

how remote in their culture and social circumstances. Yet the spring that fed the saint's mind and heart—as servant of the Christian people, as intrepid explorer of the Christian mystery—this spring, this living source remains: Jesus Christ 'the same yesterday and today and forever'.

The Spirit of St Catherine of Siena¹

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We commonly think of St Catherine as the greatest of Dominican tertiaries; and so no doubt she is; it is as natural to think that of her as to think of St Thomas as our greatest theologian. Yet it is easier to assess the greatness of a theologian than the greatness of a tertiary. Theology is a science; being a tertiary is a vocation. You can compare one theologian with another in respect of qualities that are fairly evident, at least in principle, for they are intellectual qualities expressed in rational argument. A theologian is great in the degree that he gives satisfactory answers to the questions put by the human mind when it asks, what does the Christian faith mean? It is true that a theologian will not be able to give such answers with a clarity and profundity that deserve to be called great unless his intellect is docile to the Holy Spirit, that is unless he has the Gifts of understanding and wisdom to a high degree. But, this granted, his work is a definite body of expressed argu-

¹A lecture to the Congress of London Dominican tertiaries, 1960. Most of the quotations are from St Catherine's letters, and I have used the critical edition of these by E. Dupré Theseider, *Epistolario di S. Caterina da Siena*, Rome 1940. Unfortunately only volume I of this edition has so far been published; but as it contains 88 letters written between 1373 and January 1377—i.e., one half of St Catherine's short life as a writer—it is a fairly representative selection. For the convenience of readers I have added, in each case, to the number-reference to the Dupré Theseider edition the number of the corresponding letter in the better known Tommaseo edition (1860, and reprinted without alteration by Misciatelli in 1912). The former number is in Roman numerals, the latter in Arabic.

ment capable of being critically assessed in itself and compared with the work of other minds that have worked over the same material, the Christian revelation as accessible to reason. But to compare one tertiary with another is like comparing one religious with another. And religions are great, as such, in the degree of their holiness, that is in the degree of their fidelity to the grace of their vocation. And who are we to measure fidelity to grace? Grace, the presence of God in the soul, is an element we cannot fathom. It eludes our human techniques of criticism and classification. We have to do our best with the 'conjectural signs' that St Thomas speaks of²—the signs of grace; and in our present case with what may be called the Dominican grace, by which I mean the interior spiritual quality that makes a good Dominican.

What is this quality? Well, various descriptions might serve, but I propose for the moment this: a love of Christ as the truth. Essentially we are preachers; and what we preach, and also the tone and special stress of our preaching as authentically Dominican, has never been more vividly and succinctly described than in words written long before the Order began, in the second Epistle to the Corinthians: 'For we preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ our Lord; we, your servants for Jesus' sake. For the same God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness" has shone into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus'.³ In these words St Paul expressed with singular clarity his own apostolic ideal; which was also to be St Dominic's ideal. The early Dominicans had a great devotion to St Paul; and this was perfectly natural; and, as we shall see, it was to be one of the Dominican characteristics of St Catherine. The Dominican is a contemplative who endeavours to communicate his contemplation: *contemplata aliis tradere*⁴ But when we repeat, as we so often do, this Thomist formula—we do well to remember the one object implied in the two verbs, *contemplare* and *tradere*. It is not philosophy that we, as Dominicans, preach; it is not even theology; these are only our necessary instruments. What we preach, or should preach, is 'Jesus Christ our Lord . . . the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus'. And it is precisely because St Catherine so superbly preached Christ as the image and glory of the Father, as the *prima verità*, as she loved to call him (echoing St Thomas) she counts as a great Dominican preacher. But of course no merely verbal preaching, however eloquent, could

² 1a 2ae . 112 . 5.

³ 2 Cor. 4: 5-6.

⁴cf. 3a. 40. 1 ad 2.

have gained her this title; indeed no such preaching would be a preaching of Christ, in the sense St Paul meant; for Christ is a person and a person is not preached, in this sense, by merely being talked about. To know Christ you must love him; to make him known the preacher must love him. Words void of love are as 'sounding brass and tinkling cymbal'. It was Catherine's contemplative love, expressed with her eager burning untutored eloquence, that made her a great preacher, one of the greatest in our history.

