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Margherita Maria Rossi

Joseph de Ponton d'Amécourt, O.P. · Alberto Lo Presti · Paul Murray, O.P.

Robert Ombres, O.P. · Marco Salvati, O.P. · Thomas Joseph White, O.P.

Efrem Jindráček, O.P. – *Curator recensionum*

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Largo Angelicum, 1 IT-00184 Roma, Italia

Tel. +39-06.6702.278

e-mail: rivistaangelicum@pust.it



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«WHO AM I?»
ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA AND SELF KNOWLEDGE

PAUL MURRAY, O.P.*
Pontificia Università San Tommaso d'Aquino, Roma

ABSTRACT

The pursuit of self-knowledge — a theme dominant in contemporary spirituality — was for St Catherine an almost abiding preoccupation. But rather than encourage any kind of self-absorbed self-scrutiny, Catherine invites us to turn our gaze to «the gentle mirror of God». For it is there we will discover our true selves, and find to our amazement the dignity and beauty of our nature. This process Catherine evokes very powerfully by the use of a number of vivid images such as the cell, the fountain, and the peaceful sea. With regard to the last image, for example, Catherine writes: «There is no other way we can either see our dignity or the faults that mar our soul's beauty, except by going to look into the quiet sea of the Divine Being». That St Catherine herself found the courage and the humility to acknowledge faults of her own is what lends to her teaching on self-knowledge such great and striking authority.

«**W**HO am I?» This question was at the heart of Catherine of Siena's spiritual journey. But Catherine was not, it goes without saying, the first author in the Christian tradition to explore in depth the question of identity. The whole issue had already been addressed many times in the writings of celebrated authors such as St Augustine of Hippo and St Bernard of Clairvaux.¹ Catherine, because of her lack of learning, was

* Contact: paulmurrayop@hotmail.com

1. Over many centuries, of course, this question of self-knowledge had already been addressed by religious thinkers and philosophers, in the Veda, for example, and in the writings of Confucius, Plato, and Aristotle.

prevented from reading directly the writings of these authors – books, homilies, treatises etc – but *indirectly* she would have imbibed their influence, being able, over many years, to enjoy regular contact with nuns and hermits, preachers and ascetics, living in or around Siena and representing a variety of monastic and religious traditions.

These men and women religious were manifestly important sources. But the most immediate influence, the real fountain and source of Catherine's teaching on this particular topic, came not from something outside – not from an *external* source – but sprang from within, from her own profound knowledge of self. This knowledge has two very different, very distinctive aspects. On the one hand, Catherine discovered, with contemplative joy, that she was created out of love, formed in the very image and likeness of God. On the other hand, she discovered, through her practice of prayer, and from the experience of day-to-day living, that at times she could be stubborn and self-willed, and was often inclined to be harsh in her judgment of others. In one letter, for example, she speaks of what she calls «my lack of charity»² and in another of «my stunted life».³

For Catherine, an open and honest acknowledgment of past failure was of fundamental importance in the spiritual life. At no stage, however, did she suggest that, with grim repetitiveness, we are obliged to put our face down into the mud and memory of past sin. Accordingly, to a contemplative nun who was suffering greatly from discouragement, she wrote:

I really want you to see your nothingness and negligence and ignorance – but I don't want you to see them through the darkness of discouragement but in the light of the infinite goodness of God that you find within yourself. Understand that the devil would like nothing better than to have you go over and over the knowledge of your wretchedness without anything else to season it. But that knowledge has to be seasoned with hope in God's mercy.⁴

2. *Letter to Francesco di Pipino*, T 265, in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol. 4, trans. Suzanne Noffke, Tempe AZ 2008, p. 87.

3. *Letter to Raymond of Capua*, T 344, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 231. (In future, citations from Noffke's translation of Catherine's letters will be referred to simply as *Letters*.)

4. *Letter to Suor Costanza*, T 73, in *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 305–306.

1. «IN THE GENTLE MIRROR OF GOD»

In order to discover who and what we are in any kind of depth we need, according to Catherine, not only to look within ourselves but also to lift our gaze above and beyond ourselves. «In your nature, eternal Godhead, I shall come to know my nature. And what is my nature, boundless Love? It is fire, because you are nothing but a fire of love».⁵ The journey towards true self-knowledge requires that we see ourselves directly under the gaze of the One who created us. «In the gentle mirror of God», Catherine writes, the believer when at prayer «sees her own dignity: that through no merit of hers but by his creation she is the image of God».⁶ That said, however, what the believer discovers, in this act of gazing, is by no means all brightness and consolation. In «the mirror of continual prayer»,⁷ Catherine explains, she begins to see her faults and failures far more clearly than ever before. «In the mirror of God's goodness she sees as well her own unworthiness, the work of her own sin».⁸

This humbling discovery is the inevitable result of being now able to contemplate, even a little, the wonderful innocence and purity of the Godhead. «For just as you can better see the blemish on your face when you look at yourself in a mirror, so the soul who in true self-knowledge rises up with desire to look at herself in the gentle mirror of God [...] sees all the more clearly her own defects because of the purity she sees in him».⁹ Catherine, in the *Dialogue*, describes her own experience of self-knowledge in God as both «sweet» and «bitter». At one point, referring to herself in the third person, she writes: «Now as light and knowledge grew more intense in this soul, a sweet bitterness was both

5. Prayer 12, in *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, New York 2001², p. 117. (In future this edition of the work of Catherine will be referred to simply as *The Prayers*.)

6. CATHERINE OF SIENA, *The Dialogue*, 13, trans. Suzanne Noffke, New York 1980, p.48. In future this work by Catherine will be referred to simply as *Dialogue*.

7. *Letter to Raymond of Capua*, T 343, *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 268.

8. *Dialogue*, 13, p. 48.

9. *Ibidem*.

heightened and mellowed». ¹⁰ *Bitter*, because Catherine could now recognise, as never before, her capacity for failure, but sweet also because that very acknowledgement served to heighten her awareness of the loving kindness and mercy of the Father.

2. «DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE?»

