

ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA Doctor of the Church

[Homily of the Holy Father Paul VI at St. Peter's Basilica, October 4, 1970]

Reprinted from *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, October 15, 1970, pp. 6-7.

The Holy Father presided in St. Peter's at the ceremony of proclaiming Saint Catherine of Siena a Doctor of the Church, on Sunday, October 4, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. The ceremony was attended by festive crowds from Siena and all Tuscany, who celebrated the occasion with music and dancing in St. Peter's Square and all around Rome. The Holy Father spoke as follows in the Basilica.

Spiritual exaltation bursts into Our soul as We proclaim the humble and wise Dominican virgin a Doctor of the church. The loftiest comparison which We can make (and where its justification may be found) is with the purest joy which Our Lord felt when he "rejoiced in spirit", as the Evangelist Saint Luke tells us, and said, "*I thank thee, Father of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and has revealed them to the simple. Yes, Father, for so did it please thee*". (Lk 10, 21; cf. Matt. 11, 25-26).

The truth is that when Jesus thanked his Father for having revealed the secrets of his divine wisdom to the humble, he was not thinking only of the Twelve whom he had chosen from among the uneducated people and whom he would one day send out as his apostles to instruct all peoples and teach them what he had commanded (cf. Matt. 28, 19-20). He was also thinking of those who would believe in him. Among these innumerable souls there would be the least cultivated in the eyes of the world.

The Apostle of the Gentiles took pleasure in making this observation when writing to the community of the Greek city of Corinth, which was swarming with people who were infatuated with human wisdom. "*For consider your calling, brethren*", he wrote, "*how not many who are wise in earthly estimation, not many powerful people, and not many noble have been called by God. But God has chosen that which is foolish to the world in order to confound the wise; he has chosen that which is weak in order to confound the strong. He has chosen that which is not, in order to bring that which is to nothing, so that no creature may glory in his presence*" (1 Cor. 1, 26-39).

Exterior activity of Catherine

The Master had already foretold God's preferential choice of what is negligible or even despicable in the world's eyes. He foretold it when he went sharply against earthly evaluations and called blessed the poor, the afflicted, the meek, those hungering for justice, the pure of heart and peacemakers. (cf. Matt. 5, 3-10).

It is not Our intention to linger over showing how the evangelical Beatitudes found a model of superlative truth and beauty in Catherine's life and exterior activity.

In any case, you all know how she was free of all earthly cupidity, how much she loved virginity consecrated to the heavenly spouse, Christ Jesus, how she hungered for justice and was filled with mercy as she strove to bring peace to families and cities which were torn by rivalries and atrocious hatreds, how she did wonders to reconcile the Republic of Florence with the Supreme Pontiff Gregory XI, and even went so far as to expose her life to vengeance from the rebels. Nor will we stop to admire those exceptional mystical graces with which the Lord chose to endow her and which included the mystical marriage and the sacred stigmata. We think that these are not the circumstances to recall the story of her great-hearted efforts to induce the Pope to return to his rightful place, Rome. The success which she finally achieved in this was truly the masterpiece of her work. For centuries it will be remembered as her greatest glory and will constitute a quite special claim to everlasting thankfulness on the part of the Church.

But we do think that this is the right moment to throw some light, though only briefly, on the second of her titles justifying the conferring of this Doctorate on this daughter of the illustrious city of Siena, in

accordance with the Church's judgement . This second title is the peculiar excellence of her doctrine.

The first title is the title of sanctity. This was solemnly acknowledged, in ample measure and in the unmistakable style of the humanist that he was, by Pope Pius II, her fellow townsman. He did this as the Bull of Canonization, *Misericordias Domini*, which he himself wrote (cf. M-H. Laurent O.P., *Proc. Castel.*, pp. 521-530, Italian translation by I. Taurisano O.P., *S. Caterina da Siena*, Rome, 1948, pp. 665-673). The special liturgical ceremony for it took place in St. Peter's Basilica on June 29th, 1461.

