

St. Catherine of Siena's Spiritual Secret

Introduction

Don't be surprised if you fall in love with St. Catherine. There are many reasons you will like her, but the main one is because she loves you. You say that she died long ago, and you are right. But she loved you anyway, because her love is Christ's love. She loved everyone she met, and she longed to meet all God's children, at every time. Today she's free of our space-time limitations. So she can know and love you as you are here and now.

That's strange! You are right again. It's not our ordinary thinking. It's wisdom. It's Christian wisdom because Jesus gives it. His wisdom is easy to accept. You already accepted much of it. You accepted His impulse to love people. Selfless love flows from Christ. He changed the world beyond recognition, because He brought Love.

Love Himself came to us, to invite everyone to love as He loved. We don't love as much as Jesus did, but we love the way He loved. Every desire to help suffering people echoes Christ's love. St. Catherine echoed it so well that we hear her six centuries later. Let's listen to her echo in her life history.

St. Catherine's Life

St. Catherine Benincasa astounded people with her Christ-love. The love of Jesus radiated from her so powerfully that she inspired everyone she meet. From her earliest years Jesus urged her to love God first, and her neighbors as herself. This mystical union with Love Himself is her spiritual secret.

How did she live this secret? In her short 33 years of life, she loved everyone she met. Naturally, this love is the real thing: giving Jesus to everyone, and accepting Jesus from them. You are right that some people use the word love to mean taking pleasure from others. Notice that real love and fake love are opposites: giving versus taking. Jesus teaches us real love by giving Himself infinitely. We imitate Jesus by giving ourselves in our finite ways, and ever striving to love more. St. Catherine helps us keep giving, no matter what happens.

She was a simple lay woman. So she was just like millions of people. She joined the third order of Dominicans, for ordinary working people. Her group of lay women did what they could to share Jesus with their neighbors. Catherine packed a lot of loving service into her years from 1347-1380.

Her parents expected her to marry, and have as many children as she had brothers and sisters. She was the 24th of 25 children. If she had matched her parents, she would have become the grandmother of about 300 children. Instead, she imitated Christ's virginity, to offer pure service to God and His people. Because of her virgin-love, she has many more than 25 children, and 300 grandkids.

In her time the Black Death plagued Europe, killing off entire towns, and wiping out about 20% of the population. So people needed Catherine's service. One in every 5 people died of bubonic plague. This terrorized the survivors. Under this extraordinary pressure, beautiful and bubbly Catherine poured Christ's love on His people.

In the wake of the Black Death, famine swept Europe. Because many farmers died, few were left to plant food. Where farmers survived to produce wheat, few merchants survived to transport and sell it. While many bishops and priests helped, quite a few clergy were corrupt, and did great harm. During this terrifying experience, when some populations were totally destroyed, everyone suffered.

Barbara Tuchman wrote *A Distant Mirror* to show that the devastation of this time mirrored the slum of a century that we just lived through. Instead of the Black Death, National Socialism (Nazis) and Communism wiped out millions of people. To stop the Nazis, we fought a horrifying world war. Again 20% of Europe died. Often, our human responses to this tragedy made it worse. Catherine improved life wherever she went. She showed how much better Christ-life is than sin-life. It's the difference between love and hate; construction and destruction. Our experience is very much like Catherine's. So we can learn a lot from her loving response to the disaster of her time. Perhaps we can even imitate her, and help people live well in spite of horrors.

Catherine was precocious, having a vision of Christ when she was only 4 years old. In spite of hysterical people all around her, she lived Christ's peace. In the furor of her time, she radiated Jesus, calming people with every joyous smile. At the tender age of seven, she made a vow of virginity, to be more like Jesus.

When her beloved older sister died young, Catherine realized how short life is. Her sparkling personality captured everyone's heart, but superficial victories were not enough. She decided to give herself entirely to God. God is our destiny, so we ought to hasten to Him. God is why we exist. So she "converted" to God, or turned around from fascination with God's creatures to God Himself. This decision sparked her intense devotion.

To express this devotion, she joined a group of widows, the Mantellati, so that she could pray and serve more. This group followed a modified rule for ordinary people who strove to be like the Dominicans. St. Dominic founded this third so that married, widowed, and single people could seek intense spiritual union with God. This group certainly achieved that purpose, as Catherine lived for 3 years in almost complete silence & solitude.

St. Dominic's First Order was for priests and brothers who served God and neighbor by radical Christ-life. They expressed their love of Jesus by such great poverty that they begged each day for their daily bread. Begging is the ultimate way to be poor. Thousands of people joined this first order. Their humble service, at the complete disposal of others, inspired women, who wished to imitate Christ in this profound way.

Therefore St. Dominic founded the Second Order for dedicated women who would beg their daily bread as well. Many holy women joined this group, and established convents where their communal life enabled such radical poverty. They devoted themselves to prayer, to teaching the faith, and to serving the poor. Naturally, this inspired people to imitate the first and second orders. But such people were already committed to families, so could not beg for bread. So St. Dominic established a modified way for them to pray and serve: the Third Order.

Catherine achieved this prayer and service by first devoting herself almost exclusively to prayer. This intense prayer life prepared her to serve. She lived in God's presence most of her life. In a sense, we all live in His presence, because His presence is the gift of Himself to us. This gift of Love makes us exist. God loves us into existence. Beyond this basic way of living in His presence, we can focus on God's presence. We can consciously rest in God's love. We can recognize that He is with us every instant of every day. Children do this quite naturally, as Catherine did. The rest of us distract ourselves from Him, and must relearn to live in His loving presence. Practice makes us so perfect that we converse with our Beloved every waking moment. All of us can do it. If we do, His love floods us, enabling us to love others for Him.

In God's presence, Catherine talked with Jesus. You can read them in the book called *Dialogs*. Her prayer life expanded Love in her heart so much that Catherine "married" Christ. This profound union deserves the name mystical marriage. God loves each of us so much that He wants to be completely one with us. Human marriage imitates this mystical marriage, which imitates the union of Jesus with the Father. Ultimately, all three persons

of the Trinity are one. This is the basic one for all other unity. Catherine told how to increase love to profound union, even on earth. Perfect union is after death. Our growth and development in Christ strives toward this union. Jesus says exactly that in John 17:21: “I came that you may be one as I and the Father are one.”

