

## 9. Catherine of Siena

Catherine had no formal education and died at thirty-three years of age, yet few medieval mystics achieved greater fame: prophet, saint, political activist, creative theologian, the first woman mystic to write in the vernacular, the patron saint of Italy and Europe, and Doctor of the Church.

Her book, *The Dialogue*, along with her biography by Raymond of Capua, were among the first books to see print in England, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Catherine has been called the mystical apostle of the blood of Christ - the word "blood" appearing over eighteen hundred times in her writings. The "inbloodiment," of the Word, not the Word Incarnate, plays the key role in our redemption from sin and our reconciliation with God. The blood of Christ is life itself, food and drink, the bath in which sin is washed away, the key and door to eternal life, the bond and mortar that binds us to the trinity.

**I. Introduction:** "I Catherine, am writing to you in his precious blood. I long to see you hidden and enclosed in the side of Christ crucified. - *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol. I, trans. Suzanne Noffke , Letter 55, p. 170.

Catherine of Siena: Catherine had no formal education and died young, but became one of the most influential women in Church history. Few were so mystically graced. She experienced: Ecstasies, Levitations, Prophetic powers, Miracles, Visions of Christ, of the saints, of an apostolic commission. Living for long periods on only water and the Eucharist. A mystical marriage to Christ, exchange of hearts with Christ, and the stigmata

Called the mystical apostle of the blood of Christ. The "Word's inbloodiment," not the Word incarnate, plays the key role in our redemption. She underscored that we were loved even before we came into existence because of our preexistence, or virtual existence, in the divine mind.

**II. Imagery:** Catherine's mysticism also focused on Christ's pierced side, an early form of Sacred Heart mysticism. Her mystical experience of drinking from Christ's pierced side. Epektasis, or unsatisfied satiation, a fundamental mark of the direct consciousness of God. She received the head into her hands of a beheaded young man that mingled his, Christ's, and her blood. Catherine distinguished between baptism by water and baptism by blood and fire, the baptism granted to the martyrs.

Her images for Christ: anvil, bed, book, hook, bridge. What God the Father told

her about the bridge and Christ's divine and human nature. Catherine connects even her Trinitarian mysticism to Christ and the Eucharist. The apostle Paul's ecstasy.

Catherine described six kinds of tears that correspond to six steps to mystical union. At the stage of "unitive tears," Catherine longed only to have Christ as the "nipple" of the divine breast that she suckles to be filled with the milk from the "high eternal Godhead." She expressed mystical union in terms of a baby at the mother's breast, or the love one has for a friend or a child - not in erotic terms.

**III. An Early Transformation:** When she was about six years old, a visionary experience prompted Catherine to vow her virginity to God and she took on severe ascetical practices. A paradigm of holy anorexia and abject eating. When 16 years of age, Catherine cut off her hair and deliberately scalded herself in nearby hot mineral springs and almost died - to defy her parents' wish that she marry.

At 18 years of age, she became a member of the Dominican Third Order. When approximately 21 years of age, Catherine experienced mystical marriage with Christ and an exchange of hearts with him. This event transformed her from an overly ascetic solitary into an apostola, that is, a woman whose charitable work brings God's good news of mercy, love, and peace to the wider community.

At the age of 23, she experienced her "mystical death," a four-hour God-given ecstasy in which her body seemed to be dead. She also maintained that she had received the stigmata, though only she could see them. Then she underwent a second mystical death.

**IV. Her Masterpiece, The Dialogue:** Perhaps her greatest work, The Dialogue offers us a glimpse into Catherine's mind and mysticism. Importance of her spiritual friend, Raymond of Capua. Book often came from ecstatic utterances. Awakening of her mystical senses. Catherine addressed four petitions to God. Ecstasies and levitation. Catherine taught that God is "first truth." The incarnation as the "engrafting" of God into human nature. Prayer and the soul's watching her, itself, God.

A good number of Catherine's spoken prayers were preserved by her scribes - some within the context of dictated letters - for she would ecstatically burst into prayer while dictating or even during a conversation.

**V. Catherine's Mystical Life of Service:** We have 382 extant letters addressed to people from all walks of life, from popes to prostitutes. During the last five years

of her life, Catherine was involved in the religio-political problems of the Italian city-states and barely escaped assassination. Highly influential in mitigating the antipapal forces in her region; the last few years of her life saw her in ever-declining health, but still laboring for Church reform and unity.

The interdependence of love of God and love of all humans is the defining core of her message. While dying, she implored God's mercy in virtue of the Son's most sweet blood. "Blood! Blood! Father, into your hands I surrender my soul and my spirit." - St. Catherine of Siena in Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 213.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Catherine of Siena used blood language and imagery in a potent and visceral way. Is this helpful to you or troubling?
2. How did Catherine's early life and mystical experiences help shape her later theology, mysticism, and political involvement?