April 29th, the Feast of St. Catherine of Siena…

Catherine of Siena

Notes on Her Life and Spiritual Thought for Preachers

Her Life…

Saint; born at Siena c. 1347, Catherine Benincasa was one of the many children of a Sienese dyer. At the age of twelve she vowed her virginity to Christ and at sixteen was admitted into a Dominican lay sisterhood. Later she was to tell her confessor, Raymond of Capua, OP, that she had never learned anything from men or women about the way of salvation, 'but only from the sweet bridegroom of my soul, the Lord Jesus Christ. 'Nevertheless her Dominican connection was of utmost important, her two reasons. First, it gave her extraordinary spiritual and intellectual apostolate the backing of a religious order of unsurpassed prestige and authority in the church. Secondly, the Dominican idea of 'communicating things contemplated' (Aquinas, *Summa theol*., 2a2ae. 188, 6;3a 40, 1 ad 2) exactly suited Catherine's approach to Christ as 'the sweet First Truth', the Word made flesh 'to give...knowledge of the glory of God' (II Cor 4.6; cf. John 1.18). We shall see presently how Catherine envisaged this gift of knowledge

After three years of strict seclusion Catherine began her public life, probably in 1368, at the command, as she believed, of Christ himself. It falls into three periods: 1368 to the summer of 1374; thence to November 1378; then to her death on 29 April 1380. The first period, spent entirely in Siena, saw the formation round her of a 'family' of friends and disciples, both men and women, clerics and layfolk. This represented a shift in the direction and expression of her charity: hitherto concentrated on the poor and the sick, it became increasingly doctrinal as she grew more conscious of her vocation as teacher and counselor. So the great series of her letters began (c. 1370), dictated to secretaries chosen from her 'family'. Before long these letters began to touch on public affairs, beginning with the contemporary project of a crusade against the Turks. That issue receded, however, as Catherine became involved successively in two more urgent matters: the conflict between Florence and the Holy See, 1375 to July 1378, and the Great Schism, which began in September 1378. Both issues stimulated her intense desire for a reform of the church; but whereas in the former her chief immediate concern

was to reconcile the Holy See with the Italian laity--with whose grievances she had much sympathy--once the Schism began every other consideration took second place in her mind to the unity of the church and the authority of Urban VI. Her first call was now to the clergy--a recall to obedience. For her the indispensability of the church--and so its unity--consisted in this, that it is the medium through which the blood shed on the cross for sinful man is available to sinners individually. The church 'holds the keys of the blood', the blood 'reaches us through the ministers of Holy Church'. The church only exists *in function* of the Blood. And with this we return to that 'knowledge' of God that the incarnation, as she understood it, reveals. The God so revealed is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but viewed especially in relation to man--as creator and, since man's lapse into sin, above all as recreator. This recreation works by love, the supreme manifestation of which is the blood shed on the cross. The way to God starts here--in an awareness of his love through that sign of it. But this awareness, Catherine never tires of insisting, presupposes self-knowledge.

From "Catherine of Siena"*by Kenelm Foster, OP, in* The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. G. Wakefield (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983): pp. 80-81.*

Her spiritual thought…

Catherine of Siena (1347-80) was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1970 by Pope Paul VI. Every Doctor or teacher has a definite doctrine or teaching. Catherine's teaching is found principally in her "writings": the *Dialogue,* her letters, and prayers. The *Dialogue,* a rather large book, is a synthesis of her mature spiritual thought. In the work, which is an account of a conversation between God and Catherine, she asks a few questions and the eternal Father replies at length. The book is a spiritual classic although it demands some patience and perseverance on the part of the reader owing to the inconsistency of terminology, overlapping arguments, interruptions, and repetitions owing to the fact that Catherine dictated the book in installments to disciple-secretaries while she was in a mystical state. There are, nonetheless, many nuggets of gold buried in the *Dialogue* which make reading it worthwhile. Catherine's teaching stays close to the Gospel and is very practical. In addition to the *Dialogue,* we have Catherine's 381 letters and twenty-six prayers, all of which have been translated in English. The letters are treatises on the spiritual life and resemble spiritual conferences or sermons coming from the depths of her great humanity. It is in the letters that we come to know Catherine personally and sense her presence.

