

Dear friends of Saint Catherine,

On this great feast of our patron saint, I would like to invite you to a little reflection guided by Saint Catherine. In the late part of her life, when she was traveling a lot, she made friends in different parts of Italy and even Europe. The letter that I attach below was written as a response to the women who kept inviting Catherine back to Lucca (Tuscany) and kept reminding her how much they miss her. Catherine's response might also be helpful to us in the time of separation: Let nothing be between you and God, and between each other, but the love of God. No emotion, no ideas, no memories. Just the love of God. Interesting isn't it?

May our patron saint intercede for us in this difficult time and bring us comfort.

Jacek Buda OP

In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of gentle Mary, mother of God's Son.

My daughter in Christ Jesus,

I Caterina, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, am writing to encourage you in his precious blood. I long to see you so transformed and fused into the fire of divine charity that nobody and nothing will ever separate you from it. You know, my dear beloved daughter, that to join two things together there must be nothing between them or there cannot be a perfect fusion. Now realize that this is how God wants our soul to be, without any selfish love of ourselves or of others in between, just as God loves us without anything in between. Freely and generously he loved us, gratuitously and not because he had to: he loved us without being loved. For us it is impossible to love the way God does. We are always obligated in duty to love since we are constantly being given a share in God's goodness and blessings. So we have to love with this second sort of love. But let this love be so clean and free that we love no one, nothing, spiritually or temporally, apart from God.

And if you say to me, "How can I have this sort of love?" I tell you, daughter, that we cannot have it or draw it from any source but the fountain of First Truth. At this fountain you will discover your soul's dignity and beauty. You will see the Word, the slain Lamb who gave himself as your ransom and as your food. And he was moved only by the fire of his charity and not by any service he could have received from us, from whom he had received nothing but offense. I am saying, then, that when we gaze into this fountain thirsty and hungry for virtue, we begin at once to drink. We do not see or love ourselves or anything else selfishly, because we see everything in the fountain of God's goodness. In him we love what we love, and we love nothing without him.

Now how could the soul who has seen such immeasurable goodness on God's part do anything but love? This, it seems, is what gentle First Truth invited us to when he cried out with heartfelt earnestness in the temple: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink, for I am the fountain of living water!" You see, daughter, it is the thirsty who are invited. He does not say, "anyone who is not thirsty," but "anyone

who is thirsty." So God insists that we bring with us the vessel of our free will, with a thirst and willingness to love. Let us go, then, to the fountain of God's sweet goodness. There we shall discover the knowledge of ourselves and of God. And when we dip our vessel in, we shall draw out the water of divine grace, powerful enough to give us everlasting life.

But remember: we wouldn't be able to make any progress if we were burdened with a heavy load. This is why I don't want you to clothe yourself with love for me or anyone else, but to be clothed only in love for God. I'm telling you this because I know from your letter the pain you suffered at my departure. I want you to learn from gentle First Truth. Neither attachment to his mother nor to any of his disciples kept him from running like one in love to the shameful death of the cross, leaving Mary and his disciples behind. Yet he loved them immensely. And later on they left one another for the greater honor of God and other people's salvation, because their concern was not for themselves. They gave up their own consolations for God's praise and glory, as people who eat and savor souls. You must believe that when they were so distressed they would gladly have stayed with Mary, whom they loved so much. Yet they all left. For they did not love themselves or their neighbors or God selfishly. No, they loved God because he was supremely good and worthy of love, and themselves and their neighbors and everything else they loved in God.

Now this is how I want you and the others to love. Look at me only in terms of giving honor to God and your best efforts to your neighbors. For though we may feel a certain sadness when someone we love leaves us, still we accept it graciously if our love is true, rooted only in God's honor and concerned more for the salvation of souls than for ourselves. Now then, don't let me see any more sadness, because this would be an interference that would hinder your being conformed and united with Christ. It is because I think God asks us to give ourselves freely, as he did, that I said I want you and my other dear daughters to be transformed in and united with God by love, getting rid of any medium, anything that gets in between - except divine charity, which is a sweet and glorious medium that doesn't separate but unites.

Really, it seems just like the master mason. He gathers many stones and fits them together, and the result is called both "stones" and "a wall." He does this by using mortar as his medium. Without the medium the stones would fall apart more scattered and broken than ever. So now imagine how our soul has to gather all people and be united with them in love and desire for their salvation, so that they may be sharers in the blood of the Lamb. So here this wall stands - many people, yet they are one. This, it seems, is what Saint Paul was inviting us to when he said that many run the race, but only one wins, and the winner is the one who has used this medium, divine charity.

But you could say to me what the disciples said to Christ when he said, "A little while and you shall not see me, and again a little while and you shall see me." They said, "What is he going to do, that he says, 'A little while and you shall not see me, and again a little while and you shall see me'?" So you could say, "First you tell us that God doesn't want anything between us and him, and now you tell us to put something in between!" My answer is that you must use the medium that doesn't put anything between us and God, the fire of divine charity, which becomes one with [God] as wood put into the fire. Would you say the wood remains wood? No, it becomes one with the fire. But if you were to use as medium your selfish love for yourself, you would be using a medium that would separate you from God, even though it is nothing (because sins have their root in nothing but selfish love and pleasure and enjoyment apart from God). For just as all virtue proceeds from charity, which gives it life, so all vice proceeds from selfish love, which deals death and eats away every virtue in the soul. This is why I said that God doesn't want anything between himself and us, and that any love not set in the true medium [of divine charity] does not last.

Run, my beloved daughters! Let's sleep no longer! I've felt sorry about your pain, and this is why I am giving you this remedy of loving God without anything between you and him. But if you still want poor wretched me as intermediary, I want to show you where to find me without being separated from this true love. Go with the dear loving Magdalen to the most sweet venerable cross. There you will find the Lamb and me, and there you can graze and feed and fulfill your desires. This is the way I want you to seek me and every created thing. Let this cross be your standard and comfort. And don't imagine, because I am physically far away from you, that my affection and my concern for your salvation are far away. No, I am even closer than when I am there physically.

Don't you know that the holy disciples had a greater awareness and knowledge of the Master after he had left them than before? They had been so taken up with his humanity that they hadn't looked beyond it. But after his departure they began to know and understand his goodness. This is why First Truth said, "I have to go; otherwise the Paraclete will not come to you." So I say I had to leave you so you would begin to seek God in truth and not through any intermediary. I tell you, you will be better off than before, if you enter into yourselves to ponder the words and teaching you have been given. In this way you will receive the fullness of grace by the very grace of God.

I'll write no more, because I have no more time for writing.

I'm sending this letter primarily to you, Melina, and then to Caterina, Monna Chiara, Monna Bartolomea, Monna Lagina, and Monna Colomba. Warm greetings from all of us!

Keep living in God's holy and tender love.

*Translator: Suzanne Noffke, O.P.*