

Self-knowledge and knowledge of God:

The core teaching of Saint Catherine of Siena

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Introduction

Saint Catherine of Siena (1347 - 1380) is one of the most fascinating personalities in Church history, for several reasons. Not only was she a great mystic, a woman of prayer, tireless in her service for her brothers and sisters in humanity and passionate in her love for them, for God and for the Church, she was also involved in the affairs of society to an unusual extent for a woman in her time, and was the first woman, together with Teresa of Avila, to be given the title Doctor of the Church.

Many attempts have been made to identify the central theme of Catherine's teaching, and not all scholars agree on it.¹ However, one often mentioned, and one which is linked to most or even all of the other suggestions, is the concept of self-knowledge and knowledge of God. It is on this theme, therefore, that I will focus in this essay.

To begin with, I will give a brief biography of Catherine and present the sources to her teaching. Secondly, I will consider the theme of self-knowledge and knowledge of God, and thirdly I will outline two other important themes, namely truth and love of neighbour, and their relation to the doctrine of self-knowledge and knowledge of God.

Catherine of Siena, the woman and the works

Catherine was born in Siena, Italy, on March 25th 1347. She was the 24th of 25

¹ Cf. Thomas McDermott, OP, *Catherine of Siena: Spiritual Development in Her Life and Teaching* (New York/Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), pp. 79 - 80.

children of Jacopo Benincasa and his wife Lapa. Catherine's twin sister, Giovanna, died shortly after birth. It quickly became clear that this was no ordinary child. Already at the age of six she had a vision of the royal Christ appearing in the sky over the Dominican church in Siena, a vision that would mark her for the rest of her life. A year later she made a vow of virginity, and gradually during childhood and adolescence, she began to lead the life of penance and prayer that would prepare her for and sustain her in the mission that was to be hers. In 1363/64, Catherine joined the Dominican lay movement for women, the Mantellate, in Siena. Around the time she received the Dominican habit, she began a three-year period of seclusion in a room in the family house, during which she had several mystical experiences, most notably the mystical espousals with Christ. This experience in a way inaugurated a new phase in Catherine's life. She now re-joined her family in daily life and also began exercising a ministry of charity outside the house, caring for the sick and needy. She maintained an intense prayer life and received people for spiritual counselling at home, as well as giving advice and admonitions through letters. She was passionate for the reform of the somewhat decadent Church of her time and for peace, and eventually she would get involved both in peace-making on a secular level and between the state of Florence and the Church. She also made great efforts to get the Pope to move back to Rome from Avignon in France, where he was currently staying. Catherine ended her life in Rome April 29th 1380 at the age of 33, worn out by her intense life of prayer, penance and service.²

Our sources to Catherine's spiritual teaching are above all her own writings, either written by her own hand or dictated to one of her secretaries. These include the

² All of the above information has been found in *Catherine of Siena: Passion for the Truth, Compassion for Humanity, selected spiritual writings*, ed. annot. and intro. by Mary O'Driscoll, OP (New York: New City Press, 1993), pp. 139 - 141 and Suzanne Noffke, Introduction to *The Dialogue*, trans. and intro. Suzanne Noffke, OP, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press,

great work *The Dialogue*, referred to by Catherine herself simply as "my book",³ a collection of almost four hundred letters addressed to all kinds of people, from family members and friends, via priests, religious and prostitutes, to popes and secular authorities,⁴ and lastly a collection of about twenty prayers, usually spoken out loud by Catherine at prayer and put into writing by her followers.⁵ In addition to her own works, the biographies, most notably Raymond of Capua's *Legenda Major* and the *Libellus de Supplementum* and *Legenda Minor* of Tommaso d'Antonio Nacci da Siena, commonly known as Caffarini, along with the material from the canonisation process, are important sources to Catherine's life and spirituality.⁶ Catherine's life was very much an expression of her teaching, or rather - following the Dominican device "*contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere*" - what she taught was what she had learned through her own experience of God in prayer and thus what she herself strove to live out.⁷ It follows from this that the biographical sources, while being written in the genre of medieval hagiography and demanding to be read and interpreted within that context,⁸ are not unimportant for the comprehension of her spiritual doctrine.