And yet she was only a tertiary. The 'only' is not an impertinence, it simply points to the paradox that her case presents, the paradox that is of the essence of her strange history and is inseparable from her example. Catherine embodies the tertiary ideal, but she lived this ideal with such an ardour of intellect and will as seemingly to overrun by far the normal limits of the tertiary status; so that one may even wonder how so extraordinary a tertiary could be set up as a model for tertiaries. And yet, if we look more closely, we shall see that she is indeed a perfect model; not of course in the external details of her activity, nor yet in her inimitable 'style', but in the spirit that always inspired her. Indeed, we shall come to see that she was great, and great as a preacher and spiritual leader, not in spite of being a tertiary and a woman, but just because she was these things; that it was not accidental but essential to her achievement that she was a tertiary and a woman. She acted within the limits, though certainly stretching them to the utmost, imposed by her status and her sex. Apparently transcending these conditions, what she did in fact was to realise their fullest possibilities in the moment of time which was hers. She remained rooted in the soil from which she sprang; and if she sprang so high it was only that she realised to a heroic degree the range and scope of the grace that was given her. As Dante would say, it was by the power of truth that she soared: *la verità che tanto ci sublima*.⁵ But a tertiary and a woman she remained, and these conditioning facts, I repeat, are of the essence of her achievement. They define its paradoxical quality; and though, in this article, I am more concerned with her teaching than with the details of her career, it may help to bring out a little more clearly the special quality of her vocation if I touch briefly on the circumstances of her life.

You know the outlines of her story; let me remind you of some details. Born, 'as far as we know',⁶ in 1347, Catherine was the twenty

⁵*Paradiso* xxii, 42: The truth that so exalts us.

⁶A. Levasti, *My Servant Catherine*, p. 1.

third child of Jacopo Benincasa, a fairly prosperous dyer of Siena in Tuscany. Of her three greatest fellow Tuscans of that age, Dante Alighieri had been dead twenty five years when Catherine was born, Petrarch, now at the height of his fame but still living in Provence, was forty three, Boccaccio was thirty four. The Church since 1305 had been ruled from Avignon. Siena was a small republic of Ghibelline traditions, still independent despite the growing power of Florence to the north west; a busy, tough little Tuscan commune in fact, though if Dante's mockery is anything to go by, the Sienese had some reputation for dreamy vanity and bizarre recklessness:

‘Or fu già mai
gente sí vana come la sanese?’⁷

However that they may have been, the Benincasa were practical bourgeois folk and in the crowded higgledy piggledy of Jacopo's house Catherine grew up in full touch with human realities. She grew up quickly, too, in grace: before she was twelve she had vowed her virginity to Christ, a step which brought her into direct conflict with her family; and at eighteen or nineteen she was received into the Dominican tertiary sisterhood of Siena. Already for several years she had lived as a recluse in the tiny room her holy obstinacy had wrung from her father, only leaving it to help with the housework and go to church; but now as a tertiary, a *mantellata*, she began to visit the sick and work in the hospitals. And now too her mind, formed by a continuous intense contemplation of Christ, began to radiate its influence. People began to fall under her spell; a spiritual family gathered around her. For a dozen years now, till her death in 1280, Catherine was never to be without her group of friends and disciples—men and women, priests (both secular and religious) and layfolk, most of them her seniors, but all, in varying degrees, her spiritual pupils. Three of them, laymen, became her secretaries, writing letters at her dictation. Most of them seem to have called her ‘mother’, and she called them her children. It was of course a very extraordinary situation. She was a woman, she was young, she was not of noble birth, she had never been to school, she was not even a nun; the wonder is not that her position, depending as it did entirely on her personality, aroused opposition, but that it aroused so little. But medieval society, though stiff with social and legal restraints, was spiritually, in a sense, less restricted than modern society. It had every vice, it has been said, except vulgarity—an epigram that may be questioned, but which does point to a certain relative absence

⁷*Inferno* XXIX, 122: Have there ever been people so vain as the Sienese?

