

Saint Catherine of Siena's Pedagogy of the Cross¹

Perry J Cahall

Introduction

In October 1970 Dominican Saint Catherine of Siena was declared by Pope Paul VI to be a “Doctor of the Church,” a title which designates her as one of the preeminent teachers of the faith in the history of the Catholic Church. This may seem an unlikely honor for someone who died at the young age of thirty-three without receiving any formal schooling, having learned how to read not until she was eighteen years old, and how to write not until she was thirty years old. Her “scholarly” output is less than impressive by modern standards, having composed one book entitled *Dialogue* which recounts mystical encounters in prayer between Catherine and God the Father, 382 extant letters, and twenty-six prayers.

Many people are familiar with some of the more extraordinary events that punctuate Catherine's meteoric lifespan. She was born on March 25, 1347 a twin and the twenty-third of twenty-five children. She consecrated her life to God at the unlikely age of seven and later she cut off her hair to avoid being married off by her family and to remain faithful to her consecration. She received the Dominican habit at the age of eighteen as a lay member of the *mantellate*, a group of third order Dominican women. She experienced mystical espousal to Christ at the age of twenty-one; two years later in 1370 she experienced a “mystical death” drinking deeply of the Lord's Passion. At the age of twenty-eight Catherine preached a crusade to the Holy Land and found her soul illuminated by an invisible stigmata granted her by Christ. A year later she embarked on efforts to persuade Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome from Avignon, France and to undertake measures of much-needed Church reform. After the pope did return to Rome and a rival French anti-pope was elected, Catherine became an advisor to Pope Urban VI, pouring herself out

¹ This paper was delivered as the Catherine of Siena Lecture at Ohio Dominican University on the evening of April 28, 2005 to commemorate the feast day of St. Catherine of Siena. Thanks are owed to Dr. Michael Dougherty and Sr. Mary Ann Fatula for their thoughtful reading of this paper and the revisions they suggested to help improve it.

as a libation in efforts to restore the unity of the Church. Finally, as her life drew to a close and her health failed to the point of being unable to ingest any food besides the Eucharist, Catherine died on April 29, 1380, offering her life for the Church which she saw as inseparable from Christ.

Many of the events in this brief survey of her life are indisputably impressive and evidence a woman of remarkable character. However, one is not dubbed a "Doctor of the Church" because of the remarkable (or the ordinary) nature of one's life. Nor does one receive this title for exceptional holiness – that is the title of "Saint." Pope Pius II had given this title to Catherine on June 29, 1461. While all of the Doctors of the Church are Saints, which shows that teachers of the faith should evidence the truth of their teachings in their lives, the title "Doctor," a Latin word meaning "teacher," denotes that the individual bearing the title has contributed *intellectual* insights that are of perennial value in assisting the faithful to live out their relationship with the Lord Jesus. The depth of insight into the mysteries of the faith provided by the Doctors of the Church allows the faithful to grow in love for Christ since the more one knows about the object of one's love the more one can love. Dominican Sister Mary O'Driscoll has noted about the title "Doctor of the Church" as it is applied to Catherine of Siena: "The significance of this declaration is immense, for it places this unschooled woman among the major Church theologians, thereby recognizing her ecclesial role as a teacher whose doctrine is relevant for the whole Church and for all time."² Why, then, does the Church present Catherine to us as a model teacher of the faith? What is the substance of her writings that prompted Pope Paul VI to recognize Saint Catherine as a Doctor of the Church?

Saint Catherine, Teacher of the Cross

In his homily on October 4, 1970, given on the occasion of proclaiming St. Catherine a Doctor of the Church, Pope Paul VI casts light on "the special excellence of her doctrine."³ In the course of pointing out the "characteristic features, the dominant themes" of Catherine's teaching he begins by noting that she is "the mystic of the Incarnate Word, and above all, of Jesus crucified."⁴ Paul VI continues by explaining, "She exalted the redeeming power of the adorable Blood

² Mary O'Driscoll, "Introduction," *Catherine of Siena: Passion for the Truth, Compassion for Humanity – selected spiritual writings* (New York: New City Press, 1993) 11.