Catherine helps us see into this union with God. For example, she expresses her mystical marriage as “trading hearts” with Jesus. St. Paul says the same thing in these words: “putting on the Lord Jesus”, Rom. 13: 14. When Catherine traded hearts, or put on Jesus, her love became His. So great was her love that she showered it upon all she met. Even a violent murderer, Niccolo de Tuldo, accepted God’s love from Catherine, and asked that she catch his head when the executioner cut it off. She brought the consolation of God’s love to his last hours. Her love encouraged him to repent before losing his head. Dying repentant in Jesus is a fine example of God’s love. Catherine’s love persuaded Pope Gregory XI to return from his Avignon Captivity in France to his home in Rome. Catherine delighted in the few months of joy that followed. After Gregory’s death, his successor, Urban VI impatiently imposed reform. His abrupt decisions to remove corrupt cardinals prompted those not yet removed cardinals to elect an anti-pope, Clement VII. This split the Church, and Catherine’s heart. Schism quite probably hastened her death, and surely did prompt her day-long prayers for unity in St. Peter’s Basilica.

In Rome, Catherine lived at the great Dominican priory of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, and walked the mile from there to St. Peter’s to pray for unity. Even the worst human sins did not discourage Catherine. She learned patience from Christ. Jesus revealed God in the flesh. Therefore, He sanctified flesh. He teaches us that flesh is good, even though our fallen flesh leads us astray all too often. God’s union with humanity affirms how much He loves us, body as well as soul. In spite of our defects, God comes to dwell with and in us. So we learn to love each other, even of the other person sins against us. Schism is the worst attack against us. It splits the unity that Christ came to establish. When cardinals tore the Church apart, Catherine suffered tremendously.

Naturally, Catherine, whose mystical union with Christ tied her so closely to all He did, prayed for unity at the tomb of St. Peter, who gave his life for the unity of all Christians. As long as Catherine could drag herself to Peter’s tomb, she prayed fervently for unity. When she had a stroke, and could no longer walk, she prayed in her cot at the convent until she died, April 29, 1380. She was 33 years old.

Her community buried her in Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, where her body remains today. Thieves stole her skull, and brought it to Siena, where it is now on the main altar. Their desire for Catherine’s mortal remains is very human. It reflects the fact that Jesus sanctified human flesh and bones. True, sins distract us from this love. Sin prevents Christ’s love from being our life. So we must struggle. Catherine teaches us to love one another in spite of our sins, as Jesus did. Sins make us so miserable that Christ became flesh to save us from them.

He Who is Sinless takes all our sins upon His innocent self. As God, he is able to take those sins away, to free us from them, and to redeem us from our guilt. He died in agony on the cross to save us. His love first creates us, then redeems us. All He asks is to love Him in return, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Catherine loved as Jesus loves. She loved remarkably well. Let’s explore how she did it.

Catherine Expresses Her Love

In her time, very few people could read and write, and most of them were priests. During the terror of the Black Death, survival was top priority. Naturally in those conditions, Catherine did not go to school, so her ability to write puzzles us. Some folks thought that her writing was a miracle. Whichever way she learned, she wrote quite a lot, and we are grateful that her contemporaries saved those pages for us. They show how her love grew.

First she wrote 382 letters, on many topics. The most famous are to Pope Gregory XI, urging him to return to his home in Rome. As you would expect, these letters consider practical details. So they provide excellent examples of specific acts of love. After learning Catherine's general directions for love, you will enjoy fitting these details into her life. Her letters provide glowing examples of loving care for her friends.

Her Dialogs, or spiritual conversations with God, outline how her love grew. She lived completely in God's presence, and spoke to Him heart-to-heart. So these Dialogs express her life-long interactions with God. They show her love glow and burst into flame. We will review the main points of Dialogs, to illustrate her growing love. She inspired thousands of people over the last 650 years, and will inspire you.

Finally, her prayers are 26 talks with God in St. Peter's Basilica. She did not write them. In her last days, she spoke them. When she entered the church, she fell upon her knees, and became absorbed in prayer. In this ecstasy, she spoke aloud to God. Her friends heard these prayers, and wrote them down to inspire each other. Thanks to their careful recording, we can share those inspired prayers today.

Shortly after she died, her great friend, Fr. Raymond of Capua, OP, wrote the official life of St. Catherine. He did it in the style of the time, which is not our style. So it is quite flowery, and lacks the details that we appreciate. For example, to express her joy in serving, she would run up the stairs to the sick person. Describing this, Raymond says that she flew up without touching the steps. If we adjust these flowery words to the way we speak, we can profit from this biography. More modern accounts of her life also exist, and help us know her better. There is so much to know about Catherine, that each biographer develops different dimensions.

Because she taught us important lessons by her life and by her writings, Pope Paul VI declared her Doctor of the Church. This means that her doctrine, or teaching, urges the entire Church forward toward God. She is the doctor of Christ Crucified. By giving herself to Christ in love, she lived His life so completely that she radiated Jesus to us, even over the span of 650 years. Her writings unite us with her life, through her love of Christ.

From what I wrote, you could conclude that Catherine's life was just joy. To balance that view, I remind you that she loved many people. That means that she opened herself to them, and made herself vulnerable. Now you see that she was often wounded, and deeply. Her love launched her into great hopes and expectations. Naturally, most of them failed. She suffered more than we can understand. One example was the stigmata. These are the marks of Christ's nail and spear wounds. She endured pains like His crucifixion.

She says that she endured these pains because Jesus showed her that she was His creature. In these days of self-affirmation, we don't want to hear that we depend upon God. But it's no less true for our denial. Catherine expresses this reality in very stark terms. Jesus said to her: "I am He who is; you are she who is not." Shocking as it is to us, it's true. It reflects what Abraham experienced at Mount Moriah, what Moses learned at the burning bush, and so throughout the faithful prophets and priests of the Old Covenant. It's what Christ reveals in the Gospels. It's the ultimate truth that sets us free from complaining that we don't deserve pain. Now your picture is complete. Catherine overcame crippling suffering to radiate Christ's love for us all because she knew who she was, and who God was. This Truth showed her Love. She knew and loved Jesus so well that she inspires us.

Difference between knowledge and love

St. Paul, in 1 Cor. 2:10, reminds us that God unites us to Himself by gifts of knowledge, wisdom and love. We start with basic knowledge: that God exists, that He creates, and that He redeems. Our gift of wisdom urges us to follow God through the maze of confusing creatures. Catherine loved to call God "Truth". We must seek truth

first, or we do not know who to love. Finding the great Who is the most truthful thing we do. Nothing diminishes this great accomplishment. But all truth, even Truth, misses God's center, and leaves us gasping for more. Truth is precious, but not enough for us.

So we need Love, which unites us to God. God is Love. He loves us first. If we accept His gift of Himself, we join His love. St. John says it this way: "God is Love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him", 1 Jn 4:8; 4:16. Abiding is a great way to say that we are together, much closer than a loving family abiding at home. God wants to abide totally with and in us, and we with and in Him. This is the union we seek.

