

St. Catherine of Genoa: "Love conquers all things."

In the year 1451, in the Italian city of Genoa, a man was born who would play a significant role in opening Europe's horizons and ushering in a new age. His name was Cristoforo Colombo, or as he has been known to us, Christopher Columbus. It was no accident that a Genoese man might play such a role. Genoa was a bustling port at the northwest corner of the Italian peninsula, advantageously close to both France and Spain and with trade access to central Europe. The Genoese had long enjoyed a history of seafaring and commerce: during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries their port city had grown into one of the leading urban centers of Europe, with impressive influence and far-flung possessions. Genoa's ships plied the Mediterranean, scoured the coasts of Africa, and settled colonies along the shores of the Black Sea. Rivalled only by Venice as a merchant and seafaring city, Genoa controlled Corsica and Sardinia, counted many Greek islands among her holdings, and developed a close trading relationship with the Byzantine Empire, carrying goods from Persia and the Far East to Western Europeans. The Genoese were important contributors to the crusading movement, often providing ships and money for the Christian armies. At its height Genoa was a wealthy and bustling metropolis with a population of over one hundred thousand people, ruling itself through its leading merchant families and dealing with the great powers of Europe as equals.

But a different epoch of history was overtaking Europe and the Genoese. In 1453, two years after Columbus was born, an event took place that shocked and frightened all of Europe: the great city of Constantinople fell to the Turks. Having proudly carried the banner of Roman civilization for twelve hundred years, the world's most prestigious Christian city was lost to Christendom. With the fall of Constantinople, the Byzantine Empire, long weakening, was finally annihilated, and its Ottoman conquerors cast an eager eye on Europe, hoping to extend their dominion ever deeper into Mediterranean waters. Trade had become difficult, and Genoa's fortunes were looking grim. It was part opportunism and part desperation that drove Columbus to look for alternative routes to the markets of the East.

Among the prominent ruling families of Genoa, the line of the Fieschi stood out. Their ancestry included two popes, dozens of cardinals, many illustrious admirals and generals, and a few "captains of the people," as the rulers of Genoa were called. They had perennially played a significant role in Genoese affairs. A few years before the birth of Columbus, a daughter was born to the Fieschi, the youngest of five children, by the name Catherine. Like Columbus, she would come to exercise a significant influence on the new age that was dawning in Europe, though in a manner very different from her fellow Genoese. She has been known to

history as St. Catherine of Genoa.

The outward facts of Catherine's life are easily told. The Fieschi gave their children a pious upbringing, and as a young girl Catherine was inclined to prayer and to the things of God. It is not uncommon that a child will have certain premonitions concerning the life she will eventually lead. At the age of eight, Catherine began to practice penitential austerities; we are told that she gave up her bed and slept instead on straw with a block of wood for a pillow. Catherine's older sister Libania had joined an Augustinian order of nuns, and Catherine showed a strong inclination to follow her into the convent. At thirteen she requested permission to enter the same religious order, but her application was denied due to her youth, and she reluctantly set the possibility aside. At the age of sixteen, falling in with her family's wishes, she was engaged and married to a man from another leading Genoese family, the Adorno.

The match was no doubt a good one from the standpoint of family alliance, but it was unfortunate in the character of Catherine's husband, Giuliano. We are not given many details of the early years of the marriage. Catherine seems to have suffered intensely what many young women in her position have had to endure: the misery of being married to a disorderly, occasionally violent, financially irresponsible, and sexually promiscuous husband who had little concern for home life and little affection for his wife. Catherine was of a reserved and sensitive disposition; the first five years of her marriage saw her turning away from her husband's bad behavior and withdrawing into herself in an attitude of quiet desperation. She lived in her luxurious home almost like a hermit, depressed in spirit and isolated from social life. After five years of this melancholy existence, looking for some sort of relief and wanting to please her family, who found her isolation unseemly, Catherine attempted to engage her husband's world more actively as an elegant woman of fashion. It seems that she was not very good at it. She could never find her way to enjoying the ephemeral distractions of the fashionable world, and though her behavior was correct and respectable, she experienced a great weariness of spirit.