³ Pope Paul VI, "Catherine of Siena: The Gift of Wisdom," *The Pope Speaks* 15 (1970): 198.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

of God's Son, shed on the wood of the Cross in expanding love, for the salvation of all generations of mankind."⁵ Mary O'Driscoll, O.P. corroborates this observation of Pope Paul VI when, regarding Catherine's works, she noted, "The central theme in all her writings is the love of God for humankind manifested in Christ crucified. In the light of this mystery she discusses the great truths of the Christian faith: the Trinity, creation, redemption, the Church, grace, life after death."⁶ Thus, in all of her writings Catherine takes her readers to the foot of the Cross and helps them to gaze at the Crucified Lord in order to understand all of the mysteries of the faith. She sees in the immolated and broken body of the Savior the revelation of the deepest truths about God, about the human person, and about the relationship that should exist between the two. One can then speak in truth of Saint Catherine of Siena's "pedagogy of the Cross." It is this pedagogy that this article seeks to illuminate.

The Cross Reveals the Fullness of God's Love

One aspect of Saint Catherine's writings that is immediately evident to any reader is Catherine's insistence that it is the crucified Lord who fully reveals the depths of God's love for us. It is the blood flowing from the wounds of Christ that "makes the infinite love of God for us visible."⁷ In her wonderful overview of Saint Catherine's thought Dominican Sister Mary Ann Fatula has written: "Nothing in the universe draws us more irresistibly than love. In the cross of Jesus Catherine discovered not the repugnant horror of death pushing us away, but the gracious face of love drawing us close . . . A tortured death thus paradoxically shines as the revelation of the most profound beauty."⁸ One would be hard pressed to express with more eloquence what it is that Catherine saw when she gazed upon the crucified Lord.

Catherine saw with absolute clarity that it is love alone, and not the brutality of the spikes driven through his emaciated human flesh, which held Christ pinned to the Cross. Catherine says to God the Father in her *Dialogue*, "Your mercy made your Son play death

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ O'Driscoll, 13.

⁷ Mary Ann Fatula, O.P., *Catherine of Siena's Way*, revised ed. The Way of the Christian Mystics 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 108. I can suggest no better summary of Saint Catherine of Siena's thought than the one provided in this book by Sister Mary Ann Fatula. I am especially privileged to have been able to call Sister Mary Ann a colleague for the four years that I was an Assistant Professor of Theology at Ohio Dominican University in Columbus, OH. I am indebted to Sister Mary Ann in many ways, the least of which was her willingness to read and provide comment on this paper. I am convinced that Sister Fatula is not only an astute scholar of the thought of Saint Catherine but also her mystical sister.

⁸ Ibid., 126.

against life and life against death on the wood of the cross.”⁹ Thus it is the love of the Father supporting the Son which keeps Christ on the Cross even as Jesus is uttering and fulfilling the trusting cry for help of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34). Referring to one of Catherine’s letters Sister Mary Ann Fatula notes, “No human power nailed Jesus to the cross, for earthly forces could not bind him to the wood had his own love not held him fast.”¹⁰

In the *Dialogue* Catherine says, “O abyss! O eternal Godhead! O deep sea! What more could you have given me than the gift of your very self?”¹¹ It is worthy of pointing out that in this passage Catherine notes that the crucified Lord offers himself to her *personally*. In her *Dialogue* the Father tells Catherine, “He bows his head to greet *you*, wears the crown [of thorns] to adorn *you*, stretches out his arms to embrace *you*, lets his feet be nailed that he may stand with *you*.”¹² This means that Jesus offers himself not in some general way for a vaguely identified “humanity” but instead has each and every member of humanity personally in mind as one of his friends for whom he makes the ultimate offering of love (see John 15:13). It is the recognition of this reckless personal love that Jesus has for her which takes hold of Catherine and shapes her entire life.

That the reckless love of Jesus knows no limits is made tangible on the Cross. Catherine teaches us that God could not give more than He has given on the Cross. In one of her prayers Catherine said, “Your mercy did not will that the spotless Lamb should redeem the human race with just a single drop of his blood, nor with pain in just one part of his body, but with his whole body’s pain and blood.”¹³ The white-hot pain endured by Jesus on the Cross reveals the white-hot love that burns in his heart for each of us. “Raised on high before the gaze of the entire universe, the cross of Jesus unveils infinite love vulnerable to the last measure of self-giving, as love alone shines

⁹ *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke. *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 30, p. 71. (Citations from *The Dialogue* will reference the section number of the Noffke translation followed by the page number.)