Catherine, during the countless hours she spent at prayer and meditation, was told wondrous things about the dignity and beauty of her own nature, and indeed about human nature in general. But, on one occasion, when she was alone in her «cell» at Siena, she received a message from God which, at first hearing, seemed to contradict all the affirmative things she had been told up that point. According to the report given by Raymond of Capua, God said to Catherine: «Do you know, daughter, who you are and who I am? [...] You are she who is not, and I AM HE WHO IS». ¹¹

These two statements, far from being calculated to make Catherine feel that she counted for nothing in the eyes of God, were intended, Raymond tells us, as nothing less than «a betrothal-pledge». ¹² Acceptance by Catherine of their meaning, their *import*, would set her feet «on the royal road which leads to the fullness of grace, and truth, and light». ¹³ Catherine would have «beatitude» in her grasp. ¹⁴ Well, that does indeed sound reassuring. But, viewed from the perspective of common sense and reason, what light or truth or grace — what *beatitude* — could possibly be based on the words addressed to Catherine: «You are she who is not»?

As an aid towards unravelling this puzzling conundrum, there is in the *Dialogue* one passage which merits close attention. Catherine, after

10. *Ibidem*.

11. RAYMOND OF CAPUA, *Life of Catherine of Siena*, 10, trans. C. Kearns, Wilmington, Delaware 1980, p. 85. (In future this translation of Raymond's book will be referred to simply as *Life*).

12. *Ivi*, p. 89.

13. *Ivi*, p. 85.

14. *Ibidem*.

stating openly, «I am she who is not», addresses God the Father: «You alone are who you are, and whatever being I have and every other gift of mine I have from you». ¹⁵ So utterly convinced is Catherine of her complete dependence on God, she confesses in the same passage: «If I should claim to be anything of myself, I should be lying through my teeth!» ¹⁶ These are strong and bold assertions, but they do not exhaust the full *meaning* of the statements made originally to Catherine. For it soon becomes clear that, at their core, they are nothing less than a revelation of love.

Responding, on one occasion, to the question how in practice people come to the realization that they are loved by God, Catherine replied, «In holy self-knowledge, when we see that we were loved before we came into existence, for God's love for us compelled him to create us». ¹⁷ The idea is startling. That something or someone, a mere «nothing», could be loved into existence and most tenderly held in existence by God, is a stupendous thought, a thing of wonder, and it is the hidden, joyous meaning of «You are she who is not».

In Raymond's *Legenda maior (Life of Catherine)* the statement «You are she who is not» is taken up and looked at from many different angles. Although tiny, the phrase contains, Raymond declares, «a meaning without limit» and «a wisdom without measure». ¹⁸ He writes: «Let us take the trouble to unearth it, for even what we see on the surface shows that a rich hoard lies hidden here». ¹⁹ What, for Raymond, is that hidden wisdom, that buried "hoard"? It is, he tells us, the revelation of a «bountiful and gracious Lord [...] who loves his creatures so much, and bears them such good will, that they were loved by him before he ever made them». ²⁰

These lines of Raymond are indeed very fine. But, on the subject of

15. *Dialogue*, 134, pp. 273–274.

16. *Ivi*, p. 273.

17. *Letter to Monna Lodovica di Granello*, T 304, in *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 185.

18. *Life*, 92, p. 85.

19. *Ivi*, 93, p. 86.

20. *Ivi*, 96, p. 88.

self-knowledge, nothing quite measures up to Catherine's illumined thoughts and expressions. Her words impact like radiant arrows. They strike with force — a voice that is wholly alive and wholly present. On one occasion, addressing head-on the question of the «nothing» in self-knowledge, she writes: «I have no doubt that if you turn your understanding's eye to look at yourself and realize that you are not, you will discover with what blazing love your being has been given to you. I tell you, your heart and affection will not be able to keep from exploding for love».²¹

3. FREEDOM IN LOVE: THE DRAMA OF ATTACHMENT AND DETACHMENT

Certain passages in the *Dialogue* reflect on the ordinary vivid drama of human affection, how the attention of an individual can become focused on another person «with a special love», and how this deep attachment can become in time the occasion of acquiring certain basic self-knowledge. According to the *Dialogue*, this love, this attachment, can either develop into a friendship that's wholly positive or into a relationship that's far from perfect. «Do you know», the Father says to Catherine, «how you can tell when your spiritual love is not perfect? If you are distressed when it seems that those you love are not returning your love or not loving you as much as you think you love them. Or if you are distressed when it seems to you that you are being deprived of their company or comfort, or that they love someone else more than you».²²

Here what is being judged as problematic is not the emotion of the reaction itself, for that's to be expected, but rather the possessive character of the love behind the emotion. If love is indeed based on no more than the fulfillment of one's own need for the presence of the other, and if that is all that «special love» means, the end result, the Father explains to Catherine, is probable suffering and distress. «Whenever the soul loves someone with a special love, she feels pain when the pleasure or

21. *Letter to a Great Prelate*, T 16, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 116.

22. *Dialogue*, 64, p. 121.

comfort or companionship she has become accustomed to, and which gave her great consolation, is lessened. Or she suffers if she sees that person keeping more company with someone else than with her». ²³

But things don't end there, at least not necessarily. Against all expectation, this negative, unhappy experience can yield a positive result: «This pain», the Father observes, «makes her enter into knowledge of herself». ²⁴ Elsewhere in the *Dialogue*, addressing Catherine directly, the Father declares, «This is why I often permit you to form such a love, so that you may come through it to know yourself». ²⁵ What is being stated here is of tremendous import. Catherine, in the process of attaining self-knowledge, had to struggle not just once or twice but *often* with the question of her attachment to certain individuals among her friends and associates.

This should come, perhaps, as no great surprise. Catherine's letters betray again and again the depth of her affection for certain individuals, and the consequent risk she must have faced of becoming over-attached. «Of ourselves», she admits in one place, «we are frail and weak where our sensual selves are concerned, especially when we love ourselves very much and when we love other people and material possessions in a sensual way. If we love them so much, with a clinging and sensual love, then we suffer intolerable pain when we lose them later on». ²⁶ How to answer this dilemma? The solution, as Catherine sees it, is first and last to find our strength in God, and then to do everything we can «to subdue our weakness with reason, with willpower, and with the hand of free choice». ²⁷

Addressing the question of «inordinate love» at one point, she writes: «We are always forming attachments. As soon as God cuts off one branch from under us, we grab onto another». ²⁸ The honest, sharp-

23. *Dialogue*, 144, p. 302.