Catherine's Conversion: Ten years into her marriage, at the age of twenty-six, Catherine had an experience, or rather the beginning of an inner state persisting through the rest of her life, that changed everything. She had come to the end of her rope, and was looking for a way to change the dreariness of her tiresome existence. While visiting a church dedicated to St. Benedict on his feast day, such was the depth of her misery that she asked the saint's intercession in gaining an excuse to remove herself from the stale pastimes of her socialite existence: "Pray to

God for me, Oh St. Benedict, that for three months he may keep me sick in bed - an odd request to a saint. The next day, while visiting her sister at the Convent of Santa Maria della Grazie, Catherine was urged by her sister to go to Confession. She reluctantly agreed, and - so she recorded later - as soon as she knelt down for the confession, "her heart was wounded by a dart of God's immense love, and she had a clear vision of her own wretchedness and faults and the most high goodness of God. She fell to the ground, all but swooning,' and from her heart rose the unuttered cry, 'No more of the world for me! No more sin!'" The experience was overwhelming. Making excuses to the priest, she rushed home, shut herself in her room, and spent the next number of days in prayer. It was the turning point of her life.

It is never easy to describe what such an experience means to the person who undergoes it. Catherine found herself in an intense relationship with God, swept into a divine union that often consumed her. Much of the rest of her life was shrouded in the experience of this hidden but constant life of prayer: a laywoman and wife going about her daily business, yet in a secret and vivid communion with God.

For the space of four years after this encounter with the Holy Spirit—an experience that she called her "wound of love" Catherine was almost entirely dominated by her inner life. She prayed for six hours a day. She spoke little, ate only the simplest foods, and practiced various kinds of bodily austerities such as wearing hair shirts and sleeping on sharp objects. When asked why she was performing all these penances, she hardly had a coherent answer. She felt herself swept along by an inner motivation. She saw constantly before her inward eye an image of Christ bent under the weight of the Cross, and in the light of that vision she experienced a profound affection and love for God and a deep sorrow for sin. Above all, she was taken by a burning desire to unite herself to the suffering Christ for the sake of the world.

Then, after four years, the impulse for these severe measures abruptly ceased. Her desire for prayer and union with God were as keen as before, but she no longer felt drawn to practices that previously she could hardly keep away from. It was as though she had been brought through a purifying fire that had now completed its work. From the start to the finish of this process, whether embracing austerities or letting them go, her desire had simply been to conform herself to the current action of the Holy Spirit. In everything she did she wanted as deep a union with the Divine Will as was possible. An expression of this correspondence with the will of God that began during this time was Catherine's regular experience of Lent and

Advent, one that continued throughout her life. During those penitential seasons she would experience an effortless ability, almost a necessity, to fast, such that she was unable to take any food apart from the Eucharist. If she tried to eat, as she sometimes did under the advice of her spiritual director, her body would simply reject the food. Yet during those seasons of almost no nourishment, she was healthy and more than usually full of energy and strength. As soon as Lent or Advent had passed, she would find herself in an opposite situation: she regained her ability to eat, and was unable to practice anything like the austerity she had earlier sustained. She had no control over these variations, and those who knew her well, including her doctors, came to think of them as a kind of spiritual phenomenon, a tangible expression of being so closely united to the spirit of Christ.