of spiritual cowardice in that age, an absence which left room for heroism to expand with a candour and spontaneity that are only too rare today. The Church herself, in the relations between her members, found room for more candid and direct approaches than have been customary since the Reformation. And so a young laywoman like Catherine could address her own father confessor as 'my son in Christ' without anyone finding this particularly shocking. People questioned her sanctity, of course; but no one who had once admitted her sanctity seems to have been shocked at the tone of authority she habitually adopted. And it was a very high tone, indeed. When she writes to her secretary, young Neri Landoccio, as 'my beloved son in Christ', we are not surprised, but we may well be surprised to find her addressing the government of Florence as 'my very dear fathers and sons' ('fathers' because these men had civil authority, 'sons' because she was about to give them some spiritual counsel—which, as it happened, they were reluctant to receive); and we may be still more surprised to find her writing to a group of religious who had preceded her to Avignon in 1376, a group that included her own director Bd Raymund of Capua and an Augustinian master in theology, and addressing these eminent divines, she, a young woman of twenty nine, as 'my children in Christ', adding for good measure 'It is my will and command that each of you be subject to the other, and that you bear with one another's defects'.⁸ Let me add that the tone of her letters to Bd Raymund is usually less explicitly maternal than that; she usually calls him simply 'my father'.

I have alluded to the criticisms she encountered; by 1374 her reputation had grown sufficiently for these to be taken seriously by the Dominican authorities, and she was summoned to appear before the General Chapter of the Order, which met at Florence in that year, to give an account of herself. It must have been a formidable experience even for Catherine, but she satisfied the assembled fathers that she could be trusted, and so returned to Siena greatly strengthened by this official approval. It is worth insisting on the immense importance for Catherine of being able to carry on her work under the wing of the Order; in the medieval Church the Order of St Dominic was relatively more important than it has ever been since. In those days the Dominicans as a body were the highest theological authority in the Church, at once an intellectual élite and a touchstone of orthodoxy. Catherine could no more have done what she did had she been merely a laywoman than she could have done it had she been an enclosed nun. And her Dom-

⁸Epist. LXV (219).

inican connection was a special advantage.

After that journey to Florence the range of Catherine's activities widened rapidly. In 1375 we find her at Pisa busy with propaganda for a Crusade (the one project of hers that never looked like succeeding) and in 1376 she was at Avignon. The immediate occasion of this visit to the papal court was a war which Florence had started against the Holy See. Catherine in fact was the Florentine ambassador to Gregory XI, and on the whole a successful one. But her major success on this occasion (and it was an astonishing achievement) was to persuade the pope to return to Rome, which he did in the following January. Catherine herself was back in Italy before the end of 1376, working as a peace-maker in and around Siena and, with less success, in Florence. But in the autumn of 1378 what she had dreaded happened; the great schism began, and with it, for Catherine, her final prolonged spiritual agony, that desperate struggle for the unity of the Bride of Christ and on behalf of the authority of Urban VI, which was to bring her, utterly exhausted, to her death in Rome on the 29th April 1380. Her book, the famous *Dialogue*, had been dictated to her secretaries by Sept. 1378.

Reflecting on this life, so brief and so marvellously full, one is struck most perhaps, at first, by two things: by the extremely personal character of Catherine's vocation and by her amazing courage; and these two things in a sense are one. For her vocation was first a most intimate and personal self-surrender to our Lord in the secrecy of her cell, and then an entirely fearless living out the consequences of that surrender in the face of the world and the Church. Significant in this connection is her idea of the spiritual cell, the 'cell of self-knowledge' (by which, as we shall see, she meant a knowledge of oneself gained by contemplation of one's lover *par excellence*, the incarnate truth); it was an idea that she did not invent but to which she gave a new stress and a new currency. All her activity, all her strange authority and power—and for a short time her personality was a dominant factor in the western Church—all this sprang straight from her personal experience of Christ. All her writings are marked by the tone and authority which experience alone can give. No saint has more evidently exemplified the words of St Paul, 'the spiritual man judges all things and is himself judged by no man'. Her judgment—fortunately—was the authentically spiritual sort that includes self-judgment, humility. And humility she learned at the source, from the humble *dolce Agnello*. But having learned this lesson, her judgment was henceforth free, and she used it with a candour, a courage and also (despite appearances to the contrary) on the whole with

a certain sweetness and charm which make Savonarola, for example, seem by comparison heavy-handed, tactless and harsh. Admittedly Savonarola had his own peculiar difficulties; and was not a woman.

