

Catherine De' Ricci and the Will of God

Part II

Domenico di Agresti

[Translated and adapted by Simon Tugwell OP]

If everyone lived the love of God as fully as it is often talked about, it would not be a pious exaggeration to say that this world would be paradise. Unfortunately, in reality nothing is more rare than a pure, total love of God, and the proof of this is that there are so few saints, who are, by definition, people who do live this love to a heroic degree. It is also only too easy to draw up theories about the love of God and its various stages and degrees, but between word and deed there lies the will. Because Catherine was serious about living the love of God, we can sum up all her sanctity and the whole way she followed in one simple sentence, which she wrote in a letter to her bishop on 15 February 1552: 'This is what my Lord pleases . . . I want it to be pleasing to me too' [CRE I 248]. Or in what she wrote to Giovambattista de' Servi on 20 May 1552, 'Please pray that his most holy Majesty will, if it pleases him, grant me holiness enough to be able to fulfil my office [of prioress] to his honour; if not, then his will be done in me always, in this and in everything else' [CRE I 266]. And what she lives in herself first then becomes her teaching to her disciples: 'Make your own will to be united with Jesus and never at any time separate or withdraw yourself from him, but frequently make him this gift of yourself and your will, because it is a gift which pleases the Lord' [CRE IV 209–210]. Indeed, we can say that the whole collection of Catherine's letters has no other programme to offer to her disciples except this constant call to live according to the will of God, so it is this central point of Catherine's whole spiritual journey which we must look at more deeply. And the basis for it all is the practice of the three theological virtues.

It is easy at times of serenity and wellbeing to believe that everything comes from God. But to believe that human misfortunes, like disease, death and humiliations, and that interior trials and torments like scruples, desolation and darkness are willed by God, and to accept them and resign oneself to God's will, that is difficult. Only people who have faith, and heroic faith at that, as likely as not, can in such circumstances abandon themselves simply to God. Writing to a sick friend, Alessandro

Capponi, on 19 January 1578, Catherine assures him of her prayers and those of all the nuns for his recovery; but then she adds, 'Have patience and take comfort in God, whatever happens, because health and sickness and everything we do is in him, and his help never lets anyone down, if they entrust themselves to his most holy goodness' [CRE IV 13]. In the perspective of the Christian faith, life is nothing but the unfolding of God's plan, born of his love. Very often our human wisdom and prudence are at odds with this plan, but precisely because he loves us and desires our true good (which at such times we fail to recognise), he intervenes with his visitations and his touches.

If it is God who takes responsibility for leading us in the straightest possible way, it is clear too that his interventions must always be adapted to the particular needs of each individual, because each individual has a path that has been traced out for him as his own. Catherine deploys all the richness of her vocabulary and a whole range of imagery to illuminate the constant point that each one of us has a battle to fight and to win for himself, on his own.

'We must always stand ready', she writes to Buonaccorso Buonaccorsi a few days after the death of his son in May 1555, 'because we are often touched by the Lord, to prevent us going to sleep in these low-lying, dangerous places. Let us be vigilant, then, and when we feel ourselves shaken let us turn to him and be attentive to his visitations, which are all for our salvation.' Here is the first image. The Lord watches over us, and when he sees us about to go to sleep 'in these low-lying, dangerous places', with the risk that we shall let ourselves be captured and ruled by worldly prosperity or by earthly feelings and concerns or by anything else which will make us neglectful of higher things, then he wakes us up with his 'touch', which is something light and delicate. But if that does not suffice, 'because left to ourselves we shall often be overcome by the opposition of our senses', then he lays it on thicker and gives us a good 'shaking' to remind us that here we have no abiding city . . . 'Something for us to ponder, but not to be dismayed by; it should rather make us more eager and attentive to reap a plentiful harvest' for heaven. All this is certainly painful, but our faith tells us that these visitations are 'for our salvation' and that, even if the heart bleeds, we should not lose our cheerful spirit, 'because everything comes from him whose every deed is well done. Therefore I remain content and peaceful with whatever pleases him, and I give thanks to his goodness' [CRE II 21–22].

This is not all. Faith teaches us that every touch, every blow comes from God, and God does not make mistakes. The pain offered or bestowed on us by God becomes something positive instead of negative,

if we cooperate actively with it and do not just endure it passively. Here we meet another of Catherine's images, that of pain as 'a talent to do business with'.

