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St. Catherine of Siena

The Dialogue

ST. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) lived in a time of extraordinary troubles and turmoil. The black plague devastated Italy, civil wars among the city states raged unceasingly, and the Church was on the brink of disintegration.

In her native city of Siena she was known for her piety and for her zealous care for the victims of the plague. Although she became a member of the Dominican religious order, she continued to live and work outside of the convent. Her influence spread beyond Siena. She took an active part in Church affairs and in politics not only through personal encounters but also through numerous letters addressed to popes, kings, governors, and military leaders, upbraiding them for their failures and offering advice and counsel.

She became involved with Church policy at the highest level. She reproached Pope Gregory XI so strenuously for not ending the so-called "exile" of the papacy (when for almost seventy years the popes resided in Avignon in France) that he at last gave in to her scolding and moved to Rome in 1377. With equally vigorous indignation she wrote to kings and military leaders, pointing out that it was their responsibility to stop warfare among Christians and to unite in resuming the crusades against the Muslims.

St. Catherine's role in politics and in the Church was an important one. But perhaps of even more importance and enduring influence was her role as a leading figure in the history of religious mysticism. Her Dialogue, from which the following selection is taken, describes her mystical experience as if she (or her soul, as she prefers to say) were actually conversing with God. She writes of her experience as a withdrawal into the "inner cell" of her being where she communes with God in an intensely personal relationship that transcends the rituals of formal religious practice.

The Dialogue gives an insight into the inner life of the religious mystic and an understanding of the strength of the motivations of those who, like St. Catherine, lead lives of unceasing and inflexible dedication to their religious beliefs. Canonized by the Church in 1461 and declared a patron saint of Italy in 1849 by Pope Pius XII, her memory and influence continue to the present day.

As the soul¹ comes to know herself she also knows God better, for she sees how good he has been to her. In the gentle mirror of God she sees her own dignity: that through no merit of hers but by his creation she is the image of God. And in the mirror of God's goodness she sees as well her own unworthiness, the work of her own sin. 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 with the eye of understanding sees all the more clearly her own defects because of the purity she sees in him.

Now as light and knowledge grew more intense in this soul, a sweet bitterness was both heightened and mellowed. The hope that first Truth had given her mellowed it. But as a flame burns higher the more fuel is fed it, the fire in this soul grew so great that her body could not have contained it. She could not, in fact, have survived had she not been encircled by the strength of him who is strength itself.

Thus cleansed by the fire of divine charity, which she had found in coming to know herself and God, and more hungry than ever in her hope for the salvation of the whole world and the reform of holy Church, she stood up with confidence in the presence of the supreme Father. She showed him the leprosy of holy Church and the wretchedness of the world, speaking to him as with the words of Moses:

"My Lord, turn the eye of your mercy on your people and on your mystic body, holy Church. How much greater would be your glory if

¹St. Catherine uses "her soul," "she," "that soul," as well as "I" to refer to herself.

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within
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you would pardon so many and give them the light of knowledge, then they would surely all praise you, when they see that your goodness has saved them from deadly sin and eternal damnation. How much greater this than to have praise only from my wretched self, who have sinned so much and am the cause and instrument of every evil! I beg you, divine eternal Love, to take your revenge on me, and be merciful to your people. I will not leave your presence till I see that you have been merciful to them.

"For what would it mean to me to have eternal life if death were the lot of your people, or if my faults especially and those of your creatures should bring darkness upon your bride, who is light itself? It is my will, then, and I beg it as a favor, that you have mercy on your people with the same eternal love that led you to create us in your image and likeness. You said, 'Let us make humankind in our image and likeness.' And this you did, eternal Trinity, willing that we should share all that you are, high eternal Trinity! You, eternal Father, gave us memory to hold your gifts and share your power. You gave us understanding so that, seeing your goodness, we might share the wisdom of your only-begotten Son. And you gave us free will to love what our understanding sees and knows of your truth, and so share the mercy of your Holy Spirit.

"Why did you so dignify us? With unimaginable love you looked upon your creatures within your very self, and you fell in love with us. So it was love that made you create us and give us being just so that we might taste your supreme eternal good.

