

# Catherine of Siena, Justly Doctor of the Church?

Suzanne Noffke, O.P.

*Theology Today* 60 (April 2003): 49-62

On October 4, 1970, Pope Paul VI solemnly bestowed on Catherine of Siena (1347-80) the title doctor of the church, making her, at the time, the youngest of the then thirty-two doctors. She and Teresa of Avila, honored the same day, became the only women ever so honored. (More recently, of course, Therese of Lisieux has become the third and youngest woman so honored.) The ecclesiastical doctorates of these women mystics-Catherine, Teresa, Therese-are often looked upon as something of a courteous nicety, a concession to feminist sensitivities. Surely they cannot be taken seriously as theologians! Do they-does Catherine in particular-deserve the title on theological grounds? As a long-time student of Catherine's life and thought, I am convinced that she does indeed merit being called doctor, teacher of the universal church. But I have sometimes wondered whether my own reasons for that conviction have anything in common with the reasons formally proposed for the canonical granting of the title, the documentation of which has been given little consideration in English. I propose in this essay first to examine that ecclesiastical process and then to present my own position on the question.

## PRELUDES AND PROCESS

Already in Catherine's lifetime, questions were being raised about her orthodoxy and the legitimacy of her voice within the church. In 1374, the Dominican friars took steps to safeguard their endorsement of her public ministry by appointing Raimondo da Capua, "safely" respected in hierarchical circles, as sole authority over her within the order. In 1376, a trio of cardinals, fearing that Pope Gregory XI was taking Catherine too seriously and hoping to discredit her, interrogated her-with Gregory's permission.

After her death, artists portrayed her holding a book, the iconic attribute of doctors of the church, and no amount of protest from the "experts" succeeded in stopping the practice. Dominicans in Venice in fact displayed her book, *The Dialogue*, as a relic when they preached on the anniversary of her death each year-even before any steps had been taken to have her canonized-thus prompting their bishop's demand that an investigation into her holiness be commenced. She was canonized in 1461.

It was just over five hundred years later that Pope Paul VI, on the feast of Teresa of Avila in 1967, told the World Congress on the Apostolate of the Laity of his dream that Teresa and Catherine should be the first women to be proclaimed doctors of the church. By December of that same year, the process was in full swing. The Congregation of Rites asked whether that title could in fact be given to a woman, especially in view of Saint Paul's strictures. They unanimously answered their own question in the affirmative the following March; the pope concurred.

There are actually three formal requirements for granting the doctorate in the church. The first, outstanding holiness, already had been attested to in Catherine's case in her canonization. The second, the testimony of popes or general councils, was easily garnered. The third, distinguished teaching, was yet to be judged and would be the chief topic of investigation. Letters of postulation (petition), the affirmation of the Dominican general chapter, and a formal petition from the master of the Dominican Order, Aniceto Fernandez, carried the process forward. Supportive monographs and articles were gathered as resources for the official advocates, censors, and others whose work would lead to the final positive decision. What were the reasons put forward for that decision?

## **The Letters of Postulation**

Thirty-eight persons and groups—hierarchy, heads of orders and religious organizations, university officials, laity—wrote to ask that Catherine of Siena be declared doctor of the church. The reason they cite with the greatest frequency is Catherine's defense of the primacy and authority of the Roman pontiff. "Bringing her back into the light by this declaration," argues the Carmelite superior general, "can be of particular benefit in this era of conflict and strife, this era in which the sense of God and of spiritual realities, and so of the church, is languishing."<sup>1</sup> Some of these petitioners also note Catherine's reforming role in the church, but usually in contrast to what they see as a misguided spirit of reform in the post-Vatican II church. Catherine, they point out, was a loyal promoter of peace and unity, not a sower of dissent.

