed into the divine life, and expresses her wish to celebrate Easter with him, that they may enjoy together the abundant goodness of God, and so be better able to know Him hereafter. She exults in Christ, and opens her heart to Fra Lazzarino as to a friend. Gardner, however, does not think that Fra Lazzarino ever belonged to Catherine's intimate spiritual family, and probably he is right if one understands this family in the strict sense of the group of those who were most often with her, or accompanied her in her journeys, assisted her as secretaries, or directed her as confessors; but if by her family we mean those in whom she confided, and who owed to her much of their spiritual progress, the great enthusiasts of her life and thought, then Fra Lazzarino is to be numbered as not the least of her beloved children.

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Stories of her conversion of Fra Lazzarino da Pisa and of Andrea

di Naddino, her extraordinary care of Cecca, Palmerina and Andrea, and numerous similar deeds, went the round of the city, so that Catherine became more and more renowned. But this meant nothing to her. She did good because it was her duty, but her spirit was turned always to Christ. Trances and visions followed one another. One day she felt as if she were being dissolved by the power of Love; another time a shower of blood and fire fell upon her soul; once she was allowed to contemplate 'a nameless beauty' whose ineffable sweetness enraptured her. When the priest received Holy Communion he seemed to her to enter a blazing furnace, and sometimes a little child came from between the celebrant's hands. She had the impression moreover that her soul passed into God, and God into her, as the fish enters the water and the water enters the fish.

But her longing for real union with Christ gave her no rest; her striving became every day more intense, as she yearned to get out of herself for ever, and lose herself in God. She wanted to die, and in her continual prayers she invoked death without ceasing. She yearned, suffered, waited. Her passion of love was so vehement that she was shaken from head to foot, and left exhausted. She felt she could no longer resist the power of Love, and she began, in fact, to languish, to be consumed by Love. She yearned, she suffered, she believed. She was obliged to take to her bed. Her visions never ceased; her heart overflowed with love, and still more love. She prayed and believed. Finally she felt her heart break, and lost consciousness. When her companions who were tending her saw that her unconsciousness lasted longer than in her customary ecstasies, and they could feel neither the slightest beat of her heart, nor faintest drawing of breath, they were frightened, and ran to call Tommaso della Fonte, who came at once, together with Tommaso da Siena. When the news of Catherine's death spread to the Dominican Priory, Fra Bartolomeo Montucci, with the convert Giovanni da Siena, ran to her cell, then a crowd of the faithful, admirers, protégés, and curious. Fra Bartolomeo Dominici, informed while preaching, interrupted his sermon and hastened to her side. He could hardly press through the throng. Many were weeping and many praying. Was it a swoon, or death? After about four hours of total lifelessness, when doubt was already turning to anguished resignation, the first faint heartbeats were

felt again; they slowly gathered strength until, after several hours, the whole body returned to life. Catherine came out of that state which students of mystical phenomena call the state of suspended faculties, and which culminates in the mystical death. But for her it was a real death. What had she seen or heard? What secrets had been revealed to her? Everyone wanted to know. But for two or three days following she could do nothing but weep and sob. As soon as she could speak she expressed her grief at finding herself once more on earth. Fra Bartolomeo Dominici and Fra Tommaso della Fonte, wishing at all costs to know what she had heard or seen during those four hours of apparent death, pressed her with questions. Catherine replied that her soul had entirely left her body and that she had seen God. 'But is that possible? If St Paul, arriving in the third heaven, did not know whether he was in the body or out of it, how can you say that you know?' Catherine's humility prevented her from arguing with Fra Bartolomeo, and to Fra Tommaso della Fonte, who insisted that she should tell what she had seen or heard, she said simply that she had found herself in the presence of God, who had ordered her to return to earth and enlarge the sphere of her apostolic work. But many years later, speaking to Raimondo da Capua, who had perfect trust in her, she said that besides seeing the glory of the Saints, the torments of the damned, and the pains of Purgatory, she had contemplated the essence of God: 'Take it for certain that my soul contemplated the Divine Essence, and that is why I live with such impatience in the prison of the flesh; if it were not for the love of God and of my fellows, because of which the Lord made me return into my body, I should die of grief'.

This mystical death was another major event in Catherine's life. She had now acquired a certain spiritual immunity—her physical immunity had been revealed when she drank the pus—and she was working among people with increased energy, in obedience to the explicit command of God. She had known the divine world, no longer only in spasms, or through images, or by inner revelations; she had actually left her body to live—a few hours only as men count them, but centuries for her—in immediate contact with God. Returning to earth, she had found it colder and darker than ever. Therefore, her mission was to reveal, as intensely and as widely as possible, the luminous fire that burned in her



breast. One might even say that she felt herself to be part of the fire and of the light—as if she were now made of fiery light alone—of that flame with which Christ illumines those spirits who are willing to accept Him. But to be accepted He must be known, and to make Him known He must be preached. After such a great resurrection Catherine must bear His purifying fire and saving light to all men. This was in the autumn of 1370. Then 'began men and women to seek her out more than before, and come to her even from far away'. To all she offered her loving service, her sufferings and prayers—and all were kindled by the living and transforming flame of her soul.