¹⁰ Fatula, 126 referring to *Letter T253/G194*, “To Messere Trincio de’ Trinci da Fuligno and to his brother Corrado.” The letters of St. Catherine of Siena are found in various collections including those compiled by Niccolò Tommasèo (T), Girolamo Gigli (G), and Eugenio Dupré Theseider (DT). A complete English translation of all of the extant letters of Saint Catherine is being published in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-), currently in two volumes. References to Saint Catherine’s letters will be to this translation unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ *Dialogue* 167, p. 365.

¹² *Dialogue* 128, p. 252. (emphasis added)

¹³ *Prayer 9*, in *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 73.

forth from every part of Jesus' torn body."¹⁴ It is "when the side of God's own Son was torn open to pour forth the last measure of his blood, [that] we could know finally and without doubt the truth of God's mercy toward us."¹⁵

What is more, the act of complete self-donating love that the Cross reveals to us what it means to call God Love (1 John 4:8). We see clearly in the Cross that the inner life of the Trinitarian Communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a life of ineffable mutual self-abandonment. This self-abandoning love lived by the three distinct Persons in the inner life of God is offered to us through the Second Person of the Trinity as he hangs on the Cross. "Jesus unveils to us the unspeakable love of the Trinity, a love whose power submits itself to our weakness so that love may draw forth the free response of love."¹⁶ It is by the free response to the Love of the Trinity offered to us on the Cross that we come to share in the divine nature (see 1 Pet 1:4).

Catherine teaches that in his act of self-abandonment Christ literally opens himself up as a libation of love offering healing to each of us. In one of her letters Catherine states: "on the tree of the cross . . . is revealed such warm love . . . that he has torn open his very body, has shed his life's blood, and with that blood has baptized and bathed us. We can and should make use of that baptism every day with continual remembrance and great love . . . in the blood we will wash away our sins and our unwillingness to suffer. There all wounds will be healed: not only will we cease to brood on them or seek revenge, but we will receive the fullness of grace to lead us along the right path."¹⁷ In a different letter Catherine writes, "Only Christ crucified was the Lamb who with unspeakable love opened up his slain body, giving himself to us as bath and as medicine, as food and as garment, and as a bed where we can rest."¹⁸ In yet another letter she counsels, "shut yourself up in the open side of God's Son, that open storeroom so full of fragrance that sin itself is made fragrant. There the bride rests in the bed of fire and blood. There she sees revealed the secret of the heart of God's Son."¹⁹ Thus Christ's offering of himself on the Cross reveals the fullness of God's love *and* makes this love accessible to us for our healing. The blood of Christ poured out on the Cross is medicine for the putrid illness of sin, his body is food to strengthen

¹⁴ Fatula, 127.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 180–181.

¹⁷ *Letter T101/G27/DT23*, "To Cardinal Iacopo Orsini," in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Vol. II, 67–68.

¹⁸ *Letter T166/G349*, "To Monna Columba of Lucca," in *ibid.*, Vol. I, 177.

¹⁹ *Letter T273/G97/DT31*, "To Frate Raimondo da Capua," in *ibid.*, 85.

us against sin, his open side is clothing to shield us from evil, and he himself is the bed on which we can find ultimate rest.

Catherine teaches that the complete personal offering of the healing love of the Cross that invites us into the life of the Trinity is extended to each of us through the sacraments which draw their efficacy from the Precious Blood of Christ poured out on the Cross.²⁰ By giving us the sacraments Christ enables us to participate in the inner life of the Triune God on this side of heaven. It is in the gift of the Eucharist in particular that Catherine said she “tasted the depths of the Trinity.”²¹ Receiving the humanity and the divinity of Jesus in the ineffable gift of the Eucharist, Catherine encountered Jesus personally offering himself to heal and nourish her from within, inviting her into ever-deepening communion with the God who is Love. Thus the sacraments make it possible to personally encounter the crucified Lord and to personally appropriate his offering of love.