"Then I see how by our sin we lost the dignity you had given us. Rebels that we were, we declared war on your mercy and became your enemies. But stirred by the same fire that made you create us, you decided to give this warring human race a way to reconciliation, bringing great peace out of our war. So you gave us your only-begotten Son, your Word, to be mediator between us and you. He became our justice taking on himself the punishment for our injustices. He offered you the obedience you required of him in clothing him with our humanity, eternal Father, taking on our likeness and our human nature! "O depth of love! What heart could keep from breaking at the sight of your greatness descending to the lowliness of our humanity? We are your image, and now by making yourself one with us you have become our image, veiling your eternal divinity in the wretched cloud and dung heap of Adam. And why? For love! You, God, became human and we

have been made divine! In the name of this unspeakable love, then, I beg you—I would force you even!—to have mercy on your creatures." God let himself be forced by her tears and chained by her holy desire. And turning to her with a glance at once full of mercy and of sadness he said:

"I want you to understand this, my daughter: I created humankind anew in the blood of my only-begotten Son and reestablished them in grace, but they have so scorned the graces I gave them and still give them! They go from bad to worse, from sin to sin, constantly repaying me with insults. And they not only fail to recognize my graces for what they are, but sometimes even think I am abusing them—I who want nothing but their sanctification! I tell you it will go harder for them in view of the grace they have received, and they will be deserving of greater punishment. They will be more severely punished now that they have been redeemed by my Son's blood than they would have been before that redemption, before the scar of Adam's sin was removed.

"It is only reasonable that those who receive more should give more in return, and the greater the gift, the greater the bond of indebtedness. How greatly were they indebted to me, then, since I had given them their very existence, creating them in my image and likeness! They owed me glory, but they stole it from me and took it to themselves instead. They violated the obedience I had laid on them and so became my enemies. But with humility I destroyed their pride: I stooped to take on their humanity, rescued them from their slavery to the devil, and made them free. And more than this—can you see?—through this union of the divine nature with the human, God was made human and humanity was made God."

Then that soul stood before the divine majesty deeply joyful and strengthened in her new knowledge. What hope she had found in the divine mercy! What unspeakable love she had experienced! For she had seen how God, in his love and his desire to be merciful to humankind in spite of their enmity toward him, had given his servants a way to force his goodness and calm his wrath. So she was glad and fearless in the face of the world's persecution, knowing that God was on her side. And the fire of her holy longing grew so strong that she would not rest there, but with holy confidence made her plea for the whole world. . . .

"Have mercy, eternal God, on your little sheep, good shepherd that you are! Do not delay with your mercy for the world, for already it almost seems they can no longer survive! Everyone seems bereft of

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Rebels over heads but

force of mercy soul

long of fall of mankind

love & mercy

any oneness in charity with you, eternal Truth, or even with
other: I mean, whatever love they have for each other has no ground
in you."

Then God, like one drunk with love for our good, found a way
fire up an even greater love and sorrow in that soul. He showed
with what love he had created us (as we have already begun to tell
he said:

"See how they all lash out at me! And I created them with
burning love and gave them grace and gifts without number—
freely, though I owed them nothing! But see, daughter, how they
back at me with every sort of sin, but most of all with their wretched
and hateful selfishness, that breeding ground of every evil, and
this selfish love they have poisoned the whole world. I have shown
how love of me bears every good that is brought to birth for others. In
the same principle this sensual selfishness (which is born of pride just
my love is born of charity) is the bearer of every evil.

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"This evil they do by means of other people. For love of me and love
of others are inseparable. And those who have not loved me have cut
themselves off as well from any love of their neighbors. This is why
said—and I explained it to you—that every good and every evil is done
by means of your neighbors.

"How many charges I could bring against humankind! For they have
received nothing but good from me, and they repay me with every sort
of hateful evil. But I have told you that my wrath would be softened by
the tears of my servants, and I say it again: You, my servants, come into
my presence laden with your prayers, your eager longing, your sorrow
over their offense against me as well as their own damnation, and so
you will soften my divinely just wrath.

"Know that no one can escape my hands, for I am who I am, whereas
you have no being at all of yourselves. What being you have is my
doing; I am the Creator of everything that has any share in being. But
sin is not of my making, for sin is nonbeing. Sin is unworthy of any
love, then, because it has no part in me. Therefore, my creatures offend
me when they love sin, which they should not love, and hate me, to
whom they owe love because I am supremely good and gave them
being with such burning love. But they cannot escape me: Either I will
have them in justice because of their sin, or I will have them in mercy.
"Open the eye of your understanding, then, and look at my hand,
and you will see that what I have told you is true."