When we love, we act as God acts. Naturally, our love is much less than God's love, but it is the same kind of act. Because it is the same kind of act, it unites us. God's act is ours. This is another way to say that love unites us. It is Catherine's secret. By accepting God's love, she accepts God, and acts as He acts. She loves by His loving. Christ came to involve us in Love, which is God's Being. We can't act God's way on our own, by our natural powers. But Jesus shares His power with us, if we accept it.

He shares His knowledge if we accept faith. He shares His plan if we accept hope. Greatest of all, He shares His very being if we accept charity. That's why Catherine could love people so magnificently: her love was Christ's. Jesus shows us the Father and the Spirit by showing that all Three are Love. If you don't understand that, then you realize that it's infinite truth. None of us is infinite, so we can't understand it. But we can agree to love as Christ loved. We can unite with Him just as Catherine did.

You are right that knowledge is also one of God's acts, and to know God is to unite with Him by knowledge. But His knowledge is a different kind from ours. It differs in two significant ways. First, it is infinite, and we are finite. So there's no fit. Maybe we can do what God does when He knows, just as we do what He does when He loves. Unfortunately, we can't manage that. We cannot know God as simply as He does. Our knowledge is complicated, so it is a different kind. Therefore our knowledge falls woefully short of God.

We simply do not know what God is. We know that he definitely exists. We acknowledge that God's infinity exceeds our finite capacity to know. But His simplicity also exceeds our capacity. As creatures, we are part being and part not-being. This complexity prevents us from achieving God's simplicity. Only God is infinite and simple enough to know Himself. We humans can't reach God by our knowledge.

But God loves us. If we accept this love, we unite passively. We let God love us. Because we are body and soul, composed of parts, we have to unite in two steps. Our active step is: decide to accept God's love. Then we passively enjoy God's love. For example, we can be cold, and see the sunshine just a foot away from us. The active step is to move into the sun. The passive step is to soak up the sun, to bask in it. God's love is more powerful than sun radiation, but the steps are the same. First, decide to receive Love, then let Him enlighten and warm us.

Catherine taught us to take these simple steps. She showed us how to get to God by love. God initiates this romance. He loves us first. If we accept Him, He loves us more. The more we accept Him, the more He loves us. It could hardly be otherwise, since God is Love. His Love is the source of all we are, so it is the unity of all we are. When we accept God's love, He unites all our abilities. He integrates us. When He gathers our scattered parts together, He enables us to love more simply. Then we love as He loves. Jesus is Love Himself. He leads us to the Father and the Spirit, Who are also Love. Christ is among us, so we can approach Him, and learn Love. As we learn more, we become more simple, and more like God. God moves us into Him. He simplifies us.

Catherine says this in *Dialogues*, p 121: “I ask that you love me with the same love with which I love you.” As Catherine develops Christ’s request, she emphasizes that God’s friends taste and know, experience and feel God in their very souls. Every human ability participates in union with Jesus. This integration of all abilities fills us so fully that we overflow. That’s why God gave her the gift of writing so that “when I came down from the heights, I would have some way to pour out my heart so it would not burst”. Love necessarily expands.

The heights represent God’s love in mystical union. The word “heights” tells the tale because from a mountain top we see everything below with great clarity. From the heights, confusing details fade into proper perspective. God’s love is like heights because it’s the clear view of what we are and where we’re going. In God’s love, we find everything. We discover who we are, and how we advance further to God. While on these heights, we bask in God’s love. We soak up His love, and let it transform us. This transformation is the overflow of His love, expanding us to love more. There’s no end to this infinite increase.

Just as His love created us, so His love expands us. Just as He loved us into being, so He loves us into becoming more. St. Paul says it well: “I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me”, Gal. 2:20. Christ abounds in us, so that we forever increase. It must be so, since our very existence is an expression of His love. Opening to His love opens us more to existence. We “grow up in Christ”, Eph. 4:15. Our part is small, but necessary. Our free decision to cooperate lets Christ urge us on. He won’t take us along unless we agree.

When we live in God’s love we directly experience God. In His simplicity, His Truth is His Love. One necessary result is that mystical life increases our knowledge and love together. Plato and Aristotle recognized that the height of human life is contemplation, or synthesized knowing and loving. Catherine’s rich contemplative life is an excellent example of knowing and loving becoming one.

Because she was so simplified by Christ, she encourages us to follow her. We start as she started. So we can finish as she finished.

Catherine’s Knowledge

Without school, Catherine knew all the important truths. She integrated them better than most highly educated people do. Contemplative life produces that amazing knowledge. Perhaps you noticed that the Carmelites are much more united with what’s happening than college professors. Often, book-learning isolates a person. Memorizing many words has just the opposite effect from real learning. Mystical experience tunes us in to reality.

Above all, Catherine learned by prayer, heart to heart with Jesus, our great Teacher. Prayer is being real. At first, we are real about superficial things like our pet dog’s death. Then we progress through more important realities, to the ultimate real: God. This divine unity is the most true, good and beautiful of all prayer: opening to God.

Like a bud opening into a flower, we grow in love. Our active contemplation is prayer that we initiate, sustain, and conclude, to unite with our infinite lover. Once we freely commit to His love, He loves us by initiating, sustaining and concluding passive contemplation. As our freedom grows, we open further to infused contemplation. This mystical activity is a foretaste of heaven, a preview of our eternal destiny.

We can’t adequately express our prayer experience. Even our primitive active contemplation is beyond words. We invent words to deal with things like bread and butter. Words work well to ask: “pass the bread”. But the taste of bread escapes words. The process of baking the bread, is still further away from what words can say. The mother’s love in baking the bread is way beyond anything that words can express.

God's love is still further away. But every step of this progress advances us toward more important meaning. Bread by itself is insignificant. Knowing how to bake bread is much more valuable. Mother's love is a quantum leap from baking, and God's love is the ultimate being. No meaning compares to Him. Words quickly fall behind our knowledge, which is woefully short of our experience.

So we use images to bolster words, and stretch beyond verbal limits. Mystics communicate experiences of God remarkably well. In the hands of a mystic, words evoke images, which point more clearly and directly at reality. The ultimate verbal artist is the mystical poet. St. John of the Cross is the greatest master. Catherine is not far behind. When she says that God is like the sea, we see that He is eternal, infinite, active, life giving... and on.