The Cross as Ultimate Strength and Peace

Catherine sees with absolute clarity that the Cross of Christ alone is that which provides unshakable consolation in the times of sorrow that this life brings. It is because the Cross fully reveals the truth of God's immeasurable personal love for us and makes this love fully accessible that it is the ultimate source of peace amidst the most intense of tribulations. “When anguish and confusion rob us of peace, this ultimate truth of God's love lightens the burdens and sweetens the bitterness in our lives . . . The God of the universe has shed his blood for *me*.”²² It is confidence in this ultimate truth of the universe, a truth that frees us from all fear and discouragement, that prompts Catherine to write to Pope Gregory XI. She encourages him to return from Avignon to Rome (where St. Peter, the first pope, suffered martyrdom for the Church) with the words, “take heart, and don't be afraid, for you don't need to. Take up the weapon of the most holy cross, which is security and life for Christians.”²³ Likewise, in a letter to one of her confessors, Dominican Bartolomeo Dominici, Catherine writes, “to encourage you in the precious blood of God's Son. I beg to see you set afire, swallowed up and consumed in his blazing charity.”²⁴

²⁰ *Dialogue 115*, p. 215.

²¹ *Dialogue 111*, p.210.

²² *Fatula*, 63.

²³ *Letter T233/G8/DT76*, “To Pope Gregory XI, in Avignon,” in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Vol. I, 213.

²⁴ *Letter T146/G115/DT27*, “To Frate Bartolomeo Dominici, in Florence,” in *ibid.*, 96.

God the Father makes it evident to Catherine that it is the Cross of Christ that provides ultimate peace and consolation. The Father says those who enter eternal life “will pass through the narrow gate drunk, as it were, with the blood of the spotless Lamb, dressed in charity for their neighbors and bathed in the blood of Christ crucified, and they will find themselves in me, the sea of peace, lifted above imperfection and emptiness into perfection and filled with every good.”²⁵ In fact, the title of her work the *Dialogue* refers not only to the dialogue between Catherine and God, but also to “the great dialogue initiated by God with humanity in which Jesus Christ is the reconciling, peace-making Word.”²⁶ This is why in this life the Father instructs Catherine: “Let your place of refuge be my only begotten Son, Christ crucified. Make your home and hiding place in the cavern of his open side.”²⁷

One could say that the Cross of Christ provides peace and consolation in another way as well. The Cross provides concrete instruction that we must embrace God’s will and abandon ourselves to His Providence in order to experience peace. Referring to one of Saint Catherine’s letters Sister Mary Ann Fatula has noted:

Catherine loved to picture Jesus himself not only embracing the cross but even running to it like one insane with love. Held fast to the cross not by nails but by the unbounded love which he had and still has for us, Jesus nurtured one burning desire, that he would accomplish his Father’s will. How, then, can we ourselves ‘lift up our head against the goodness of God,’ and wish that our narrow will would be accomplished? ‘How shall we not will that the will of God be fulfilled?’ [*Letter T132/G173/DT48*].²⁸

Thus we must not only trust in the truth of God’s love revealed through the Cross, but we must also embrace the cross for ourselves as it becomes enfleshed in our own lives (see Mt 16:24). It is only in embracing the cross that we will find peace, for the cross is the Father’s will for each of us. Catherine makes this evident in a letter to two Augustinian hermits when she expresses the desire that they “do not seek peace or tranquillity anywhere except in Christ crucified, hungering at the table of the cross for the honor of God, the salvation of souls and the reform of holy Church.”²⁹

That the Cross of Christ reveals the Ultimate truth which sets us free (Jn 8:31) and that this truth must be embraced and entered into in the concrete circumstances of daily existence in order to

²⁵ *Dialogue* 82, p. 152.

²⁶ O’Driscoll, 86.

²⁷ *Dialogue* 124, p. 239.

²⁸ Fatula, 57.

²⁹ *Letter T326*, in O’Driscoll, 46. Sr. O’Driscoll has provided a wonderful representative selection of Saint Catherine’s letters.

experience true freedom is abundantly clear in Catherine's writings. Catherine's message is that gazing at the Cross which makes visible God's reckless love for us we can confidently abandon ourselves to God's Providence knowing that, "Even in life's tragedies, God's providence works to bring life from death," and we can grow in our ability to "recognize God's tenderness and care in even the most painful of our experiences."³⁰

