

**Keep the Fire Burning:  
St. Catherine's Preaching to Her Brothers**



Francesco Messina, *Monument to Catherine of Siena*, 1962  
Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome

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April 2022

One of the many joys of being a student in Rome is the frequent opportunity to see the statue of St. Catherine of Siena located near the Vatican. This *Monument to Catherine of Siena* portrays Catherine walking along the road leading from Castel Sant'Angelo to the Basilica of St. Peter.<sup>1</sup> This is the very route the Dominican saint walked during the final two years of her life (1378-1380), as she regularly made the short trip from her home near the Basilica of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva to the Old Basilica of St. Peter. Her object was twofold: to pray and to advocate in court of Pope Urban VI, who was burdened by the papal schism. It was a messy time bearing some resemblance to our own: a divided Church, the aftermath of a plague and natural disasters, ongoing wars and political uncertainty. In the midst of this chaos, Catherine walked her Dominican vocation “on two feet”—love of God and love of neighbor.<sup>2</sup>

For me, the exemplary genius of Catherine is how she harmonized in a particularly Dominican way these two “feet” of Christian life, which are closely related to the perennial debate about the active and the contemplative life. In reality, both the active and the contemplative life are activities, things to which we dedicate our time, attention, and effort. Because of this, we tend to think of the active and contemplative dimensions of Christian life as opposed to each other, like the two bowls of a balance scale or the two ends of a tug-of-war rope. The more of one we have, the less there will be of the other. This tension plays itself out in the countless personal and communal decisions we make each day. Should I interrupt my quiet meditation to answer that potentially urgent call? Should I spend this next free hour in the chapel, in the library, or at the computer, answering the 87 emails and writing the five homilies and four lectures I have to give this week? Should I agree to meet with that engaged couple instead of going to Evening Prayer or should I ask them to meet later? Should we do more as a community during important liturgical seasons and feasts or relax the schedule because we're all busy with pastoral work? Would having more community prayers make us more authentically Dominican or would it keep us shackled to the choir stall when we should be out preaching in the streets?

I do not presume here to provide an answer to these questions that often wage war within our hearts and our communities. I believe that flexibility is a particularly brilliant feature of our Dominican structure, allowing us to adapt the particulars of our religious lives according to what's

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study of the monument and the significance of its cultural context, see Gerald Parson, “A Neglected Sculpture: The Monument to Catherine of Siena at Castel Sant'Angelo,” *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 76 (2008), 257-276. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40311137>.

<sup>2</sup> See Raymond of Capua's *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. G. Lamb (London: Harvill Press, 1960), 108.

best for the local and individual situation. I do, however, assume that for most of us, our temptation is to err on the side of more external activity and less contemplation. Despite frequent allusions to Catherine's experience of God pushing her to leave the solitude of her cell, despite frequent reminders that "we're not monks!" I still find it easier to grind through my to-do list and let prayer slip than to stray into the opposite pattern. It seems that such an experience is not unique to me nor to our current hyperactive culture. A few months ago, in a conversation with another friar, we both remarked how we could not think of a single friar we knew whom we could accuse of praying too much. There are certainly many cases where we had seen (and, if we're honest, experienced in ourselves) a lack of zeal for preaching, but the problem was always something like too much TV or too much scrolling through social media, not too much contemplation!

What advice would our sister Catherine offer us in this predicament? Thankfully, because of the many letters she wrote, answering this question doesn't require much imaginative speculation. I would like to share with you, then, excerpts from two letters Catherine wrote to her beloved spiritual director and confessor, Raymond of Capua, precisely on the issue of negotiating the relationship between the active and contemplative dimensions of life. Both letters are written in the years shortly before the pope summoned her to Rome, while Raymond was collaborating with Catherine on her work as a political and ecclesiastical intermediary.