Images transcend words, even while using them. Mystics follow Jesus, Whose images are best. Christ said that the kingdom of heaven is like a net. That image enables us to see a net, spread wide through the sea, sweeping through vast distances to gather many fish. The net brings them together, preserves them, prepares them to achieve their destiny... By words alone, we would tangle ourselves in too many details, and would always leave out something important. The correct symbol says it quickly, easily, and more completely.

Catherine uses many symbols. Her writings are loving chatter about many things. But her images are nuggets of pure gold. All her work expresses her unbounded love, but her symbols stay with us. For example she describes wood becoming fire as it accepts love. This image is so effective that we love it, and remember it lovingly. She symbolizes Christ as the bridge that unites us to God across the chasm of sin. This inspires tens of thousands of people. When you read the words that evoke the image, you will see how effective the symbol is.

She calls God's infinite love "mad loving" because ordinary love falls far short of Christ's loving. When love enflames people, they go somewhat crazy, like going mad. Accepting God's love stretches us so far from normal that we look crazy. So the symbol of the mad lover fits very well. Real love is so intense that the lover can't live without the beloved. Love cannot be satisfied except by total oneness of lovers.

Catherine soars into love like an eagle floats on thermals. We symbolize St. John the Beloved, the Evangelist, as an eagle because he gives himself to God's love, and is carried away. As a result, his gospel soars, and carries us along in the rising current of divine love. Catherine's work is more like St. John's Apocalypse, as it is less well-organized than St. John's Gospel. Catherine and John soar along on marvelous mystical flights.

St. Catherine's Writings

Dialog is the richest source. Be sure to use Sue Noffke's translation, published by Paulist Press, 1980. Other translations are misleading. God and Catherine converse in this book. God does most of the talking. Catherine does not identify Him, but we learn quickly that He is the one who leads the dialog. Numbers refer to individual conversations. It took Catherine 10 months to write these dialogs. A pious legend said that she was inspired and did *Dialog* in 5 days. All page numbers are for the Paulist Press 1980 edition.

Dialog

1. A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God's honor and the salvation of souls. She has for some time exercised herself in virtue, and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge, in order to know better God's goodness towards her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.

But there is no way she can so savor and be enlightened by this truth as in continual humble prayer, grounded in the knowledge of herself and of God. For by such prayer the soul is united with God, following the footsteps of Christ crucified, and through desire and affection and the union of love He makes of her another Himself. So Christ seems to have meant when He said: "If you will love me and keep my word, I will show myself to you, and you will be one thing with me, and I with you". (Cf Jn. 14:23) These paragraphs are on page 25.

Commentary: At once Catherine rises up to God. She calls herself "a soul", restless with desire for God and her neighbor "souls". That is real love, after all, to be one with the beloved. Knowledge of her true self grew from her many years of loving contemplation. This self is the one that God wishes us to be. That self, the one God made us to be, is the opposite of the self we impose when we are teenagers. Real self-knowledge flows from prayer. That's why prayer is being real.

Prayer is our opening wide to receive God's gifts. When we open, God enters, and unites with us. That's why He created us, to be one with us. First we become one with God by knowing the truth. God is Truth. Jesus is God revealed in the flesh, so in His footsteps we explore God. Once we see the truth, we love it. The ultimate result is that God makes us another Himself. This is our journey to be a better image of God. As we drop our false selves, and become more like God, we become more real!

If we let God make us another Himself, He dialogs with us in prayer. Nothing could be more natural for people who love each other than talking with and about each other. We humans have a hard time at the start because of our many and serious limitations. So we most frequently quit conversing, and love dies. Like burning sticks in a fire, mutual warming is necessary for love to flame up into full life.

Though love and fire are different, they are so much alike that fire is a fine symbol for love. Friends draw close and multiply their love for each other just as two burning sticks warm each other to burn more completely. As they give themselves up to the fire that they share, they unite in one blaze. This is love in action.

Love unites persons into one by sharing activity. If two persons will to please each other, they love to learn what pleases each other. Then they do just that to be more one. Friends can finish each others' sentences because friends have identified with each other. They have become one in many ways. We struggle to love because there are so many ways that we can become one. There are also ways to break unity.

Friends strive to overcome all barriers to their unity. They study each other to find frustrating breaks in unity. Many of our acts disunite us from each other, frustrating the unity we so deeply desire. As we advance in love, we overcome more and more of these splits. It is as if we burn more closely together. All this expresses the positive results of love. But we must admit that growing in love is painful. Some people quit loving because of that pain. Each of you has his own examples of pain. You conflict was so simple, so silly, but so painful, that it often ends love. That end is even more painful. Remembering it can prevent us from trying to love again. Among humans pains can kill love. Catherine notes that Christ doesn't mind pain, so we don't worry that God may stop loving us. Jesus is the man of pain, so God never quits loving us. We do many stupid things to upset unity. But God forgives all our sins. We are the only ones who can harm this friendship.

God can't stop loving us. So if we keep loving God, our friendship can grow infinitely. Nothing else will satisfy us. No limited good is enough for us. Divine friendship is the best for us, and the easiest for us to promote, if we keep trying. All we have to do, is repent of our offenses against God. Since He is Love, He continues to love us throughout our messy lives.

Though loving God is painful, it is the least painful way to live. Rejecting God's love is so painful that we can hardly find enough energy to do it. In the long run, we minimize pain and wasted effort by loving God to our max. Catherine unites all her effort in prayer, giving us an outstanding example of love.

Catherine Asks God, and He Responds

In *Dialog*, Catherine first asks God, or states her petition. Then God responds, and Catherine overflows with thanksgiving to this response. In section 4, she asks for the salvation of the entire world. God the Father responds to her as His beloved daughter. She pictures Him as Gentle Truth. In His name Catherine expresses his love, the reason He created us. First He loved us into existence, then He loved to clean us of our sins. In this way the Father freely saves all people who accept His love.

Dialog 4

I have shown you, dearest daughter, that in this life guilt is not atoned for by any suffering simply as suffering, but rather by suffering borne with desire, love, and contrition of heart. The value is not in the suffering, but in the soul's desire. Likewise neither desire nor any other virtue has value of life except through my only begotten Son, Christ crucified, since the soul has drawn love from Him, and in virtue follows His footsteps. In this way, and in no other, is suffering of value. It satisfies for sin, then, with gentle unitive love born from the sweet knowledge of my goodness, and from the bitterness and contrition the heart finds in the knowledge of itself and its own sins. Such knowledge gives birth to hatred and contempt for sin, and for the soul's selfish sensuality, whence she considers herself worthy of punishment and unworthy of reward. "So you see", said Gentle Truth, "those who have heartfelt contrition, love for true patience, and that true humility which considers oneself worthy of punishment, and unworthy of reward, suffer with patience, and so make atonement".