Their interpretations of Catherine's view of the laity's role in the church covered a broad range. For the hierarchy of Tuscany, it is "very clear" that Catherine believed that "the duty of the laity is first of all to pray, to do penance, and to obey for the spiritual reform of the church."<sup>2</sup> Igino Giordano, on the other hand, writes of the immediacy and lucidity with which she knew how to show the value and capacity of what we today call the people of God—formulating, we might say, an early theology of the laity. For her, women and men, rich and poor, were all called to holiness . . . . She eliminated the walls, erected under the pressures of feudalism, between lay and cleric, between religious and people, between convents and family homes. She shared the holiness of the cloisters with the people in the streets.<sup>3</sup>

Few of the thirty-eight petitions dwell on Catherine's broader theology, except to place it firmly within the tradition of the church. "Her teaching has the simplicity of the gospel as well as its focus," according to Igino Giordano. For Luigia Tincani and Antonio Piolanti, her teachings presage those of Pope Paul VI in *Gaudium et spes* (1965).<sup>4</sup> Her originality, they point out, lies not in what she says but in how she says it.

A few of the letters address the question of the supernatural nature of Catherine's knowledge. Jean Rupp, bishop of Monaco, articulates the more common interpretation: "The way Catherine acquired her knowledge is miraculous, and seems to give her teaching a seal of divine approval."<sup>5</sup> Nicola Petruzzellis's is a minority voice: "In Saint Catherine mysticism was not irrational fideism, nor did it rest in an improbable experience of an anonymous 'Sacred Being,' of an impersonal 'Numinosity.' No, it was the exaltation of a perfect rationality into an encounter with supreme Truth who is inseparably Love and Truth."<sup>6</sup>

A number of the petitioners point out that Catherine's life of prayer joined with action is in itself the pinnacle of her teaching, "contemplation which burst forth into action" (Charles Cardinal Journet), a "wonderful balance" (Giovanni Cardinal Urbani, Patriarch of Venice; Soeur Clurois, superior general of the Daughters of Charity).<sup>7</sup>

While a few petitioners stress the timeliness of granting the doctoral title to a woman, it is instructive to note the range of their observations. The Dominican master general asks of Catherine's Dialogue: "How could one imagine or believe that this was written by a woman?"<sup>8</sup> The bishop of Monaco states that naming Catherine as doctor "would demonstrate that the equality of the sexes, so acclaimed by our contemporaries, is also of interest to the church . . . . Only certain 'givens' of the psychological order or in the sphere of revelation, of a deeply traditional or biblical character, keep this equality from becoming a total assimilation."<sup>9</sup> And how ironic that the editors of these letters of postulation have arranged them first in categories from hierarchy to laity, and within each category placed the letters of men before the letters of women!

## **The Censors**

The two censors, both anonymous, take quite different approaches. The first censor's analysis is very careful and perceptive. He is one of few contributors to this process who does not define Catherine's teaching as coming from divine inspiration only, but unambiguously recognizes its human aspect:

The human spirit, even the grandest human spirit, even enlightened by the Holy Spirit, is still so limited that all one can ask of eminent Christian teaching is that it remain in touch with what has been revealed, adverting consistently to the most central truths while putting certain points into bolder relief. In a teaching in which spiritual experience plays as much a part as intellectual reflection, when we are dealing with a holy woman of prophetic temperament whose intelligence is completely steeped in affectivity, a mystic whose mission is the interior reform of every Christian so that the church may come to know unity and peace, there is no way to demand of her teaching the logically ordered rigor of the theological Summas. What is important is that her assertions be consistent, coherent, and well-founded, no matter what modes of expression she might use; and that they do not fall into the haze of a devotion perhaps impassioned but not solid.<sup>10</sup>

He, in fact, raises and responds to questions relevant to a defense of Catherine's theology. He notes that many have doubted the authenticity of her writings, contending that they were in all probability heavily edited by her scribes and editors. His own conclusion is that "unity of inspiration" is more important than any variations of style possibly imposed by scribes, that the latter are "only harmonics to the basic notes."