24. *Ibidem*.

25. *Dialogue*, 64, p. 121.

26. *Letter to Marco Bindi*, T 13, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 16.

27. *Ibidem*.

28. *Letter to Madonna Biancina*, T 111, *Le Lettere*, vol. 11, p. 159.

edged character of this remark, and others like it, may possibly indicate something of the struggle Catherine herself had to undergo in order to be free from certain attachments. It's not inconceivable, therefore, that a few of the saint's hard sayings on the subject — for example, «Cut yourself free in every respect from these bonds»²⁹ — may have been addressed originally, and with the same bold and direct challenge, to Catherine herself.

What, then, are we to conclude? In the opinion of St Catherine is it always a mistake to allow a «special love» for another person to develop and flourish? The strong bond of affection which can exist between two people, is it, in the pursuit of perfection, something to be discouraged? Fortunately, this is not at all what Catherine is proposing. In the first place, she has every confidence that should a particular love be in any way «disordered» or imperfect, it can with the help of grace and human effort be transformed into «well-ordered love».³⁰ She herself, on occasion, appears by no means unwilling to acknowledge a disordered attachment, but always Catherine's principal concern is with finding a way forward. «I was deluded», she writes to Raymond of Capua, «when I looked for [satisfaction] in other people. So in times of loneliness I want to find companionship in the blood».³¹ By «blood» Catherine means, of course, the unconditional love of God made manifest in Jesus — her own profound experience of that love. «In this way», she continues, «I will find both the blood and these other people, and in the blood I will drink their love and affection».³²

By the illumination and purifying grace of what Catherine calls the «blood», not only is the contemplative led into the bright humble realm of self-knowledge, she is also afforded the joy of deep and close com-

29. *Letter to Peronella*, T 360, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 252. In a letter to Raymond Catherine writes: «Free yourself from every creature — of me first of all». T 102, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 348.

30. *Dialogue*, 144, p. 302.

31. *Letter to Raymond*, T 102, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 348.

32. *Ibidem*. In another place Catherine speaks without hesitation of the «special intimate love» between herself and Raymond, distinguishing it from «the love we should have in general for every person». T 344, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 230.

panionship, first with Christ, and then with the friend whom she loves with a «special love». In the *Dialogue* we read:

If she is willing to walk wisely in the light as she ought, she will come to love that special person more perfectly, for with self-knowledge and the contempt she has conceived for her selfish feelings, she will cast off imperfection and come to perfection [...] For I [God the Father] have permitted the struggles and the special love and everything else to bring her to the light of perfection.³³

*

One of the friends on whom Catherine bestowed a «special love» was a young man from the minor nobility of Siena called Stefano Maconi. Of the same age as Catherine, he was by all accounts a singularly attractive and lovable individual. Struck by the great peace and joy he experienced when in her company, Stefano decided to join Catherine's *famiglia* early in 1376.³⁴ He became one of her most devoted secretaries. «She loved me», he writes, «with the tenderness of a mother, far more than I deserved [...] She admitted me into her closest confidence».³⁵ In the spring of 1376 Stefano was asked by Catherine to travel with her to the papal palace at Avignon. That journey was to be one of several which he made with Catherine outside Siena.

The prolonged absence of Stefano away from home caused his mother, Monna Giovanna, much heartbreak. In the end she voiced her complaint, and her sad lament reached the ears of Catherine. By way of reply the letter which Catherine wrote to Monna (November 1376)

33. *Dialogue*, 144, pp. 302–303.

34. Before 1376 Stefano was not interested in meeting someone like Catherine. «At that time», he writes, «I was completely immersed in the currents of worldly living, but Eternal Goodness [...] arranged through this virgin to free my soul from the jaws of hell». See «Il Processo Castellano», in *Fontes Vitae S. Catharinae Senensis Historici*, vol. IX, ed. M.H. Laurent, Milan 1942, pp. 258–259.

35. *Letter of Stefano Maconi to Tommaso d'Antonio (Caffarini)*, cited in Augusta T. DRANE, *The History of Catherine of Siena and Her Companions*, London 1880, p. 294. When Catherine died, Stefano carried her body to the Minerva. And it was Stefano, at the end, who with his own hands laid the body of Catherine in its coffin of cypress wood, reverently kissing it and weeping profusely.

is an astonishing epistle.³⁶ It betrays not the least hint of hesitation or shyness about her «special love» for Stefano. On the contrary, by a rather brilliant and dexterous sleight of hand, Catherine effectively claims Stefano as her own. She writes:

Do not be disturbed that I have kept Stefano so long, for I have taken good care of him. By love and by affection I have become one with him, and so I have treated your things as if they were my own. I think you have not taken this in bad part. I want to do all I can for you, and for him, even up to death. You, mother, bore him once; and I wish to bear him and you and all your family in tears and in sweat by continual prayers and desire for your salvation.³⁷

By love and by affection I have become one with him. The statement is decidedly bold. It leaves us in no doubt about the depth and quality of St Catherine's «special love» for her young friend and devoted disciple Stefano. Both of them, as it happens, were together at Avignon in August 1376. There, on one particular day – it was the Vigil of the Assumption – Catherine, absorbed in an ecstasy of contemplation, was overheard by those in attendance speaking with God at great length. Her prayer concluded with these words:

I pray to you also
for all the children you have given me
to love with a special love
through your boundless charity,
most high, eternal, ineffable Godhead.
Amen.

4. THE PROBLEM OF SELF-DISDAIN

When talking with others, Catherine was always candid about her own «defects». «Wretch that I am», she confessed, «I've so often fallen into unhappiness and into passing judgment on my neighbours».³⁸ And

36. *Letter to Monna Giovanna di Corrado Maconi*, T 247, *Le Lettere*, vol. IV, p. 58. A few months earlier Catherine sent another letter to Monna, Stefano's mother.

37. *Letter to Monna Giovanna*, T 247, in *Le Lettere*, vol. IV, p. 58.

38. *Letter to Daniella of Orvieto*, T 65, in *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 240.

again: «I am not so virtuous as to know how to do anything but imperfectly».³⁹ Such admissions of weakness although no doubt, at times, greatly exaggerated («My own sins are numberless», she declared on one occasion⁴⁰) are, nevertheless, admissions which spring from feelings of real sorrow and real regret.

