

# Catherine of Siena as Spiritual Director and Pastoral Theologian

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Approaching Catherine and her thought through the *Dialogue* may not be the best way of getting to know her. She reveals herself more easily in the record of her relations with others that we find in her letters. We see immediately the variety of individuals and circumstances with which she became involved: prisoners, outcasts, nobles, businessmen, physicians, lawyers, soldiers, hermits, kings, queens, cardinals, popes, men and women immersed in the world. They write to her with all sorts of questions, looking for help in all kinds of situations and difficulties.

Her letters were spoken rather than written – she learned to write only three years before her death – and her vitality, adaptability, fearlessness, and insight are all clearly present in them. They reveal her warm, understanding tenderness for men and women, no matter what the shame or confusion that has come upon them. She shows extraordinary understanding and compassion for the problems that afflict human hearts.

We can sketch as follows her way of responding to people as revealed in her letters:

*1) she rarely begins with rebuke striking first a note of humility – she describes herself as ‘servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ’ or some such*

*2) next comes a meditation on some theme, the wonder of Divine Love, the duty of prayer, the nature of obedience – something to lift her correspondent above the world to remember God and His kingdom*

*3) then a quick return to the problem at hand, highlighted now by being contrasted with what has just been said about the kingdom*

*4) but Catherine always goes with her correspondent into that place of dismay or difficulty no longer writing ‘you’ but always ‘we’ – it is as if she feels the sadness and guilt of the sins of others, a strange kind of solidarity with people in their distress and need*

*5) she is saved from arrogance by identifying herself with the person to whom she writes; she does not pause in reprobation of evil but moves quickly to an impassioned appeal, showing great confidence in people (often misplaced as it turned out),*

*6) this attitude is sustained by her frequent discussions of charity and tolerance, constantly urging her disciples and friends to put the highest possible construction on their neighbours’ actions*

*7) she loves the text ‘in my Father’s house are many mansions’: many characters, temperaments and practices coexist in the house of God.*

It is all about ‘repentance’, quickening it by a positive method, not by spending too much time analyzing evil or rubbing in the consequences of sin, but by seeking to enkindle in souls the ‘holy desire’ which is not only the watchword of her teaching but the key to her personality.

Let us look at this 'method' of Catherine in her letter to Sr Daniella of Orvieto who, we are told, 'not being able to carry out her great penances had fallen into deep affliction'. There is kindness and wisdom in how Catherine compares her own faults with those of Daniella. She agrees that what Daniella seeks is good but tries to show her a greater good that is even more desirable. What in the hands of another person might have been simply a criticism of Daniella's behaviour and a call to change it, becomes instead a rich theological meditation, referring everything to God and to the ways in which Daniella's relationship with God can be strengthened.

Catherine stands alongside Daniella, they look together towards God and the ways in which God, through our holy desire for him, brings us into sharing God's own love and wisdom. Catherine clearly worries that Daniella's strictness with herself will lead to an unhelpful strictness with others. This will be counter-productive, she fears, leading people into the same despair that afflicts Daniella. Pastoral care does not mean increasing the distress of the other person but rather 'making oneself ill with them', and giving what healing one can in order to enlarge their hope. We need to repent, don't we, Catherine concludes, from our complementary errors, so that we will grow in virtue and be the people God wants, able to guide others.

Catherine wants to see in Daniella 'the holy virtue of discretion', which has its roots in 'the knowledge of ourselves and of God'. As Catherine explains it, discretion combines aspects of prudence and charity. Discretion is 'an offspring of charity', she says, whose chief act is this: 'having seen in a reasonable light, what it ought to render and to whom, it renders this with perfect discretion at once'. The 'order of charity' is God – oneself – others.&

Different kinds of discretion are required of different people depending on their state of life, responsibilities, relationships and commitments. 'But let us now talk to ourselves', she says turning to Daniella's particular indiscretion, and adding 'we will speak in particular, and so we shall be speaking in general too'.

Discretion regulates not only charity to one's neighbour but also prayer and the desire for virtue. It rules and orders the creature physically, withdrawing the body from indulgences, luxuries and the conversations of worldlings, and giving it conversation with the servants of God. It imposes restraint on the members of the body that they be modest and temperate: eye, tongue, ear, hand, and feet.

But all this is to be done not indiscreetly but with 'enlightened discretion'. How? By the soul not placing its chief desire in any act of penance. Penance must be used as a means and not as a chief desire. Why not? So that the soul may not serve God with a thing that can be taken from it and that is finite but with holy desire which is infinite through its union with the infinite desire of God and with the virtues that cannot be taken from us unless we choose. 'If I build my chief principle in bodily penance, I build the city of my soul upon the sand', but if I build upon the virtues, 'founded upon the Living Stone, Christ sweet Jesus, there is no building so great that it will not stand firmly, nor wind so contrary that it can ever blow it down'.

Penance easily becomes a matter of self-will, making us weak and inconstant whereas 'the love of virtue and endurance through Christ crucified' makes us strong and persevering. The soul then 'finds prayer in every place' because 'holy desire prays constantly' in the house of our soul. The beginning of so great good is discretion. Discretion seeks to present to others the foundation it has found, the love and teaching it has received, and to show these by its life and doctrine. It 'comforts the soul of its neighbour and does not confound him by leading him into despair when he has fallen into some fault; but tenderly it makes itself ill with that soul, giving him what healing it can, and enlarging in him hope in the Blood of Christ crucified'.

Therefore 'I summon thee and me to do what in past time I confess not to have done with that perfection which I should'. I have been over-lax and easy-going compared to you, Catherine says to Daniella, but it seems now that your strictness is out of all bounds of discretion, indiscretion making you feel some of its results and quickening your self-will. 'I am very much distressed at this and I believe that it is a great offence against God'.

Let us love virtue, then, and kill self-will, undertaking a regular life in moderation but not intemperately, that we may hasten on the road of virtue and guide others. Catherine concludes: 'Forgive me should I have talked too presumptuously; the love of thy salvation, through the honour of God, is my reason.'