

have managed to deepen the mystery, not by creating confusion, but by disclosing the infinite vistas of God's promises.

We ought to think on these things often and study them more deeply. We ought also to cling to them with a firm hope, knowing that we need not rely on our own weakness, but on the power of God, who is faithful to his promises: "Him who overcomes I will permit to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of my God" (*Apoc.* 2:7).

—Urban Sharkey, O.P.

THE THEOLOGY OF CATHERINE OF SIENA

FEW PEOPLE have said their piece in this world in a voice loud enough to be heard. Fewer still have delivered such a ringing message that it is today as sharp and clear as it was five hundred years ago. But when the voice belongs, as St. Catherine of Siena's belonged, to a young, uneducated woman, sometime nurse and domestic servant, then our very capacity to wonder at the marvel is stunned.

The durability of St. Catherine's message comes from many things. One of them is its simple, uncluttered design. It is as likely to go out of commission as a block of marble. St. Catherine tells us how we can be saints. Our aim must be to obtain light. If we gain access to the light God pours out everywhere, we can become saints. St. Catherine tells us how to reach the light. This, too, is simple, though very painful. It demands a fierce, violent attack on our own love of ourselves. St. Catherine kept her message as simple as possible. She taught it to her mother, to Blessed Raymond, her spiritual director and a theologian of no small intelligence, and to the vast and vastly different group she gathered about her; she taught it to anyone who would listen, and if they wouldn't listen, she taught them anyway.

Another reason St. Catherine's message has endured is the authority the saint exercises. The root of the authority, of course, is that St. Catherine does not speak for herself but for God. She did not learn the things she said in the usual way, but she had them poured into her mind by God. Her message is not some new revelation, but only the ancient truth made new

by the lips of a Tuscan dyer's daughter. But even if we forget the bond between St. Catherine and her Creator, her message rings with authority. When St. Catherine answers a question, she gives the right answer. But more than that, she gives the right answer that goes the deepest into the problem. So, much of the time, she seems to say extremely simple things, things almost too simple for our minds to be stopped by their meaning.

From a practical viewpoint, the reason St. Catherine's message has remained alive is that it works. St. Catherine tried it out herself and saw the great number of her friends put it into practice. It worked then, as it has always worked, and as it will always work for a man on his way to heaven.

We mentioned that God gave Catherine her profound knowledge in a special way. God made her know things without having to learn them. This is the same way she learned to write, and the way she learned, after learning to write, to read. This mark of God's favor does more than lend weight to what St. Catherine said. It also teaches us how St. Catherine could do so much. If she needed anything, she did the best she could, and prayed. She tried to learn the alphabet and was not getting very far, so she asked God to let her read, please. And she could read, though the alphabet remained a mystery to her. St. Catherine had only thirty-three years on earth, and she had to cut every corner she could. Most of us will have to be satisfied with learning things the hard way. But we can all do much more than we are doing if we call for God's help in faith. Prayer itself is part of becoming a saint. And becoming a saint demands light, and the light is the faith.

Many people think that mystics stop thinking and act in some vague, blind, almost possessed way. Even good Catholics can be confused because of the weird things that often happen to a mystic soul, because of their trances and the strange way God treats them and lets them be treated. But mystics are just the highest kind of Christians, the most honored of our race. And if it were all right for them to forget they had minds, it would be all right for the rest of us. And this is precisely the point St. Catherine is making when she incessantly hammers home the need for light, light to pervade our every action and its every part. For St. Catherine truths do not lie quiet once we let them into our minds. The truth will drive us to do good things; but first it must be let into the mind. First there must be light.

In other words, it helps to know what a thing is all about. This is true of mystics in their lives, it is true of shuffleboard, of dying for one's country, of dropping a quarter in the Sunday collection, and offering oneself

up as a victim for the Church. *Genesis* describes God as going about the creation of the world as would a potter. And the first thing God does is to make light, so that He can see what He is doing. The world that God made shows that He saw every detail with infinite clarity. We know that God sees every tiniest thing in the world, and that His seeing it is why the thing is at all. St. Catherine would stand no nonsense on this point. Before we can say of what we do that it is good, we have to open our eyes to God's light.

