

## **6. Catherine of Siena: Theology of Incarnation**

With the human Christ at the center of her thought, Catherine emphasizes the intimacy in spite of the dualism that pits matter against spirit, Catherine managed to create a theology rich in of the divine-human relationship; turns to the language of bodies and everyday objects to articulate her incarnational theology; and, as a lay Dominican, extends Christ's work through ministry to the concrete material and spiritual needs of others.

**1. Elements of Incarnation in Catherine's Theology:** "Man is made God, and God is made man." "We are your image and you are our image." Catherine of Siena: *The Dialogue*, (1980), p. 15, 13. These two citations from Catherine's Dialogue reveal the intimate reciprocity she experienced in her relationship with God. For Catherine, the foundation of the Christian story is located in the intimate, mirror image of God and humanity, realized in the Incarnation.

That Catherine wrote in her local Tuscan dialect has incarnational implications in itself. Vernacular vocabulary, taken from everyday life, gives Catherine's theology a very material, enfleshed tone. She did not rely primarily on abstract concepts, but on the "stuff of her daily experience: Bridges, blood, cell, anvil, eating and drinking, bed, city, sea, keys, mirrors, breast feeding, and fishhooks, to name a few.

In a Trinitarian image that seems unique to Catherine's experience she imagines the Trinity as table, food, and server. The Father is the table. The Son is the food on the table. The Holy Spirit is the waiter who serves it.

Catherine brings her unique creative imagery to the theological project, leading the reader from the language of the text to the immediacy of physical and emotional reality - a consistently incarnational move.

Perhaps the most striking example of Catherine's engagement with matter can be found in the description of her mystical marriage to Christ. Instead of a more traditional ring, Catherine is given Christ's foreskin, removed at circumcision, as a symbol of the union.

Catherine embodied the motto of the Dominican order to which she belonged: *contemplare et aliis tradere contemperate* - "to contemplate and to give to others the fruit of that contemplation." Her theology integrates elements of contemplation and action. Genuine holiness leads to mission. Her life was a synthesis of the mystical

way and public activity. Her involvement in civic and ecclesial politics resulted in a practical theology that resonates with our own time.

I suggest that, if she were living now, Catherine would support vocations to be sacraments of God's presence in the factory, the office, the bank, the home, the hospital, or the assembly line. She teaches that God's incarnational love extends to everyone and calls all the baptized to a life of virtue.

As a lay woman, Catherine would have been sensitive to the need to argue for the holiness of those who were neither ordained nor cloistered religious. Her theology eschews individualism in favor of community - generous service to the world from family needs to protecting eco-systems.

Catherine did not always embrace the physical body. For much of her life, she imagined her body at war with her spirit, fasting to extremes that ultimately contributed to her death. At times she links the body with sin, and when speaking to vowed religious, she described their lives as angelic in contrast to the more common life of the laity.

Later in life, she changed her position, realizing that without a strong body, one could not serve the neighbor effectively. These examples point to the complexity of her thought and caution us not to rush to one conclusion by excluding others that are in tension with it.

**II. Christ's Humanity:** For Catherine, the divine-human Christ is the linchpin of redemption and of the entire Christian life. Catherine wrote that Christ "makes of her another himself" (Dialogue, 1). A sub-text of her theology is Paul's powerful Christology with its exhortation to live "in Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:22-24)

Catherine and many other medieval women mystics identified closely with the humanity of Christ. Medieval scholar Carolyn Walker Bynum writes of medieval women mystics: They "became the flesh of Christ, because their flesh could do what his could do: bleed, feed, die and give life to others." *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, p. 222

**III. Use of Metaphor: The Blood** - Catherine lived in a time of blood associated with war and illness. But throughout history, blood has also served as a symbol of love and life. Seen this way, she refers to blood almost 2,000 times in her writings. The image of blood is central to Catherine's incarnational theology - God's love for the world is expressed most powerfully in the cross.

Understanding theology is a fruit of the blood. Bernard McGinn writes of Catherine's polyphonic use of the image of blood: "Blood is life, blood is food and drink, blood is bath, blood is bond and mortar, blood is ransom, blood is key, blood is door, blood is clothing, blood is reproach, blood is witness, blood is even grace, and more." *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 1350-1550*, p. 208 In a letter, Catherine writes that she wishes she could sweat blood that would heal the world's sin.

For Catherine, blood symbolizes the embodiment of grace. Blood is the source of compassion. Drinking from the heart of the Crucified involves drinking from the wounds of our neighbors. Blood is also a way to imagine Christian identity. Catherine wants her readers to receive, drown in, bathe in, cloth themselves in, get drunk on, and satiate themselves in the blood of Christ.

**IV. Use of Metaphor: The Bridge** In her second major Christological metaphor, Catherine envisions Christ's body as a bridge - the link between heaven and earth. The path of the spiritual life involves walking across the body of Christ toward truth and love (John 14:16). Below the bridge is sin, imagined as a dangerous, raging river that separates us from God. When the faithful hear Christ's voice, they do not simply walk but run over the bridge, anxious to learn the doctrine that is written on the very body of Christ crucified. In his free choice to become human and die out of love for us, Christ becomes this bridge. The way across requires imitation of Christ's virtues - the shops on the bridge provide food, respite, and community.

The thought of Bernard of Clairvaux is in the background of this extended metaphor. He interpreted the kiss of the Song of Songs as ascension to union with God in three stages: The kiss of the feet; The kiss of the breasts; The kiss of the lips Catherine too imagines three steps across/up the body of Christ,

**V. Catherine Today:** Since theology grows out of concrete life experience, different lives produce different "flavors" of theology as one would expect in any of the following categories: East or West; Male or female; Rich or poor; Celibate or married; Urban or rural; Wartime or peace

Catherine wrote her theology of Incarnation from the trenches of fourteenth century Italy. Her ability to see theological truth in the ordinary things of daily life continues to enrich the Church.

Catherine's theological legacy especially invites women to reflect on their experience as women. 1. Her recourse to metaphors of eating, drinking, feeding, nursing, betrothal, and marriage reminds us of the sacredness of these acts. Her public persona and political engagement challenge the limits we place on women's roles and the graced effects of Incarnation. Caroline Walker Bynum notes that many medieval women "reached God not by reversing what they were [women] but by sinking more fully into it." *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, p. 172

For Catherine, the Incarnation is the result of God's mad, drunken love for creation (*Dialogue*, 55). She addresses God: "O mad lover! It was not enough for you to take on our humanity: you had to die as well!" (*Dialogue*, 25-26). Her language about the intimate closeness of God is as extreme as her awareness of God's awesome otherness. Paradox abounds. Catherine refuses to let go of either nature - God's divinity or God's humanity.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Catherine's theology is rich in imagery. Which images appeal to you most? Identify two of your own images for Incarnation.
2. Take a moment to engage in a meditation - imagine yourself walking across the body of Christ. Describe what happens.
3. In what specific ways does Christ's humanity reveal to you aspects of your own existence? How does Christ regard you in your humanness, even when it is marred by sin and selfishness?