On her spiritual teaching I must speak with diffidence. My impressions are gathered from some familiarity with her letters and rather less familiarity with the *Dialogue*. This teaching is not, I need hardly say, speculative theology. It was a deduction from her experience of God, an experience gained through love but issuing, none the less, in certain quite distinct conceptions which served her as starting points in meditation and teaching. There is nothing hazy about Catherine's mind; nor does she, as some great and orthodox mystics have done, stress the unknowability or ineffability of God. Certain aspects, so to say, of God she fastened on with her intelligence and turned at once into practical principles. She knew through love, and in order to love; yet certainly she knew and delighted in knowledge. Her spirituality shows her Dominican training; a clear, positive intellectual vision is worked out unflinchingly in practice. The wisdom we find in her writings answers closely to St Thomas's description: 'wisdom as a Gift of the Holy Spirit has indeed its cause in the will, namely charity; but its essence is in the intellect whose act is to judge rightly'.⁹

Her starting point is God our lover; and God's love she sees always in two facts: the creation of 'the creature that has reason', and the redemption of this creature from sin; the original creative act and then the recreative act of incarnation and crucifixion; God's pouring out of being and God's pouring out of blood. Let me illustrate these two main points from Catherine's writings.

1. *God's love shown in the creation of man.* 'I am that which is; thou art that which is not', said our Lord to Catherine:¹⁰ the gift of existence precedes all others. 'Thou art he', she cries to God, 'who alone art good, thou the tranquil sea whence flow all things that exist'.¹¹ 'Do not love yourself for yourself, but for God; nor any creature for itself, but for the praise and glory of God's name; and do not love God for yourself, for your utility, but love God for God's sake, as the sum of goodness all worthy to be loved. Then will your love be perfect, not mercenary; then you will be unable to think of anything but Christ crucified . . . and that perfect charity which God gave you and showed you before the creation of the world, being in love with you before you existed;

⁹2a 2ae. 45. 2.

¹⁰Raymund of Capua, *Life of St Catherine*, I, ch. 10.

¹¹Epist. I (30).

for had he not been in love he would never have created you. By the love he had for you, seeing you in himself, he was moved to give you being'.¹² And again: 'Love, love; see, before you ever love, you were loved. For as God gazed into himself he fell in love with his creature's beauty, and so created it, moved by the fire of unutterable charity; and to this end only, that the creature might have eternal life and enjoy the infinite good that God enjoyed in himself'.¹³ It is from this idea of creation that Catherine draws out her high conception of the dignity of the rational soul with its inborn desire of the divine essence from which it has come. 'Think', she writes, 'that the first clothing we received was love, created as we are to the image and likeness of God, and this only through love; and so man cannot live without love, being made of nothing but love, and all that he has, both in soul and in body, he only has through love'.¹⁴ The mention here of the body is an allusion to the sexual love involved in parenthood, but the unmediated divine love creating the rational soul is what draws all Catherine's attention; it is basically because of this love that the soul 'in this life can find no peace, for its desire is never satisfied until it be joined and oned with the divine essence';¹⁵ until it 'become one thing (*una cosa*) with the first truth, the sweet truth'.¹⁶

And an immediate consequence is her stress on the soul's original natural freedom from all things except God; a stress, by the way, that she shares with Dante. 'Here is shown the immense goodness of God, in the treasure he has given to the soul, the power to decide freely and for itself'.¹⁷ This sentence, in the Italian, recalls to me some lines of the *Paradiso* which delighted Chesterton:

*Lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza
fesse creando ed a la sua bontate
piú conformato equel ch'e' piú apprezza,
fu de la volontà la libertate . . .*¹⁸

¹²Epist. XVIII (29).

¹³Epist. XVII (28).

¹⁴Epist. LII (not in Tommaseo's edition, this letter was discovered by Edmund Gardner and printed in the appendix to his *Saint Catherine of Siena*, London 1907).

¹⁵Epist. XVIII (29).

¹⁶Epist. XLV (137).

¹⁷Epist. XVII (28).