The fact of recurrent failure, the painful recognition of radical weakness can breed, in the lives of certain individuals, emotions of both shame and self-hatred. If by «shame» here is understood the honest admission of failure, and the unhappy feelings which accompany it, that would not be strange. But actual «self-hatred»? Under any rubric, or title, or understanding, can that ever be the response to human weakness which the great spiritual tradition actively recommends?

On this subject, Catherine's approach merits close attention. Although she does appear, on occasion, to support an attitude of self-dislike or even self-hatred, what she is concerned to uphold is not a cold disdain of self but rather a whole-hearted hatred of the slavery of sin, something which mocks the self and mocks all hope of freedom. Writing in an early letter to the poet, Neri dei Pagliaresi, Catherine speaks approvingly of what she calls «the sword of self-hatred and self-contempt».⁴¹ This statement, if read or understood in the wrong way, could certainly be dangerous. Fortunately, Catherine makes clear that what she has in mind here is *not* disdain of one's own being but rather what she calls «hatred and contempt of sin».⁴² Elsewhere Catherine draws our attention to the distinction between a false love of self, on the one hand, and an enlightened love of self on the other, noting with regret how people tend to love «whatever agrees with that puny sensual part of themselves *rather than loving themselves reasonably*».⁴³

39. *Letter to the Lord Defenders of the City of Siena*, T 121, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 416. In a letter to Raymond of Capua we hear Catherine exclaim: «My love is lukewarm [...] Woe is me, my Lord! Will I be like this always and everywhere and in every situation?» See *Letter to Raymond*, T 344, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 229.

40. *Letter to Biringhieri degli Arzocchi*, T 24, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 158.

41. *Letter to Neri dei Pagliaresi*, T 99, in *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 14.

42. *Ivi*, p. 15.

43. *Letter to Cardinal Iacopo Orsini*, T 223, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 162. My italics.

Catherine along with many of the great spiritual authors in the tradition writes with urgency about the dangers of false self-love. But, with no less urgency, she writes also about the dangers of cold self-hate. Catherine knows that many of those who attempt to follow a spiritual path can easily become, as a result of repeated failure, harsh in their judgment of their own being. Of those closest to Catherine, the individual who most stands out in this regard is Neri dei Pagliaresi. Neri was a man much given to melancholy and self-torment. He was constantly at risk, as a result, of falling into what Catherine called (in the original Italian) «*confusione*».

How best to translate this word? If considered at the level of the mind, it refers to a state of mental self-doubt and grim self-interrogation; at the level of the heart, to a deep and wounding sense of discouragement. Catherine writes to Neri: «I want all your “*confusione*” to be burned up and to disappear in the trust in the blood, in the fire of God’s boundless charity. Let nothing remain but true knowledge of yourself».⁴⁴ Then she goes on to say with even greater eloquence:

Isn’t God more ready to forgive than we are to sin? And isn’t he our doctor – and we the sick ones? Isn’t he the bearer of our iniquities? And doesn’t he consider spiritual discouragement [*la confusione della mente*] worse than any other sin? Yes indeed! So, dearest son, open your mind’s eye with its light, most holy faith, and see how much God loves you. Don’t become discouraged [*non entrare in confusione*] as you consider his love and your heart’s coldness but let the fire of holy desire grow in true knowledge and humility.⁴⁵

What Catherine calls «*confusione*» has the effect of stirring up in the heart of the individual a kind of self-loathing. Not only, she explains, is it «a leprosy that dries up soul and body and keeps us in continual torment», it also «makes us unbearable even to ourselves».⁴⁶ The letter to Neri concludes: «With living faith, then, and with holy desire and firm trust in [Christ’s] blood, let the devil of discouragement [*confu-*

44. *Letter to Neri dei Pagliaresi*, T 178, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 263.

45. *Ibidem*.

46. *Ivi*, p. 264.

sione] be vanquished. I'll say no more. Keep living in God's holy and tender love. I beg God to give you his gentle blessing. Gentle Jesus. Jesus love!»⁴⁷

On another occasion, moved by the same spirit of kindness and concern, Catherine addresses once again the unhappy phenomenon of self-torment and self-disdain. Writing to Suor Costanza in early May 1376, she speaks of «the darkness of unwarranted despondency [*disordinata confusione*] that often enters the soul under the guise and pretext of a stupid sort of humility».⁴⁸ Then she goes on to explain what she means exactly by «*confusione*»:

I mean when notions come into the heart that say, "What you are doing is neither pleasing nor acceptable to God; you are in a state of damnation." And little by little, after these notions have caused discouragement, they infiltrate the soul and point out a way disguised as humility, saying, "You can see that because of your sins you aren't worthy of many graces and gifts" – and so the person stays away from communion and from other spiritual gifts and practices. This is the devil's trick, the darkness he causes.⁴⁹

5. DARKNESS INTO LIGHT: THE PATH OF ILLUMINATION

«Darkness» is the word Catherine uses most often, and with most insistence, when she speaks of the Evil One. The devil's aim, she explains, is to invade the mind «with shadows»⁵⁰ breeding as much confusion as possible and undermining, by use of subtle temptation and whispered lies, the individual's sense of integrity and self-worth. The solution, as Catherine sees it, is to open our mind and heart to the light of God's compassion – something which we hear repeated by Catherine many times in her writings. But, on occasion, we also hear Catherine speaking directly to God in exactly the way she recommends to others. Reflecting, for example, on the mystery of divine compassion and divine light,

47. *Ibidem*.

48. *Letter to Suor Costanza*, T 73, in *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 305.

49. *Ibidem*.

