

St Catherine of Siena's 'Mystical Apprehension' of God

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In 1970 when Pope Paul VI declared St Catherine (1347–1380) a Doctor of the Church, he said, '... her wisdom was infused, a lucid, profound and inebriating assimilation of divine truth and the mysteries of faith contained in the scriptures; an assimilation assisted certainly by singular natural gifts, but obviously due more fully to a special charism of wisdom from the Holy Spirit, a mystical charism... a charism of exhortation by words of wisdom, words of knowledge... such as St. Paul shows operating in various members of the faithful in the early Christian community... Her doctrine was not acquired — she was a teacher before ever a pupil' (AAS 62, 1970: Acti Pauli Pp. VI, pp. 675–6).

The Dominican Order's own official comment was: 'Richly endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, her sensitive response to Him enabled her to combine in a remarkable way a busy apostolic life with the lofty contemplation of divine things. So closely was she conformed to Christ crucified that she bore the imprint of his sacred wounds, and received other mystical gifts which enabled her to pass on to others a record of outstanding spiritual doctrine in her *Dialogue (Ordo Praedicatorum, Directorium pro celebrationibus liturgicis, 1979)*.

I think we might explore a little what is meant here by 'infused knowledge' or 'mystical wisdom'; I am not doubting that God can communicate with the human mind in ways known only to Himself; I merely ask: is this what was happening here, all the time, when those descriptions are used? How far does what seems to be 'mystical' or 'infused' build on, or subsume naturally acquired knowledge? Is there perhaps some analogy with our understanding of how inspiration operates in the case the writers of scripture?

In Catherine's case we have an extensive and detailed biography running to more than 360 printed pages, compiled by Friar Raymund of Capua, from notes kept by two of her confessors from her early childhood who carefully recorded their sources, as well as from Raymund's own personal knowledge.¹ It is not only a 'spiritual'

¹ Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda Maior*; trans. G.Lamb, *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, London, Harvill Press, 1960; also trans. Conleth Kearns, *Life of St. Catherine of Siena* by Raymond of Capua, Michael Glazier, Wilmington 1980; this edition includes the Prologue not previously printed in English.

References in the text given as: R + number of section and chapter.

biography, nor merely conventional hagiography; it is fairly precise and analytical, and at times remarkably 'down to earth' in tone and content (cf, R.II.). Other sources of information are provided by her own writings – principally her *Dialogue*, a record of conversations with Christ out loud, while she was in ecstasy, written down by listening scribes, and edited by Catherine after she returned to her senses² (cf, R.III.1). Very many of her letters also survive, together with some recorded prayers, which help to fill in details of her life and provide further examples of her teaching.³

Her early life and family background obviously provided the first sources of her natural knowledge: as the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children she must have had considerable opportunities for observation and normal experience; she was in fact very fond of one particular older married sister Benvenuta, with whom she often stayed as a child, and whose death caused her great grief.

She attended the local Dominican church from an early age, where she heard the scriptures read and listened to regular preaching which, it seems, included frequent patristic quotations and allusions, since these are common in her own works, as are echoes of Aquinas.⁴ From the impressionable age of six her attachment to the Dominicans was a major influence in her life: she had a regular Dominican confessor the first of whom, Friar Tommaso Caffarini, was a relative who actually lived with the family for a time. Later Friar Bartolomeo da Siena received a papal rescript to accompany her on her various journeys as official confessor, since her teaching and reputation collected numbers of would-be penitents, and Raymund of Capua, who was with her in Rome during the last two years of her life, became Master General of the Order shortly before her death. At the age of sixteen she became a Dominican Tertiary (*mantellata*) following a Dominican Rule of life in which regular weekly conferences and instructions were a standard feature.

She evidently had an alert mind and a retentive memory and it was her practice to ponder and reflect on what she heard. At one stage in her early teens she spent three years in more or less complete seclusion in a 'cell' or bedroom of her own – an unusual situation in a mediaeval town house (R.I.ix). She also showed a certain natural piety

² St.Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, trans. as *The Orchard of Syon, Wynkin de Werde*, London 1519; ed. P.Hodgson & G.M.Liegey, EETS, OUP, 1966; also trans. Algar Thorold, London 1896; and Suzanne Noffke, Paulist Press, NY, 1980.

References in text given as: D + chapter number.