Commentators have also repeatedly asserted that Catherine's heavy borrowing from other authors bespeaks a lack of originality. The censor dismisses their argument as invalid:

When truths or doctrines have been personally assimilated; when traditional elements borrowed consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, have passed through a temperament whose personal spontaneity illumined by grace imposes a new order on them, one can say that such teaching is truly personal . . . . If what she says comes from a common spring of Christian verities, the insistent accents she places on certain of these give her work an original tone that is very much her own.<sup>11</sup>

He raises the issue of the "theological" nature of Catherine's writings. Hers is, he says, "popular theology" rather than "pure theology," but her works are "indubitably theological." It is her imagery that contributes to making her theology less than "pure" or "scientific." Yet, "if these expressions are clumsy, they are infrequent enough and their inadequacy does not seriously mutilate the religious truth they attempt to express." It is to Catherine's "more technical statements which go beyond the popular style she normally uses" that this censor turns to substantiate his judgment that her theology is "in harmony with the sound theological tradition of her time."<sup>12</sup> The fact that Catherine did not attempt to produce anything like a "summa" of theology, that she picked and chose what she would dwell on, does not, for him, detract from the genuine theological nature of her writings. He alludes in passing to Catherine's pastoral approach, but only to underscore her orthodoxy and theological soundness.

The second theological censor takes an approach more aligned with traditional Italian interpretations of Catherine. He affirms the commonly held view that "the gifts with which she was adorned, though superb . . . [are] absolutely inadequate to explain the knowledge and grace which came forth from her" and that her masterful teaching must therefore be attributed to divine inspiration.<sup>13</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that he finds her thoroughly orthodox. He admires her singular ability to adapt her message to the diversity of people she addresses, a gift that "gives her teaching a particular specificity and a perennial relevance."<sup>14</sup>

### **The "Informatio super Dublo"**

On April 30, 1969, Hugo and Pietro Seraphini, as advocates for the process, presented their *Informatio super dubio*, a formal response to all that had been put forward up to that point.<sup>15</sup> They conclude that Catherine's teaching is indeed of significance for the universal church, of "grand and cosmic vision," and consistent with the magisterium and orthodox Christian tradition. They specifically note her treatment of key theological themes such as God, supreme being and Trinity; Christ as mediator; love for neighbor as measure of love for God; faith, obedience, humility, and patience as the heart of all virtue. But at the core of each of these themes and shining through and above all of them they see Catherine's love for the church, her loyalty to the pope and

hierarchy, and her work for reform. She is, in their eyes, preeminently "doctor of the primacy of the supreme pontiff, . . . perfectly orthodox in respect to tradition and the sense of the church." Even her adroit use of scripture is seen as directed to her readers' having "the true sense of the scriptures before their eyes . . . under the watchful care of the sacred magisterium of the church."

### **Declaration of the General Promoter of the Faith**

The next official declaration along the way to the doctoral decision was presented by the General Promoter of the Faith, Raphael Perez, OSA, on June 29, 1969.<sup>16</sup> The promoter first takes up the question of Catherine's gender, pointing out that "'the word of wisdom and knowledge' was granted to women—even these holy women whose writings the church permits and encourages for the edification and instruction of the faithful only in private and intimate conversation." Still, he concedes that the situation of women has since changed, even to the extent that women have served as consultors during the Second Vatican Council and subsequently. Nevertheless, can a woman be named doctor of the church? He responds that, "extraordinary" as it is for a woman—and so young a woman—to be proposed for this rank, the woman in question must, of course, fulfill all of the conditions customarily required for the granting of the title. At the same time, he stresses (as if in deference to those who would still hesitate to grant the title to a woman) that "the title of doctor does not, strictly speaking, have the same connotation as the gift of the magisterium granted to the apostles and their successors; nor does it have the same significance as the authority of the early fathers as witness to the tradition." In addressing the eminence of Catherine's teaching, the promoter places her doctoral merit in her identity as "mystic of the most precious blood and as teacher and defender of the unity and holiness of the church and the primacy of the Roman pontiff."

He emphasizes that her obvious orthodoxy is clearly the work of the Holy Spirit, since she is "uneducated so far as acquired knowledge is concerned." Though he finds her letters "like the sermons of any doctor of the church," he is quick to remind the reader that she "of course had no hierarchical authority to preach because of her feminine condition." Her interpretation of scripture is sound because "she adheres faithfully to the magisterium of the church." And the "personal touch" with which she expresses Christian tradition is "aptly wedded with the sense of the church."