50. *Letter to Frate Antonio of Nizza*, T 17, in *Le Lettere*, vol. 1, p. 58.

and stressing the importance in the act of contemplation of a free and committed engagement of the human will, Catherine says to the Father:

If we open the eye of our understanding with a will to know you, we know you, for your light enters into every soul who opens the gate of her will. For the light stands at the soul's gate, and as soon as the gate is opened to it, the light enters, just like the sun that knocks at the shuttered window and, as soon as it is opened, comes into the house. So the soul has to have a will to know, and with that will she has to open her understanding's eye, and then you, true Sun, enter the soul and flood her with the light that is yourself. And once you have entered, what do you do, Light of Compassion, within the soul? You dispel the darkness and give her light. You draw out of her the dampness of selfish love and leave her the fire of your charity. You make her heart free, for in your light she has come to know what great liberty you have given us by snatching us from slavery to the devil [...] She closes her will so that it loves nothing outside of you but loves you above all things and everything in you according to your will and wants only to follow you. Then she is truly compassionate to herself, and just as she is compassionate to herself, so is she to her neighbours, ready to give up her bodily life for the salvation of souls. In all things she exercises compassion wisely because she has seen how wisely you have worked all your mysteries in us.⁵¹

There is one brief statement made in that quotation which is startling in its implication but which could easily be passed over unnoticed, namely: «The light stands at the soul's gate». What the statement means is that the «true Sun», the light of the divinity, will not enter and flood the soul with light unless the soul accepts to open to him the eye of its understanding. Here one is reminded of the event of the Annunciation as described by Catherine, that decisive encounter between heaven and earth in which, according to Catherine, «human strength and freedom are revealed».⁵² Also laid bare by this event is the manifest respect which God has for human freedom. Catherine, moved no doubt by the unexpected display of divine humility, and by the simple courage of

51. *Prayer 15*, in *The Prayers*, pp. 153–154.

52. *Prayer 18*, in *The Prayers*, p. 192.

Mary's *fiat*, turns to the young mother and exclaims: «God's Son did not come down into your womb until you had given your will's consent. He waited at the door of your will to open to him».⁵³

6. SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN GOD: NINE IMAGES

Catherine, when addressing the question of self-knowledge in God, refers again and again to a few central images, among them the cell, the fountain, the peaceful sea, the tomb, the stable, the night, the well, the full circle, and the house. Of them all «the cell» is the image which we find employed most often. Right at the start of the *Dialogue* we are informed that Catherine had «become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge».⁵⁴

6.1. *The cell*

«This cell», she explains to a close friend, «is really two rooms in one».⁵⁵ The first room offers the joyful knowledge of being loved by God; the second room, in contrast, offers the painful knowledge of human weakness. But both rooms, Catherine makes clear, need to be inhabited at the same time, «otherwise your soul would end up either in confusion [discouragement and self-doubt] or in presumption».⁵⁶

Writing to another correspondent, Suor Costanza, and once again taking up the image of the «cell», Catherine writes: «Do you know how you ought to act? Just as you do when you go to your cell at night to sleep [...] It is clear that you need your cell [that is basic knowledge of self, but your cell isn't all you need».⁵⁷ At this point, Catherine imagines the nun glancing over at the bed in her cell. Here, the bed, needless to say, stands for more than simple repose. For Catherine, it represents absolute security in the knowledge of being loved by God. And so, with

53. *Ibidem*.

54. *Dialogue* 1, p. 25.

55. *Letter to Mona Alessa dei Saracini*, T 49, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 601.

56. *Ivi*, p. 602.

57. *Letter to Suor Costanza*, T 73, in *Letters*, vol. 1, p.306.

a burst of playful exuberance, she declares to Costanza: «Walk across the cell and get into bed, the bed in which is God's tender goodness, which you find within this cell, yourself».⁵⁸

Catherine, in her enthusiasm at this point, begins to mix metaphors, and to an almost alarming degree: «In this bed», she writes, «there is food, table, and waiter. The Father is table for you; the Son is your food; the Holy Spirit waits on you. And the same Holy Spirit makes of himself a bed for you [...] I beg you, then, for love of Christ crucified, stay in this lovely, glorious restful bed».⁵⁹

6.2. *The fountain*

Another favourite image of Catherine is the fountain. Referring, in one place, to Christ as «the fountain of First Truth», she writes: «At this fountain you will discover your soul's dignity».⁶⁰ Elsewhere, in similar vein, Catherine describes how, by gazing at our reflection in «the well-spring [the *fonte*] of the sea of the divine Essence»,⁶¹ we gain knowledge of both our human wretchedness and our human dignity, for «we see neither our dignity nor the defects that mar the beauty of our soul unless we go and look at ourselves in the still sea of the divine Essence wherein we are portrayed; for from it we came when God's Wisdom created us to his image and likeness».⁶² And so she concludes: «Let us go, then, to the fountain of God's sweet goodness. There we shall discover the knowledge of ourselves and of God. And when we dip our vessel in, we shall draw out the water of divine grace, powerful enough to give us everlasting life».⁶³

58. *Ibidem*.

59. *Ibidem*.

60. *Letter to Monna Melina*, T 164, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 31.

61. *Letter to Raymond*, T 226, trans. by K. Foster – M.J. Ronayne – I. Catherine, London 1980, p. 171.

62. *Ivi*, p.172.

63. *Letter to Monna Melina*, T.164, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 32.

6.3. *The peaceful sea*

Powerful in its impact was a particular experience Catherine had in 1375 when she travelled from Pisa to its port at Livorno. «I have just re-discovered the sea», she wrote, «not that the sea is new, but it is new to me in the way my soul experiences it».⁶⁴ Stunned by the great beauty of what she witnessed, she began from that time on to refer to God as a «peaceful sea» — «*mare pacifico*». In a letter to Raymond, for example, Catherine writes: «There is no other way we can either see our dignity or the faults that mar our soul's beauty, except by going to look into the quiet sea of the divine Being. There, in that Being, we see our reflection. Why? Because we came forth from there when God's wisdom created us in God's image and likeness».⁶⁵

When in the *Dialogue* Catherine comes to reflect on the illumined knowledge of self that comes with living faith, she speaks of faith as «a sea» whose water, she says, is a «mirror».⁶⁶ «When I look into this mirror, holding it in the hand of love, it shows me myself, as your creation, in you, and you in me though the union you have brought about of the Godhead with our humanity».⁶⁷ The two images of «mirror» and «sea» are both present in the letter which Catherine wrote after her visit to the port of Livorno. So profound was the experience that day of gazing out at the «*mare pacifico*», it made Catherine think of the words «God is love». And this in turn prompted her to compose the following bright and thoughtful meditation:

Just as the sun shines its light on the earth and a mirror reflects a person's face, so these words echo within me that everything that is done is simply love, because everything is made entirely of love. This is why he says, "I am God, Love." This sheds light on the priceless mystery of the incarnate Word, who, out of sheer love, was given in such humility that it confounds my pride. It teaches us to look not just at what he did, but at the blazing love this Word has given us. It says that we should do what a loving per-

64. *Letter to Frate Bartolomeo Dominici*, T 146, in *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 96.