¹⁸*Paradiso* V, 19-22: 'the greatest gift that God in his generosity gave in creating, and the one that most corresponds to his goodness and that he accounts the most precious, was the freedom of the will'

Whether Catherine ever read or heard read a line of Dante we cannot say, though doubtless she heard his name mentioned. It is St Paul, anyhow, not the poet, whom she recalls in the next phrase: 'for no devil or any creature whatsoever can constrain the soul to a mortal sin against its will'—one, I think, of many echoes of a favourite passage from *Romans* 8. But then suddenly this flash of her own *alta fantasia*: 'know that in the very act of man's creation these words were spoken to him, "let it be done as you will", that is, "I create you free—subject to nothing whatsoever except me". O inestimably lovable fire of love that dost so declare and make manifest the creature's nobility, creating all things to serve thy creature, and thy creature to serve thee! But we, miserable wretches, turn away to love the world . . . and through this love the soul loses its lordship and becomes servant and slave of sin. It takes the devil for its lord'.¹⁹ Elsewhere she works back to this notion of the soul's original dignity as 'the creature that has reason' by way of the re-creation in the redeeming blood of Christ. 'Think . . . that the soul that loves God, the servant and slave redeemed by the blood of the Son of God, comes to such dignity that no longer can she be called servant but empress, as bride of the eternal emperor . . . To serve God is to reign. He takes away her servitude to sin, he makes her free. Strong indeed then is this perfect union (with Christ in charity) which adding to the dignity of creation, by a love-union brings to perfection that primal dignity of being, joining the creature with its creator'.²⁰

It was with an eye to such texts as these, I suppose, that Père Deman wrote: 'According to current views, what needs explaining is how man ever does what is right; but as Catherine sees it, what needs explaining is how man can ever go wrong. Others seek the cause of human goodness, because they think man is naturally inclined to evil; she looks for the cause of evil, being convinced that at the root and origin of human life is a desire for the good. Hence . . . Catherine's notion of self-love as that which makes natural desire deviate and go astray. And even so she will say that self-love makes us seek the good where it is not to be found, not that it inclines us to evil. This obstacle once removed, nature goes free'.²¹ Catherine's delight then, like Dante's, in the doctrine of creation, springs in part from the assurance it gives her that our nature is basically 'good and for the good', as Dante said.²²

¹⁹Epist. xxiv (69).

²⁰Epist. xviii (29).

²¹T. Deman, O.P., in *Vie Spirituelle, Supplément*, Oct. 1934, p. II.

²²*Purgatorio* xxviii, 92.

Only we must not in the least underrate her awareness, her horrified awareness, of that 'obstacle', self-love. Self-love for her is the root of all evil, and the whole world stinks with its horrible fruit. She attacks it again and again. Her extremely acute sense of its presence and power in the soul is the reason why she so insists on the need for self-knowledge. To know oneself is to know sin; and there is no way to God except through hatred and love: hatred of self and love of Christ. The two attitudes, hatred and love, are inseparable, for to love Christ, 'the dear Lamb drained of his blood', is simply to plunge into his blood, and the whole point and meaning of this blood is the reversal, the annulling of self-love. To enter the blood is to enter God's love as an active purifying force and to co-operate in the purification that it effects. This is the great Catherinian theme, elaborated with a persistent, persuasive use of blood-imagery, and, only less, of fire-imagery. Every letter she wrote starts with a praise of the blood, often linked with St Paul's image of the 'vesture of the new man', the being 'clothed with Christ'. But sometimes the Pauline metaphor suffices by itself. 'You ask, how should we be clothed? I answer: with hatred and with love; as when one puts on a new dress, loathing the old one and tearing it off and putting on the new one with love . . . And where shall we find this hatred? Only in self-knowledge' . . .²³ Or again, dropping all metaphor: 'The holy and sweet remedy of knowing that as a creature one has no being of oneself . . . and that one is forever doing that which is not, namely sin. And once a soul has known itself it knows God's goodness in itself, and knowing this, it loves God and loathes itself—not loathing itself as a creature, but as a rebel against the creator'.²⁴ Here again, as always with Catherine, hatred is balanced and explained by love. But the hatred is deadly serious, and its special object is sensuality, the *amore sensitivo*. Here is the special stress and motive of Catherine's very realistic, very physical asceticism. She did not hate the body as such, but she took to extremes the Christian sense that in fallen man the body is the chief instrument of sin. Her own body she treated without mercy. It seems certain that for years she ate scarcely anything except the consecrated host. And yet—or was it somehow because of this?—we are told that quite literally she smelled good; people were refreshed by her scent as well as by her smile.

2. *God's love displayed in the recreation of Man by Christ.* I have already touched on this theme and I have no time here to draw out its applica-

²³Epist. XLIX (108).

