

Consider Catherine Cambridge University Sermon 30 April, 1995

Ann Loades

Yesterday, 29 April, happens to mark the anniversary of the death at the age of thirty-three, of Catherine of Siena, in Rome in 1380. And for that day we find her listed in the Church of England's Alternative Service Book under the heading of 'Lesser Festivals and Commemorations' as a mystic — a designation she shares with Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila. In the Roman Catholic tradition she also shares with the latter the dignity of having in 1970 been accorded the title of Doctor of the Church. I note in passing that no women in the Church of England's list are yet deemed to have been Teachers of the Faith!¹

By comparison with Teresa, Anglicans at least seem to have neglected Catherine and what she may represent for us — with the notable exception of that remarkable nineteenth century reformer, Josephine Butler, whose own day of commemoration falls on December 30. With these preliminary points in mind, therefore, I would like to take the opportunity provided by this occasion to make a small contribution to the consideration of Catherine.

Catherine's book, her *Dialogue*, a biography and other memoirs of her, were among the earliest books in print, her *Dialogue* indeed in an English version by 1519.² The book, the biography and the memoirs, copies of her letters and prayers, — all would be needed by those who wanted to advance her claim to sanctity, declared as it happened some eighty years after her death. And all these writings are now available to us in new translations and editions to provoke us to ask in our time what we might now make of her.

She is supposed to have been born on March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation in 1347, just before one of the grim years of the Black Death. She had a twin sister who died when the babies were only a few days old. One more daughter was to be born, named Giovanna after the twin who had died, but who was herself to die when Catherine was about sixteen. So she was almost the youngest in a family of twenty-

five. To a brother at odds with their mother later in life she was to write:

You forget her labour in bringing you into the world, the milk with which she fed you, and all the trouble she had in rearing you and the others. You may want to say that she didn't look after us, but I say that isn't true. Her great care and concern for you and your brother have cost her dearly. And even if it were true, *you* are still the one who is under an obligation to her, not she to you. She did not get her flesh from you, but gave you hers.³

Of the children running round her mother's kitchen she was to say, 'If decency allowed it, I would never stop kissing them', but she knew the hazards of losing them, of bereavement, and of her own possible death — a much loved sister died in childbirth — and such eventualities might have helped to prompt her, as it did other young women, to think she would prefer marriage to Christ. And there were those inside as well as outside her family to encourage her.

There was a Dominican church in Siena, and the Friars Preachers there included a young man, Tommaso della Fonte, who had been brought up in her own family after he'd been orphaned by an outbreak of plague. It was Tommaso who encouraged her to cut off her hair, one of the ways she could show her family of her determined resistance to their plans for her. She could, surely, only have got away with it because she was utterly secure in their love, not least that of her father who allowed her a form of seclusion in her own home for about three years. Of course Christ would later address her as 'My daughter Catherine', 'O daughter whom I so love', 'O dearest gentlest daughter'!

This daughter was being transformed from the family's darling into a different and rather unexpected person, unnerving to herself as to them, and to her Dominican protectors and confessors. These in particular were crucial to her future role, for without them what she undertook would have been simply impossible for a mere laywoman, unmarried or not. We might compare the fate of Margery Kempe in fifteenth century England.

So that period of seclusion depended not only on her father and family's goodwill, but on that of the Dominicans. They found themselves confronted with a determinedly unmarriageable and perhaps almost unmanageable sixteen year old, clever, imaginative, passionate and therefore deeply ascetic, who wanted her way with them too. Not for her what was then on offer as the Dominican vocation for women.

Dominic himself, we may recall, had been willing to provide a house of his Order for women retrieved from the Cathar heresy, and the Dominicans had negotiated their way through all the unpredictable as

well as predictable problems experienced by the old and the new orders attempting to cope or refusing to cope with the religious aspirations of women.⁴ It was to the credit of the fifth Master General of the order of Friars Preachers, Humbert, author of a significant text *On the Formation of Preachers*, who recognised the obligations of the Order to women.⁵ However, these mendicants committed themselves to the support of houses for women who were to be enclosed contemplatives.

The Order had claimed for themselves both preaching and the licensing of preachers (rather than leaving all this to bishops alone) under the rubric, as it were, of Paul's text in second Corinthians: 'We preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ our Lord'. They had moved into the major cities where they could tackle the intellectual battles of their day as they begged for their subsistence. It was as yet inconceivable, unfortunately, that there could be priories where women too would study, so that they also might teach (if not actually preach), hear confession and counsel penitents. But it looks as though this is just the sort of vocation Catherine was looking for — so she managed the next best thing.