As he must, the promoter deals with objections and reservations raised by the postulators and censors. He finds it "inappropriate to ask of a woman, particularly a fourteenth-century woman," that her theology be "scientific"; the manner in which Catherine expresses her teaching, he says, is "truly theological, though not scholastic." He seems satisfied with the first censor's response to the question of the authenticity of Catherine's writings, but does not address the question of originality posed by that same censor.

Finally, the promoter summarizes the testimony of popes through the centuries: Gregory XI and Urban VI valued Catherine's counsel; Pius II praised her doctrine as infused, not acquired; Benedict XIV compared her with Paul and the doctors of the past; Pius XII lauded her as "born with a feminine heart and the soul of a man"; John XXIII personally found "admirable wisdom" in her letters and Dialogue.

### **THE GRANTING OF THE TITLE**

On December 2, 1969, the Congregation of Rites heard the entire rationale summarized by the Dominican cardinal Michael Browne and concluded that Catherine should indeed be "enrolled in the list of the doctors of the church." In his Apostolic Letter of October 4, 1970 conferring the title of doctor on Catherine of Siena, Pope Paul VI picks up most of the themes of the official documents that led to that moment.<sup>17</sup> He praises her writings as "a monument to the charisms of exhortation, wisdom, and knowledge . . . . She is always concerned about what affects the interior person and with what emphasizes the divine . . . . She spurns the non-essential, as is fitting for one who is setting forth the 'doctrine of life' given to humankind by the divine Word of God." He then goes on to paint in very broad strokes the "wonderful, certain, definite coherence of her teachings." Central

to the pope's thought, however, in calling Catherine doctor of the church is the obedience she demonstrated in her efforts to reform "morals in the church, and first of all, the morals of the popes."

He sides with those who have minimized Catherine's human giftedness. She learned "without benefit of human teacher." Her success in persuading Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome from Avignon in 1376 "is to be attributed to her holiness rather than to her human wisdom." He cites and affirms the reaction of the cardinals Catherine once addressed in Rome: "It is beyond a doubt that it is not this woman who is speaking, but the Holy Spirit." And he acknowledges that she needed the approval of the master of the Dominicans because "at that time no such ministry was open to women."

The same themes predominate in his homily following the declaration. Again he emphasizes Catherine's simplicity, minimizing her human gifts. Because she is a woman, he says, one cannot expect of her "the lofty speculations proper to systematic theology . . . . What rather strikes us most is her infused wisdom, her lucid, profound, and inspiring assimilation of divine truth and of the mysteries of faith contained in the sacred books of the ancient and new Testaments-an assimilation furthered not only by extraordinary natural gifts but obviously prodigious because of a charism of the Holy Spirit's wisdom, a mystical charism." In the same vein, her involvement in political matters was "in a sense completely spiritual."

The remainder of the homily is devoted to Catherine's love for the church, to which "one must be submissive and offer reverence and assistance . . . . To the cardinals and to many bishops and priests she addressed urgent exhortations and severe reproofs-but always in complete humility and respect for their dignity as ministers of the blood of Christ." And in harmony with many of the postulators, he points to Catherine as a figure in contrast with the church he now rules: "What did she understand by renewal and reform of the church? Certainly not the subversion of its essential structures, rebellion against pastors, a way of liberty and personal charism, arbitrary innovations in worship and discipline-as some would wish in our day."

### **THIRTY YEARS LATER**

So now, more than thirty years later, I take my turn! Why would I today name Catherine of Siena doctor of the church? Examining this mass of documents as a person of faith has brought me to ponder once again the centrality of faith to all that Catherine did, said, wrote, and was. There is no issue in the life or works of this woman that can be considered apart from faith. As a member of the Roman Catholic Church, I have come through my confrontation with these documents to a new appreciation of the sincerity and commitment of all involved, as well as the constraints dictated by the historical, theological, ecclesiological, and sociological vantage points from which each approached the questions. As a student of Catherine's life and thought from theological, linguistic, historical, and literary perspectives, I have found fascinating dynamics at work at every level of the canonical process. I have been struck repeatedly by the contrasts with my own vantage points and enlightened in my attempts to enter into a dialogue with those other vantage points. So why would I-today, as a person of faith, as a Roman Catholic Christian, and as a student of Catherine's life and thought-name Catherine of Siena doctor of the church?

