

Deuteronomy the love of God does come into question, a double series of promises and threats is there to remind the Israelite that it is very much to his interest to follow Yahweh. Repentance seems based on the most imperfect contrition possible, that which is rooted in egoism. Fortunately men's souls proved to be of finer mettle than their theology. The Bible is studded with examples of holy men who love Yahweh for himself. But they were in advance of the theology of their times. The prophets alone visualised the whole depth of the love of Yahweh which went far beyond the mathematical calculations of the moralists. When they pondered over these things, those minds which were most deeply religious were tempted by all that was best in themselves to utter a protest against the traditional theology. This was precisely the case of the author of Job, who wrote his poem in this atmosphere of troubled uncertainty and perhaps barely two or three generations after the return from the Exile.

*Translated by K. POND.*

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## A LETTER TO NOVICES

BY

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA<sup>1</sup>

*To certain novices of the Order of Our Lady of Mount Olivet*



IN the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of sweet Mary. Dearest sons in sweet Jesus Christ. Catherine, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, writes to you in his precious blood, with a desire to see her sons obedient unto death, learning of the spotless Lamb who was obedient to the Father, even unto the shameful death of the cross.

Consider that he is the way and the rule which you and all creatures must follow. Put him before you and look at him with the eye of your mind; see how obedient he is, the Word of God made flesh. He does not shrink from the heavy burden put upon him by the Father. On the contrary, he shoulders it and runs with great desire. He made this clear at supper on Holy Thursday when he said, 'With desire I have desired to feast with you before I die'. That is to say, he intended to keep the paschal feast, fulfilling the will of his Father, and his own obedience. Seeing at last the time draw near in which he was to sacrifice his body to the Father for our sake, he was filled with joy and exultation. In his happiness he said, 'With

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by D. E. K., O.P. This letter has not appeared before in English.

desire I have desired'. This is the paschal feast of which he spoke; the feast whereat he was to give himself as food, making a sacrifice of his body in obedience to the Father. He had kept the paschal feast with his disciples before, but never such a one as this. Oh inestimable love, most fervent, most sweet! You have no thought for your own sufferings, nor of the terrible death that awaits you! For if you had thought upon them, you could never have gone to your last supper with such joy, nor would you have called it a feast.

Consider now this Lamb, dearest sons, in the likeness of an eagle, who looks not down to the earth of his humanity, but fixes his eye upon the sun, upon the Eternal Father. And he sees the divine will in himself, wherein we are sanctified. We of ourselves could not be sanctified because of the sin of our first father Adam. It was therefore necessary that there should be a means given us, whereby the will of God might be fulfilled. See the Word which the Father has given as spouse to mankind. He has commanded that Word under obedience to pour forth blood, as a means whereby his will might be perfected in us and we might be sanctified. Such is the banquet of the spotless Lamb. With the greatest love, the greatest desire, he brings his desire to fulfilment, and at the same time fulfils the will of God. Oh sweet and inestimable love! You have united and conformed the creature to its Creator. Are not the stones of a wall joined together with mortar so that the winds may not prevail against it? So mankind has been reintegrated in its Creator by means of the Incarnate Word, in whom the divine essence commingled with blood. Your blood has bonded the stones into a wall of such strength that no wind can do it harm. Through that blood the wall withstands many onslaughts of terrible storm and trial inflicted upon it by the devil and his temptations, by man and his sensual nature—all winds that strive against the soul. Thy blood, sweet Truth, poured out amongst us, has made this wall so strong that no hurricane can break it down. We, the stones of that wall, have good reason to love each other in thee, sweetest love, and never to fear on account of whatsoever illusions come to attack us.