I believe Catherine's primary answer to our question would be that it is a mistake to think of love of God and love of neighbor or of the active and contemplative life in a dialectical, oppositional way. They are in fact intrinsically related and mutually supportive—the more you have of one, the more you will have of the other. Here is what Catherine preaches in her letter to Raymond and the unknown brother Papo:

I long to see you true sons and trumpeters of the incarnate Word, God's Son, not only with your voices but in your actions. Learn from the Master of truth, who preached virtue only after he had practiced it. In this way you will produce fruit and will be channels through whom God will offer his grace within the hearts of those who hear you.

Realize my sons, that it is impossible for us either to learn about or to have the good life, or to be hungry for God's honor and the salvation of souls, unless we go to the school of the Word, the Lamb slain and abandoned on the cross, because it is there that the true teaching is found. This is what he said: "I am way and truth and life." And no one can go to the Father except through him. Let your mind's eye be opened to see, and unplug your ears and listen to the teaching he gives you. Look at yourselves, for in him you will find yourselves, and in yourselves, him. What I mean is that you will find yourselves in him in that he is creating you in his own image and likeness—gratuitously, and not because he owes it to you—and within yourselves you

will discover God's boundless goodness in having taken on our likeness by the union the divine nature has effected with our human nature. Let our hearts explode wide open, then, as we contemplate a flame and fire of love so great that God has engrafted himself into us and us into himself! Oh unimaginable love! It would be enough if we had even appreciated it! To this Wonderful school, then, my sons! For this energy and love will lead you on and will be your life!<sup>3</sup>

Catherine clearly sees preaching as the ultimate goal. For Dominicans, contemplation for its own sake, contemplation which doesn't overflow as a gift given to others makes no sense. Yet she makes a strong argument for why her brothers can't be "true trumpeters of the incarnate Word" if they lack a robust contemplative life.

She offers at least three reasons for why this is the case. First, she says that preachers need to be holy—that is, they actually have to live what they preach. So often we are so busy with the welfare of others that we forget our own spiritual needs, we forget that we too are sinners in need of God's grace and all the tools the Church provides to help us grow morally and spiritually. I recall how often, when giving advice in the confessional, I think to myself, "Wow, I should really listen to my own advice—doctor, heal thyself!" Paying attention to our own sanctification is not inherently selfish. We know that while God can certainly do great things through us despite our brokenness and weakness, nothing dampens the effectiveness of our preaching more than when it appears we don't really believe or take seriously for ourselves what we're saying.

Second, Catherine encourages us to form ourselves at the "school of the Word." If we're not getting our words from the Word, whose words are we preaching? Contemplative study and prayer ensure that we are learning from the Master, that what we are handing on is really true and valuable. Otherwise, if we remain in a long-distance relationship with Christ for too long (and no, all that spiritual time we put in during the novitiate or last year's retreat doesn't cut it!), our preaching becomes at best stale and at worst self-serving and distorted by our own flawed ideologies. The mysteries of our faith and the living God we meet in contemplating them are an insatiable source of new and profound insights, new ways of speaking the truth the world needs to hear.

Catherine's third reason for encouraging her brothers to cultivate the contemplative life is, by my estimation, the most important. In contemplative prayer, we are alone with ourselves and

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<sup>3</sup> From Letter T266/G89, To Frate Raimondo da Capua, written about 17 February 1376, in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 2, trans. Suzanne Noffke, OP (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), pp. 5-6.

God. Perhaps our discomfort and fear of what we find in that solitude sometimes leads us to avoid it. But if we instead stick with it, we discover in that quiet place who we really are in God. We find that despite the noise and ugliness of our hearts, God is still willing to live there and love us there. In contemplation, we come to experience that the Good News we preach isn't just true in some abstract, objective sense, but that it is true for us personally and existentially. And in coming to know Love, we catch fire with love ourselves, and we can't sit still. Burning with this divine gift of love, we can't help then to share it with others. God makes us preachers after his own heart.