I must begin with Catherine's own view of doctors of the church. Consider first the texts.

The way that [Christ] taught . . . has been verified by the apostles and proclaimed in the blood of the martyrs. It has been lighted up by the doctors, attested to by the confessors, and committed to writing by the evangelists. All of these are living witnesses to the truth in the mystic body of holy church. They are like lamps set on a lampstand to point out the way of truth, perfectly lighted, that leads to life. And how do they tell you? From experience, for they have experienced it in themselves. So every one of you has enough light to know the truth if you but will, that is, if you do not decide to put out the light of your reason by your perverse selfishness.<sup>18</sup>

By this light set in his mind's eye Thomas [Aquinas] saw me and there gained the light of great learning. Augustine, Jerome, and my other holy doctors, enlightened by my Truth, understood and knew my Truth in the midst of darkness. I am referring to holy scripture, which seemed darksome because it was not understood . . . . So I sent these lamps to enlighten blind and dense understandings. They raised their mind's eye to know the truth in the midst of darkness, and I the Fire, the one who accepted their sacrifice, carried them off and gave them light, not naturally but beyond all nature, and in the midst of darkness they received the light and so came to know the truth. So what had seemed darksome before now appears most perfectly lightsome to every sort of person-to the dense as well as to the discerning. All receive according to their capacity and according to their readiness to know me, for I do not spurn their dispositions. So you see, the eye of understanding has received a light beyond any natural light, infused by grace, and in this light the doctors and the other saints came to know the truth in the midst of darkness, and from the darkness light was made.<sup>19</sup>

Catherine places the doctors of the church on a continuum of growth into the truth that is God, a journey that is open to every one of us, if we but use our "reason" and do not cloud it with self-centeredness. The doctors, who have done this in an outstanding way, have been "carried off into the very fire that is God and are so permeated by that light that they are made a light for others, light that everyone can receive as he or she is able and ready.

Pius II said of Catherine: "She seemed to have been a teacher rather than a disciple." No! She, like the doctors of the church of whom she wrote, was a disciple who, because so totally and perennially disciple, became by that very fact teacher, doctor. This is at the heart of the matter! But before proceeding to my reasons for naming Catherine doctor of the church, let me dispose of some of the specific points raised in the canonical process.

### **The Authenticity and Originality of Catherine's Works**

It would have been impossible for those who contributed to the canonical process to make a categorical statement concerning Catherine's originality and the authenticity of her writings, because the full evidence was not accessible to them. Now, however, through linguistic analysis of word patterns and themes in those works and the consequent placement of Catherine's writings in chronological order, I have established that there can be only a single author of these texts.<sup>20</sup> Because the terms of service of Catherine's several scribes are not coextensive with the various linguistic and thematic developments in her works and because Catherine is the only person whose hand was in every one of these works, that single author is indisputably Catherine herself. The overlapping beginnings and endings of periods when different linguistic patterns and themes occur is such that it would have been impossible for any group of scribes or editors to manipulate. Scribal manipulation of what Catherine dictated must therefore have been minimal, limited in general to minor grammatical and orthographic standardization. Her originality also is finally demonstrable from the establishment of the chronology of her writings. True, she does not break any new ground in terms of basic theological content or concept. It is clear, however, that, though she borrows quite freely from other authors, once she has borrowed, she continues to develop each idea in her own way and to integrate it uniquely into her own theological tapestry. In that development, that integration, that tapestry, she is original.