The Cross as *The Way* to Holiness

Not only does the Cross reveal the fullness of God's love and provide ultimate strength and peace, Catherine teaches that identification with the Cross of Christ in prayer and life is *the way* to holiness. In one of her prayers Catherine asked, "O eternal Truth, what is your teaching and what is the way by which you want us to go to the Father, the way by which we must go?"³¹ Catherine answers, "I know of no other road but the one you paved with the true and solid virtues of your charity's fire. You, eternal Word, cemented it with your blood, so this must be the road."³² In a letter to a tailor in Florence, named Francesco, Catherine explains that the ordinary way of holiness lies open to all Christians and the way "is the doctrine of Christ crucified. Whoever walks along this way . . . reaches the most perfect light."³³ In another letter written to her niece, Sister Eugenia at the monastery of St. Agnes, Catherine explains that one's soul grows in prayer "according as she nourishes herself with the food of angels, that is, with a holy and true desire for God, raising herself up . . . to receive it at the table of the most gentle cross . . . Bathe and drown yourself in the gentle blood of your bridegroom."³⁴ In a letter to Dominican friar, Thomas della Fonte, Catherine's cousin and her first confessor, Catherine links growth in love to the Cross when she says, "when we love, we find ourselves united with and transformed in love, in this mother charity, having passed through and yet ever passing through the gate that is Christ crucified. He said as much to his disciples: 'I will come and make my dwelling place with you' (Jn 14:23)."³⁵

In the *Dialogue* God the Father tells Catherine that when souls have surrendered their wills to Him, "they run in virtue along the bridge of

³⁰ Fatula, 155.

³¹ *Prayer* 9, 70.

³² *Ibid.*, 70–71.

³³ *Letter T249*, in O'Driscoll, 13.

³⁴ *Letter T26*, in O'Driscoll, 23. Exhortations and desires to bathe in the blood of Christ crucified appear in other letters as well (e.g. *Letter T174*, *Letter T273/G97/DT31*, *Letter T344*).

³⁵ *Letter T41/G105/DT3*, "To Frate Tommaso dalla Fonte, in San Quirico," in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Vol. I, 8–9.

the teaching of Christ crucified.”³⁶ These souls who follow this way “have found table [the Father] and food [the Son] and waiter [the Holy Spirit], and they taste this food through the teaching of Christ crucified.”³⁷ The Father also tells Catherine:

... that it is by means of my servants and their great sufferings that I would be merciful to the world and reform my bride. Truly these last can be called another Christ crucified, my only-begotten Son, because they have taken his task upon themselves. He came as a mediator to put an end to the war and reconcile humanity to me in peace by suffering even to the shameful death of crucifixion. In the same way must these be crucified and become mediators in prayer, in word, in good holy living.³⁸

Thus Catherine teaches that following the Way who is Jesus (Jn 14:6) means we must follow the way of the Cross. And she echoes St. Paul's teaching to “fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the church” (Col 1:24). This is not an option, but *the* vocation of the Christian disciple, as is evident when St. Paul says, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29).

Thus Catherine teaches that it is a gift when we are presented with the Way of the Cross. It is truly a gift when each of us struggles, with the support of God's grace, to embrace the cross of self-denial (Mt 16:24) and crucify our sinful inclinations and vices so that we might live in the freedom of God's law and answer Christ's call to become more perfect as his heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48). It is truly a gift even when God seems to be completely absent in times of severe trial. It is at these times that “Catherine would think of Jesus on the cross and how abandoned he felt even as the Father was utterly near to him” and this thought helped her to realize that God is never closer to us than when we are enduring trials.³⁹ In the well-known letter to her confessor Raymond of Capua in which she recounts her presence at the execution of young man whom she had befriended Catherine states, “the Son, Wisdom and Word incarnate, gave him the gift of sharing in the tormented love with which he himself had accepted *his* painful death in obedience to the Father for the welfare of the human race. And the hands of the Holy Spirit locked him in.”⁴⁰ Catherine continues by telling Raymond, “my desire [is] to see you drowned in the blood and fire pouring out from the side of God's

³⁶ *Dialogue 79*, p. 147

³⁷ *Dialogue 78*, p. 145.

³⁸ *Dialogue 146*, p. 307.

³⁹ Fatula, 84.

⁴⁰ *Letter T273/G97/DT31*, in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Vol. I, 88.

