

Feast of St Catherine of Siena -- 29 April 2002

Homily by Fr. Vivian Boland, OP

2013: Vicar to the Master of the Dominican Order, Convento S. Sabina, Rome.



Catherine of Siena is one of four women to have been declared Doctors of the Church, the other three being Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux and now Hildegard of Bingen.

At the centre of Catherine's teaching is what she has to say about prayer. She refers to prayer as 'the cell of self-knowledge'. At least to pray is to enter this 'cell of self-knowledge'. So prayer is a place where we get to know ourselves. But we get to know ourselves in a particular light because in prayer we seek to be in the presence of God. So in prayer we get to know ourselves in the light of God, seeing the weaknesses of our nature on the one hand but also the extent of our desire, a desire that reaches up even to God.

She gives us an image to keep in mind. There is a bridge, she says, across which we want to travel so as to come to God. There are three steps up to the bridge and she identifies these steps as different parts of the cross, or different parts of Christ's body as he hangs from the cross.

The first step is his feet, the second his side and the third his lips. These represent three different attitudes in us as we relate to God in prayer. If we come in fear it is as if we were kneeling, kissing the feet of Jesus. If we come in love it is as if we were standing by his side. And to be kissing his lips, she says, refers to a union with God that happens in prayer from time to time but for which we do not really have the words.

Catherine says that in prayer we learn all the virtues, especially faith and charity. Without faith we would not pray at all, I suppose, and it is charity, God's love, that we learn in prayer. Catherine is thinking of us praying before the crucified Christ, meditating about Christ on the cross. That makes her think of the blood of Christ, poured out for love of the Father and the world. The blood of Christ makes her think about the Eucharist because it is above all when we come to the Eucharist that we partake of the blood of Christ. This is where we come into the presence of God and enter the mystery of his love.

She adds another detail to the picture she paints for us. Beside the bridge, she says, is a hostel for the travellers who are keen to make the journey up onto the bridge. This hostel is the Church where the Eucharist is offered to travellers as sustenance and support on their journey. Whenever we drop in here, then, to take part in the Eucharist we are visiting this hostel, coming to be nourished on the blood of Christ, to be in the presence of God and to experience his love.

For Catherine prayer is not an end in itself. It is always fruitful in charity. That is the outcome of prayer for her. She means that we will be ready to go to the help of our neighbour, to practise charity in that sense. Through praying to the God of love, and through receiving the blood of Christ, we in turn become lovers. We are able to reach out to others to help them, to bring them the love of God we have come to know.