65. *Letter to Raymond of Capua*, T 226, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 8.

66. *Dialogue*, 167, p. 365.

67. Ivi, pp.365–366.

son does when a friend comes with a gift, not looking at the friend's hands to see what the gift is, but looking with the eyes of love at the friend's loving heart. And this is what God's supreme, eternal, more tender than tender goodness wants us to do when he visits our soul.⁶⁸

6.4. *The tomb*

Of all the images for self-knowledge in God employed by Catherine perhaps the most vivid and most unexpected is that of «the tomb of self-knowledge». We find the image taken up by Catherine and developed most memorably in a letter which she sent to a young monk or friar who had abandoned religious life. First of all, Catherine appeals to him to return to his monastery: «Oh dearest son, turn your memory back a bit. Open your mind's eye to recognize your sins in hope of mercy. See the truth! Return to your fold!»⁶⁹ As soon as he returns to his community, to «the fold» to which he belongs, he will, Catherine assures him, find out the truth, since then he will be «free from sin».⁷⁰ The truth for Catherine is, of course, nothing other than God's mercy: «In this mercy», she writes, «you will find relief from the terrible dejection that seems to have come from seeing yourself fallen from the heights of heaven into profound and total misery».⁷¹ So she goes on to say: «Hide yourself under the wings of God's mercy, for he is more ready to pardon than you are to sin».⁷²

Towards the end of the letter, in one particular paragraph, Catherine takes up the theme of self-knowledge. Here, not only are the traditional Christian images of death and resurrection explored in a way that is totally original, Catherine also in this passage — prompted, it would appear, by her natural kindness and by a keen and thoughtful intuition — finds a strong, imaginative way of drawing the young man, clearly bur-

68. *Letter to Frate Bartolomeo Dominici*, T 146, in *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 96.

69. *Letter to a Brother who has left his Order*, T 173, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 512.

70. *Ibidem*.

71. *Ibidem*.

72. *Ibidem*.

dened by guilt, into the grace and promise of the Paschal mystery. She writes:

Go into the tomb of self-knowledge, and with Magdalen ask, “Who will roll back the stone from the tomb for me? For the stone (that is, the guilt of sin) is so heavy that I can’t budge it.” And as soon as you have acknowledged and confessed how imperfect and heavy you are, you will see two angels, who will roll this stone away. I mean that divine help will send you the angel of holy love and reverence for God (a love that is never alone but gives us the company of love for our neighbours), and the angel of hatred [for sin] (accompanied by true humility and patience), to roll this stone away. So, with true hope and lively faith, never leave the tomb of self-knowledge. Persevere in staying there until you find Christ risen in your soul by grace. Once you have found him, go and proclaim it to your brothers – and your brothers are the true, solid, lovely virtues with whom you want to and do take up your residence. Then, Christ lets you touch him in continual humble prayer by appearing to your soul in a way you can feel.⁷³

6.5. *The stable*

With regard to the attainment of self-knowledge Catherine refers on occasion to the example of the saints, to St Mary Magdalen, for example, and to others.⁷⁴ But, in this particular context, on a few rare occasions, she refers also to Christ. In one of her prayers, addressing Christ directly, she says very simply and very clearly: «You understood yourself».⁷⁵ The statement, though brief, in light of the divine and human natures of Christ, carries quite an extraordinary weight of significance. It prompts Catherine to ask a question: «What, then, was your glory, oh gentle loving Word? You yourself. For you had to suffer in order to enter into your very self».⁷⁶ With regard to the witness given to us by the Incarnate Word, God the Father says in the *Dialogue*:

73. *Ibidem*.

74. See *Letter to Monna Bartolemea*, T 42, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 42. And see also *Letter to Frate Matteo di Francisco Tolomei*, T 94, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 672.

75. *Oratio XIII*; S. CATERINA DA SIENA, *Le Orazioni*, ed. G. Cavallini, Rome 1978, p. 164.

76. *Ibidem*.

He taught you not only with words but by his example as well, from his birth right up to the end of his life [...] this gentle loving Word born in a stable [...] to show you pilgrims how you should be constantly born anew in the stable of self-knowledge, where by grace you will find me within your soul. You see him lying among the animals, in such poverty that Mary had nothing to cover him up with. It was winter, and she kept him warm with the animals' breath and a blanket of hay. He is the fire of charity but he chose to endure the cold in his humanity. All his life long he chose to suffer [...] He was nailed to the cross to loose you from the chains of deadly sin. By becoming a servant he rescued you from slavery to the devil and set you free.⁷⁷

6.6. *The night*

«Try to get to know yourself!» Catherine makes this appeal to Raymond in a letter in which she speaks about what she calls «the night of self-knowledge».⁷⁸ «Night» – a demanding period of spiritual darkness – descended on Catherine at the close of a three-year period of solitude and seclusion. She was about twenty years old. While in solitude she had been blessed with a number of quite remarkable illuminations, and she had experienced also the radiant felt presence of her divine Lord and Master. All that changed, however, when it seemed that the God with whom she had enjoyed such intimacy, was now completely abandoning her. According to Raymond, «Her Spouse who up till now had been accustomed to visit her frequently and fill her with his consolations, seemed to withdraw».⁷⁹ The young Catherine was devastated. «Her soul», Raymond writes, «was plunged in a very sea of sorrow».⁸⁰ And,

77. *Dialogue*, 151, p. 320.

78. *Letter to Raymond of Capua*, T 104, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 654.

