

# “The sweet, loving Word”

*Catherinian spirituality is reconstructed directly from her writings. The mystery of the Trinity is constantly present in the life of St Catherine of Siena. The human being has three powers: memory, understanding, will. Our voluntary response to God’s loving search for us is faith. The drama of sin, as deliberate disobedience. The incarnation and sacrifice of Christ, to redeem those he has made. Jesus, the “Bridge” between heaven and earth, the model to whom we conform, so that each one of us becomes “another Christ”, in total abandonment to the Father.*

Catherine’s teaching, like her own spiritual life, is principally a reflection of the teaching guarded and transmitted in and by the Catholic Church, and of Catherine’s own understanding of the mysteries of faith. God reveals himself to invite humankind into communion with himself, and Catherine not only responds with the obedient assent of faith, but takes such intimate possession of God’s mystery that it becomes her own life.

The mystery of the One and Triune God is constantly present in the saint’s life and experience. Indeed, the Trinity is the atmosphere and “ecosystem” in which Catherine moves, exists, prays, offers herself and proclaims the Gospel. All comes from the Trinity and all returns to it.

God, “the first, sweet Truth” is love, and all God’s works are works of love. This truth shines through creation, but is most clearly shown forth in the re-



*Allegorical painting by Mario Barberis “The Tree of Humanity” (1952), St Dominic’s Church, Teramo (Italy)*

demption: “Eternal love moved you to create humankind in your own image and likeness. You said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image and likeness’. And this you did, eternal Trinity, willing that we should share all you are, high eternal Trinity. You, Eternal Father, gave us memory to hold your gifts and share your power. You gave us understanding so that, seeing your good-

ness we might share the wisdom of your only-begotten Son. And you gave us free will to love what our understanding sees and knows of your truth, and so share the mercy of your Holy Spirit. Why did you so dignify us? With unimaginable love you looked upon your creatures within your very self, and you fell in love with us. So it was love that made you create us and give us being, just so that we might taste your supreme eternal good” (Dial. XIII).

Just as there is one divine being of the Trinity, in the Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, so there is one human being with three powers of memory, understanding and free will: enclosed in “the heart of the garden of the Trinity” we were drawn from God’s mind like a distinct flower with three powers, so that these might return us to the garden of the Trinity bearing that fruit which God himself had bestowed: the gift



*S. Catherine receiving the stigmata: attributed to Dominic Beccafumi, but also to Bartholomew Neroni, called the Rich*

of divine beatitude with which the soul would have been crowned in the state of original grace. (cf. Prayer, 21).

And this is the journey which the Trinity proposes, guides and brings to completion in every human being. This is the life of the Spirit, which has its stages and its own pathways. This is the life of grace. This is that eternal plan of salvation through which God unites his creatures to himself, and makes us able to live united with our creator, and gives us the gift of eternal friendship. These powers are in us so that we can penetrate and enter into the knowledge of God's self-revelation. God himself takes the initiative of speaking to us in human language, inviting us to build a relationship of friendship which will lead to a life of communion with him, a sharing of all that belongs to the one and to the other. God does all this by revealing himself to humankind a little at a time, involving himself in human history in words and in deeds; he brings his self-

revelation to completion in the Incarnation, himself entering into human history in the context of fallen weakness and frailty of which human existence is constituted. God reveals himself: and through God's initiative we respond by the obedience of faith. If we desire to form a relationship with God, opening ourselves in friendship to the plan God sets before us, we respond by obedience.

This knowledge of God leads to love. Love is the focal point of all our living and working. The human creature participates through understanding in the wisdom of the Son. This wisdom is not theoretical but existential, because it produces knowledge and faith. Faith, infused by the gift of the Spirit's grace at baptism, is our response, when we hand ourselves over to the Father's plan. As with Jesus, our response is founded on obedience, in that unconditional filial abandonment to the Father's plan.

Love overflows from faith, but

also from the means human nature itself possesses through the "eye of the understanding", of which faith is the "pupil". The essence of God is revealed to human understanding illumined by faith. "To sit in the seat of awareness" and "live according to reason", to discern and evaluate one's own choices in relation to a plan we recognise as good, is the first and fundamental step for beginning the path of Christian life, for what Catherine would call "the following of the Truth".

If the understanding is the spring from which flows the life of grace, free will possesses the key which opens and closes the door to God's action. The will is a reflection of the Spirit's mercy. Mercy is that free gift of grace issuing from the immense and "foolish" exchange of love between the Father and the Son so that their love becomes a divine Person: the Holy Spirit. And this gift of mercy, pouring down on us, dwells in us by God's gift of grace through the sacraments, and becomes a spring of divine life for us. The nature of this gift makes us essentially children of God, new creatures, "graced". This is not something "stuck on" to our humanity: it is a gift inherent in our person, something transforming which stays with us, lives within us in deepest communion. We correspond with this gift with our free will, by our assent to the Father's plan for us to become his children in the Son, loved in the Beloved. And here Catherine sees our drama, our frailty: sin. The first sin of all, which breaks the union between God and us, and between human beings them-

selves, has unhinged our deep unity with our own selves, making us vulnerable, incapable (to use a Catherinian image) of swimming against the current which is taking us away from God and from others.