The way of perfection: knowledge of self and God

According to her great friend, confessor and biographer Raymond of Capua OP, Catherine's "fundamental maxim of the spiritual life taught her by our Lord at the outset"⁹, is what Jesus told her one day when she was in prayer: "Do you know, daughter, who you are and who I am? If you know these two things you have

1980), pp. 3 - 7.

³ Noffke, Introduction to *The Dialogue*, p. 11.

⁴ O'Driscoll, Introduction to *Passion for the Truth*, p. 19.

⁵ Suzanne Noffke, Introduction to *The prayers of Catherine of Siena*, trans. and ed. by Suzanne Noffke OP, 2nd edn. (Lincoln NE: Authors Choice Press, 2001), p. xi.

⁶ Noffke, Introduction to *The Dialogue*, p. 2.

⁷ Cf. McDermott, p. 231.

⁸ Cf. McDermott, p. 17.

⁹ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans., intro, and annot. by Conleth

beatitude in your grasp. You are she who is not, and I am he who is."¹⁰ Many modern day catherinian scholars would agree with Raymond that this is a very central or even the central aspect of Catherine's teaching.¹¹ We find the theme expressed in her own words at the beginning of *The Dialogue*:

A soul rises up restless with tremendous desire for God's honor and the salvation of souls. She has for some time exercised herself in virtue and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God's goodness toward her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it. But there is no way she can so savor and be enlightened by this truth as in continual humble prayer, grounded in the knowledge of herself and of God.¹²

A little later, she recounts how God the Father addresses her these words: "Here is the way, if you would come to perfect knowledge and enjoyment of me, eternal Life: Never leave the knowledge of yourself. Then, put down as you are in the valley of humility, you will know me in yourself, and from this knowledge you will draw all that you need."¹³ She returns to this theme at numerous occasions throughout the entire text of *The Dialogue*, and it is also found in many of her letters and in her prayers, either explicitly expressed or simply implicitly present as the source from

Kearns, OP (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1980), 1, X, 92, p. 85.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ For a list see O'Driscoll, Introduction to *Passion for the Truth*, p. 13, n. 15.

¹² Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. and intro. Suzanne Noffke, OP, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 1, p. 25.

¹³ *Dialogue 4*, p. 29.

which her prayer flows. As Thomas McDermott writes:

For Catherine, self-knowledge is the foundation of prayer as well as an expression of the Christian's basic attitude or stance in life. The reader may be surprised at how seldom Catherine explicitly mentions prayer in the *Dialogue*. The reason is that self-knowledge, to a certain extent, is prayer.¹⁴

Knowing who we are - or rather, that we are not - is then the starting point for spiritual progress. But self-knowledge alone is not enough. Already in the first of the above quotes from *The Dialogue*, we see how self-knowledge and knowledge of God are intimately linked. Catherine "dwells in the cell of self-knowledge in order to better know God's goodness towards her". Knowing herself as she is, in her nothingness, she sees how tremendous God's love and goodness toward her is, both in the fact that God created her - she who is not has being because God wills it - and further on in the incarnation and redemptive suffering of Christ for her sake.¹⁵ Through the knowledge of herself, she learns to know the truth about God. So the two knowledges are intertwined, as it were, and mutually stimulating one another. According to Mary O'Driscoll "the interconnection is so great that we can speak of one knowledge rather than two."¹⁶ Knowledge of ourselves leads to knowledge of God, and knowledge of God leads to a new and deeper knowledge of ourselves. "As the soul 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

¹⁴ McDermott, p. 118.

¹⁵ Cf. *Dialogue* 4, pp. 29 - 30 and *Life* 1, X, 93 - 96, pp. 86 - 89.