So in obedience to the most high Father, she raised her eyes, and she
saw within his closed fist the entire world. And God said:
"My daughter, see now and know that no one can be taken away
from me. Everyone is here as I said, either in justice or in mercy. They
are mine; I created them, and I love them ineffably. And so, in spite of
their wickedness, I will be merciful to them because of my servants, and
I will grant what you have asked of me with such love and sorrow."

The fire within that soul blazed higher and she was beside herself as if
drunk, at once gloriously happy and grief-stricken. She was happy in
her union with God, wholly submerged in his mercy and savoring his
vast goodness; but to see such goodness offended brought her grief. She
knew, though, that God had shown her his creatures' sinfulness to
rouse her to intensify her concern and longing. And so she offered
thanks to the divine majesty.

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As she felt her emotions so renewed in the eternal Godhead, the force
of her spirit made her body break into a sweat. (For her union with God
was more intimate than was the union between her soul and her body.)
The holy fire of love grew so fierce within her that its heat made her
sweat water, but it was not enough. She longed to see her body sweat
blood, so she said to herself:

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"Alas, my soul! You have frittered your whole life away, and for this
have all these great and small evils come upon the world and holy
Church! So I want you to heal them now with a sweat of blood."

Indeed, this soul remembered well what Truth had taught her: that
she should always know herself and God's goodness at work in her, and
that the medicine by which he willed to heal the whole world and to
soothe his wrath and divine justice was humble, constant, holy prayer.
So, spurred on by holy desire, she roused herself even more to open the
eye of her understanding. She gazed into divine charity and there she
saw and tasted how bound we are to love and seek the glory and praise
of God's name through the salvation of souls. . . .

[And God said:] "You are the workers I have hired for the vineyard
of holy Church. When I gave you the light of holy baptism I sent you by
my grace to work in the universal body of Christianity. You received
your baptism within the mystic body of holy Church by the hands of
my ministers, and these ministers I have sent to work with you. You are
to work in the universal body. They, however, have been placed within
the mystic body to shepherd your souls by administering the blood to
you through the sacraments you receive from them, and by rooting out

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from you the thorns of deadly sin and planting grace within you. They are my workers in the vineyard of your souls, ambassadors for the vineyard of holy Church.

"Do you know what course I follow, once my servants have completely given themselves to the teaching of the gentle loving Word? I prune them, so that they will bear much fruit—cultivated fruit, not wild. Just as the gardener prunes the branch that is joined to the vine so that it will yield more and better wine, but cuts off and throws into the fire the branch that is barren, so do I the true gardener act. When my servants remain united to me I prune them with great suffering so that they will bear more and better fruit, and virtue will be proved in them. But those who bear no fruit are cut off and thrown into the fire. . . ."

"Keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard. But every one is joined to your neighbors' vineyards without any dividing lines. They are so joined together, in fact, that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbors.

"All of you together make up one common vineyard, the whole Christian assembly, and you are all united in the vineyard of the mystic body of holy Church from which you draw your life. In this vineyard is planted the vine, which is my only-begotten Son, into whom you must be engrafted. Unless you are engrafted into him you are rebels against holy Church, like members that are cut off from the body and rot.

"It is true that while you have time you can get yourselves out of the stench of sin through true repentance and recourse to my ministers. They are the workers who have the keys to the wine cellar, that is, the blood poured forth from this vine. (And this blood is so perfect in itself that you cannot be deprived of its benefits through any fault in the minister.)

"It is charity that binds you to true humility—the humility that is found in knowing yourself and me. See, then, that it is as workers that I have sent you all. And now I am calling you again, because the world is failing fast. The thorns have so multiplied and have choked the seed so badly that it will produce no fruit of grace at all.

"I want you, therefore, to be true workers. With deep concern help to till the souls in the mystic body of holy Church. I am calling you to this because I want to be merciful to the world as you have so earnestly begged me."

And the soul, restless in her great love, answered:

"O immeasurably tender love! Who would not be set afire with such love? What heart could keep from breaking? You, deep well of charity,

it seems you are so madly in love with your creatures that you could not live without us! Yet you are our God, and have no need of us. Your greatness is no greater for our well-being, nor are you harmed by any harm that comes to us, for you are supreme eternal Goodness. What could move you to such mercy? Neither duty nor any need you have of us (we are sinful and wicked debtors!)—but only love!

"If I see clearly at all, supreme eternal Truth, it is I who am the thief, and you have been executed in my place. For I see the Word, your Son, nailed to a cross. And you have made him a bridge for me, as you have shown me, wretched servant that I am! My heart is breaking and yet cannot break for the hungry longing it has conceived for you! . . ."