79. *Life*, 107, p. 99. This experience, often referred to as «the dark night», is described most memorably in the work of the Carmelite mystic St John of the Cross. Catherine only once, to my knowledge, cites the actual phrase itself. It occurs in the long Passion Sunday prayer of 1379. In a spirit of deep humility Catherine says to God the Father: «If I gaze into your exaltedness, any rising up to there that my soul can manage is as the dark night compared with the light of the sun, or as different as is the moonlight from the sun's globe». See *Prayer 19*, in *The Prayers*, p. 204.

as if this was not enough, Catherine now found herself plagued by grotesque and unrelenting temptations from the Evil One: «the demon pack with their words and acts of obscenity and lust, buzzing thick about her like a cloud of flies».⁸¹

In time Catherine came to understand that there was, in fact, a reason why, as she puts it, «God sometimes permits her spirit to be dark and sterile and swamped by all sorts of perverse imaginings, till it seems impossible to think about God — till she can scarcely remember God's name».⁸² The reason, she discovered, had to do first and last with self-knowledge: «God permits all these struggles and this barrenness of spirit so that she will come to know herself and see that she is not [...] Knowing herself, then, she humbles herself in her non-being and recognizes the goodness of God who through grace has given her being and every grace that is built upon being».⁸³

The «night» of the absence of God — terrible though it is — becomes in the end the saving night of self-knowledge. And not only that. Against all expectation, God, her beloved Spouse and Lord, is now found and experienced at the very heart of darkness.⁸⁴ «So», the Father

80. *Dialogue*, 197, p. 99.

81. *Ivi.*, 108, pp. 100–101.

82. *Letter to Suor Bartolomea della Seta*, T 221, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 180. For some people on the path to perfection the spiritual experience alternates between a sense of presence and a sense of absence. But for those who reach perfection, God tells Catherine: «I relieve them of this lover's game of going and coming back. I call it a 'lover's game' because I go away for love and I come back for love — not, not really I, for I am your unchanging and unchangeable God; what goes and comes back is the feeling my charity creates in the soul». See *Dialogue*, 78, p. 147.

83. *Ivi.*, p. 181. St John of the Cross is at one with Catherine in emphasizing that the most immediate fruit of the dark night is growth in self-knowledge. He writes: «The first and chief benefit that this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self [...] The soul considers itself to be nothing and finds no satisfaction in self because it is aware that of itself it neither does can do anything». See «The Dark Night», Chapter 12, 2, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans. K. Kavanaugh — O. Rodriguez, Washington D.C. 1964, p. 321.

84. See *Letter to the Monks of the Monastery of San Girolamo at Cervia*, in *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 136.

says to Catherine, «I am telling you not to let these struggles distress you unduly. No, I want you to glean the light of self-knowledge from this darkness, and in that knowledge learn the virtue of humility. Be exultantly happy, realizing that at times like this I am living within you in a hidden way».⁸⁵

6.7. *The well*

Catherine, in a letter to Frate Tommaseo dalla Fonte, likens the inner core of the self to a well of deep, clear water. In order for us to attain to that depth — that wondrous source — we must first of all confront and acknowledge the earth, the muddied soil of our human misery. Catherine writes:

As we discover the earth we get to the living water, the very core of the knowledge of God's true and gentle will which desires nothing else but that we be made holy. So let us enter into the depths of this well. For if we dwell there, we will necessarily come to know both ourselves and God's goodness. In recognizing that we are nothing we humble ourselves. And in humbling ourselves we enter that flaming, consumed heart, opened up like a window without shutters, never to be closed.⁸⁶

6.8. *The full circle*

In the *Dialogue* God the Father says to Catherine: «This knowledge of yourself, and of me within yourself, is grounded in the soil of true humility».⁸⁷ It is a union, he explains, which forms a «circle» which should never be broken.

Imagine a circle traced on the ground and, at the center of the circle, a tree with an off-shoot grafted into its side. The tree finds its nourishment in the earth within the expanse of the circle. But, were it ever uprooted from the earth, it would die, yielding no fruit [...] It is necessary, therefore, that the root of this tree, that is the affection of the soul, should grow in

85. *Letter to Suor Bartolomea della Seta*, T 221, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 182.

86. *Letter to Frate Tommaso dalla Fonte*, T 41, in *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 8.

87. *Dialogue*, 10, pp. 41–42.

and issue from the circle of true self-knowledge, knowledge that is joined to me, who, like the circle itself, have neither beginning nor end.⁸⁸

Our most fundamental task, therefore, is to move from knowledge of God to knowledge of self and then back to knowledge of God. But should it happen, the Father warns, that knowledge of self becomes disconnected from knowledge of God, «there would be no full circle at all», and everything «would end in confusion».⁸⁹ In more positive vein, however, the Father adds that this «circle», although clearly grounded in the plain earth of self-knowledge — in the humble soil of truth — is of infinite expanse, and has «neither beginning nor end». Accordingly, by surrendering ourselves to the movement of the circle, we are able to flourish greatly, and grow like trees «made for love and living only by love».⁹⁰

This image of the self as a tree of love recurs in one of Catherine's letters. «We are a tree of love», she writes, «because we are made for love».⁹¹ On this occasion, however, Catherine introduces the additional theme of freedom and free choice. She writes: «This tree is so well made that no one can keep it from growing or take its fruit without the tree's consent. And God has given this tree a worker to tend it as it pleases, and this worker is free choice».⁹² What matters, then, in Catherine's understanding, is that «free choice plants the tree where it ought to be planted, that is, in the soil of true humility».⁹³ And the place, she goes on to say, where this soil can be found is «the enclosed garden of self-knowledge».⁹⁴

88. S. CATERINA DA SIENA, *Il Dialogo*, X, ed. G. Cavallini, Rome 1968, p. 24.

89. *Dialogue*, 10, p. 42.

90. *Ivi*, p. 41.

91. *Letter to Countess Bandeçça Salimbeni*, T 113, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 677.

92. *Ibidem*.

93. *Ivi*, pp. 677–678.

94. *Ivi*, p. 678. Elsewhere Catherine writes: «First Truth has made our reason, together with our freedom of choice, to be our gardener. It is the task of reason and free choice, with the help of divine grace, to root out the brambles of vice and plant the fragrant herbs of virtue». *Letter to Abbot Martino of Passignano*, T 22, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 692.