²⁴Epist. XXIII (101).

tions, in her later letters especially and in the *Dialogue*, to the theme of the Church—the Church which ‘holds the keys of the blood’.²⁵ She is, we know, one of the saints who have been most concerned with the thought and the affairs of the Church; she is one of the great Catholic reformers. But I pass over that side of her work. Nor will I dwell on her meditations on the incarnation, nor on the famous image of Christ as the ‘bridge’. But I want, in the time that remains, to touch briefly on some passages concerning Christ (and in a sense she has no other theme but him) which may help to bring out her characteristic stress on three virtues in particular: charity, gratitude and patience.

Charity is love responding to love. Its starting point, from our side, is knowledge. Always she insists on the need for knowledge: ‘open the eye of knowledge’. And the pupil of this eye is faith. It is remarkable how she insists on the *seeing* power of faith. Far from stressing, as so many mystics and theologians do, the darkness of faith, she if anything exaggerates the knowledge it gives. This perhaps is because her own faith was so concentrated and focussed on one point, the revelation of God’s love in Christ. It was thoroughly Christocentric, like St Paul’s. And like St Paul’s her ethical teaching is dominated by charity, and charity she sees always as a love of response, a loving in return for love.

‘You know . . . that to unite two things, there must be nothing in between; anything in between would impede union. Consider then that this is how God wills the soul to be, without any intermediary love whether of itself or any other creature. For God loves us directly, without intermediary; being grand and generous he has loved gratuitously, not as paying a debt but as loving without being loved. Such love as this it is not in human power to give. When man loves he is always paying a debt, for he never ceases to receive and share the gifts of God’s goodness. So we have to love with this second love; but let it be clean and generous so that we love nothing apart from God . . . And if you ask me “where shall I find this love?” I answer that there is no finding it except we draw it from the spring of the first Truth. In this spring you will see the dignity and beauty of your soul; for you will see the Word, the Lamb drained of his blood, who has given himself to you as your food and ransom, moved by nothing but the fire of love . . . The soul then . . . gazes into this spring and drinks at it, . . . seeing everything in the spring of God’s goodness, so that it is for God’s sake she loves all that she loves and apart from him she loves nothing. And how can the soul that has once seen in this way the boundless

²⁵Epist. xvii (28); and frequently elsewhere.

goodness of God, possibly be held back from loving?²⁶

How characteristic is that last phrase; for all her self-knowledge Catherine was an innocent; it was really always a wonder to her that people did not love God as she did. But let us read on a little in the same letter and see her question her own rejection of every medium between the soul and God, in order to draw out further the meaning of charity.

'Let there be nothing then in between; no medium save only divine charity, the sweet glorious medium that divides not but unites But you may object: "You have told us God wants nothing in between him and us, and now you say we should put something in between". I answer, put the fire of divine charity in between; the medium that is no medium but makes us one thing with him. It is as when wood is thrust into fire. Does it remain wood any more? No, it has become one thing with fire. But there *is* a medium that removes God from you—self-love! And yet this medium itself is utterly unreal, for sin is a nothing and has no foundation but self-love and enjoyments apart from God . . . It was in this sense that I said that God wants no medium. And no love can last away from the true medium'.²⁷

And again: 'O wondrous, sweetest charity, what moved thee? Love alone . . . For as between stone and stone, to weld them into strength a builder puts cement mixed with water, so God has welded the soul to himself with the blood of his . . . Son, mixed with the living cement of the fire of his charity; for the blood is not without fire, nor the fire without blood. The blood was shed with the fiery love of God for the human race'.²⁸

A favourite idea is that it was not the nails but love which kept 'God and man fixed to the cross'. Another is that he on the cross has made himself 'table, food and servant' of the soul. Always she stresses the lowliness, gentleness, servitude of Christ, the *umile dolce Agnello*. And this stress is paradoxically inseparable from her other stress, in practice, on all that is free, bold, high-minded and fierce in Christian living.

Her stress on charity as a love of response becomes inevitably, a stress on gratitude; indeed, at times she seems to combine all sins under ingratitude, just as she finds their common root in self-love. 'Shame, shame on man's pride, complacency, self-love; to see so much goodness poured out on him . . . so many graces as benefits received—as pure

²⁶Epist. LVIII (164).

²⁷Epist. LVIII (164).