¹⁶ Mary O'Driscoll, OP: "Mercy for the World, A Study of Intercession in the Life and Writings of Catherine of Siena" (doctoral dissertation, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, 1981), p. 11.

creation she is the image of God."¹⁷

From this it should be clear that Catherine's quest for self-knowledge is not mere introspection, search for psychological self-understanding or simply self-centredness.¹⁸ She does not, like Narcissus, contemplate her own reflection in the water and become infatuated with admiration for herself. Rather, looking at her own reflection, she falls in love with the water reflecting her, the peaceful sea that is God.¹⁹ She writes to Raymond of Capua about how the soul seeing "not self for self's sake, but self for God and God for self [...] is then moved to love self in God and God in self, like a man who, on looking into the water, sees his image there and seeing himself loves and delights in himself. If he is wise, he will be moved to love the water rather than himself, for had he not first seen himself, he could not have loved or been delighted by himself"²⁰

The text from this letter to Raymond also shows that just as far away from contemplation of her own navel this quest is, just as far is it from being a depressing self-scrutiny leading to self-rejection. Seeing herself in God, Catherine sees the beauty and dignity given to her by her Creator and delights in it, just as God delights in her. Of course, looking at oneself in this mirror that is God, one also becomes aware of "the defects that mar the beauty of the soul".²¹ This should lead to humility, but can also bring discouragement or even despair. That is why Catherine insists that self-knowledge without knowledge of God will lead to confusion of mind²² and that "if self-knowledge and the thought of sin are not seasoned with remembrance of the

¹⁷ *Dialogue* 13, p. 48.

¹⁸ O'Driscoll, introduction to *Passion for the Truth*, p.14.

¹⁹ Catherine of Siena, Letter T226, quoted in McDermott, p. 124. See also Prayer 2 in *The prayers of Catherine of Siena*, trans. and ed. by Suzanne Noffke OP, 2nd edn. (Lincoln NE: Authors Choice Press, 2001), p. 18; and *Dialogue* 79, p.147.

²⁰ Letter T226 quoted in McDermott, p.124.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Letter T49 in *Passion for the Truth*, p. 26.

blood and hope for mercy, the result is bound to be confusion."²³ God is described by Catherine as a mad lover,²⁴ and she talks about Christ being drunk with desire for our salvation to the extent that he ran to the cross.²⁵ In Christ, and especially in his blood shed for us, she sees God's love for his creatures fully revealed and made manifest. He is the bridge given by the Father to make it possible for all people to reach their goal: loving union with him.²⁶ There is then no reason for despair. In fact, the deeper the awareness of her own radical existential and moral poverty, the more acute the sense of God's love for her, the more gratuitous and overwhelming this love appears to be and the more exuberant the joy and gratitude of being so loved.

If we live by the truth and in love...

Self-knowledge and knowledge of God is nothing other than an affair of truth, another big theme for Catherine. As a Dominican, she is concerned with truth, *Veritas*, which is the motto of the Dominican Order. Among her favourite names for God and Jesus are Truth, First Truth and Gentle Truth²⁷ and what she seeks at the outset of the Dialogue is to "pursue truth and clothe herself in it [...] to know and follow truth more courageously"²⁸. The double knowledge is simply to come to know the truth about oneself and God, oneself as creature and redeemed, God as Creator and Redeemer.²⁹ The goal of the spiritual life is that God's truth be fulfilled in God's creatures,³⁰ that is that human beings, created in God's image and likeness should

²³ *Dialogue* 66, p. 124.

²⁴ *Dialogue* 153, p. 325.

²⁵ Letter T225 quoted in Paul Murray, OP, *The New Wine of Dominican Spirituality: A Drink Called Happiness* (New York: Burns & Oats, 2006), p. 164.

²⁶ The blood of Christ and Christ as the bridge are two major aspects of Catherine's teaching that I will not develop further here because they are too vast for the purpose of this assignment.

²⁷ *Dialogue* 2, n. 9, p. 27 and McDermott, p. 80.

²⁸ *Dialogue* 1, p. 25.

²⁹ O'Driscoll, "Mercy for the World", p. 10.