What then shall We say of the eminence of Catherine's teaching? In her writings, that is, her *Letters*, a large number of which have been preserved, in her *Dialogue of Divine Providence* or *Book of Divine Doctrine*, and in her *orationes* we shall certainly not find the apologetic vigour and the theological boldness which mark the works of the great lights of the ancient Church both in the East and West. Nor can we expect the uncultivated virgin of Fontebranda to give us lofty speculations which belong to systematic theology and which made the Doctors of the scholastic middle ages immortal. It is true that her writings reflect the theology of the Angelic Doctor in a surprising degree, yet that theology appears there bare of any scientific clothing.

But what strikes us most about the Saint is her infused wisdom. That is to say, lucid, profound and inebriating absorption of the divine truths and the mysteries of the faith contained in the Holy Books of the Old and New Testaments. That assimilation was certainly favoured by most singular natural gifts, but it was also evidently something prodigious, due to a charism of wisdom from the Holy Spirit, a mystical charism.

In her writings Catherine of Siena provides us with one of the most splendid examples of those charisms of *exhortation*, of *the word of wisdom* and the *word of knowledge* which Saint Paul describes as being in operation in some faithful belonging to early Christian communities. He desires that use of them should be well disciplined and pointed out that such gifts are not so much for the benefit of those endowed with them, as for the whole body of the Church. In that body, he went on to explain, "the Spirit who distributes his gifts to each one as he wills (is) one and the same" (1 Cor 12, 11). Hence the benefit of the spiritual treasures which his Spirit distributes ought to devolve to all the members of the mystical organism of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11, 5; Rom 12, 8; 1 tim. 6, 2; Tit. 2, 15).

"*Dottrina eius (scilicet Catharinae) non acquisita fuit; prius magistra visa est quam discipula*" (*Proc. Castel.*, 1. c.). Her doctrine was not acquired: she was a teacher even before she was a pupil. This is what Pius II said in his Bull of Canonization. Indeed, how many rays of superhuman wisdom, how many urgent calls to imitation of Christ in all the mysteries of his life and in his suffering, how many efficacious teachings about the practice of the virtues proper to the various states in life are scattered through the Saint's works. Her Letters are like so many sparks from a mysterious fire, lit in her ardent heart by Infinite Love, that is, the Holy Spirit.

Mystic of the Incarnate Word

But what were the main features, the dominant themes of her ascetical and mystical teaching? It seems to Us that Catherine is the mystic of the Incarnate Word, above all of Jesus Crucified. In this she was in imitation of "glorious Paul" (*Dialogue*, chapter XI, ed. G. Cavallini, 1968, p. 27), whose bounding and impetuous style she sometimes reflects. She was one who exalted the redeeming power of the adorable Blood of the Son of God, shed on the wood of the cross in expanding love, for the salvation of all generations of mankind (cf. *Dialogue*, chapter CXXVII, ed. cit. p. 325).

The Saint saw that Blood of the Saviour continually flowing in the Sacrifice of the Mass and in the Sacraments, thanks to the ministry of the sacred ministers and for purification and embellishment of the whole mystical Body of Christ. We may therefore say that Catherine was the *mystic of the mystical Body of Christ*, that is of the Church.

And the Church for her part was for Catherine a genuine mother to whom there is a duty to submit and to give reverence and obedience. "The Church", she dared to say, "is nothing else but Christ himself" (*Letter* 1271, ed. P. Misciatelli, III, 89).

What deep respect then and passionate love did the Saint not have for the Roman Pontiff! We Ourselves, the least of the servants of God, personally owe Catherine immense gratitude today, certainly not because of the honour that might redound to our humble person, but because of the mystical apologia which she made of the apostolic office of Peter's Successor. Who does not remember? In him she saw *il dolce Cristo in terra*—sweet Jesus on earth (*Letter* 196, ed. cit., III, 211). To him is due filial affection and obedience, because “Whoever is disobedient to Christ on earth, who represents Christ in heaven, does not share in the fruit of the Blood of the Son of God” (*Lett.* 207, ed. cit., III, 270).

Almost anticipating not only the doctrine but also the language of the II Vatican Council itself (Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 23) she wrote to Pope Urban VI: “Most holy Father...you know the great necessity for you and for holy Church to keep this people (of Florence)

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in obedience and reverence to Your Holiness, since here is the head and the beginning of our faith” (*Letter* 170, ed. cit. III, 75).

She also addressed pressing exhortations to Cardinals and to many Bishops and priests; nor did she spare them strong reproaches, but always with deep humility and respect for their dignity as ministers of the Blood of Christ.