'I have understood', she writes to Capponi on 30 June 1589, 'how much you have to suffer, and I am sorry about it. But I keep thinking that our King gives each of his servants a talent, or two or five talents, for them to do business with. . . . So cheer up, and with good patience put this talent of yours to work' [*CRE* V 103]. The goldsmith beats gold with his hammer to make it more pure, the potter tests the solidity of his pots with fire, the craftsman uses a file to refine and give lustre to his metalwork [*BR* 267; Peter Damian, *Ep.* 8.6]. This is how even pain becomes a 'talent' for Catherine: the greater the pain is, the more the 'talent' is increased. We can not only double it, but triple it if we accept pain generously, not carrying our cross under constraint like Simon of Cyrene, but like souls in love. At the root of suffering there is no angry, vindictive God—that he hardly ever appears to be, and only as a last measure in desperate cases. It comes from a gift of his love. All human logic is turned upside down here, as it is by the mystery of the cross.

In this image of doing business, Catherine appears a true daughter of the Florentine merchants. Another image which we find as well reveals another aspect of her personality, that of the 'strong woman' [*Prov.* 31:10]. 'I am getting distraught and beg Jesus with all my heart', she wrote to Salvati about a cousin of his on 18 June 1589, 'I wish he would accept this visitation from the Lord, who has come to knock on the door of his house. I hope that, when he chooses to enter, he will find everything ready for him within, because we know that generally when people knock it means that they wish to enter. . . . Let us be glad, my father, that we have taken Jesus for our master and captain' [*CRE* II 182–183]. Every trial is a 'visit' from the Lord, it is his knock and signifies that he wishes to enter. It is thus a special occasion of grace. Jesus does us no violence, he does not force us, he invites us to welcome him as 'master and captain', he calls us and leads us into battle, which we would never be able to endure without his support. 'Since it pleases the Lord to visit you,' she wrote to Dianora Berardi in July 1586, 'it is by way of sickness that you must win paradise, a place which is so beautiful, so charming, so delightful, you must first taste a little bitterness. . . . There is a wearisome, high mountain to climb, but you are already near the end of this tiring labour, and on the summit of the mountain is the Spouse of your soul and ours in all his beauty and happiness. . . . I see you distressed, in anguish and trouble because of your great sickness. I am sorry for you, but on the other hand I see the Spouse of our souls utterly utterly ready to give you paradise in return,

in recompense for all this toil' [CRE IV 285]. Mountaineering, battle, weariness, toil. All these are images of commitment and struggle. In all this to accept Jesus intelligently as 'master' signifies for Catherine choosing 'to walk in the way of simplicity' [CRE II 183]. Anyone who follows this course 'does business' for eternal life 'like a good merchant' [CRE IV 143], whereas those who run away from it and make themselves 'great merchants' in a worldly sense 'fail over and over again' and risk falling into 'the pit of eternal failure'. It is not that they too are not loved by God. They are certainly 'dear to our Redeemer', and he continues to knock and to ask them to open their hearts to him and follow him. But 'if they will not turn to receive his help, both his mercy and his justice are shown forth in them' [CRE II 183]. In this perspective we can understand even Catherine's prayer to Jesus for her sisters: 'If they are not willing to suffer for love, make them suffer whether they like it or not' [CRF VII. 3 140].

All of this makes sense, obviously, only at the level of faith. If our senses and feelings rebel, that is in a way natural to them and unavoidable, and we must try to rise above them with our reason [CRE I 258, SL 60]. But even our reason easily gets bewildered in face of certain trials. The soul generally sees it as a punishment, when it is thrown into confusion by what happens; it rarely sees such trials as a gift. Nothing is gained by argument or enquiry. Faith does not answer our questions about how and why, it simply assures us that everything 'has come from him. We do not know his secrets, but we do know how to humble ourselves in sincere faith and humility to receive whatever he wishes and to refrain from trying to interpret things whose meaning he has kept to himself' [CRE V 108].

Glimpsing the general design of God is a first step, but if we are to avoid being dismayed we need something else too, namely hope. The mere passive acceptance of God's design can only be turned into a positive adherence to it if we hope in the help that we receive from on high. What can we do on our own, if he does not lead us, sustain us and correct us? According to the bible, it is only thanks to the Holy Spirit that we can even cry 'Abba' [Rom. 8:15]. If we experience every day our own feebleness and unreliability and wretchedness, at a time of trial all this expands beyond all measure, which cannot help but plunge us into a kind of darkness. Catherine's answer is that God's help never lets anyone down, if we rely on him [CRE IV 13].