You ask me for suffering to atone for the offenses my creatures commit against me. And you ask for the will to know and love me, supreme Truth. Here is the way, if you would come to perfect knowledge and enjoyment of me, eternal Life: never leave the knowledge of yourself. Then, put down as you are in the valley of humility, you will know me in yourself, and from this knowledge you will draw all that you need.

No virtue can have life in it except from charity, and charity is nursed and mothered by humility. You will find humility in the knowledge of yourself when you see that even your own existence comes not from yourself, but from Me, for I loved you before you came into being. And in my unspeakable love for you, I willed to create you anew in grace. So I washed you, and made you a new creation in the blood that my only-begotten Son poured out with such burning love. 29

Commentary Catherine knows that we experience only parts of what God does, so she unites these fragments to show us their integrity. These fragments include suffering and redemption. We strive to realize that suffering redeems. When we attain this truth, we're tired, and usually quit trying to learn more. But there is much more to know. The most important new knowledge is that suffering by itself is nothing. Only suffering by love is valuable. This is another huge fact, hard for us to know. So Catherine shows us how love makes suffering valuable. God's love starts us going. Because He loves us, He wants us to exist. He wants us to exist as persons who know our options, and freely choose to love Him. This makes sense: He loves us, so we love Him. In a way, we second God's motion; we agree with His love for us by loving Him. That makes creation a romance, a love story. God the Father, Creator of the universe, expresses Himself by acting out Who He is, by loving creation into existence. Remember when Catherine is writing this. Remember the conditions in which she lived. It's the middle of plague-death and famine. Nothing like this devastation had been recorded in previous history. Weak souls were frozen stiff in terror. Catherine is bubbling over with God's love. Why could she do this in such horror?

Because it's true. It's true whether humans are tortured in misery, as in her time, or relatively relaxed in luxury, as Americans were about a century ago, or haunted by horrors we can't quite identify, as today. God is Love, and He simply loves. Loving is giving, so all He does is loving gift. What we do about this loving gift is another story altogether. Catherine's response was loving care for the sick and dying, for the discouraged, for everyone whom she met. We are all unhappy because the One we need the most is still distant. We sin, and separate ourselves from our Loving Father. Even as His Son pours love for us on the Cross, we fail to return His gift.

But Catherine saw God's love through all the pain around her. She saw the world as it is. We sinners deserve our pain. But God loves us so much that He wants to save us from suffering. So we must do our share to accept deprivation as it occurs. But the bottom line is God's love, to which we respond in kind. If we love God, then we tune in to the harmony of the universe. Pain is out of tune. But if we love God, we can tune even pain into Him. That is how Catherine overcame the minor defect of pain. Jesus shows us how apply God's saving love even to suffering. Thus we fulfill the soul's desire. What is the soul's desire?

If the soul desires what God desires, then suffering satisfies for sin. After all, sin is separation from God's love. We can't cure that separation by suffering, but only by unitive love. When we unite with God again, then every event makes sense. But if we refuse to unite, we increase sin. Unitive love is precisely what Christ teaches us. He reached out from his perfection in heaven to us sinners. As St. Paul so well expressed it: "...even though He was God, He did not look upon divinity as something to be held. Rather he humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even death upon the cross", Phil. 2:5-7. That's what God the Father praises as Christ's love for human souls. Redemptive love unites with creative love. Then love is complete.

The Son's love is from "sweet knowledge of My goodness". Catherine means God's goodness. The great value of prayer is that Catherine dwelt in God's love until these simple effects of love became clear to her. We can follow her in this understanding and appreciation. It helps that we despise sin. We know that sin is the pits. Sin multiplies bitterness. So let's use that bitter ill to impel us to contrition. Let sin's effects drive us back to God. Love has loved us into existence, but sin rejects Love, so we attack our own existence until we return to Love.

Love is the main theme of life. Even sin drives us to atonement. Its English parts clarify that word's meaning: at-one-ment. It is reintegrating, or being one again with God. We atone when we become "at one". Atoning for sin is healing the break between us and God, so that we are now at one with Him. Surface familiarity is not enough. We need to plumb the depths of this at-one-ment.

In its profound meaning, we return God's gift of love by loving Him. As Jesus said: "The first commandment is to love God with your whole heart, and soul, and mind. The second commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself", Mat 22:38-39. Thus we escape from the "bitterness and contrition the heart finds in the knowledge of itself and its own sins", into "the gentle unitive love born from the sweet knowledge of My goodness". Beneath the surface of harsh reality is the love story of God's gentle love.

Prayer advances us from our primitive state into this rich state of love that Catherine shares with us. Then pain no longer frightens us. Instead, we recognize love in those who suffer pain for us, and we learn to love through pain. Just observe Christ dying for our sins in agony on the cross. Gaze on His willingness to suffer anything for us, because He loves us. Catherine contemplated the Cross, and learned to suffer along with Christ. God the Father loved her good will, and says that she can have both her requests: to suffer and to have perfect knowledge of God. The way to get these requests was: "Never leave the knowledge of yourself". This sounds strange to us.

Generally, “ourselves” would be the enemy. The “ourself” we are most familiar with is our sinful self. So we must distinguish between true and false selves. Indeed, our false selves betray us. But our true selves are the selves that God has loved into existence. These genuine selves are acts of God’s love. These we need to know, because God made us in His image and likeness.

Therefore, to know our true selves is to know God. That’s why the loving Father says: “you will know Me in yourself”. How wonderful this is. God has loved us to be, so our being is God’s love. Since God is Love, if we know ourselves as God’s act of love, then we know God. “. . .and from this knowledge, you will draw all that you need.” Gentle Truth is telling Catherine that He’s within, patiently waiting for us to seek Him out, and to find Him Whom our hearts desire. St. Augustine said it so well that we quote him often: “The heart is restless until it rests in Thee, O Lord”. Catherine says the same thing in different words. Let’s pray with these great saints until we find God in our hearts.

Catherine shows us that prayer is the way to be real by contacting God in our hearts. As we contact Him, and advance step by step, we come to know Him as Love. Progressively, we see better that behind agony is love. Love calms our restlessness. We become increasingly peaceful. Serenity begins to replace anxiety. We enter love. In a way we “fall” in love, it’s so different, like the change from walking to falling. Love Himself is much more than we can imagine, much less prepare to find. But we become more active as we realize that God made us free, and wants us to freely return His love. This free choice is genuine charity.