Catherine's extraordinary inner life was hidden from the eyes of the world, and she did whatever she could to keep it that way. But she could not hide all the effects of that life on her behavior and demeanor. Her love for the suffering Christ led her naturally to find Christ suffering in those around her. Soon after her conversion she began going regularly into the streets of Genoa, seeking out the sick and those who were in need of help, especially if they were alone. She would visit their houses, tend to their illnesses, wash their clothing and bandages, clean their homes, and bring the presence of Christ and the joy of cheerful faith into whatever dark places she could find. This work among the sick eventually came to center around Genoa's main hospital, the Pammatone. In Catherine's day, a hospital was a very different place from what it is now. There was no official nursing staff, and patients were left to the care of family or friends. Many of the very sick, especially if they were contagious, were abandoned by relatives and had no one to care for them; in a pre-antiseptic age a hospital was as much a place for the healthy to become infected as it was for patients to regain health. In such a hospital, there was plenty of work to be done by anyone willing to embrace the difficult and dangerous task of caring for the seriously ill. Catherine did so, tirelessly, for forty years. So effective was her service to the sick that she was eventually given the directorship of the hospital and managed both its care and its finances for many years, living in a small apartment nearby and working without pay. Especially noteworthy in this regard was her care for the victims of a furious epidemic that descended on the city of Genoa in 1493. All who could flee during that time of fear left the city, and the majority of those who remained died; but Catherine stayed cheerfully at her post, never leaving the sufferers. There were stories of miraculous healings and of profound conversions among those who came under her care, though she tried to keep such matters secret. Even Catherine's husband, whose unruly life had led to the destruction of the family's finances, eventually fell under

her good influence; he converted to the Faith and aided her in her hospital work until he died, tended by the wife he had earlier scorned, having been brought to Christ through her example and her prayers.

Catherine's Inner Life: The source of our knowledge of Catherine's remarkable inner life, which during her lifetime she kept as hidden as she could manage, comes from the publication of two mystical works written by her, accompanied by a short account of her life by her former spiritual director and confessor. The volumes were not made public until 1551, more than forty years after Catherine's death. The first of these two mystical treatises, *The Dialogue of the Soul and the Body*, deals with the internal battle against self-love that Catherine had experienced as she encountered the purifying fire of divine union. The second, written toward the end of her life, is the famous *Treatise on Purgatory*. It is a uniquely encouraging vision of the crucible of purgation. In Catherine's vision, Purgatory is not a place of horror to be feared; despite its pains it is a blessed state. "I believe no happiness can be found worthy to be compared with that of a soul in Purgatory except that of the saints in Paradise; and day by day this happiness grows as God flows into these souls, more and more as the hindrance to His entrance is consumed."

Among the effects of this years-long period of divine union and inner purification upon Catherine was a profound knowledge of self. As has been true of all great mystics, Catherine's clear perception of God's goodness led her to see herself as filled with evil by comparison. She possessed a deep conviction of her own sinfulness.

I see that whatever is good in myself, in any other creature, or in the saints, is truly from God; if, on the other hand, I do anything evil, it is I alone who do it, nor can I charge the blame of it upon the devil or upon any other creature; it is purely the work of my own will, inclination, pride, selfishness, sensuality, and other evil dispositions, without the help of God I should never do any good thing. So sure am I of this, that if all the angels of heaven were to tell me I have something good in me, I should not believe them.

Such a harsh judgment could seem exaggerated, perhaps the result of a distorted and unhealthy self-hatred. But in Catherine, as with all the saints, this sense of her own worthlessness apart from God was countered by a yet greater sense of God's overwhelming love for her. Catherine was utterly convinced that despite her sins and her smallness she was deeply beloved by God.

I have no longer either soul or heart; but my soul and my heart are those of my Beloved. Oh my God, it appears to me that you have nothing else to think of but my salvation! What am I that you should so care for me? Everything is mine, for all that is God's seems to be wholly mine. Oh Love, no words of mine can express the sweetness and delight with which you fill the heart. If the heart receives but the smallest drop, it earnestly desires to increase it. If I could express the joy, the pleasure, and the peace which it brings to the one beloved, all who hear or read these words would surrender without resistance. Oh Love, who shall prevent me from loving you? I know by what I have experienced that Divine Love can be conquered or impeded by nothing. It conquers all things.