³ ed. Nicolo Tommaseo & Piero Misciatelli, *Le Lettere de S.Caterina da Siena*, Siena, Giuntini & Bentivoglio, 1913–22; trans. Suzanne Noffke, Vol.1. *Binghamton, Mediaeval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 1988. Trans. Suzanne Noffke, *The Prayers of St. Catherine of Siena*, Paulist Press, NY, 1983.

⁴ Noffke, *Dialogue*, Introduction identifies the influence of SS.Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Cassian, Uherino da Casale, Passaventi, Cavalca O.P., Jacopo da Voragine, O.P. & Colombini.

which was attracted to church-going and practices of devotion. There was too a practical streak which led her to apply what she learnt to her own experience and situation, as well as to those of others and to life in general – she was no ‘up-in-the-clouds’ mystic. As she grew older and more confident she showed a natural talent for friendship, which provided her with many further opportunities for learning from others; she told Raymund that one of her greatest pleasures was discussing the truths of the faith with other people.

What does she herself tell us about her mystical experiences? She introduced her *Dialogue* by asking God four questions, and in the final chapter she reports Christ as saying that he has ‘satisfied’ her by ‘enlightening you with my truth; showing you how you may come to know the truth; and how, with the light of faith, and knowledge of yourself and of me, you may arrive at the knowledge of the truth’ (D.1 & 67). She represents the intimacy of these conversations by recording Christ’s use of such phrases as: I have explained to you, I described to you, to enlighten you further I showed you, I made a comparison which I used to represent three stages, I showed you what things are necessary, I spoke to you of three kinds of punishment narrating their miseries; and verbs such as: I told, I promised, I asked, I explained, I spoke; I showed, I answered recur constantly in all Catherine’s accounts of her relationship with Christ.

For her own part she described her soul as ‘having seen with the eye of her mind and recognised the truth; having heard it with feeling and tasted it with longing’, going on to say that ‘with your light you have given me light; (cf. Ps.37.10) through your wisdom I have come to know the truth. . . . Love constrained you to enlighten the eye of my mind with the light of faith so that I should come to know and understand your truth revealed to me. Grant that my memory may be able to retain your blessings.’ Further she said, ‘The knowledge you have given me of your truth . . . compels me to desire to leave this body behind, because I have tasted you and seen with the light of my mind into your light, your abyss, O Eternal Trinity. . . . Having had infused into my mind your power and your wisdom, with your light I came to realise that, in the creation you made of me in the blood of your Son, you have fallen in love with the beauty of your handiwork’ (D.167).

Such passages could perhaps suggest possible stages of a development from the initial gift of faith, nourished and fostered in the normal Christian way, to a much deeper penetration of the truths of the faith resulting from intimate prayer and spiritual experience, but still utilising human faculties, such as memory, to provide material for further pondering and reflection. Raymund’s biography too would indicate that she did originally learn in the ordinary way by hearing scriptures and preaching, and applying their truths to her own life in practice; in the *Dialogue* Catherine reports Christ’s own exposition of this natural mode of learning (D.9, 29, 45–6, 98).

Raymund describes her faith as 'based on the Word of God, i.e., the scriptures and her memory of these' (*R. Prol.*). He is perhaps over-impressed with her memory – no doubt better than his own since she was illiterate whereas he could have recourse to written sources, for he uses the word 'infused' for her knowledge of 'the saints and fathers' and says that 'revelation taught her the lives of the Fathers' (*R. Prol.*). His account of how she learned to read is interesting: unable to do so in her youth she tried to learn from her elder sister but gave up in despair at her lack of success after a few weeks, and asked God to teach her if he wanted her to be able to read the psalms in his praise. Raymund tells us that three weeks later, though she could not speak Latin, she could read the words of the psalms and pronounce them properly, but she read so fast that she could not read separate syllables nor spell the words. Is this a miraculous gift, or evidence of a very good visual and oral memory fiercely concentrated on a single project without distractions for three weeks? It occurred during her period of seclusion in her own cell (*R.I.xi*).