Catherine expresses the reality of sin through various images, but in her way of thinking the direct cause of sin is always disobedience. We are created for love in the image and likeness of God in order to taste God's highest and eternal good, but we distance ourselves from our creator: *"Because she (the creature) had closed the door of her desire, the sun of grace did not shine on her. It was not the sun's fault. It was the fault of the one who has closed the door of her desire"* (Dial. LXIII).

The reason for humankind's disobedience is rooted in our being, which was made to the image of the Being of the Trinity. For both in virtue and in sin we decide and act according to memory, understanding and free will. In sin we abuse all our three powers, even if the sin itself is completed in the will. Indeed, without consent there is no sin, and consequently, in sinning, we become "enemies" of the divine Being of the Trinity, and particularly we enter into war with the mercy of the Holy Spirit. This is how the "garment of grace" is lost, the "heat of divine charity" dispersed (Cf. Letter 160). Losing divine grace by the disobedience of sin, we enter into war with the Holy Spirit, because we are unable to attune ourselves with the loving will which comes from the bosom of the Trinity: our fault resides fundamentally in loving



that which God hates or hating what God loves (cf. Dial. XCVIII). Instead of accepting the Trinity's invitation to the living water of grace in the life of beatitude, sinful humanity preferred the devil's invitation to the devil's water: "in him there is death, so he invites to the waters of death" (cf. Letter 318).

After our rebellion against the Trinity through the powers of the soul, rebellion against our own selves followed. Original corruption was like a tempestuous river in which all human generations suffered: *"With sin there came at once a tempestuous river that beat against them constantly with its waves, bringing weariness and troubles from themselves as well as from the devil and the world. You were all drowning, because not one of*



*you, for all your righteousness, could reach eternal life"* (Dial. XXI).

Sin is therefore in opposition to the justice which is proper to God and which is his mercy. This truth is clearly revealed in the redemption: if God had not "madly" loved us, he would not have given his Only Son up to death. So that his truth might be fulfilled, the truth of existence as a gift of love, the Word of God was made flesh and died on the cross rescuing us from the slavery of sin. (cf. Prayer XVI).

The decision for the Incarnation of the Word was taken in the "great council of the Trinity" before the world came to be. And if it was an act of mercy to save the creature from his own ruin, it was also an act of justice to demand the reparation due to the harm done against the divinity: *What way did you find, eternal Trinity, in order that your truth might be fulfilled both in showing mercy to us and in satisfying your justice? What remedy did you give? See, here is the act of remedy. You willed to give us the Word, your Only-Begotten Son, that he should take the weight of our flesh which had so displeased you; so that, wearing it as a human being, satisfaction might be made to your justice, not in virtue of the humanity but in virtue of the Godhead united to it: and this was done, and your truth was fulfilled and your justice and mercy were satisfied"* (Prayer XI).

The Incarnation of the Word has, therefore, in the council of the Trinity, the task of re-establishing peace between humankind, "fallen in the great war" and God himself. So that



“great peace should be made out of war”, God gives us his Son, our mediator with God (cf. Dial.XIII). To satisfy for the fault against the infinite Being of God, the Council of the Trinity sends the Word, clothed in the same corrupt nature of Adam’s humanity “so he could suffer in that same nature which had sinned, and by suffering in his body even to the extent of the shameful death of the cross he would placate my anger” (Dial.XIV).

The Word of God did not come alone, but he came with the power of the Father, with his own wisdom, and with the mercy of the Holy Spirit. The nature of God in all its perfection and richness, which the Son received from the Father, took on the imperfection and misery of human nature to strengthen and enrich it in the gift of his divine self: “O eternal Trinity, fire and abyss of love! Foolishly in love with your creature! O eternal Truth! O eternal Fire! Did only your Wisdom come into the world? No – because there was no wisdom without power, and no power without mercy: therefore you did not come alone as Wisdom, but the whole Godhead was there” (Prayer XVII).

The two natures are combined in the one person of the Word Incarnate, who by assuming human nature purified and raised it up even to the divine nature; he recalled it to where the Trinity had placed it in the beginning, and even more, he united it to the divine nature in the person of the Son himself.

Catherine delves deeply into the mystery of the Incarnation, linking it to the redemption through the image of grafting. The Trinity, mystery of communion and of love, is the tree of life; the creature was willed by this mystery to be a free, independent tree, capable of bearing fruit through the gifts showered on it. But disobedience to God’s plan made it into a tree of death, which, separated from communion with God, brought forth fruits of death (Prayer X).