'Most noble Lady, very dear in Christ Jesus', wrote Catherine to the grandduchess Joanna of Austria on 19 June 1573, 'When I found my nuns without bread or oil and could find no one who could provide me with the money to buy any, God's goodness inspired your Highness to

be so generous . . .’ [CRE III 211; SL 32]. God’s dependability was a daily experience for Catherine, and it was precisely on the strength of this that she could write to Servi in June 1519, ‘I urge you to give yourself entirely to the Lord and to rely on him with complete confidence, bearing in mind that he loves you more than you can think, and if he gives you some tribulation or worry, be certain that he allows it all for your salvation . . . But we must put all our trust in Jesus . . . The Lord is so good that he permits nothing to afflict us beyond our strength, but he always provides his own help and grace . . . Offer yourself totally to him and he will always be with you and will help you at all times and comfort you in all your distress’ [CRE I 187]. Acceptance of God’s will and self-oblation to him create union between him and us, us and him; with his help and his comfort we can accept any trial, in particular interior trials which make us even more aware of our frailty.

‘We must be faithful like David,’ she wrote to her beloved Salviani in June 1562, ever a prey to doubts and anguish, ‘and believe . . . that he, who is supreme goodness, would have to contradict himself to refuse to listen to a sinner who comes to him with all his heart . . . While we are in this wretched prison, our nature is like that of a tree, which constantly needs water; similarly we need constantly to strip off superfluities (i.e. sins and faults). We are like a cloth, always needing to be washed and cleaned . . . So, my son, we should be a true David, we should act like the prodigal son, like a tree which lets itself be watered and a cloth which lets itself be well washed and throws itself into that holy sea and purifies itself and squeezes itself and wrings itself out with the boundless grace of our dear Saviour. And then we should have no doubts’ [CRE II 254].

Here too, precisely because Catherine’s exhortations all flow from her own profound personal experience, her language is always fresh and varied, in accordance with all the different circumstances and people she is addressing. Here, for example, is one concise formula of hers, in a letter written to Servi when his wife was distraught with a headache: ‘Tell her that she belongs to Jesus and not to herself, and so she must be content with whatever way he pleases to keep her’ [CRE I 121, SL 59]. Four years later she wrote, again to Servi, ‘Let us be confident in his goodness and cheerfully go to him, because he loves his creatures so much that his help never lets them down. So hope in him and rely confidently on him, being cheerful and content with whatever pleases him’ [CRE I 274]. More laboriously, but with the same conviction, she had made the same point to her father in 1543: whoever believes in ‘Jesus, the lover of our souls’ and tries ‘to walk according to his most holy will’ will see that ‘God’s goodness will never abandon him, as I

have often said' [CRE I 28–29], because God 'has the power to prove in us the truth of the holy word he left for our comfort, that his burden is light and his yoke sweet' [CRE V 107]. In practice, the fundamental rule is: entrust everything to him, because he will not will not desert you.

If faith gives us a glimpse of a different level of reality and a different scale of values, hope, if it is lively, gives us confidence and courage and drives away despondency, which is the mother of despair and arises precisely because we fail to grasp the significance of God's visitations here and now and their role in our lives as a whole with reference to eternal life. Hope also banishes the feeling of not caring any more, which implies that the blessings promised us are not worthy of all our effort and all our esteem. 'It is very true', Catherine wrote to Lorenzo Taddei on 27 September 1554, 'that if we considered our own merits, we should find there no reason to hope, but his infinite goodness has seasoned them with the oil of mercy, and anyone who will stand beneath his banner will feel that oil dripping down and seasoning all his works in such a way that he will abound in great hope and confidence, and so he will always be cheerful and content, hoping that he will see the light of day at the end of this dark night' [CRE I 348].

Catherine's teaching is thus illuminating in a concrete, straightforward manner. God calls his beloved children by the way of the cross. Faith shows us the path we must follow, day after day, in all we do and say and think and even in our most hidden purposes, where true purity belongs in the sight of our heavenly Father. Hope, relying on the oil of the Lord's mercy, makes our poor merits fragrant and acceptable to him, so that he, the just judge, will reward them with eternal life. In faith it is possible to glimpse the design of God, in hope it is possible to accept that he will remain close to us in our trials; but God's design is fulfilled only when his visitation, his touch, his assault is accepted in concreto, or, without metaphor, when we accept God's will as it is offered to us concretely by the people and circumstances and surprises that confront us. It is not simply a matter of not rebelling against God's will, or of enduring it just because it is impossible to do otherwise, as happened to Simon the Cyrenean. That would not help very much. What is needed, as Catherine says, is 'to carry the cross with Jesus, not with Simon of Cyrene' [CRE I 351], and only 'someone who carries the cross for love of him is never abandoned by him, however much tribulation he may want us to have' [CRF I 187]. And Catherine has an infallible criterion by which to know whether one is carrying one's cross for him and with him: cheerfulness. We shall return to this criterion in the next section. For the moment, let us conclude with some other aspects.