Raymund makes allusions to her natural endowments and quotes examples of her discussing the gifts of God with him, implying that she appreciated his priestly office and training and genuinely wanted his advice and his answers, though he also refers to her own spirit of discretion when she found the directive of an earlier confessor quite impossible to fulfil (*R.II.vi*). Speaking of her remarkable freedom from anxiety in all circumstances, he refers to the psalm: 'cast your cares upon the Lord and he will sustain you' (55:23) and comments that 'Catherine learned certain things by her own experience and went on to deduce further truths about the soul's relationship with God'. When trying to present Catherine's spiritual experiences, for instance when God said to her 'I am He who is; you are she who is not', Raymund often develops his theme with scriptural allusions which were presumably also familiar to Catherine; in this case he referred to Moses' experience at the burning bush when God told him 'I am Who am', and to the 'I am' phrases in St. John's Gospel, especially Chapter 8. Elsewhere he refers to I Corinthians 12:9, 'Power is made perfect in infirmity', and to St. Augustine's *City of God*, saying that these will help his readers to realise the foundations of Catherine's doctrine. Presumably they also helped her to develop it in the first place (*R.I.x*).

Catherine clearly had exceptional powers of concentration and a talent for pondering and reflection; she says that God told her 'never to emerge from the cell of self-knowledge' and to 'shut out all other thoughts from her mind and think only of him, and he would think of her' (*D.4*). When he told her to end her three years of seclusion and go out and work for his people, she objected that this would disrupt her relationship with him; he told her not to be selfish and rather to construct a cell within her heart to which she could retire at any time.

Catherine told Raymund that ever after, for the rest of her life, she was conscious of this intimate presence of Christ; it would seem, according to Raymund, that her visions and conversations with Christ were virtually continual, even while she was sleeping or talking with others (*R.I.ix & xi; II.i & ii*). It is difficult to interpret the character of this constant consciousness of Christ's presence: Raymund tells us that when her more public and political activity began, Our Lord appeared to her and told her about the further extraordinary graces and gifts she would receive for her 'public work. The vision vanished and she remained lost in thought, wondering what this would mean' (*R.II.v*). Later however, when she insisted on travelling to Pisa despite an outbreak of plague in that city, she told Raymund that Our Lord had 'appeared to her as usual and told her to go' (*R.II.x*).

Such confident and conscious intimacy with Christ prompted her frequently to pray for assistance of various sorts and also for further enlightenment, a prayer which was obviously answered. She tells us that God taught her how to distinguish his true visions from those counterfeited by the devil: genuine visions produce the fruit of greater knowledge of the truth for the soul, while the devil's visions produce only transient and illusory satisfaction (*D.88-9*). She also had a remarkable gift of intuition in relation to other people: Raymund recounts several examples of her telling people about entirely secret sins they had not confessed, and the incident of her revealing to the Pope her knowledge of his own vision of Christ commanding a return from Avignon to Rome is famous. Raymund records the origin of this particular gift in the occasion of Catherine's dealings with another tertiary, Palmerina, who reviled and slandered her. Catherine prayed 'more with her mind than her lips' that she would stop being an occasion of sin for Palmerina, and after the latter's death Our Lord showed Catherine a vision of her soul, saved in answer to Catherine's prayers. She told Raymund 'From that time I have been able to read people's souls intuitively' (*R.II.x*). Raymund testifies that he and other companions frequently had the experience of Catherine telling them the thoughts in their minds or things they had done even when she was away from them. It is perhaps significant however that he says, 'Nothing remained hidden from her of the things concerning herself or the people who shared a joint life with her or turned to her for help in matters concerning the good of their souls.' Was this highly developed intuition the result of natural familiarity?

Much of Catherine's own teaching concerns the inseparability of knowledge and love, a constant theme throughout the *Dialogue* (1-2, 85-6, 134 etc). Her devotion to her heavenly bridegroom had never wavered since her vow of virginity at the age of seven (*R.I.iii*) and Raymund tells us that 'Grace increased in her heart and the Spirit of

the Lord overflowed so much in her that she herself was astounded by it'. She 'languished with love' which in her last years could only be solaced by the frequent reception of the Eucharist (R.II.vi & xii.). Both Raymund and Catherine herself refer in this context to Ps.73:26 'My flesh and my soul faint for joy, God is my portion for ever' and Ps.77:3, 'I thought of my God and I groaned; I pondered and my spirit fainted.'

On the basis of her own teaching such intense love would deepen and sharpen her knowledge of the mysteries of God, and Raymund comments on how everything about her was controlled by the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom which he mentions constantly: her faith was becoming ever more enlightened and her own wisdom was thus increasing. 'She penetrated the abyss of divine wisdom in a way surpassing all human reckoning without the aid of a human teacher' (R. Prolog.) – here Raymund is virtually quoting her own *Dialogue* (D.1–4, 12 & *passim*) (R.I.iii & ix). Certainly there were some unusual phenomena in Catherine's life. When Raymund describes her extreme abstention from food in the last years of her life before her death at the age of thirty-three and her occasional levitations, he compares her with Mary Magdalen who 'lived in a cave, not eating for thirty-three years, and was lifted up in the air by angels' — a legend popular with Dominicans since Magdalen was early adopted as patroness of the Order (R.II.vii). Were some of Catherine's devotional practices evoked by imitation – conscious or unconscious – of Dominican traditions?