Catherine affirms that virtue lives in charity, or in the love we offer to God. English has but one word for love. Our impoverished language should expand into at least the three words that Greeks use. The most primitive form of love is consuming, or gobbling up what we love. This is *eros* in Greek, or erotic love, which uses the love object as we use water, to consume. This type of love is required for us bodily creatures to survive, but it’s a very low level of unifying with things. Everything we consume is inferior to us (lesser beings than we are).

But we can also love equal beings (human-to-human love), which Greeks call *philo*. In English, we often call this friendship-love. We yield to the goodness of beings who are on the same level as we are. So we should not **use** these beings. Instead, we should respect them, and even reverence them. Like us, they are images of God. The more we realize how we are images of God, the more we see that other humans are too. Even if they belong to different branches of the human family, and have different skin colors, we are all God’s children.

Unfortunately, there are humans who do not realize that other humans are equal. These people dehumanize others, reducing them to mere objects. Though this is a lie, some humans try to force other humans down to the level of objects, like Big Macs, to be consumed for pleasure. Humans who impose such lies upon others also find it hard to imagine that there are beings greater than they are. So these dehumanizing humans have a hard time admitting that God exists, and should be loved in yet a third way.

Loving a greater being is quite different from loving equals. This is the love that the Greeks called *agape*, or the English call divine love. Often we call it worship. Everyone can love the greatest of all beings, God Himself. When we do, we lowly creatures love the Creator. God invites us to love Him. As Love Himself, He can hardly do otherwise. Catherine reminds us regularly that God initiates our romance. He leads the love-dance.

Because God is Love, He must love others. Love must be creative. Love is not satisfied with less, but always expands to more. Love overflows. It’s impossible for Love Himself to avoid loving other beings into existence. Love forever expands. No wonder that creation is so rich and varied. The more we see of God’s creatures, the

more we realize that God is infinite, producing much more than we can comprehend. He Who is greater enables we who are lesser to flourish. He wants us to flourish. He wants the best for us. He wants us to be one with Him.

When we love Him Who is Greater than we, we expand. Our love grows by contact with His. Later we will see that Catherine symbolizes love as fire. While fire represents the vigor of love, it does not show God's creative expansion. Rather than consume us, Love increases us. If we agree with Love, we become more like Love. We expand most when we love Him Who is Love. Catherine's secret: Love incites our love into Love Himself. Though we could become proud of our expansion into God, we actually become humble. Humility is the power to acknowledge all things as they are. St. Thomas Aquinas shows us that humility is truth. Catherine learned that from the gentle Father Who says: "even your own existence comes not from yourself, but from Me, for I loved you before you came into being". In fact, God's love created us, or made us be. Love creates.

Today, we have few living examples of love creating. Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Blessed John Paul II were excellent examples of creative love. But too many people today live run on rage. Hatred is too frequent. Hatred looks warm, even hot, like Catherine's symbol of fire. But hatred destroys. Where hatred happens, good disappears. Where love happens, good grows. That's the warmth we desire. That's the fire that creates. When we open to God's love, we expand into virtue, which is another word for power to do good. Where virtue happens, good expands. Fortunately, you know all this, though you may never have heard it clearly expressed. Catherine expresses it clearly: "No virtue can have life in it except from charity".

Charity, or the most profound love, is the source of all being. Charity is God. Perfect Love, or God, is necessary. Charity is the source of all creatures, who are unnecessary. The more we dwell upon this reality in prayer, the more real we become. The more real we are, the more humble we are. Humility is truth, or reality. Therefore, as Catherine says here, "charity is nursed and mothered by humility". They go together because they boil down to the same Love. They mutually enable each other. So Catherine's motherly heart says that humility nurtures and mothers charity. Pray about this, and you will see how well her words point to the union of charity and humility.

Catherine learned all this without words, in the silence of prayer, listening to God speak "heart to heart". So she writes as if God spoke words to her, reminding her that He created her out of love, and redeemed her from sin out of love. Naturally, these acts of love fit well together. God's love is everlasting, and overcomes all obstacles. The only obstacle that God will not overcome is our free choice to reject Him. Even when we do this, God will love us. If we freely agree to His love, He heals us. We fragment ourselves, but He puts us back together. So Catherine has Him say: "In my unspeakable love for you, I willed to create you anew in grace. So I washed you, and made you a new creation in the blood that my only-begotten Son poured out with such burning love".

You know what this means, but it helps to re-express it. Sin is rather like death. We even call the most serious sin "mortal" because we can kill God's life in us. Then we live on in a deprived way, very anxious, depressed, and furious that we have destroyed God's most valuable gift. But God will create us anew in grace. He will give us His life again. We usually regain this life through Confession, the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When we freely accept the gift (grace) of God's life again, Love flows in to repair the damage we did to ourselves.

Removing sin is like washing. In this case, Christ's blood, shed to redeem us, washes us clean of sin. He offers this cleansing wash. If we accept it, then God cleanses us of sin. Catherine expresses this in the language we learn from Jesus. He told us something we could never discover. He told us that there are two persons who love each other in the perfect being Who is God. We are not as simple as God is, so we cannot understand Him sim-

ply. But we can understand that loving requires two persons. So we call the first person God the Father. The second person that He loves is God the Son. This is as far as Catherine goes into the Trinity in this section, so we will stop here. God's only-begotten Son poured out his blood with burning love. Burning represents perfect love, love completely unrestricted, like unconfined fire.

Catherine zooms through these symbols. Perhaps we must scramble to keep up. But it's delightful to see a saint share her prayer life with us. Catherine experiences God's love. She then reflects on how God the Father reveals Himself in God the Son. God the Son takes humanity unto Himself by becoming a human being. His divine person takes on flesh, and becomes visible. We can see and touch Him. He can bleed, and does so for love of us. He takes on the wages of sin, death, to redeem us from sin. This is love beyond understanding, but we can dwell in it, come to know it better, and even become as full of God's love as Catherine was. That's why Catherine provides us with these dialogs, to urge us on to pray, and thereby experience God's love in its infinite variety. How can we resist? Let's join Catherine to experience God's everlasting love.

Introduction to Catherine's Symbols

We have seen that Catherine urges us to cooperate with Christ. He starts our romance. He woos us. He saves us by loving suffering, and asks us to look for Him in ourselves. So we follow God's advice by admitting that He created us to be what we are. He created us as His image and likeness. So if I know myself as image and likeness of God, I know God. God's gift of being is what our being is. God simply is His being. When He gives Himself to creatures, His gift of being expresses God. Catherine says that she received herself from God. Therefore, God knows her best. God is her best friend, Her greatest lover. Relaxing in His love, she goes quickly from self-knowledge to God. His knowledge of her is perfect, so she knows herself best in Him. This mutual reinforcement from obvious truths like God created me to God loves me, enlightens Catherine. So her realizations deepen. It's clearer each time she reviews it that God knows her best, loves her most, and wants her to be closer to Him. Each review ratchets Catherine closer to God. Prayer enables unity by this spiral review.