³⁰ Letter T193 in *I, Catherine: Selected Writings of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. by Kenelm Foster and Mary John Ronayne (London: Collins, 1980), p. 184.

come to enjoy their true destiny which is to share God's very own life and goodness.³¹

"[O]ne who knows this truth never forgets it but ever loves it and follows it, treading in the steps of Christ crucified,"³² Catherine writes. This truth is revealed to us in Christ and his blood, as mentioned above, and we come to know it in the cell of self-knowledge and by the light of faith.³³ Then, "knowing it one loves it, and so comes to love what God loves and hate what he hates."³⁴

The first among the things God loves is our neighbour. Effective love of neighbour, including refusal to judge others, is another big catherinian theme linked to the doctrine of the double knowledge. It has been shown above how dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge makes a person aware of how great God's love for him or her is. From this experience of being loved is born a desire to love back, but it is impossible for the creature to return to the Creator the same gratuitous love with which he or she was first loved. Therefore, says the Father, "[...] I have put you among your neighbours: so that you can do for them what you cannot do for me - that is, love them without any concern for thanks and without looking for any profit for yourself. And whatever you do for them I will consider done for me."³⁵ So, for Catherine, there is an intrinsic relationship between love of God and of others. One's love of one's neighbours is the measure and litmus-test of one's love for God.

Seeing her own beauty and dignity in God, also leads Catherine to acknowledge the beauty and dignity of all human beings,³⁶ and this is another impetus for her to be actively concerned with their welfare, both in this life and the next. She tells Raymond of Capua that nothing in this world could possibly compare to the human

³¹ McDermott, p. 80.

³² Letter T193 in *I, Catherine*, p. 184.

³³ *ibid.* and *Dialogue* 98, p. 185.

³⁴ Letter T193 in *I, Catherine*, p. 184.

³⁵ *Dialogue* 64, p. 121.

³⁶ O'Driscoll: "Mercy for the world", p. 10.

soul in loveliness and that if he were to see it, as she did, she was convinced he would willingly die a hundred times to save it.³⁷ Loving God can for Catherine never be separated from loving others. In fact, the more a one gives oneself in effective, loving service to others, the closer one is united with God.³⁸ Catherine more than once, both in her letters and in the *Dialogue*, scolds people who seem to want to seek God in their private prayer while neglecting their neighbour's needs.³⁹

Finally, self-knowledge is in the service of love of others because it makes one humble, and humility is the mother and nurse of charity.⁴⁰ This humility should lead to refusal to judge others, and to an appreciation and acceptance of the different ways by which people go to God. Judgement belongs to God alone, and nothing in the world can make it right for us to judge the state of another's soul or their intentions.⁴¹

Conclusion: The truth will set you free

To sum up, one could say that the maxim of the double knowledge may well be said to be at the core of Catherine of Siena's teaching as a sort of hinge on which other important elements of it hang. Coming to know one's own nothingness and sinfulness, leads to knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer, and appreciation of God's tremendous love for each person, especially revealed in Christ crucified. This knowledge of God makes one see the beauty and dignity of the human being created in God's image and likeness, opens for recognition of the value of every other person and to a greater love for them. It also gives humility that leads to compassion and a refusal to judge. The desire to love God is an impetus to live that love out through service of neighbour.

³⁷ *Life* 2, IV, 151, p. 146.

³⁸ *Dialogue* 7, p. 36.

³⁹ See e.g. Letter T326 in *Passion for the Truth*, pp. 46 - 47 and *Dialogue* 69, pp. 130 - 132.

⁴⁰ *Dialogue* 4, p. 29.

Like the Gospel itself, this is a truly liberating doctrine, freeing the one who lives by it from his or her false ideas - too small or too big - about themselves, and from false images of God, setting them free to become fully human and to live the greatness to which they are called: to know and love as God knows and loves.

The Swiss theologian and spiritual writer Maurice Zundel writes: "[...] to be free is to live and move in God, in the infinite space of Love [...]"⁴². For me, this could well be a description of Catherine of Siena and of the freedom her spiritual doctrine brought her and would bring to all who avail themselves of the wisdom she passes on.

⁴¹ *Dialogue* 105, p. 197.

⁴² Maurice Zundel, *Le poème de la Sainte Liturgie*, ([Paris]: Desclée, 1998), p. 124, translation mine.

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