Actually, for most of us, this is the effort of a lifetime. We spend most of our time sweeping aside the curtains to let in the light. St. Catherine knew this. She speaks of it as a cloud. The cloud is over love of self, and it cuts off the divine light that crashes down at us like chunks of solid fire. Obviously it is a very thick cloud. Our love of self is the same as the grand total of tangled ties we have formed with things, all the disorder in our attachment with things. Even to begin we have to get rid of the cloud, to dispel the shadow on our lives. To destroy the shadow is a violent task. St. Catherine says it calls for hatred of oneself. And this calls for knowledge of oneself, for light. It seems we have come full circle. We have; but perhaps a spiral is a more accurate notion than a circle. We have come to the point where it becomes apparent that we need God at the very beginning even to help us to begin. We need God to help us ask Him for knowledge of ourselves. We do what we can; we try to open ourselves up to God. But we have to call on Him to make up what is lacking. St. Catherine shows us by her life that it is possible; she herself helped others, people more like us than St. Catherine was, to believe that it was possible and to succeed in doing it. Neither St. Catherine nor anyone else has ever given out the idea that it is easy or pleasant.

But once we begin to know ourselves, and so to hate ourselves, we are on the road. We can at least see the road.

For every need one has as he proceeds along the road, St. Catherine has a means of fulfilling the need. The means seem like mathematical formulae, but this is because the saint is so sure and so definite as to the exact thing required. The core of the answer is always truth: the particular truths with which we must fill our minds if we want to reach our goal. So, for instance, St. Catherine advises the soul who seeks humility to focus its mind on what it really is. To a man tried by his impatience, she presents six closely joined facts to ponder: that God exists; that everything comes from Him; that He is good; that He wills only good for us; that it is His love that sends us tribulations; that it is His justice that punishes our sins. For

the growth of love, St. Catherine would have us think of God's love for us, of our coming from God, of the Creation, of the Incarnation, and of the Blood of the Lord.

One can decide that all this emphasis on knowledge and meditating on truths to reach a goal, while perfectly pleasant and harmless, was not the thing that made St. Catherine great. The ecstasies and visions made her great, or the work she did for the Church and for souls, but not her theory about knowledge's being the core of a human life. But St. Catherine herself denies her visions were more than decoration, highly dramatic but still outside the solid framework of her life: she maintained that the heart of the matter was not in visions but in vision, in insight that cut through to what was what. And as far as her apostolate went, it was truth that propelled her on her unbelievable career. For God's truth, God's light, is not cold brilliance, but, like the light of the sun, is warm nourishment. It was because St. Catherine knew what sin looked like, even smelled like, that she had such compassion and concern for sinners, and that she gave herself as a victim for them. For this is the highpoint of her apostolate, not trying to bring the Pope back to Rome, but giving herself up as a victim for souls to repair the Body of Christ, her Spouse. Her joy and serene peace, in spite of all her sufferings, are qualities that convince us St. Catherine had a thoroughly satisfying life; these came from a sweet and profound spirituality that sprang from her closeness with God, the closeness of two people who know each other very well.

St. Catherine ended her life of knowledge and love and action by an action that demanded the greatest knowledge and love, her imitation of the Crucified. Just as He poured out His Blood for the whole race, she offered up her life to be poured out for the Church and for souls. It is the most overwhelming proof of her surrender to Truth, and the perfect finish for a life begun and lived in truth, and by truth, and for truth. For one of St. Catherine's most certain convictions was that the Truth is in the Blood. The Blood from the Cross washed away sins of the world. The Blood belongs to the true Light that enlightens every man who comes into the world. God forbade man to shed man's blood, because the blood belonged specially to Him. But he did demand the shedding of man's blood—not the blood of His sinful creature, but that of His only Son. The shedding of the Blood of Christ let loose in the world the ultimate light, the brilliance of God's love glistened on the wood of the Cross. And so St. Catherine's life ended where it had begun, in the Blood. It was here she received the knowledge that drove her forward. It was by imitating Its shedding that she showed

the love her knowledge had started burning. In It was the truth of God's loving care. In It, finally, was she washed, and made whiter than snow.

—Francis Bailie, O.P.

LOVE IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

The Harlot

IN THE BEGINNING of the Lord's speaking to Osee, the Lord said to Osee: "Go, take a harlot wife and harlot's children, for the land gives itself to harlotry, turning away from the Lord."

So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Debelaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. Then the Lord said to him:

Give him the name Jezrael,
for in a little while
I will punish the house of Jehu
for the bloodshed at Jezrael
And bring to an end the kingdom
of the house of Israel;
On that day I will break the bow of Israel
in the valley of Jezrael.

When she conceived again and bore a daughter, the Lord said to him:

Give her the name Lo-ruhama;
I no longer feel pity for the house of Israel:
rather, I abhor them utterly.

Yet for the house of Juda I feel pity;
I will save them by the Lord, their God;
But I will not save them by war,
By sword or bow, by horses or horsemen.