### **Catherine's Inspiration and Natural Gifts**

Only two persons among those who contributed to the canonical process concede that Catherine's human gifts played any truly significant and integral role in her teaching. I cannot agree with those who contend that Catherine's knowledge was in no way humanly acquired. Yes, Catherine herself did say, "No man or woman has ever been my teacher in the way of salvation; my only master and teacher has been our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>21</sup> But to understand that statement one must understand the role faith and grace played in her life. For Catherine, life was faith life; the action of God in human life (that is, grace) was real for her. The reality of God colored her use of her natural gifts as deeply as any deep love colors all a person is and does. Yet there is plenty of evidence of Catherine's intelligence and even genius. The sources tell of her relentless questioning of the

learned members of her circle. The manner in which she spontaneously (and certainly without the written text before her) "lifted" with all but total accuracy entire paragraphs from works she had read or heard testifies to phenomenal powers of retention. The logic and coherence of her reasoning, the interweaving of ideas and images without loss of consistency, testify to a truly exceptional mind. Those powers were certainly at work in all she did. But so was the work of grace-so real that Catherine could sincerely say that in everything it was Jesus Christ who was her teacher.

### **Her Imagery and Her Theology**

Is Catherine's imagery, as the first censor judges, "clumsy and inadequate" even though it falls short of "mutilating" her theology? I wonder, has this censor never found in poetry a vision of truth more profound than can be told in syllogisms? The allegory of the bridge, on the surface so complete in its own complex of images, incorporates and relates with the whole of Catherine's imaged theology in a way that communicates as no abstract narration ever could. The complex of blood, fire and sun, water and milk and wine imagery-meshing with the imagery of tree and engrafting, wedding garment and bed, conception and birth-expresses in a tightly woven fabric a coherent theology of creation, incarnation, redemption, church, ministry, human wholeness, and salvation. True, there are in Catherine's works some images that at first reading seem to be used simply to embody a very specific idea-the lion and lamb as image of Christ, the fly and the boiling pot as image of the devil and the fervent soul, the boat as image of church or religious life, the cell or house as image of the knowledge of self and of God. But even these, when plumbed, are found to be woven into the larger whole. No, it is hardly in spite of her imagery that Catherine's writings can be called theological; imagery is the very language of her theology!

### **Truth and Orthodoxy**

The canonical process lays great stress on Catherine's orthodoxy. Yes, she is thoroughly orthodox, but her concern for truth is far deeper than mere orthodoxy and harmony with tradition. For Catherine, truth is the most basic context of everything, the theme on which all else is variation and development. She inherits a scholastic tradition that defines truth as what is. God is very being and the source of all being: "Tell them I AM has sent you" (Exod 3:14). Thus, for Catherine, God is truth, the sole absolute truth, infinite mystery. This is for her a fountain of immense freedom within the structures of dogma and law.

In her theology and spirituality, only God is "master (maestro) of truth"-master not as dominating, controlling, but as one who holds, embraces, relates as creative artist and lover. All others are servants and ministers of truth, called to embrace truth also as lovers and bring it to birth in the world in Jesus Christ, God and human, in whom are embodied both mastery and servanthood of truth. "I am way and truth and life" (John 14:6). Catherine's theology of church rests on this base.

### **Authority in the Church**

Christ alone on earth is teacher or master of truth. Every other person in the church who carries forward the mission of Christ-including every minister, "ordained" or not-is called to be servant, disciple of truth. Catherine always uses the term minister rather than teacher of truth in referring to pastors, as if to stress the point. If, however, we are disciples, learners, we are always seekers into truth, not possessors of it. How can we as church, as individuals, or as institution, administer what we are only searching into and do not possess? Only if we are in love with the one absolute truth, the ultimate mystery, into whom we search! "Oh dearest father," she writes to Cardinal Pedro di Luna, "fall in love with this truth, so that you may be a pillar in the mystic body of holy church, where this truth must be administered. For truth . . . must be ministered by truthful persons who are in love with truth, enlightened by truth, not ignorant and uninformed of truth."<sup>22</sup> She goes so far as to declare, "If you are not searching for truth, you know the truth is not in you!"<sup>23</sup>