Son.”⁴¹ Catherine desires this for Raymond because the Father has revealed to her the necessity and the privilege of embracing the cross. Catherine echoes St. Paul who tells us it is our willingness to suffer with Christ that determines whether or not we will be heirs with Christ in glory (Rom 8:17). Catherine teaches us that Christ seeks to live his life, including his Passion and Death, over again in each one of his disciples in order to make us like him. In fact, we live in a time of privilege in which Christ gives us the dignity of offering reparation for our sins through embracing our own cross before we experience the fullness of salvation in the resurrection. And there can be no resurrection without the cross.

The Cross Shows the Unity of Love of God and Neighbor

Not only does the Cross reveal the fullness of God's love, provide ultimate strength and peace, and serve as *the* way to holiness, Catherine also sees “the body of Jesus crucified as the bridge that binds heaven with earth” and she teaches that travelling along this bridge unites us in stages to God and others in increasingly perfect love.⁴² The Father tells Catherine, “Find your delight with him on the cross by feeding on souls for the glory and praise of my name.”⁴³ In turn, Catherine sees that leading others to salvation means leading them to travel the Bridge of the Crucified Lord. She begins a letter to a Dominican laywoman named Caterina di Scetto by stating, “I Caterina, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, writing to you in his precious blood.⁴⁴ I long to see you a true servant and spouse of Christ crucified.”⁴⁵ In a different letter Catherine says the soul “abides with her bridegroom at the table of crucified desire, rejoicing to seek the honor of God and the salvation of souls, for she sees clearly that this eternal bridegroom ran to the shameful death of the cross, in obedience to the Father for our salvation.”⁴⁶ In yet another letter Catherine says, “This is my desire: to see you in this dwelling in this transformation. My soul longs for this – for you especially, and for everyone else, too. I beg you: be nailed fast to the cross.”⁴⁷ To authorities in Bologna Catherine, echoing St. Paul's instruction in Eph 4:22-24, Catherine writes, “I desired to

⁴¹ Ibid., 89.

⁴² Fatula, 102. See *Dialogue* 21, 22, 27, 55, 56, 59, 62, 74, 79.

⁴³ *Dialogue* 107, p. 201.

⁴⁴ This is a common way in which Catherine addresses those to whom she writes.

⁴⁵ *Letter T50/G185*, “To Caterina di Ghetto,” in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Vol. II, 593.

⁴⁶ *Letter T26*, in O'Driscoll, 23.

⁴⁷ *Letter T41/G105/DT3*, in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Vol. I, 9.

see you divested of the old self and clothed with the new self, Christ crucified.”⁴⁸

Catherine thus teaches us that the Cross of Christ commands us to desire and work for the salvation of others, evidencing the inseparability of love of God and neighbor that our Lord taught in word before he lived it out on the Cross (Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:29-31; Lk 10:25-28). Catherine teaches us that when we unite ourselves to the God who died for us His zeal for souls becomes ours.⁴⁹ In the *Dialogue* God the Father tells Catherine, “love of me and love of neighbor are one and the same thing: Since love of neighbor has its source in me, the more the soul loves me, the more she loves her neighbors.”⁵⁰ The Lord goes on to explain to Catherine, “I have put you among your neighbors: 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.”⁵¹ In her own life as Catherine realizes more deeply the reckless love offered to her by the Crucified Lord she offers her own reckless love to others that the Lord gives her.

Catherine sees that since love of God and neighbor are in fact the same love, no one can love God without loving neighbor (1 John 4:11, 20). The Father says in His dialogue with Catherine, “I wanted to make you dependent on one another so that each of you would be my minister, dispensing the graces and gifts you have received from me. So whether you will it or not, you cannot escape the exercise of charity!”⁵² Ultimately the reason why this two-fold love of God and neighbor is inescapable in our lives is that it has been ingrained in the nature of the human heart. The Triune God of ineffable self-abandoning Love is the God in whose image we are made and in whose likeness we are called to grow, empowered by the Person of Love of the Holy Spirit. And it is by gazing upon the pierced heart of Jesus hanging on the Cross that we come to understand the Trinitarian depths of our own hearts.

Catherine manifested the inseparability of love of God and neighbor toward the end of her life in a particularly poignant manner. About three months before her death, during the turmoil of the Great Schism when two and then three different men simultaneously claimed to be the pope, Catherine offered a prayer in which she offered to embrace the cross for love of the Church. She saw with absolute clarity that Christ has indelibly united himself to and thus is inseparable from the Catholic Church. Thus offering herself for the Church was to offer herself for Christ. Catherine therefore prayed, “I offer once again

⁴⁸ *Letter T268*, in O’Driscoll, 40.