In all her works, Catherine's theological language is that of images—homey images drawn from her daily life. She compares the soul to a house, a city, a vineyard. The Church she compares to a wine cellar (a nice Italian analogy!) and the pope to the cellar master. She compares baptism to a lamp. She has hundreds of images to illustrate the various articles of faith. In a certain sense, she could be called a doctrinal mystical theologian, although as a mystic she did not explore the truths of faith in an exclusively intellectual way but rather as someone who had had an encounter with God. She presents religious truth, therefore, not solely as the result of reasoning but as the result of an intimately lived experience. As John Paul II said, hers was a "lived theology."

The bridge of Christ crucified

Catherine's most important image on which she hangs many of her most important teachings is the crucified Christ as a bridge stretching from heaven to earth. The sin of Adam had destroyed the road to heaven, so out of love the eternal Father made of his Son a bridge so that we could approach him and become like him by sharing in his life, joy and beauty. Catherine frequently reminds us that humanity is made in God's image and likeness, and that God's plan is for the divine likeness in us to increase through grace to the point of ultimate resemblance.

Progress on the bridge is made in stages represented by three stairs (admittedly, stairs on a bridge are hard to imagine) which lead first to the feet of Christ, then to his opened-side, and finally to his mouth. Each of the three stairs represents an increase of one's knowledge and love of God and neighbor. The journey begins

with “stripping” oneself of vice and “putting on” virtue. The most important virtue is charity, followed by humility and patience. Patience is the litmus test of whether one really possesses the other two virtues; it is the only virtue, Catherine says, which cannot be faked. When one truly loves God it means that we love what he loves—ourselves and our neighbors. Catherine constantly stresses the role of the neighbor in her spiritual teaching. No one crosses the bridge alone; everyone must have a companion—meaning that we must be in relationship with others and not isolated from them.

Let us take a look at some of her principle teachings regarding spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is possible because we are made in God’s image and likeness—a reality which is meant to be dynamic, not static. Through God’s gift of grace and our free cooperation, we are called to be images of Christ by participating in God’s own nature and life through deifying grace.

The incentive to pass along the bridge toward God and therefore to become more Christ-like, is owing to the attraction of Love emanating from the head of the Christ-Bridge. The eternal Father tells Catherine: "The soul cannot live without love. She always wants to love something because love is the stuff she is made of, and through love I created her." But only that which is greater than ourselves can ever ultimately satisfy us, and only God—not any created thing—is greater. God is love and he attracts us with the hook of his love and we respond. This is Catherine’s interpretation of Christ’s words: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32).

Progress on the Christ-Bridge involves the intellect and the will, the chief faculties of God and humanity. But one cannot love God unless he or she first “sees” or knows him as he really is. “One who knows more, loves more,” Catherine says. Knowledge of God involves knowing the truth about his radical love as shown by his bleeding and dying on the cross. Because God is a “holy abyss,” knowledge and love of him are wonderfully endless—even in eternal life. Sin, on the other hand, acts like a cataract that prevents us from seeing the truth; it clouds or even blinds the “eye,” which is Catherine’s image for the intellect and faith. Sin is the result of defective knowledge and disordered desire. It is an over-attachment to finite things: self, other creatures, or material things. Spiritual growth, therefore, is not a matter of more or less violent acts of the will but rather a matter of more knowledge of the truth—or, we might say, a broader perspective of the truth. This principle is typically Thomistic and Dominican.

Catherine, following St. Augustine, says that “love transforms one into what one loves.” If we love God, we will be transformed into him. Catherine also echoes St. Athanasius when she says, “God was made human and humanity was made God.” To love sin, however, is to love nothing because sin has no being; it is literally no-thing, and to love it is ultimately to be transformed into it.

Adapted from Filled With All the Fullness of God. An Introduction to Catholic Spirituality *by Thomas McDermott, OP (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.87-89.*