I beg you then, sweet sons in Jesus Christ, never to fear, having full confidence in the blood of the Crucified. Do not weaken because of moods and illusions, nor because of some fear that you might not be able to persevere, or to bear the obedience of your order. Never fear, for any reason whatsoever. Keep always within you a good and holy will, for the will is master of this wall in that, like a powerful pickaxe, it can destroy the wall or keep it in repair. So I wish you never to fear. Let all servile fear be cast from you. Then, giving answer to your lukewarm hearts and the illusions of the

devil, you will say with the dear enamoured soul of Saint Paul, 'Endure steadfastly today, oh my soul! Through Christ crucified all things are possible to me, for he is in me who gives me strength with his desire and his love'. Love, love, only love. Drink of the Lamb's sweet blood, which has drawn your souls away from the devil's tyranny and established you firm as a rock. He has given you your soul in freedom and love, and none can take the mastery of it from you without your consent. Thus mercifully has he acted towards all creatures.

But I perceive that the divine Providence has placed you in a ship, so that you may not come to grief in the dark tempests of the sea of life. That ship is the ship of our true and holy religion, steered by obedience as holy and as true. Only think, how much grace God has given you, knowing your weakness. For those who live in the world must sail the sea relying on the strength of their own arm. But those who live in religion have no need to rely on themselves. The religious who is truly obedient has no need to render an account of himself, but rather must he render an account of his Order since he lives in obedience to his superiors. If you, my dear sons, are obedient, then I shall know that you are following the Lamb, the victim of the sacrifice. I have already told you that I wish you to learn of sweet Jesus who, fulfilling the will of the Father, completed his obedience in death. God desires you also to fulfil his will in the observance of the rule of your Order, preferring death to the transgression of obedience. If it should ever happen (God forbid!) that a superior commanded you to do something manifestly outside the will of God, then of course you must not obey, nor do I wish you to in such a case. But in all things with that exception I desire you always to obey.

Forget your own consolation, either spiritual or material. I say that because at times the devil colours our own desires with virtue and with what seems to be an increase of devotion. Then we, desiring places and times of our own choosing, say: 'In such and such a place and at a particular time, I find more consolation, and my soul is more at peace'. But obedience will not desire that which seems best to you, and I tell you now that you must follow obedience rather than your own consolation. This is a covert deception which threatens all God's servants, and can make them disobey God while believing that they are serving him the more. Know then, that it is the will alone which obeys and disobeys. If you, as religious, are self-willed, the devil will tempt you not with the coarse material things of the world (since having left the world you have left such things behind you) but he will tempt you in things spiritual, making

you think that when you are in certain places you are more at peace and enjoying more of God's love, than in some other place where obedience calls you. You will resist obedience, and when made to obey you will do so with distress. You will have lost peace when it was peace you sought. It is therefore better to see in oneself the will of God being fulfilled in the will of one's superiors.

It often happens thus to those in the world who depart from the will of their Creator; who when some tribulation or persecution befalls them complain, 'I would rather this had not happened, not so much because of the suffering it causes me, but because it seems to keep me away from God'. But such are deceived by the deceitful passions of the senses. Blinded by the devil, they avoid tribulation and have more fear of suffering than of offending God. The devil uses this deception on all sorts of men, in the world and in religion. Therefore it befits us to deny self-will. Orderly seculars obey God's commandments, and religious must obey both commandments and counsels because of the vows they have made in religion.

Arise then my sons! Be truly virtuous and obedient unto death. Think how, the more humble you are, the more obedient you will be, since obedience flows from humility and humility from obedience. These two virtues flow through a channel of intense love from the side of Christ crucified. It is there at the side of Christ that I wish you to live. You know that a religious outside of his cell is as dead as a fish out of water. Let your cell be in the wounded side of the crucified, where you will find self-knowledge and knowledge of his goodness.

So arise now with a great and burning desire. Go and get you into that sweet dwelling place. No one, neither man nor devil, will be able to take from you the grace of God, nor hinder your coming at last to the end you desire—to see God; to enjoy God! I will say no more. Only be obedient unto death, following the Lamb who is the way and the rule. Bathe yourselves in his blood, hide yourselves in his wounds. May you always know the sweet and holy delight of his presence. Live in charity, loving one another.

Sweet Jesus, Jesus love.