Raymund says that she 'frequently suffered that kind of excess which is known as ecstasy; so inflamed was she by divine love that she was in a region beyond human sense, her body numb when touched and her bodily senses not functioning.' During such raptures she muttered phrases and profound sayings, and subsequently told him, in the words of St.Paul, 'Vidi arcana Dei' which she could not explain; it would be blasphemous or insulting since human words were inadequate (R.II.vi). After the extraordinary event of her apparent death, when she was totally insensible for three days, she told him that her soul was outside her body for four hours and that she 'saw divine mysteries that no living soul could utter, because memory has no hold over them, and there are no words capable of describing things so divine. My soul contemplated the divine Essence' – a phrase remarkably reminiscent of Aquinas (R.II.vi).⁵

Raymund also says that she never approached the altar 'without seeing things beyond the range of the senses' and recounts various instances of miraculous or visionary communions when she was prevented from receiving the sacramental species; one such ecstatic experience was the occasion of her receiving the stigmata (R.II.vi). Extraordinary spiritual gifts are not perhaps a surprising culmination

⁵ Cf.e.g: *ST*,Ia.56,a.3,resp. or *De Potentia* 7:5 & 14.

of her development. Her chief work, the *Dialogue*, was communicated in a state of ecstasy shortly before her death and, according to Raymund, she 'possessed the holy Spirit, the key to the deep wisdom of God – her words were proof of the fire of the Holy Spirit within her' (*R. Prol. III, i & iii*). 'The flame of love within her heart flooded her intelligence with light and her memory with vigour. She herself said that she learnt the truths of salvation not from human sources but directly from Christ (*R. Prol*). He describes this as 'inspiration, revelation, infused knowledge' and offers his own version of what is an 'intellectual vision':

In point of fact, although the joy of the spirit overflows on to the body by virtue of the union between them, nevertheless the excessive elevation of spirit which takes place as a result of a vision of the third heaven, that is to say, an intellectual vision, deprives the body of its quickening powers to such an extent that if God does not restore it with another miracle it is bound to die. It is a known fact that an act of understanding does not require any object of sense for its instrument except as a means of representation of the intelligible object; now if Almighty God by a special grace presents such an object to the intellect in a supernatural way, the intellect, finding its own perfection in Christ, immediately leaves the body behind and endeavours to unite itself with it. But God in his excellent wisdom, first by revelation of his light draws up the intellect that He has created, and then permits some affliction to plunge it down into the depths, so that, drawn thereby into the middle of the knowledge both of the divine perfection and of its own defects, it may soar in safety, passing freely over the sea of this world, to arrive safe and sound at the gates of eternal life (*R.II,vi*).

Catherine herself gives some account of the whole process in the closing passages of the *Dialogue*, which again suggest echoes of St. Augustine:⁶

O Eternal Trinity! O Deity, who by the union of the divine nature gave such value to the blood of your only begotten Son! You, eternal Trinity, are a deep sea, in which the more I seek the more I find, and the more I find the more I seek for you; . . . hunger-ing for you, O Eternal Trinity, the soul longs to see you in the light of your light. . . . I have tasted you and seen with the light of my mind, into your light, your abyss, O Eternal Trinity, and the beauty of your creature; seeing myself in you I saw myself made in your image, having had infused into my mind, O Eternal Father, your power and wisdom, the wisdom that belongs to your Only Begotten Son. . . . O Abyss! O Eternal Deity! O unplumbed Sea! You are the light above all light; who with your light give to eye of the mind such abundance and perfection of supernatural light that even the light of faith grows clearer. . . . For in the light of faith I acquire wisdom, in the wisdom of the word of your Son. . . . O Eternal Trinity, in the light that you gave me, and which I received with the light of the most holy faith, I have come to know you, who by your many wonderful explanations have made clear for me the way of great perfection, so that not in darkness but with your light I may serve you and be a mirror of a good and holy life (*D.167*).

⁶ Cf. e.g. *Confessions* 1,1; 10,27 etc.