She won for herself association with those women, usually widows, who wore the black and white habit of the Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic, lived in their own homes and served the needs of the sick and poor. These women themselves were understandably cautious about taking on one so young, but were persuaded; and Catherine's period of seclusion before she rejoined her family and neighbours was a very important period of preparation for what she presumably thought would be the kind of life these Sisters led. She had time to learn to read — most likely texts with which she was already familiar from having heard them, such as the liturgy, and the New Testament, all in time to be transposed as we find them in her writings, into her own Sieneese vernacular. And she had time to learn from the Friars. She was, so far as I can see, beginning to get her intellectual framework together.

For instance, as she was later to put it, God says to her (amongst many other things) 'Open your mind's eye and look within me, and you will see the dignity and beauty of my reasoning creature'.⁶ Even more movingly, perhaps, her emendation of Luke 1.38: 'I will tell you something. When God created man, he said to him: "Be it done according to your will", that is, "I make you free, subject only to myself."' Or again, she tells someone that Christ 'has clothed us in the strongest of all clothing: in the garment of love, fastened with the clasp of free will (so that you do it up and undo it as you choose). If a man wants to keep it on, he can do that too.'⁷

What she was also doing was learning what were for her the

difficult virtues of courage and patience, some of the virtues she would need in order to care for the afflicted, and for the other tasks she was quite unable to foresee. Above all, she practised the penances which would bring about the dispossession of self which would free her for others. So she asks Christ, 'My Lord, where were you when my heart was disturbed by all those temptations?' He replies, 'I was in your heart.' She's not satisfied. 'May your truth always be preserved Lord, and all reverence to your Majesty ... but how can I possibly believe that you were in my heart when it was full of ugly, filthy thoughts?' He helps her to work it out. 'Did those thoughts and temptations bring content or sorrow, delight or displeasure to your heart?' She replies, 'The greatest sorrow and displeasure.' 'Well then', says the Lord, 'Who was hidden at the centre of your heart?''⁸

Inevitably the serious practice of her religion, intellectual, affective, practical as it was, transformed her. Already pushing at all sorts of boundaries, she became an increasingly controversial figure. Whilst she succoured the poor and the sick, nursed and buried victims of the plague, she began to collect around herself her own 'family'. There were two widows, amongst the first to act as her secretaries, Franciscans as well as Dominicans, the occasional poet and painter; and that all too English-seeming near recluse, William Flete, Austin friar and Bachelor of Cambridge University. She had an astonishing capacity to secure the protection and the resources she needed, not least for when she began to travel.

A particularly significant visit must have been the first major trip, which was to Florence, to a Chapter of the Friars Preachers in May 1374. Raymond of Capua may already have known her in Siena, but from about this time, and once convinced of her authority, this future Master General of his Order became first her confessor and later her biographer.

What, briefly, may we attend to in the latter part of her life? It coincides with the disastrous conflict between Florence and the Holy See, the papacy in Avignon, political misrule, and pitiless slaughter in the city states of Italy. Hence her attempts to influence the course of events by letter writing, and her travels between Florence, Pisa, Avignon and Rome. It is this context that she would insist, 'You know that peace is given with the mouth''⁹ — to mercenaries, to brutal churchmen, to corrupt governors. The last decade of her life corresponds with the period when Wyclif entered royal service, and came to the attention of Gregory XI. We might be hard put to it to decide between the relative merits of Wyclif's and Catherine's rhetoric of denunciation. To that same Pope (*dolcissimo babbo mio* — roughly, 'sweetest daddy mine')

she writes in effect that his government stinks.

She tried to divert combatants and mercenaries into another crusade. Medieval maps after all showed Jerusalem at the heart of the world, lying in the possession of Islam. We may well find that difficult without disputing her desire for peace. She wanted to reconcile clergy and laity; she hoped for some form of conciliar government in the church. She learned at last to write — at the age of thirty; and above all, she dictated, wrote, revised her book, her *Dialogue*. In her opening words:

A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God's honour 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 savour and be enlightened by this truth as in continual humble prayer, grounded in the knowledge of herself and of God. For by such prayer the soul is united with God, following in the footsteps of Christ crucified, and through desire and affection and the union of love he makes of her another himself.¹⁰

In the *Dialogue* as in her letters we find her theological reason for whatever she claims to be necessary for the form of the church of her day, and the exercise of its authority. It is because the church holds the 'keys of the blood', mediates to humanity God's unimaginably generous means of redemption.¹¹ And for me I think, her utter conviction about the truth of this is revealed in all its appalling clarity in one of her letters, written to Raymond of Capua, when she's in her late twenties, one of the very rare letters in which she describes her own actions.