How does this translate into an interpretation of authority within the church, an authority Catherine is said to have so loved and respected and defended, especially in the papacy? The answer is to be found in the fine tension between what she writes to "ordinary folk" and what she writes to those actually in positions of authority in her church. It is true that, when she is addressing layfolk, Catherine speaks of the pope as "Christ on earth, whom you are all obliged to obey even to the point of death," and says that "whoever refuses to obey him is . . . living in damnation."<sup>24</sup> In this, she is echoing the decree *Unam sanctam* (1302) of Pope Boniface VIII, still as alive in the minds of fourteenth-century Christians as the central declarations of Vatican II are for today's Roman Catholics. Certainly Catherine sees the necessity of respect for authority within the church.

But in her communications with those in authority and with people who deal directly with those in authority, we see the heart of Catherine's understanding of authority in the church. While she does not explicitly use the terms, she distinguishes quite clearly between authority as jurisdiction (and therefore claim on others' obedience) and authority as a moral claim to speak and be heard. The principle is that God, truth, requires obedience (openness to the demands of truth) of everyone—layfolk and clerics and religious, young and old, church authorities and subjects. And that universal call to obedience demands openness and respect from every side. We see the principle at work in Catherine's plea to Pope Urban VI, after he has silenced a Dominican who raised questions about certain abuses and papal appointments:

Oh most holy father, be patient when people talk to you about these things, for they speak only for God's honor and your well-being, as children must do who tenderly love their father. They cannot bear anything being done that will harm or dishonor their father. No, they are in their concern always on the alert, since they are well aware that their father has a huge family to care for, yet has only one person's vision. So if his trueborn children were not concerned enough to watch out for their father's honor and good, he would often make mistakes. And so it is with you, most holy father. You are father and lord of the whole body of Christianity; all of us are under your holiness' wings. As far as authority is concerned you can do anything, but in terms of vision you can see no more than any one person can. So it is essential that your children singleheartedly, without any slavish fear, look out for God's honor as well as your honor and welfare and that of the little sheep who are under your staff. Now I know that your holiness wants helpers who will really help you—but you have to be patient enough to listen to them. When a son or daughter of yours comes to tell you about something that person thinks might harm the church or souls or might embarrass your holiness, it should pain you if that person would foolishly, in your presence, refuse to tell you frankly the pure truth as it stands. For nothing ought to be kept hidden or secret from you.<sup>25</sup>

She urges those who deal directly with the pope to "stand at the ear of Christ on earth and voice this truth to him continually, so that in this truth Christ's bride may be reformed."<sup>26</sup> "With fire and passion proclaim the truth and sow the seed of God's word in every person, but right now especially in our dear Christ on earth!"<sup>27</sup> "We are all ready to obey your holiness," she writes to Urban VI himself, "I and those God has given me to love with a special love, and to suffer even to the point of death. We are ready to help you with the arms of holy prayer and by sowing and proclaiming the truth wherever it may please God's gentle will—even to your holiness."<sup>28</sup> Every Christian is responsible to whatever truth he or she has perceived, and so every Christian shares responsibility for the church's search into truth.

## **Conclusion**

During Catherine's lifetime, one of her devoted disciples and defenders, the Augustinian William Flete, had accused another, the Vallombrosan Giovanni dalle Celle, of associating Catherine with "heretical reformers." Giovanni responded:

I would consider it a glory to be called a heretic with her . . . . Oh sweetest heresy of the heavenly Catherine! You turn sinners into just people. Friend of publicans and sinners, you make the angels laugh and heaven rejoice. You honor God; you enlighten the church of Christ; you raise the dead to spiritual life . . . . You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and known that you are anointed by the Holy Spirit and are the daughter of the living God!<sup>29</sup>

So why would I name this Catherine doctor of the church? Through the very quest of her misguided youthful plunge into an all-but-absolute solitude in which she sought an intimacy with God that had no room for other people or for the affairs of the world, Catherine was brought to the graced insight that changed her life: In the incarnation, God has so identified the divine with humankind that God and neighbor are henceforth inseparable. The honesty of her response to this insight, born out of the honesty of her prayer, led her from religion as relation with God "alone with the Alone" to religion as relation with God in all and all in God. If she were to love her God in this way, she must serve others, and so she began to wait on the material and physical needs of those around her. From this simple material service, the faith that for her permeated all (along with the gradual recognition of her gifts) led her to a more and more explicitly pastoral service.