Catherine had a particular delight in the Mass, and she received Holy Communion daily, an uncommon practice in her time, especially for a layperson. Often, even when she was not intending or able to get to Mass and receive Communion, the Mass would come find her: she would be spontaneously summoned by a priest who had been inspired that day in prayer to see that she received her "daily bread." Her hunger for the Eucharist was so intense that it would regularly give her severe physical pains. Again, like many of the Church's mystics, Catherine made a special point of avoiding states of ecstasy, even to the point of praying regularly that she be given no special experiences in prayer. On one occasion when she had been enveloped by a deep sense of sweetness and a strong perfume after receiving the Eucharist, she prayed: "O Lord perhaps you would draw me to you by this fragrance? I do not desire it; I desire nothing but you, and you alone; you know that from the beginning I have asked of you the grace that I might never see visions, nor receive external consolations." But this was one of the few of Catherine's prayers that seems to have remained unanswered. She would regularly find herself deep in contemplation, sometimes for hours, insensible to what was going on around her, overcome by the love of God. At times she would find the experience so demanding that it seemed too much to take. She would throw herself onto the ground, writhing, and would cry out: "Oh Love, I can bear no more!" To those attending her and who asked what was wrong she could only say, "Now my heart seems to be all ashes; I am being consumed by Love!"

If we were to ask what was the special character of the luminous spiritual gift Catherine received, it would be found in this: that she was given a clear and constant vision of the truth expressed so cogently by John the beloved Apostle: that God is love. In the light of that vision of divine love, all matters clarified. Catherine was given a vision of the intensity of God's burning charity, and in that consciousness she went through her day intoxicated by love. She was given a vision of the goodness and purity of God's nature, and in that light experienced a

profound disgust with her sins and with whatever she encountered in the world that refused God's goodness. She was privileged to experience the great pains God had taken by becoming human and submitting to humiliation and death in Christ, and under that influence she was drawn to a keen desire to walk the same road of salvific suffering. The inner sight of God was often overwhelming to her; it was the cause of her deepest pain. But it was a pain she would not have exchanged for anything else.

Here is Catherine's description of the love of God as it touches the human soul: This divine love, which separates us from the world and from ourselves in order to unite us to God, is our only true and proper love. When it has been infused into our hearts, what can we desire in this world or in the other? Death becomes a thing longed for and hell loses its terrors for the soul that loves; for it dreads nothing but sin, which alone can separate it from its Beloved. Long experience has taught me that the love of God is our life, our bliss, and our repose, and that self-love is continual weariness, misery, and death, both in this world and in the next.¹⁰ At another time she said of divine love that "it makes a person so light that he does not feel the earth beneath his feet; his affections are so fixed on things above that he loses all sense of suffering here below, and he is so free, that there is nothing to keep him from the presence of God."

Catherine's approaching death was of a piece with the rest of her life. From her first profound conversion, she had offered herself to Christ as a sharer in his sufferings, and throughout her adult life had often experienced an inner crucifixion that manifested itself in inexplicable physical ways. As she neared her death, her body was wracked with yet more profound suffering, a condition that continued for a number of months, in the midst of which she maintained peace and confidence. The many physicians who attended her could find no reason for her suffering. They witnessed the physical effects—blood flow, muscle convulsions, inability to take nourishment—but they could assign no cause; her bodily organs were all in good shape. Medical knowledge at that time was not well advanced, but her physicians were accustomed to dealing with the dying and they knew the signs of serious illness even if they could not always effect a cure. Yet they remained mystified at Catherine's medical condition. She herself asked no questions about it; she understood it to be part of her self-offering, a willing martyrdom of spirit.

Catherine's Influence: Catherine died in 1510 at the age of sixty-three. She had not been well known during her lifetime, and her death was not widely noted, except by those thousands of suffering souls whom she had cared for and to whom she had brought joy and light. She was a remarkable Christian believer who had

expressed a rare love of God and of neighbor in her life of prayer and her acts of charity; but she was not in any obvious sense a Church reformer. Unlike her earlier namesake Catherine of Siena, she did not concern herself with the Church's general fortunes, and had no obvious influence upon the popes or leading bishops of her age. Unlike Bridget of Sweden or Teresa of Avila, she neither established nor reformed a religious order to aid the Church in articulating a reforming mission.

