

# CONTEMPLATA

## NOTES ON THE *DIALOGUE*

*Ephrem Reese, O.P.*

**L**ike a medieval tapestry, the *Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Siena depicts a host of colorful images. This author hopes that a few more images will not hurt our understanding of this book, and may even, like the light of a certain time of day, reveal things large and small, new and old, in Catherine's work. The two images I offer here are an earthquake and Aaron the priest. The first is meant to give a sense of real power working through what may seem like a merely pious tract. The second is meant to weave her earthly work into the work we were made to do, the worship of God. Finally, we will consider how Catherine's power and skill can help us to tame our wild wills, so that we may know and love God as she did.

### AN EARTHQUAKE IN ITALY

**A**t St. Dominic's Church in San Francisco, a 1984 seismic study determined that the building was vulnerable to earthquakes. The measure that the parish took to steady their church against these "acts of God" came (like St. Catherine) out of medieval

Europe. By 1992, the parish had stabilized its home with flying buttresses.

No less than the San Francisco scientists of 1984, the people of Southern Europe had the means to prepare themselves for a spiritual act of God, and some did, but others did not. In 1347, the twenty-third child of Sienese cloth merchants was born and baptized Catherine, and many were left unbuttressed against her immortal force. St. Catherine brought Jesus to her time, a time which thought it already knew him. Many of Jesus' parables tell of the return of a powerful man into his house, preparing us to prepare for him. Though God made himself a weak child, even his child's arm concealed infinite power. In Catherine, we see the arm of God bared momentarily and the scurrying of men to accommodate themselves to the infinite force of divine love: "because God, who is infinite, wishes for infinite love and infinite grief," as she put it. Those who would cry over creatures, whose grief would have an end as quickly as their loves, could not withstand Catherine who cried over them. She would sway civilian and mercenary armies, shelter political pariahs, and lovingly but sternly demand that the Pope reform his clergy and himself, before her death at 33.

#### FATHER AARON AND MOTHER CATHERINE

St. Catherine devotes great energy in the *Dialogue* to affirming the traditional office of the priest. Why, some might ask today, could the Church not make her a priest? Here is a conciliatory meditation, praising her feminine power which shines out both in restraint and in Aaronic mystery. Catherine spends a significant part of the *Dialogue* both praising and correcting the priests of her time, preparing them for the ministerial service to which only they are called. This, in a sense, puts her in an arch-priestly role, just as the Mother of God (herself a descendant of Levi) prepares men after the model of her Son, to bestow the gifts of His sacrifice.

As recounted in the book of Exodus, the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests of the Lord involved, among other

things, copious pouring of blood, the blood of innocent sacrificial animals. In considering St. Catherine, one little half-verse stands out: “and you shall kill the ram, and take part of its blood and put it upon the tip of the right ear of Aaron and upon the tips of the right ears of his sons...” (Ex 29:20). The *Dialogue* will also strike its readers as frighteningly bloody. In it, the Father refers constantly to the Son as “My Truth,” and the Truth’s agency is largely expressed through his Blood. It is seed, mortar, fire, and a door. The Father’s interlocutor, the Soul, responds to him, “in you were we re-created in the Blood of Your Son.” Blood upon the ear sanctifies for faith, which comes by hearing (Rom 10:17). The blood of Jesus also speaks, indeed “more eloquently” than that of a ram or the innocent Abel (Heb 12:24). And the word of Jesus’ blood is ever on the Father’s lips, anointing the ear of Catherine.



Clarence Gagnon — *Evening, Siena*

By the power of Jesus’ blood, Catherine led the guilty to safety, covering them with her own innocence which Christ had won for her. An early story tells how, when her brothers were targeted for death by a mob during a transfer of power in Siena,

Catherine escorted them through the midst of their enemies and hid them in a hospital.

The most fearsome story of Catherine's advocacy of the condemned, however, is probably that of Niccolò di Toldo. A spirited man who seems to have been apprehended for "inciting discord" against the current regime, Niccolò was enraged at his fate until Catherine confronted him in his cell. She gives her own important account of this event, but according to the testimony of her follower and biographer Caffarini who accompanied them, merely "by means of the virgin's presence...he went devout and willing, just like a gentle lamb...to the place of beheading...it was like the *transitus* of some devout martyr and not the death of one who was condemned for a human crime." Catherine accompanied him to the end, "receiving his head into her hands"!

She is the patroness of nurses. A nurse cannot be too afraid of blood, but this last act is more than one would normally ask of a nurse. St. Catherine has here brought the sure hand of a nurse, the nerve of a son of Aaron at the altar, and the baffling confidence of a saint, directly into the scrutiny of all, at a public, political execution. An ambiguous guilt lies upon this man Niccolò—perhaps it is due in part to his own lust for glory and vindication, in part to the merciless machinations of a city in ferment. But the question of guilt is overwhelmed by Catherine's purity and peace, and in her hands, according to Caffarini, the lion simply became a lamb. One hopes that the story of that lamb points to the Lamb of God, upon whom the violence of the world, personal and political, was spent once and for all.