You might expect to find somewhere in her work what we do in fact find in a letter to friars preaching in Lent (either 1372 or 1373) that God's Son 'rushed to give himself to the shame of the cross, and to associate with malefactors, public sinners, and outcasts of all kinds.' She adds that 'you cannot set a law or limit on charity: it is oblivious of self and quite un-self seeking.'¹² Even so, the later letter is astonishing in all its horror. For Christ's making of Catherine 'another himself' as she was somewhat dangerously to put it, a Christ who committed himself to outcasts, in a sense becomes transparent in connection with the execution of Niccolò di Toldo, a young Perugian condemned to death in Siena for speaking disrespectfully of the Sienese government. By her own account, she not only saw him through making his last confession and his last Mass, but finding him still terrified, she said to him,

‘Courage, dearest brother. We shall soon be at the wedding. *You* will be going to it bathed in the sweet blood of God’s Son and with the sweet name of Jesus on your lips. Don’t let it slip from your mind for an instant. I shall be waiting for you at the place of execution’, as indeed she was.

And she says, ‘He laid himself down with great meekness; then I stretched out his neck and bent over him, speaking to him of the blood of the Lamb. His lips murmured only “Jesus” and “Catherine”, and he was still murmuring when I received his head into my hands, while my eyes were fixed on the divine Goodness as I said: “*I will!*”’. She saw Christ receive him, the hands of the Holy Spirit sealing him into Christ’s open side. And she wrote, ‘He did such a lovely thing — one last gesture that would melt a thousand hearts (and no wonder, seeing that he was already experiencing the divine sweetness). He looked back, like a bride who pauses on the bridegroom’s threshold to look back and bow her thanks to her escort.’ Catherine envied him, left behind.¹³

I am completely incompetent to comment on Catherine’s experience of God or Christ but I find this particular incident almost overwhelming in its charity, its neighbour-love, in her capacity to commit herself to someone undergoing public execution. It is here above all, for me at least, that she proclaims Christ as her Lord, and shows herself to have been one of his servants.

- 1 See the Appendix: ‘The Church of England’s Commemoration of Saints and Heroes of the Faith’ in Richard Symonds, *Far Above Rubies* Gracewing, Leominster 1993, pp.279–281.
- 2 See Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue* tr. and introd. Suzanne Noffke O.P. Paulist, New York, 1980; *I, Catherine* ed. and tr. Kenelm Foster O.P. and Mary John Ronayne O.P. Collins, London, 1980; Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena* tr. and introd. Conleth Keams O.P., Dominican Publications, Dublin, 1980. There is also an edition of Catherine’s letters ed. Suzanne Noffke, in *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 1988.
- 3 *I, Catherine*, pp.60–61.
- 4 See ‘St. Dominic and the Order of Friars Preachers’, in C.H. Lawrence, *The Friars. The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movement on Western Society* Longman, London 1994, pp.65–88.
- 5 See ‘Humbert of Romans’ in Simon Tugwell O.P., *Ways of Imperfection. An Exploration of Christian Spirituality*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984, pp.138–151.
- 6 *The Dialogue* p.26.
- 7 *I, Catherine*, p.65, p.89.
- 8 See the version of Raymond’s *Life* pp. 101–102 used in Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls. Fourteenth-Century Saints and their Religious Milieu*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, p.177, with some interspersed comment of my own.
- 9 *Dialogue* p. 141.
- 10 *Dialogue* p. 25.
- 11 And see the chapter, ‘The Keys’ in Peter Armour, *The Door of Purgatory. A Study of Multiple Symbolism in Dante’s Purgatorio* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983, pp. 76–99.

12 *I, Catherine*, p. 55.

13 *I, Catherine*, pp.71–75. See also H. Prejean, 'Two thousand volts and apple pie', *The Tablet*, 15/22 April, 1995, pp.495–496, written by a member of a religious order, who acts as a 'spiritual advisor' to men facing execution whom she too accompanies to their deaths, having also learned to listen to the 'unspeakable stories of loss and grief and rage and guilt' experienced by the families of the victims. She argues very clearly that even those who have committed the most terrible crime of killing are more than their worst crime, and opposes capital punishment. Catherine of Siena did not of course attempt to challenge the laws which sent the convicted to their deaths, but her Christ-like compassion seems still to be of profound importance in analogous circumstances.

American Art Cultural Crisis

John Navone SJ

I American Art Reflects Crisis

Art inevitably reflects the virtues and vices of the culture that produces it. This article treats of the American cultural crisis as reflected in American art and then discusses the moral and religious implications of this crisis.

1 *Shock art*

Martha Bayles, in her *Atlantic Monthly* article 'The Shock Art Fallacy' (Feb., 1994, p. 20), affirms that "Obscenity as art is everywhere. ... Never before in the history of culture has obscenity been so pervasive." She calls attention to a *Spin* magazine jeans advertisement in which a young man brandishes a handgun over the caption "Teaching kids to KILL helps them to deal directly with reality." In the Whitney Museum Bayles finds a photographic display of penises in one room and a row of video monitors showing "transgressive" sexual practices in another. The compulsion to shock dominates popular music, movies, television, publishing, talk-shows, stand-up comedy, and video games. Whatever the cultural bomb-throwers seem to think, Bayles avers that this does

170