The immense love of God for his creature brought his Son to carry out two “graftings”. The first, “in the tree of human nature” reveals to us the face of the Father, and opens for us again the path to beatitude, which had been closed because of sin. Grafting the divine nature on to human nature, the tree of God’s life restored us to new life and renewed our ability to bring forth fruits of love and communion. The second grafting is that which takes place on the tree of the most holy cross, not through the nails but through his boundless love for us. From this grafting streams the Blood of Christ, which through its union with the divine nature brings forth in us the fruits of life (Prayer XIII).

In the incarnation Catherine sees the manifestation of the invisible God, who was pleased to

reveal himself and his communion of love in order to invite us to share it. The first grafting finds expression in the Incarnation of the Word in human nature. In the second grafting Christ, through his paschal sacrifice, gives us redemption, for we were undone by sin and its consequences.

The Son of God incarnate nourishes himself “at the table of holy desire”, a desire which Catherine calls “crucified”, and which he carried with him from beginning to end. In his desire he embraced simultaneously God’s desire and ours. As soon as the Word incarnate was “sown in Mary’s womb”, the “cross of desire” began within him: the desire to do the will of the Father through obedience, in order to restore us the gift of grace and the end for which we had been created.

Catherine is a faithful disciple of Paul, and like him is immersed in the deep meaning of salvation history, and therefore wants only to know of “Jesus, and of him as the crucified Christ” (1Cor 2:2). The images she uses to contemplate the mystery of God incarnated and crucified for love of us reflect the various aspects of his mission. He is the lover who unites humanity with himself like a bride, carrying the desire to conquer her heart all through his life; and for this he hastens to the “shame of the cross”. He is the way to the Trinity, to the discovery of the infinite love of God, the way to enter into salvation. He is the Teacher who mounts to “the pulpit of the cross” to give us his teaching, grounded in truth; he is the open book in which everyone

can read the message which comes from the blood poured out for every human being. Christ is therefore the way to life, and he is Life itself.

He is the bridge between heaven and earth in the union of the divine nature with our human nature. On this bridge there are steps, a door, food which nourishes and sustains the passer-by, a drink which intoxicates and a bath which purifies. He is our peace, who brings an end to the bitter war of sin and leads us to the pacific sea of the Trinity. The Trinity, the First, sweet Truth, manifested the truth of love in Christ-the-Truth, the true meaning of history and of the human being; so that for us, Truth is identified with the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the True Word of the Father: he is Truth.

Jesus is the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father and who has revealed to us that God whom no-one has ever seen (cf. Jn 1:18); Jesus, by whom all things were made and without whom nothing exists (cf. Jn 1:3); Jesus, the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation (cf. Col 1:15); Jesus, the radiance of the Father's glory and the impress of his being (cf. Heb 1:3); Jesus, to whose pattern the Father has destined us to be moulded (cf. Rm 8:29).

He is the eternal plan of salvation through whom God unites and keeps his creatures united to himself, by giving us the gift of an eternal friendship. Saved and freed from sin, thanks to Christ's sacrifice, our course of action is to accord our own will with that of Jesus crucified. This is the way that makes us friends of God; it is a gift which does

not come to us from outside and is not a matter of external observances, but is the life of the Spirit who dwells within us, who grafts us on to Christ crucified, who nourishes us with his Blood, who makes us "sons in the Son", who works with gifts and virtues so that our lives may become an agreement, a perfect harmony, like that of the community within the Trinity.

The human creature is enabled not only to respond to God but also to be like him, in a life which becomes grace and free gift. All human beings created in the image and likeness of God, baptised and immersed in the paschal mystery of Christ, can recognise themselves as children of God, grounded in the grace of God which impels them to that dynamic action which is covenant communion, in which what and how much is done is not important; what is fundamental is to be united with God and in communion with our brothers and sisters.

This means becoming "another self", to become "anointed ones" of the Father, to deny our own will in order to be clothed with and conformed to the will of Christ. To become "another Jesus" means to be reaching out for the salvation of humanity, according to the will of the Father, because this is "the office of the Word". To be another Jesus means to become adopted children of the Father, to be Love, in virtue of the transforming action of the Holy Spirit who dwells in every heart and yearns, with us, to lead us to eternal life (Rm 8: 14-27).

Humankind desired to become "god" in opposition to the God

of Love, attaining happiness by itself; while it was actually capable of sharing in God's life by a way of "self-emptying" which God shows us in the inner relationship of the Trinity, and which Jesus, the Word of the Father, willed for himself by the Incarnation.

We become "another Christ" by way of obedience, for this leads us, as creatures, to understand the words and deeds of our Lord, to make our own the one desire of salvation of the "sweet and loving Word".

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