#### THE WILL ON THE ALTAR

Many women received mystical visions and gave commanding moral instructions in St. Catherine's time. There was even a tradition of a kind of mystical courtly adviser, the paradigm being St. Bridget of Sweden, to whom many compared St. Catherine. What makes Catherine's pedagogy different? In his historical

treatment of the real authority she had in her time and place, *The Sainly Politics of Catherine of Siena*, F. Thomas Luongo notes that Catherine “defied generic expectations of female sanctity and spiritual writing by adopting the mundane and domestic genre of the personal letter for her communications” (73). To her sons in high and low places, she spoke with an almost brutal, practical clarity. Like Aaron, she wanted her sons to know what must be done, to avoid the divine wrath (cf. Lev 10:1-2).

But the *Dialogue* is different. It is remarkable for its emphasis on seeing the truth. Purifying the eye to see the Father, by the help of his Truth, is the author’s great desire. The Father tells Catherine, “Thomas Aquinas saw Me,” and she allies herself to the great Doctor, but proceeds on the same Way in her own style. Truth reveals itself to Catherine as a bridge which is the Cross, and having crossed the bridge, the soul, “having seen the Truth, knows it; and knowing it, loves it.”

The drama of the bridge pervades much of the *Dialogue*. So is our journey over the waters of sin one of gradual reform and progress? One could emphasize a perfecting of will, a virtuous progress of knowledge and love. Catherine does not; she elevates “true humility and perfect patience” among the virtues, “a holy hatred” of self along with perfect love. All of my will must be destroyed for the sake of God and neighbor.

Here we see Catherine’s priestly steady-handedness: the will, trusting in the mercy of God, is mercilessly put to death. The will is sacrificed on the altar of love, and the soul, humble yet brave, “continually slays its own sensuality through the affection of love of virtue.” Is there some morbid medieval love of bloodshed at work here? No—this is the call to obedience. “Discretion,” a kind of prudence for Catherine, tells the soul exactly what it needs, because it sees things clearly. It is “the only child of self-knowledge.” The gift of seeing oneself rightly, which precedes prudence and the power to act rightly, all follows on death of the will. To see God is our happiness; self-knowledge sees the non-existence of the self, referred to the Reality of God; discretion, rooted in self-

knowledge, carries out a moral purification of the self in light of its non-existence. One might be surprised to hear that St. Thomas admits as much, conceding that obedience, by which we “slay our will,” though not superior to faith, hope, and love, is “more praiseworthy than the other moral virtues” (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.104.3).

The slaughter of my will, of my own sensuality, aids in revealing my realest being, my relation to God. The “mixed relation” between God and creatures is a delicate theological truth, by which we understand that God’s happiness is not diminished by our love or dismissal of him. St. Catherine brings this to bear in her famous formulation that God is He Who Is and Catherine is she who is not. God’s consuming love does not consume, as we know consumption, because he is full. Like the fire Moses saw, it burns the bush but does not burn it up. But our being-aflame, our offering of will as a whole, slaughtered, burnt offering, aids in revealing that, for us, a relation to He Who Is can flare into being in the temple where we offer humility and patience.

Aaron and Moses, by the mysteries given to their custody, built a bridge on which God’s people could cross over to him. To stand in the middle, between heaven and earth, is priestly. This means ushering the flock to safe pasture. It also means protecting sinners from the justice which their sin invites upon them, a task we call “intercession.” Now Jesus Christ, on the Cross, is that bridge. He is that intercessor, standing before his Father and offering his own blood. St. Catherine, like Aaron, stands before us without the blood of animals, but with solemn words of blood, covering her sons and daughters. Tradition calls her the Seraphic Mother, a glorious and angelic minister who, in the name of Jesus, covers the guilty with the many-winged mercy of God.

#### ON TEXTS

Catherine’s powerful testimony of the Father’s love and of the saving blood of Jesus has recently been fittingly presented in

a red leather edition from Baronius Press (2015). Their work of re-evangelization through beautiful editions of classic books like this may well help to save disenchanted souls otherwise put off by religious kitsch. It must be noted, however, that this is a reprinting of the edition which can be found in the Tan Classics series. The 1906 Algar Thorold translation follows a misleading sixteenth-century custom of arranging Catherine's writing under artificial "treatises," and leaves out a significant portion of text. Giuliana Cavallini reconstructed a more probable edition of Catherine's work in 1968, and Suzanne Noffke's 1980 translation, following Cavallini, offers a much truer presentation of Catherine's actual *Dialogue*. The Noffke translation, printed in the Paulist Press Classics of Western Spirituality series, is aesthetically inoffensive, but does not compare with the splendor of the Baronius volume.

However, the older translation of Thorold, which informed this reflection, should not be forgotten. It is by no means archaic: though words like "cicatrice" and "justicier" may send the reader to the dictionary, they only sharpen the solemn immediacy of Catherine's style. Algar Thorold, moreover, deserves remembrance. The son of an Anglican bishop, Thorold was received into the Catholic Church at Oxford. He was a scholar of mystical theology for whom, according to his obituary in *The Tablet*, "there was no subject unsuitable...since everything bears some relation to Catholic truth" (June 6th, 1936). St. Dominic, who has sent Catherine and us to hunt out souls languishing under various plagues in the cities of various times, was of the same mind: that all must be taken captive to Christ and weaved into a sanctifying dialogue that is with God and about God.

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