Having listened to Catherine's wise counsel, we might respond, "I know that the contemplative life is important, and you give great spiritual reasons, but how does it actually work in practice? I mean, there are only so many hours in the day and only so many things we can do." Catherine addresses this question in a letter written to Raymond in the following year, on the subject of "conscientiousness," by which she means being aware of and deliberate about how we use our time. Here is a helpful excerpt:

A lack of conscientiousness, then, indicates a lack of love. So we must love courageously and sincerely, letting neither our selfish feelings nor any other person get in the way. And to achieve such tender love we have to open our mind's eye to see and know how much we are loved by God. But to arrive at that knowledge we have to walk with the feet of our affection into the house of true self-knowledge, because it is in knowledge of ourselves that we conceive hatred for our selfish sensuality and love for God because of his boundless charity, which we have discovered within us. And then our heart rises up at once at the urging of blazing desire and goes in search of how we might best spend our time. For we seem never to have enough time, once we see that in time we can choose either to acquire treasure or lose it.

And we see that there is no way we can acquire true virtue except through charity for our neighbors. We have learned that charity from knowing God, because in God's goodness we have seen and have come to know that his boundless love reaches out not just to us but to everyone, our friends and enemies alike...In our concern for them we steal time from ourselves—time, that is, that we might have had for our own comfort, any comfort new or old—and we give that time to our neighbors.<sup>4</sup>

Catherine makes it very clear here that the real conflict we face is not between action and contemplation, but between selfishness and love. We often say that we don't have enough time to pray or to respond to the endless needs of those around us. But if we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that we actually spend a great deal of time in things that are helpful neither to ourselves

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<sup>4</sup> From Letter T104/G92, To Frate Raimondo da Capua, written November or December 1377, in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 2, trans. Suzanne Noffke, OP (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), pp. 652-3.

nor to our ministry. Often bored and indifferent, we try to stimulate ourselves with momentary pleasures to make life less dull and oppressive—we choose the short-lived firecracker to the blazing furnace. Paradoxically, Catherine teaches, if we instead spent more time in contemplation, we would have more time for others. That is because rather than letting the fire of love smolder, we let God stoke the flame of love in our hearts, filling us with a great energy we didn't know was possible. Life becomes an exciting and urgent opportunity to do as much good for others as we can, motivated not by pride and workaholism but because we're madly in love, and as Catherine discovered, the only way we can show our love and do something good for God (since God doesn't need or get anything from us) is by loving our neighbor in need. Of course, we can't do everything, but guided by the Word, we will have clarity about how best to use our time, and we will not hesitate to put ourselves 100% into that work.

In case all this still seems too theoretical, Catherine concludes her letter to Raymond (whom she calls “dearest father and remiss son”!) with some very practical advice:

Realize your need to dwell in knowledge of yourself, and to offer continual humble prayer. You have to treasure your cell and come to know the truth, and avoid all company except what is necessary for the salvation of souls, to rescue them from the hands of the devil in holy confession. Where that is concerned, find your pleasure with publicans and sinners. As for other people, love many of them but associate with few. Don't forget the divine office in the proper time and place. Don't be slow or careless when you have things to do for God and in service to your neighbors, either. But though you do have business to attend to, find refuge in your cell and don't be gadding about under the pretext of virtue.<sup>5</sup>

Dominican life is not easy to do well, and it doesn't just happen because we happen to have taken vows and live together. Being fully contemplative and fully active entails an intense level of conscientiousness, of honest reflection upon what we're doing and why. Yes, we're all busy with many things. Yes, we have physical and psychological limitations that keep us from meeting our ideals consistently. But we have something worth striving for. And in our amazing sister Catherine, we have living proof that we don't have to choose between being contemplative, active, or some watered-down, mediocre hybrid of both. If we're going to be true preachers, Catherine teaches us, we first have to attend to the fire within, letting God fill us with love for him and the world he loves. Then we will more effectively and joyfully go about the Order's mission: to set the world ablaze with knowledge and love of Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 656.