6.9. *The house*

For Catherine of Siena, self-knowledge is the hinge which swings open the door of freedom, allowing us to pass from the bondage of fear and sin into the new life. «Note», she writes, «what Peter and the other disciples did that enabled them to let go of their selfish fear [...] and receive the Holy Spirit [...] Scripture says that they shut themselves up at home and stayed there in watching and continual prayer».⁹⁵ Catherine then adds, making clear her conviction that the witness and example of the first disciples – their devoted practice of prayer within «the house of self-knowledge» – is now the task of all believers:

The lesson we and everyone else ought to learn from this is that we [too] must shut ourselves up at home in watching and prayer [...] Just as Peter and the others shut themselves up at home, so those who have come to love their Father and are [God's] sons and daughters have done and ought to do. Those who want progress in this state [of perfection] must enter and shut themselves up in the house of self-knowledge.⁹⁶

This letter was written to a young Dominican Frate Mattero, whom Catherine had earlier helped to convert. In a separate letter, this time, to Pope Urban VI, Catherine evokes once again the example of the first disciples at Pentecost, laying particular stress on the necessity of remaining within «the house of self-knowledge»: «I trust that this sweet fire of the Holy Spirit will work in your heart and soul as it did in those holy disciples [...] It seems they are teaching us how we can receive the Holy Spirit. How? We must dwell in the house of self-knowledge».⁹⁷

So strong is the illumination we receive from God in genuine self-knowledge, it is, in the understanding of Catherine, a radiance which can in time overcome darkness, a light which can liberate us from the thrall of evil and from the bondage of selfish love. It should come, therefore, as no surprise to find that Catherine, when she speaks about light

95. *Letter to Frate Matteo di Francisco Tolomei*, T 94, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 671.

96. Ivi, pp. 671–672. «Oh how delightful to the soul and pleasing to me», the Father exclaims in the Dialogue, «is holy prayer made in the house of self-knowledge». *Dialogue*, 66, p. 123.

97. *Letter to Pope Urban VI*, T 351, in *Letters*, vol. 4, pp. 204–205.

and the attainment of freedom, speaks also, in the same breath as it were, about the need to remain within the house of self-knowledge.

I long to see you in true and perfect light, the light that frees from darkness and guides us along the way of truth [...] This is God's truth, that he created us in his image and likeness in order to give us eternal life and so that we in return might give glory and praise to his name [...] So it is good to seek this true and perfect light, and to use hatred to free ourselves of what deprives us of it – free ourselves, that is, from selfish love for ourselves. We will achieve this sort of hatred when we live shut up in the house of self-knowledge. There we will discover the indescribable love God has for us, and with that love we will drive out selfish love for ourselves. For a soul who sees that she is loved cannot help loving.⁹⁸

The meaning of making use of hatred in order «to free ourselves» is further clarified in a letter which Catherine wrote to her friend Neri dei Pagliaresi: «Without that light», she notes, «everything would be done in the dark. But you cannot have this light perfectly unless you use hatred to rid yourself of the cloud of self-centeredness. Try earnestly, then, to let go of yourself so that you may gain the light».⁹⁹

When, in the *Dialogue*, reference is made by the divine Father to «the house of self-knowledge» and to the experience of the first disciples, it is emphasized that, as soon as they received the fire of the Spirit and the grace of self-knowledge, they did not remain any longer shut up out of fear inside a physical house or home. On the contrary, the Father declares: «They left the house and fearlessly proclaimed my message [...] They had no fear of suffering [...] It did not worry them to go before the tyrants of the world to proclaim the truth».¹⁰⁰

What is being enacted here is a dynamic movement from profound self-knowledge in God to the grace and energy of a new self-forgetfulness, a new focus on the needs of others. «So it is with the soul», the Father says, «who has waited for me in self-knowledge. I come back to

98. *Letter to Suor Bartolomea della Seta*, T 188, in *Letters*, vol. 3, pp. 194–195.

99. *Letter to Neri dei Pagliaresi*, T 42, in *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 266.

100. *Dialogue*, 74, p. 136.

her with the fire of my charity». ¹⁰¹ And it is this divine fire which makes the individual soul «strong to endure suffering and to leave her house in my name to give birth to the virtues for her neighbours». ¹⁰² She does not abandon self-knowledge itself, the Father explains, because this new «impulse of love» comes forth precisely «from that house», from that source. ¹⁰³ So the soul, as soon as she has attained within the house of self-knowledge to what the Father calls «perfect, free love», far from ending up in some form of cold and unhappy introversion, is in fact more truly alive than ever before, on fire with a new-found freedom: «She lets go of herself and comes out [into the open]». ¹⁰⁴

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For St Catherine there is no clear path out of the condition of bondage to an achieved state of freedom, no path to union with God, which does not include self-knowledge and the contemplation of the goodness of God. When, on occasion, Catherine attempts to describe that union and that knowledge, the image on which she relies most often is the image of fire. She writes: «I want you to live always in this knowledge of yourself, and to recognize within yourself the extravagant fire of God's charity». ¹⁰⁵ It is there, she notes, in that «immeasurable, indescribable, incomprehensible fire» that «the dampness of selfish love» will be dried up once and for all. ¹⁰⁶ In similar vein, in another place, she writes:

I'm sure that if you are bound and set ablaze in the gentle Jesus, all the devils of hell with all their cunning will never be able to tear you away from so sweet a union. So, since this bonding is so strong and so necessary for you, I don't want you ever to stop throwing wood on the fire of holy desire – I mean the wood of self-knowledge. This is the wood that feeds the fire of divine charity, the charity that is gained by knowing God's boundless charity. ¹⁰⁷

101. *Ibidem.*

102. *Ivi*, p. 137.

103. *Ibidem.*

104. *Ibidem.*

105. *Letter to Frate Francesco Tebaldi*, T 154, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 53.

106. *Ivi*, p. 49.

107. *Letter to Raymond of Capua*, T 219, in *Letters*, vol. 2, pp.90–91.

Catherine, all through her life, felt the need to return to this theme of self-knowledge. It was an abiding obsession. The repeated appeal she made to her contemporaries – the urgency of it – though now centuries old, still seems today to burn the page: «Let's not put off any longer our move into this holy dwelling of self-knowledge. We so need this, and it is so pleasant for us – because God's boundless infinite goodness is there».¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸. *Letter to Don Giovanni dei Sabbatini of Bologna*, T 141, in *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 145–146.