Unlike Joan of Arc, she did not march at the head of an army to save a country and enthrone a king. It could therefore be asked why she would appear in an account of Church reformers. The reason is that, unintended by her, the seed of Catherine's hidden holiness and her tireless charity - a seed that fell to the ground and seemingly died - sprouted in the soil of the age and blossomed into a remarkable legacy of reform. In tracing the lines of that legacy, we open upon a key principle in understanding the way God deals with and renews his Church. True reform always begins with the reform of the individual believer. The reform of the Church is mysteriously initiated and continuously sustained by secret prayer and hidden holiness among those who have been captured by divine love.

Though Catherine was not famous, her tireless charity and the depth of her spiritual life did not go wholly unnoticed during her lifetime. A small group of people in her home city of Genoa, attracted by her sanctity and her work among the sick, and wanting to share something of her graced life of prayer, gathered around her as her spiritual disciples. In 1497, one among them, a layman named Ettore Vernazza, established a group of like-minded believers who sought union with God through prayer and the Sacraments and who determined to express Christ's mercy by committing themselves to the care of the poor and the sick. They called themselves the "Oratory of Divine Love," taking St. Jerome as their patron. Though Catherine was never an official member, the new Oratory was guided by her spirit and her inspiration. That spirit was evident in the short rule they drew up for themselves:

“Brethren, this our fraternity is not instituted for any other reason than to root and implant in our hearts divine love, that is to say, charity.... Let him who would be a brother in this company be humble of heart, to which humility tend all the customs and institutions of this fraternity; and let each direct his mind and hope toward God, placing in Him all his affection.”

The members of the Oratory committed themselves to a way of prayer suited to busy laypeople. They were to pray upon rising, "turning their hearts to God and offering them up mentally and with great affection, begging him that all day long

he make them walk the path of His good will." Seven times a day, at the seven canonical hours, they were to recite the Lord's Prayer. One of the strictures of their rule, taking another cue from Catherine, was that their charitable work, and the existence of the fraternity itself, were to remain secret. In a time of increasing pride and vanity, when under the influence of a new spirit of humanistic development it was becoming fashionable to flaunt individual personality, the members of the Oratory of Divine Love wanted to remain as hidden as possible.

The group was not large - a few dozens only, mostly laypeople. It was a worthy endeavor, an effort of personal holiness and charity on a small scale. One would have thought it unlikely to have a wide influence or to shake the counsels of the great and the powerful. Nonetheless, the seed put down roots and began to grow. Sometime before 1517, the year made famous by Martin Luther and his Ninety-five Theses, Vernazza established another Oratory of Divine Love founded on the same pattern, this time in Rome. Other Oratories were quickly founded in other cities: Venice, Naples, Padua, and Brescia among them. In Rome, the Oratory of Divine Love soon gathered to itself a group of priests and laymen who between them set in motion much of the reforming activity that would transform the Church. Among its members were Gian Pietro Carafa, a cardinal who later became a reforming pope, Paul IV; and Gasparo Contarini, a cardinal who was instrumental in bringing about the Council of Trent and who gave decisive personal support to St. Ignatius and the Jesuits at their initial founding. St. Angela Merici, foundress of the Ursuline order of teaching sisters, was in the circle of the Roman Oratory of Divine Love, as were many of the women who first joined her. St. Philip Neri was greatly drawn to the Oratory and was a member for a time; its influence can be seen in his later apostolate and in the religious congregation he established. The influence of the Oratory of Divine Love can also be seen in the lives and work of St. Charles Borromeo and St. Robert Bellarmine.