The first aspect to consider is the clash, sometimes amounting to a real torment, between our sensibility and the supernatural dimension which God's touch brings about in us. 'My Spouse', Catherine declared in 1543, 'crucifies me with so many pains, so many anxieties . . . he drives me, torments me, presses me, and then he bids me, "Be silent, be silent . . . keep your mouth shut, do not speak a word!" . . . He undertakes to grind me down the whole time like this, and then he bids me be silent! He is my Spouse, I gave and pledged myself entirely to him long ago, he turns my body into a torturer, that is his pleasure, he treats me any way he likes. It is he who plans it, he who does it, without the intervention of anyone else. . . . He flays and mutilates me to such an extent that I often have to hang on to make sure that I do not abandon my skin and my life altogether. He goes on flaying me. I object, I resist, I cry out, because my lower part growls and refuses the sword and the fire. when he says, "Be of good heart, bear your wounds patiently. It is all for your benefit. Pain makes you beautiful." I say to him, "No, Jesus. Do it to your mother; I have no ambition to be beautiful." He replies, "I did it to her too" [CRF II 490–491].

Later on, Catherine turns this terrifying inner experience into teaching for her disciples. 'Remember,' she writes to Capponi, 'that the fiercer the battle appears, the more strongly a good soldier arms himself to meet it and prevent his enemy from conquering. We must do the same. The more we are confronted with trials which hurt our sensual part—as is happening to you now—the more you must arm yourself with the strong armour of reason and fence yourself in with it against your feelings and keep them in subjection so that they cannot prevail against the higher powers we have' [CRE V 107]. It is enough that the eye of faith does not become clouded, and that 'the will remains firm in the Lord'. Then, even 'when it seems to you that you offend him, there is pain, but not guilt, because ... the Lord sees how much you desire not to offend him' [CRE I 49, SL 61]. The more violent the battle is, the more we shall merit. In this connection, let us notice that faith, like love for God, even if it goes beyond reason, is never contrary to reason, and Catherine exhorts us to have recourse to reason and to find our armour in it. It is with 'the eye of reason, strengthened and enlightened by faith' that 'we know that our Lord allows all this for our salvation and our greater good' [CRE III 280, SL 66]. Faith is not fideism or intellectual blindness. Indeed, the fiercer the battle, the more adequate the arms offered us by reason must be, if we are to stand up to the trials which afflict our sensibility and so keep it in subjection. Catherine invites us to think about three things: 'where we come from' (God), 'what we are doing' (the path we are following) 'and where we are going' (our final

goal) [CRE V 107]. This was the experience of Jesus himself in the garden of Gethsemane: the spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. 'If it is possible,' he prayed, 'let this cup pass . . . but not my will be done, but yours' [Matt. 26:39–41].

A second aspect is very important for a grasp of the inner workings and dynamics of God's visitations: every time God taps at our door or stretches out his finger to touch us, something happens within us: some call, some invitation, some movement. Without making any noise, without causing any disturbance, God inspires us, inclines us, moves us to accept his visit and to act on it. If the soul opens itself to him, then God provides a new assistance and so we move on from one invitation to the next, from one response to the next. If, on the other hand, the soul refuses and shuts its door, the whole process gets stuck, the journey comes to a halt, fervour evaporates, the soul gradually becomes sick and only a more powerful jolt can rouse it to resume its course. Here we see not only that God is a God of love, but what that love means in practice.

A third aspect is essential if we are to appreciate the inner unity of Catherine's spirituality: the passion and the cross. She sinks her gaze and her heart into this mystery in order to draw from it light, strength and love. On Palm Sunday 1556 she wrote to Buonaccorsi, 'Come what may, I do not want you to fail to be there . . . accompanying our dear Saviour in these holy days as he pays the price for us, his creatures. And what should we want our accompanying of him to be in this act and wonderful mystery of his? Let us see in Jesus our saviour the greatest obedience, the most profound humility and the most boundless love'. She then goes on to explain how to imitate and accompany him: there is a response to be made to each virtue found in Jesus. In response to his great obedience, displayed in fulfilling the whole will of the Father, from his incarnation through to his death on the cross, 'I want us to accompany him with obedience to his holy commandments' and then, progressively, in an ever more total adherence to his will, which the voice of the Holy Spirit points out within us. To the 'profound humility' of Jesus, who from being God became man to serve us sinners, there should correspond in us 'the awareness of our wretchedness and weakness'; no mere theoretical acknowledgement, but a practical awareness which makes us feel that we are poor invalids, who need Jesus, our kind doctor. Our response to the immense endurance of our Saviour will be our generous acceptance 'of the constant interior and exterior tribulations' he chooses to send us, because, even if we are always inclined to believe our own cross to be heavier than anyone else's, he knows how to adapt the weight of our cross to our shoulders. Finally, how are we to respond to his 'boundless love', except with an