⁴⁹ *Fatula*, 110.

⁵⁰ *Dialogue 7*, p. 36.

⁵¹ *Dialogue 64*, p. 121.

⁵² *Dialogue 7*, p. 38.

my life . . . for your dear bride . . . if only I may see the reform of this dear bride, holy Church.”⁵³ Catherine thus shows that drinking deeply from the well of Christ's Passion necessarily leads one to a love of other members of his Mystical Body to the point of death.

Catherine as Model Teacher

How did Catherine acquire this wisdom of the Cross? In truth, Catherine would say that she did not acquire it, but that any wisdom she possessed was given to her as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Hers was not “an acquired wisdom about the things of God” but a “lived wisdom of the spiritual life.”⁵⁴ She did not gain her insights through a cognitive examination of the good at hand, but through an identification with the good itself, becoming connatural with the object of her love.⁵⁵ Pope Paul VI noted that Catherine did not possess “the apologetic vigour and theological boldness which mark the works of the great lights of the ancient Church, both in East or the West.”⁵⁶ Nor did she possess “the lofty speculation characteristic of systematic theology.”⁵⁷ What she possessed instead was an “infused wisdom — that is to say, lucid, profound and inebriating assimilation of the divine truths and the mysteries of the faith . . . due to a charism of the wisdom from the Holy Spirit, a mystical charism.”⁵⁸ In the end, Catherine is a Doctor of the Church because she “asked the Lord to teach her himself.”⁵⁹

That a teacher must allow himself to be taught by the Lord is a sober reminder to the self-styled academic theologian who thinks he will become more proficient in his discipline by reading more, by studying more, by researching more, by crafting clearer and more clever arguments, or by receiving the praise and recognition of his peers. Catherine was all too aware of haughty intellectuals whose pride blinded them to the Truth revealed fully in the crucified Lord. She knew that no amount of study would profit an individual if humility and love were lacking from one's life.⁶⁰ This is evident where Jesus himself says, “I glorify you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to little ones” (Luke 10:21).

⁵³ *Prayer 26*, p. 225.

⁵⁴ Ralph McInerney, “Tres Doctores Ecclesiae,” *Catholic Dossier* 5.2 (March–April 1999): 5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Paul VI, 199.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Fatula*, 94.

⁶⁰ See *ibid.*, 68–69.

Catherine knew and shows us that true wisdom is not gained but is received. In her *Dialogue* we see Catherine receiving wisdom in intimate conversation with the Lord. Catherine's "research" consists of her prayers in which she yields her "mind and heart to the Lord's love"⁶¹ revealed fully on the Cross, "remaining in the Lord's healing presence."⁶² She looked to her fellow Dominican Saint Thomas Aquinas as her model in this "research." God the Father told her that "the glorious Thomas . . . learned more through prayer than through human study."⁶³ It should not go unnoticed that the learned St. Thomas who is renowned for his powerful intellect is famous for weeping in prayer before beginning to write. Catherine's own letters show an "utter confidence in God's love and the power of Christ's passion"⁶⁴ laying bare Catherine's deep desire to share what she has received in order to draw others into the safe-haven of the wounded side of the crucified Lord.

Catherine shows us that the prayerful reception of truth can only occur when the teacher places himself humbly at the feet of the crucified Lord. In fact, in the *Dialogue* God speaks to Catherine of her father Saint Dominic and says:

Where would he have his children eat by the light of learning? At the table of the cross. On that cross is set the table of holy desire where one eats souls for love of me. He wanted his children to do nothing else but stand at this table by the light of learning to seek only the glory and praise of my name and the salvation of souls.⁶⁵

The teacher can encounter the Sacrifice of Calvary and become one with Christ on the Cross by receiving and contemplating Christ in the gift of the Eucharist entrusted to the Church. Pope Paul VI stated that Catherine "saw this Blood of the Savior continually flowing in the Sacrifice of the Mass and in the sacraments, thanks to the ministry of the sacred ministers, for the purification and embellishment of the entire Mystical Body of Christ."⁶⁶ The offering of himself that Christ presents to us in the Eucharist through his priests is the gift that allows the teacher to become one with the object of his study — Jesus — and transmit Jesus, and not just knowledge about Jesus, to his students.