Catherine had been driven by her steady, open, ever deepening encounter with truth, with the mystery that is God, into a pastoral way of life that was grounded in her own keenly perceptive and uncompromisingly honest searchings. People's needs drew her to the writing of letters and eventually a book that her followers would call *The Dialogue*, all works of what we today call pastoral theology. She had a genius for applying with a stunning common sense, to real individuals and their real life situations, the theological concepts she absorbed with such prodigious retention and integration. She spoke and wrote out of who she was constantly becoming-as woman, friend, caregiver, thinker, mama and teacher to her expanding famiglia, Dominican, and concerned member of a tormented church.

The charism-the Spirit's gift-of teaching for the common good of the church takes root, not in jurisdictional authority, but in moral authority, in being first and always disciple-and as disciple, being carried steadily into the very fire of truth, where one becomes both one's truest self and a lamp to others. Only in such is the call to teach within the church realized in truth. And so Catherine of Siena is justly named doctor-teacher-of the church.

## **ABSTRACT**

Catherine of Siena was declared doctor of the universal church in 1970 for reasons documented in the record of the canonical process for that declaration. Primary among these reasons were her defense of the papacy and her orthodox fidelity to the magisterium, with emphasis on supernatural inspiration rather than human giftedness as the foundation of her teaching. Beginning from Catherine's own comments on doctors of the church, this essay proposes that a more cogent reason for naming Catherine doctor of the church rests in her pastoral genius grounded in a discipleship that seeks ultimate truth only in the truth that is God. That pastoral genius expresses itself in writings that are at once theologically sound, faithful, and humanly sensitive.

1 *Urbis et Orbis: Concessions tituli Doctoris et extensionis eiusdem tituli ad universam ecclesiam necnon officii et missae de communi doctorum virginum in honorem s. Catharinae Senensis, virginis Tertii Ordinis s. Dominic.* (Roma: Sacra Rituum Congregatione, 1969), 491. Translations from all works cited are my own.

2 *Ibid.*, 472.

3 *Ibid.*, 511.

4 *Ibid.*, 512, 496, 504.

5 Ibid., 480.

6 Ibid., 508.

7 Ibid., 477, 476, 499.

8 Ibid., xxv.

9 Ibid., 479.

10 Ibid., 6.

11 Ibid., 5.

12 Ibid., 24-7.

13 Ibid., 29.

14 Ibid., 27-8.

15 Ibid., vi-xxii.

16 Ibid., 3-9.

17 Acta Apostolica Sedes (1970), 672-84.

18 Dialogue, ch. 29.

19 Dialogue, ch. 85.

20 Details on the chronology of Catherine's writings can be found in the introduction to the first volume of my new translation of Catherine's Letters (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000).

21 Raimondo da Capua, S. Caterina da Siena (Siena: Cantagalli, 1978), I.IX, 84.

22 Letter T284. (The "T" indicates the numeration system of N. Tommaseo.)

23 Letter T316, to Queen Giovanna of Naples.

24 Dialogue, ch. 154.

25 Letter T302.

26 Letter T284, to Cardinal Pedro di Luna.

27 Letter T280, to Raimondo da Capua.

28 Letter T306, to Pope Urban VI.

29 Letter IV, in P. Cividali, Il beato Giovanni dalle Celle, vol. XII of Memorie della R. Acc. dei Lincei, Anno CCCIII (1906), 439-40.

**SUZANNE NOFFKE, OP**

Suzanne Noffke, OP, is a scholar in residence at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. She has published translations of Catherine of Siena's Dialogue (1980), Prayers (1983, 2001), and Letters (1988, 2000, 2001), as well as commentaries on her life and thought.

Copyright *Theology Today* Apr 2003

Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights Reserved