Among the most significant of the developments arising from the Roman Oratory of Divine Love was the founding of the Theatine order of priests. St. Gaetano of Thiene had been a member of the Oratory; he and Carafa founded the Theatines, a clerical institute whose members were dedicated to battling the flagrant priestly sins of the day by living lives of prayer, self-denial, and service to the poor. The Theatines came to be called a "seminary of bishops"; they would eventually provide the Church with over two hundred bishops who were at the forefront of implementing the reforms of the Council of Trent. The Theatine order also became a template for a new type of apostolic priest: zealous, austere, and organized for action. They served as a model for St. Jerome Emiliani and the Somascan Fathers, for St. Anthony Zaccaria and the Barnabite order, and most significantly for St.

Ignatius and the Jesuits. The book *Spiritual Combat* by the Theatine priest Lorenzo Scupoli was among the most popular spiritual tracts of the century, eventually going through over six hundred editions and exercising a great influence in all areas of reform. It has remained a spiritual classic. St. Francis de Sales kept Scupoli's work by his bedside and twice a year would read St. Catherine's *Treatise on Purgatory*. His influential works of spiritual teaching and direction, notably his *Treatise on Divine Love*, owed much to Catherine's spirit.

If we take hold of many of the important Church reformers of the sixteenth century and trace back the lines of influence and the spiritual principles that animated them, we will find that a strong current of the century's reforming energy sprang from the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of this hidden laywoman, whose gift to the Church was that she loved Christ and gave herself to his will, heroically in hiddenness, with rare depth and abandonment.

There should be no surprise in this. Catherine's life and influence follows a long-established providential pattern. The history of Israel was inaugurated by the obedience of one man who was willing to follow the voice of God into exile, and that history was brought to culmination by the obedience of another who went aside to look at a burning bush and there encountered the living God. The whole of Israel's salvation history was founded on these hidden acts. When the Eternal Logos entered the world he had created, he accomplished this earth-shattering act in a small village of no importance, in the silence of an obedient virgin's womb; the most significant event in human history was known at the time to a mere handful of people. This pattern, that the great works of God are inaugurated by and founded on the hidden battles and loving obedience of chosen individuals, runs through all God's dealings with the human race. It is also the manner by which Christ reforms his Church. J.R.R. Tolkien noted this providential principle in a letter to his son Michael, who was fighting at the front in the darkness of the Second World War: "The future is impenetrable especially to the wise," he wrote; "for what is really important is always hid from contemporaries, and the seeds of what is to be are quietly germinating in the dark in some forgotten corner."

We confront an important lesson about reform in the life of Catherine of Genoa. In the counsels of God, it seems that the fortunes of the Church are often changed by individuals who respond to his call with love and obedience in hidden and seemingly insignificant ways. The Church of the sixteenth century was in great need of reform, and Christ was active by his Holy Spirit to bring that reform about. He would eventually enlist many strong personalities, creative spirits, founders of new orders, evangelists and preachers, popes and bishops, who would use their

talents and their influence to address the corruptions of the Church and to bring needed change to her structures and practices. But these impressive public accomplishments were being prepared for and sustained by a hidden grace, a grace that was given through a solitary housewife who had encountered Christ, had allowed herself to be transformed by his love, and had offered herself for whatever he might desire. It is a standing temptation for Christians to be overwhelmed by the apparent power of the world's forces gathered against Christ or by the unnerving complexity of human arrangements, in the face of which serious reform looks impossible. It can be tempting to believe that the problems we face, whether in the Church or in the world, are beyond our ability to tackle and, in any case, can only be influenced by that very small number of expert and powerful people who "sit at the controls." But in Christ's Kingdom things work differently. Small beginnings are not to be despised. Who knows what momentous developments are being prepared even now in the hidden plans of God, as the seeds of unobtrusive but graced lives, "germinating ... in some forgotten corner" by their response of loving obedience, are opening new channels of grace for the reform of the Church and the building of God's Kingdom on earth.