equivalent love, 'darting like an arrow towards our dear shepherd, who became The food of wolves in order to save us, his little sheep' and who carried us on his shoulders, without condemning us, to bring us back to the Father's house? [CRE II 47–48] It is precisely in 'chewing over' his bitter passion and death [CRE II 172] that we find reason enough to resolve to suffer for love of him whatever he pleases to give us, in order to conform ourselves to him. From the bottom of her heart Catherine cries out to her earthly father, 'Think how much he has suffered for you! And he has done everything out of the great love he bears to his creatures, so that we may be prompted to strive to love him more. So, father, be sure that you ponder on this great love. And pray for me, that I may come to know it too' [CRE I 15, SL 1–2].

Thus the meaning of the whole of Catherine's life becomes plain, as she made clear to the sisters of her monastery, when she said to them, in the name of Jesus, 'I want you to bear witness to the great love I have always borne you' [BR 258]. Following a letter she sent to Servi in the spring of 1552, which is a real doctrinal synthesis of everything we have said so far, we may sum up her message like this: 'Our coming into and departing from this world has nothing to do with our will and knowledge', it all depends 'on the will of the all-powerful God'. That means, amongst other things, that 'no one can oppose his holy will', which could 'annihilate us in an instant'. 'So' (and this is a first conclusion) 'it would be foolish to want to oppose him'. And 'indeed it would be a fault not to place our will inwardly in agreement with his or to become utterly downcast in times of misfortune', as if we had no hope. This is where the struggle begins between sensibility and reason, between feeling and understanding. Because we are 'struck where we are most sensitive and where it most hurts . . . our sensibility is forced to feel resentful. We cannot help it . . . we cannot entirely escape such a reaction'. Therefore (and this is the second conclusion) we should 'overcome it with reason'. How and for what motive? Reason should 'look to God in everything, thinking how much he loved his creatures, for whom he did not spare himself, but came to live among the hardships of this world and bore such a bitter death'. God has his plan for each one of us, whether we live or die. And this is the third fundamental conclusion: when everything seems to us to be ruined, 'God knows this, for he is infinite Wisdom and cannot be mistaken, so it's clear that he has far more noble aims' than our plans and desires, namely 'the salvation of souls. And we, if we want to be Christians and members of Jesus Christ, are ourselves too obliged to love and desire the salvation of the soul more than any other created thing [CRE I 258–259, SL 60].'

All this has to be turned into a concrete way of behaving, which brings us to Catherine's final message: 'I urge you to bear your tribulation patiently and to comfort yourself in Jesus, following him along the way that he chose to follow, which is that of the cross, giving himself to us as an example. And to make us follow him more willingly, he invites us to take his yoke upon us, saying that his yoke is pleasant and his burden light. So let us cheerfully follow Jesus with our cross and have no doubts about anything' [CRE I 179].

New World Order or New World Enemies?

Michael S. Northcott

The rhetoric of 'New World Order' came to prominence in the period of *glasnost* and its dramatic denouement in the events of 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of communism. First coined by Gorbachev in 1986, the phrase New World Order became popular particularly with Western leaders, most notably in America and Britain, as a way of describing the future development of international relations after the end of the Cold War. At the same time as Fukuyama was declaring the 'end of history', Western politicians were announcing that a new kind of international order would be established with the demise of communism. In the Cold War era, so the argument ran, the USSR and her allies had blocked the enforcement of international legality through the UN, and had fermented regional conflicts and wars for her own interests. The New World Order would allow the development of a new peace where the freedoms taken for granted in the West might be seen to spread throughout the world without the great obstacle which the enemy of communism, and the superpower conflict, had previously represented. The United Nations could now at last take on the role prepared for it after the Second World War. America and her allies old and new would be able to ensure peace in the world.

The rhetoric was first applied to the international order in the context of the events following the brutal invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in