This is why the true teacher of the faith must imitate Mary the Mother of God as a student of the Cross. Catherine opens many of her letters by invoking "the name of Jesus Christ crucified and gentle

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶³ *Dialogue 158*, p. 339.

⁶⁴ O'Driscoll, 20.

⁶⁵ *Dialogue 158*, p. 338.

⁶⁶ Paul VI, 200.

Mary," thus linking the crucified Lord with his Mother. It is Mary at the foot of the Cross as model disciple and Mother of the Church who directs our gaze to Love made visible. "Mary leads us to Jesus, and Jesus begs us to take shelter in his wounds, where we find only the fire of charity and the bath of his blood."⁶⁷ In a prayer to the Mother of God Catherine extols Mary for her "deep humility" in becoming the servant and handmaid of the Lord.⁶⁸ Mary is the one who first conceived Christ in her heart by faith before conceiving the Lord in her womb. Her *fiat* is the example of perfect abandonment to God's Providence (Lk 1:38). Mary is the first disciple of Jesus who pondered all the events of his life in her heart (Lk 2:51). She is also the member of the human race who was most closely associated with Christ's Passion, her own heart being pierced by a sword as she suffered vicariously and really with her Son (Lk 2:35). Sitting at the foot of the Cross with the Immaculate Mother contemplating the perfect act of love of her Son the teacher of the faith can learn more than is possible from any amount of academic study.

Spending time with Mary at the feet of Jesus will enable the true teacher to see the fullness of Truth revealed in the broken body of the crucified Lord. In what seems an absurdity and an abject failure to the majority of humanity the disciple of the Lord will be able to see the power of God (1 Cor 1:18). In her own life Catherine preaches the stumbling block and the folly of Christ crucified (see 1 Cor 1:23) without hesitation or reservation. She sees with absolute clarity that "God's folly is wiser than men, and his weakness more powerful than men" (1 Cor 1:25). Catherine is willing to be thought a fool and a holy scandal for God never boasting in "anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!" (Gal 6:14). Taking Catherine as a model, the teacher of the faith will be empowered to witness to the Truth without apology because he sees Love without end on the Cross.

Conclusion

Saint Catherine of Siena sought to enable everyone with whom she came into contact to encounter Jesus. As an example of this endeavour Catherine's letters, while personal correspondences, are documents of instruction seeking to lead their recipients into the heart of the Catholic faith. It is worthy of note that Catherine's letters are addressed to a wide variety of people in all states of life. She befriended and corresponded with condemned criminals, laymen and women of many professions, consecrated religious, priests, and

⁶⁷ Fatula, 123.

⁶⁸ *Prayer 18*, 156–65.

popes. Catherine understands that none of these people were placed in her path by accident. For Catherine there was no such thing as a chance encounter. She saw with great clarity that everyone she met was the Trinity's gift to her and as such her role was to present them with the love of the Triune God.

Since she seeks to lead all of these individuals deeper into the heart of the faith it is fitting that Catherine imbues her letters with the pedagogy of the Cross opening many of them with the salutation, "In the name of Jesus Christ crucified," and closing them with the words, "Gentle Jesus, Jesus love." "Catherine invites us to the cross,"⁶⁹ because, "The secret she saw exposed on the cross took hold of her and began to focus the energies of her life."⁷⁰ Catherine understood that the height of mystical union with God consists in resting "on the breast of Christ crucified."⁷¹ This union grants us intimacy with the Trinity and intimacy with others in the heart of the Church.⁷²

For Catherine the Crucifix can never be an empty icon. It is more than just a decoration used to add a respectable veneer of Christianity to an otherwise secular environment. The Cross is *the* heart of Christianity, *the* revelation of the God of Love, *the* source of strength and peace, *the* bridge between God and man and man and man, and therefore it must be *the* essential message of every teacher of the faith worthy of the title. Saint Catherine of Siena saw and taught this truth with unique and unabashed clarity and this is why she is a Doctor of the Church.

Perry J Cahall, Ph.D
Pontifical College Josephinum
7625 North High Street
Columbus, Ohio 43235-1498
Email: pcahall@pcj.edu

⁶⁹ Fatula, 146.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁷¹ *Dialogue* 96, p. 179.

⁷² Fatula, 106–107.