Catherine could not forget that she was the daughter of a religious order, one of the most glorious and active in the Church. She therefore had singular esteem for what she called “the holy religions”. She considered them as a bond of union between the mystical Body, constituted by representatives of Christ (according to a description of her own) and the universal body of the Christian religion, that is, the ordinary faithful. She demanded that religious should have fidelity to their lofty calling, through generous practice of the virtues and observance of their respective roles.

The laity were not last in her maternal solicitude. She sent numerous lively letters to lay people, calling on them to be prompt to practice the Christian virtues and the duties of their state, and to be inspired with ardent love of God and their neighbor, for these too are living members of the mystical Body. “She” (the Church), the Saint said, “is founded on love and is love itself” (*Lett.* 103 ed. G. Gigli).

Her role in Church reform

And how could we forget the intense work she did for the reform of the Church? She addressed her exhortations principally to sacred Pastors, for she was disgusted and had holy scorn for the indolence of more than a few of them, and she fumed at their silence while the flock entrusted to them was lost and ruined. “Alas, be silent no longer! Cry with a hundred thousand tongues”, she writes to a high prelate; “I see that the world is spoilt through refusal to speak out, Christ's Spouse is pallid; her colour has been taken from her because her blood has been sucked out of her, that blood which is the Blood of Christ” (*Lett.* 16 to the Cardinal of Ostia, ed. I Ferretti, I, 89).

And what did she mean by renewal and reform of the Church? Certainly not the overthrow of its basic structures, rebellion against the Pastors, a free reign for personal charisms, arbitrary innovations in worship and discipline, such as some would like in our day. On the contrary, she repeatedly affirms that beauty would be given back to the Spouse of Christ and it would be necessary to make reforms “not with war, but with peace and quiet, with the humble and continuous prayers, sweat and tears of the servants of God” (cf. *Dialogue*, chapters XV, LXXXVI, ed. Cit., pp, 44, 197). For the Saint, therefore, it was a matter above all of interior reform, then exterior reform, but always in communion and filial obedience to Christ's rightful representatives.

Was our most devoted Virgin also a politician? Yes, undoubtedly, and in an exceptional way, in a wholly spiritual acceptance of the word. But she scornfully rejected the accusation of being a political meddler, which some of her fellow townspeople made against her. She wrote to one of them: “...And my fellow citizens,

believe that negotiations are going on by means of me or the company that I have with me; they are telling the truth; but they do not know it, and they are prophesying; for I do not wish, and I do not wish those who are with me, to do anything but what is concerned with defeating the demon and depriving him of the lordship which he has seized over man through mortal sin, and to take the hatred out of his heart and bring him to peace with Christ crucified and his neighbor” (cf. *Letter CXXII*, ed. Cit. II, 235).

Offering her life

The lesson which this political woman *sui generis* gives us still keeps its meaning and value, even though there is a more strongly felt need today to make the due distinction between the things that are Caesar’s and the things that are God’s, between Church and State. The Saint’s political magisterium had its most genuine and perfect expression in this lapidary sentence of hers: “No state can be preserved in civil law and divine law in a state of grace without holy justice” (*Dialogue*, chapter XIX, ed. Cit., p. 291).

Catherine was not content with having carried out an intense and most vast work of truth in goodness in word and in writing. She desired to seal it all with the final offer of her life, for the mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, at the still youthful age of 33 years. From her deathbed, surrounded by her faithful disciples in a little cell by the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, she addressed this prayer to the Lord. It is a true testament of faith and most ardent love: “*O eternal God, receive the sacrifice of my life for (the sake of) this mystical body of holy Church. I have nothing other to give but what thou has given me. Take my heart, therefore, and press it out over the face of this spouse*” (*Lett.* 371, ed. L. Ferretti, V., pp. 301-302.).

This was a message of a most pure faith, of an ardent love, of a humble and generous dedication to the Catholic Church, as the mystical Body and Spouse of the divine Redeemer. This message was typical of the new Doctor of the Church, Catherine of Siena, to enlighten and give example to all who glory in belonging to the Church. Let us receive this message in a grateful and generous spirit, that it may be a light for our earthly life and a pledge of future secure membership of the Church triumphant in heaven. So be it!

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