This relationship of creature to Creator is easy for Catherine to say, but hard for us to understand. Let's try a few ways to express her thought. Then we will look at one of her symbols to represent seeing self in God and God in self. Then we will hear from you about what it means to find God in self and self in God.

We can say the same thing in many different ways. Language never captures our experience. But it does point to it rather effectively. Sometimes, language is necessary to remind us of our experience. All this talk is about experience. We have experienced God in many ways. Each of us can remember profound experiences of God. These experiences may have been early in life, within family contexts. Some people had glowing contacts with God through Jesus, perhaps at Christmas time, or Easter, or a Sunday Mass, or family rosary.

Moments of crisis may provide definite experience of God's help. Crisis first frightened us, then we realized that God was there, and with Him came peace. The original threat remained, but not the panic. This experience of God's care made a great impression upon us. We were like the apostles in the boat, tossed about by storm winds, and sinking. Jesus came to them across the water, calmed the storm, and then calmed them. We rely upon God, especially as He reveals Himself in Jesus. Jesus is God in the flesh, so we can relate to Him directly.

Perhaps we had a conversion experience. We missed Christ because we rejected Him in the self-created horror of sin. Sin promotes creatures beyond their value. When we sin, we devote ourselves to some creature as if it were God. First we looked for God in all the wrong places. Then we were disappointed, discouraged, and disoriented. After that fiasco, we had to return to God. God was our stability, our support, and our savior. Whatever we did, He was the one who loved us, whether we deserved it or not.

When we remember these striking experiences of God's presence, we are sure that something important happened. This important occurrence is so much better than the rest of life, that we rejoice in it, and hope to expand upon it. We want more of this divine presence. We hope to be at one with Him, overcoming all obstacles to His love for us and our love for Him. Loving union grows from unitive love, as Catherine notes often. Prayer is our way to grow in God's presence. Prayer is direct experience of God's unifying love.

Catherine symbolizes this unitive love as "mirror". If we look within, we find God. As we look at God, we see ourselves as we really are. We do not see what we want to be, or what we imagine ourselves to be. Instead, we see ourselves as God loves us. He has taken us to Himself. This is the unity that love is. When we freely agree to do what God does, then we come to know ourselves more completely. We are on our way to God's perfect knowledge of us when we observe ourselves in God.

This is not exactly what happens when we look at ourselves in a mirror, but is very much like that experience. So a mirror is a good symbol for seeing ourselves in God, and Him in us. We see the mirror as it is, and we see ourselves in the mirror. The mirror shows us how we really are, our good and bad points. It shows us how healthy we are, but also reveals smudges that need to be cleansed, hairs that need to be combed, and clothes that need to be adjusted. Naturally, we see spiritual realities in the mirror of God, but they resemble the material things visible in an ordinary mirror. And we see God. This symbol provides excellent connections to real life. With these expressions and symbol, we begin to understand how we see God in self and self in God. What can you say that helps us in this never-ending approach to God?

The Mirror: Catherine's words

Catherine speaks: "As the soul comes to know herself, she also knows God better, for she sees how good He has been to her. In the gentle mirror of God, she sees her own dignity: that through no merit of hers, but by His creation, she is the image of God. And in the mirror of God's goodness, she sees as well her own unworthiness, the work of her own sin. For just as you can better see the blemish on your face when you look at yourself in a mirror, so the soul who in true self-knowledge rises up with desire to look at herself in the gentle mirror of God, with the eye of understanding, sees all the more clearly her own defects, because of the purity she sees in him."

Commentary

Among the first things a person knows about self is change. We are never the same in most ways. We shift and we slide, we strengthen and weaken, we grow confident only to despair. All this alteration shows us that we are not independent. We are too unstable to be on our own. We depend upon a stable being for our existence. This stable being is God, Who loves us into existence. Without His initial act of love, and His continual loving, we would disappear instantaneously. Poof, we would be gone!

The soul that we know is feminine in the sense that it comes from God. The famous way to say this is: "All souls are feminine to God". In a relative way, humans can be masculine initiators and sustainers, or feminine receivers and nurturers. But this distinction is partial and incidental compared to God's perfect being. He is the one who is, as he told Moses: "I am who am", Ex 3:14. In the partial way that language works, this is the best way to identify God. We can unpack that sentence in many ways, so theologians write many books about it.

For us, now, it's enough to notice that God is the one being who is. He is without restrictions, without reservations, and without reductions. All these limits narrow creatures down to be dependent beings, beings who do not exist for a while, exist for a time, and then cease to exist. Only God **is** in the proper sense. We are in a received

sense, due to God's creative power. When He creates us, He passes on to us a spark of His existence. In this sense, we come from God, and exist in Him. Without him we would not be.

So we come to know God better as Creator. When we realize how small we are, we see how good God has been to us. He did not need us. We provide nothing for Him. But He shares His infinite being with us, because He loves us. Prayer is looking into the mirror of God. Here we see our own dignity. It is not something we earn, but a free gift from God. That's why Catherine says that we are dignified "through no merit of our own". A moment's reflection reminds us that prior to God creating us, we did not exist at all. So we could not have merited anything. After God created us, we sinned, so we lack merit even after we exist.

Still, He created us like Him, or in His image. This image is the mirror. When we look at our real selves, we see God's image. So our inner being, our spirituality, reveals God's image to us. We see God through His image in us, and we see ourselves as God's image and likeness. Gen 1:26 is the passage: "Then God said: 'Let us make man in our image and likeness. In our image and likeness, let us make him.'" So the soul shows us God's image. It also shows us ourselves, in the clearest form. We see both mirror and self in this mirror.

But we have damaged God's image in us. Catherine refers to personal sin, which is our unworthiness because sin excludes God from His image. When we look at what's left of God's image in our souls, we see what is missing. We see sin, just as a mirror enables us to "better see the blemish on" our faces. But God's image is much more than a mirror. It is gentle because God loves us. It is caring because God urges us to clean the blemish. It is teaching because it shows us God's purity. Compared to God's purity, our sinfulness needs cleansing. All this Catherine says with utter simplicity in these few words.

Her ability to say this most important thing, with such loving insistence, inspires us to follow God's love. Catherine's love, shows us that creatures can respond to God's love. Together we can go into God's infinite Love. A mystic shows us the result of this unifying love. We love to see this result in Catherine. Her bubbly love invites us to get going with this love process. We want to see God in the mirror of our soul, and ourselves in God.