²⁸Epist. LII (Gardner, Appendix I).

gifts, not as anything owed. The stupidity . . . that seems not to feel or see the heat of this love, such heat that, were we stones, it must have smashed us by now. Alas, alas, I can see but one cause of this, that the eye of knowledge has not chosen to look up at the tree of the cross where such heat of love is displayed . . . See there the generosity that has opened and torn its own body, draining itself of blood for our bath and baptism'.²⁹ And elsewhere, more simply: 'ingratitude dries up the springs of piety'.³⁰

So much talk of blood will naturally not be to everyone's taste. Even so sympathetic a reader as Miss Hilda Graef, for example, in her excellent book *The Light and the Rainbow*, finds it excessive, contrasting St Catherine's outpourings on the precious blood with the sobriety of St John and St Paul.³¹ Well, each to his taste; but God really did bleed, and all that Catherine does is to dwell on this fact as the supreme image and sign of divine love and the chief motive for ours. It haunted her day and night. An unconscious poet, she thought with symbols, and the blood became the symbol of symbols in which to express her experience and understanding of Christianity. And I suppose her readers will always divide into those who find her indelicacy in this matter rather repulsive and those who find it (as I do) magnificent.

The other virtue she very characteristically stresses is patience. In a way it is her moral touchstone or test-virtue, as the typical virtue of the Christian in this world, of the *viator*, of the soul on its pilgrimage, beset by temptation. As she saw it, I think, patience is simply the strength of the soul cleaving to God despite everything to the contrary. Patience, in this sense, is active rather than passive; temptations and difficulties are things to be used rather than avoided. The virility of this attitude is highly characteristic. 'No virtue', Catherine writes, 'is acquired, no virtue grows perfect in the absence of its contrary' (*senza el suo contrario*—the *contrario* being, of course, not vice, in the virtuous man, but temptation); 'so that if a man shuns the contrary thing he turns away from that virtue with which he ought to fight and overcome its contrary vice'.³² Again, 'the test of virtue is its contrary; through pride one acquires humility, and through impatience patience'.³³ To a woman of her temperament patience must have been

²⁹Epist. xxiii (101).

³⁰Epist. lxxviii (207).

³¹*The Light and the Rainbow* (1959) pp. 252-3.

³²Epist. lxxxviii (252).

³³Epist. lxx (211).

particularly difficult; which no doubt is why she lays such emphasis on it. But the way she does this itself betrays her temperament—or better perhaps, her vivid sense of the power of the will. She loved sinners but she expected a great deal from them. She loves to say that there is absolutely no need to sin; sin is in the will alone, and the will in respect of all creatures, is absolutely free. We are lords of nothing really, she tells the Lord of Milan, except of ‘the city of our soul’, but of this city we are lords indeed.³⁴ The soul is free-born; *la libertà è donna*, ‘liberty is a lady’, and that is why, she adds, ‘no devil or any other creature can constrain me to sin if I do not choose’.³⁵ Again: ‘no one can constrain us to commit the least sin, since God has placed “yes” and “no” in the strongest thing there is, in the will’.³⁶ The context makes it clear—should a theological eyebrow be lifted here—that she is speaking of the soul in grace.

I began this talk by calling Catherine a great preacher; I hope that the texts I have quoted will not have left you disappointed. I even hope that they may induce some of you who have not read her to start reading in a small way—preferably in her own Tuscan, which should not be too difficult for anyone with a smattering of Italian. In any case, enough has been said to remind you of your patron. St Catherine is not everybody’s saint; her ways seem perhaps too sublime, too divine for her ever to become really popular: *vera incessu patuit dea*. But she is our saint; and at her feet we can learn, if we will, much about the love of Christ; which is the beginning and the end of all her teaching. It is as a great lover that she will draw us, if she does draw us. For, as she says, ‘the heart of a man is drawn by nothing so much as by love; for man is made of love, and this seems to be the reason why he loves so much, being made of nothing but love whether in soul or in body. For it was through love that God created him to his image and likeness, and it is through love that a father and a mother give him of their substance, conceiving and begetting their child. And therefore God, seeing man so apt for love, throws down the hook of love to us, giving us the Word, the only begotten Son, who took our humanity to make a great peace’.³⁷

³⁴Epist. XVIII (29).

³⁵Epist. XXXVI (148).

³⁶Epist. XVII (28).

³⁷Epist. LXIV (196).