Catherine's Second Expression of the Mirror Symbol

"This is why I asked you, eternal Father, to enlighten me with the light of most holy faith. Truly this light is a sea, for it nourishes the soul in You, peaceful sea, eternal Trinity. Its water is not sluggish; so the soul is not afraid, because she knows the truth. It distills, revealing hidden things, so that here, where the most abundant light of Your faith abounds, the soul has, as it were, a guarantee of what she believes. This water is a **mirror** in which You, eternal Trinity, grant me knowledge; for when I look into this mirror, holding it in the hand of love, it shows me myself, as Your creation, in You, and You in me, through the union You have brought about of the Godhead with our humanity.

"This light shows You to me, and in this light I know You, highest and infinite Good: Good above every good, joyous Good, Good beyond measure and understanding! Beauty above all beauty; wisdom above all wisdom; indeed You are Wisdom Itself. You who are the angels' food are given to humans with burning love. You, Garment Who cover all nakedness, pasture the starving within Your sweetness, for You are sweet without trace of bitterness." Dialog 167, paragraphs 9-13.

Commentary

As you can see, Catherine overflowed with God's love, and expressed it so well that people loved to hear her words. No human can express the experience of God with words adequately, but Catherine came closer than

most other people to saying how infinite Goodness appears in the mirror of the soul. As usual, she overflows with love for God, burbling on and on. She is winding up the *Dialog* in this chapter or section, or dialog 167.

You remember that she started the *Dialog* with a great desire to know Truth Himself. To go toward this Infinite Truth, she has to start with her finite self. Self-knowledge gets her into the knowledge of God. True, the mirror of her soul shows her to be small, sick and foolish. But she doesn't mind being small because God is Infinite. She doesn't mind being sick because God is Health. She doesn't mind being foolish because God is Wisdom.

Reflecting back and forth between her limitations and God's perfection enables her to grow at the fastest rate. The mirror of God's image and likeness enables her to reflect. Along the way, she grows tremendously. She begins *Dialog* with: "I seek to pursue truth", and ends with: "Fill me, fill me with Eternal Truth". In between, she gathers more truth than she can share with us. We can follow her growth by following her reflections.

What worked for her, works for us. She first looked at God in her soul to see the reflection of her being and her moral condition. Both are severely limited. Even the innocent new-born babe is totally dependent upon God. This limit gets worse when we mature enough to sin. Each sin distances us from God. But God cures both limitations if we throw ourselves upon His infinite mercy. God already gives us His holy faith.

So this section of *Dialog* begins with the request to "enlighten me with the light of most holy faith". Now you know from personal experience that faith is vast. Your faith provides more than you could ever express. That's why Catherine compares it to the sea. Naturally, it is not the sea itself, but it's like the sea in its immensity. It is also like the sea because it nourishes us. It provides more nourishment than we can list: fish, shrimp, crabs... The created sea gives us more than we can count, but the uncreated sea of God is richer by far.

This symbol allows Catherine to say something meaningful, something enlightening, though she cannot say it all. Though the Trinity is far more than a sea, it's like a sea. It is not sluggish, but eternally active. It is not stormy, but perfectly peaceful. It is not terrifying, because it is Truth Itself and Love Itself. Catherine says that it distills. By that she means that God's complete being is everything in one. Just as distilling separates the active ingredient from distracting additives, so God separates being itself from various limitations. God's utter simplicity is completely distilled being. As usual, Catherine provides lots of symbols, tumbled together in her urgency to express what she has learned in prayer. We can follow step by step, and get into this wonderful view.

Distilling also reveals hidden things. We yearn for reasons to support our facts. Faith provides them. As we develop the gift of faith, we see more and more reasons. Moreover these reasons are more and more integrated. We become more simple because we get over distractions and confusions. We get to the essence, or the being behind the limitations. We get from creatures to Creator. Then we have the "most abundant light of Your faith". It "abounds", or surpasses every previous experience of light, meaning truth. As light abounds, we find our much-desired "guarantee of what she (the soul) believes".

Faith ever-expands. Faith enlightens us more completely each day. So as faith deepens, we see more and more fundamental support for things we believed as fragments before. Faith solidifies by uniting everything in ever more simple oneness. What we at first believed in isolation, we now see in totality. After seeing a few small pictures, which were fragmented, and did not fit together, we progress to the big picture. Then everything fits perfectly. We come to see in faith's light how perfectly unified the universe is. That strengthens our shaky faith.

“This water is a mirror in which You, eternal Trinity, grant me knowledge”. The infinite sea is also like a mirror, for the infinite Trinity is in us as image and likeness. When we leave distractions behind, and look at the mirror of God in our souls, we learn. This is the knowledge that we really want. Knowledge of technology is so unimportant that we change it almost immediately. But the knowledge we need is that God loves us, and we can return His love, growing into union with Love Itself. That knowledge remains for all eternity, with that Love.

“For when I look into this mirror, holding it in the hand of love, it shows me myself, as Your creation”. That’s the most important truth that the light of faith provides. We are creatures, living at God’s good pleasure, living on His love. Notice that we must hold this mirror in the hand of love. Only by love do we see the mirror at all. As we love more completely, we see more completely. Then we see our real selves. We see past the false images that we project about ourselves. We see the truth about self, that we are God’s creatures.

Necessarily, if we are creatures, we exist in our Creator. So Catherine continues: it shows me “in You, and You in me, through the union You have brought about of the Godhead with our humanity”. This intimate union of love nourishes our souls as the sea nourishes our bodies. The union God has brought about of Godhead with humanity is Jesus Christ. By his person, He is God. By his adopted nature, He is man. This unites Godhead with our humanity. Christ also reveals that God is Love. This revelation provides us glimpses of God. Our glimpses are like pieces of the great puzzle. Because God is utterly simple, all these pieces fit together in God’s Oneness.

That realization provides the totality that we desire. Its unity supports all the parts that fit into it. This unifying activity is what Catherine points to with the symbol: **distills**. In her bubbly way, Catherine uses symbols to express what she learned in prayer. To follow her, we must pray and reflect, and even discuss. All our efforts advance us toward the ultimate unity that we desire. Perhaps we have to take smaller steps than Catherine does, but we can arrive at the very same unity with God. God wants us to be one with Him, so our job is just to freely accept His love. When we do that, God brings us to Himself. He distills our spirit from material distractions.

Catherine’s other symbol is light. “This light shows You to me, and in this light I know You, highest and infinite Good”. Just as material light makes things visible, so spiritual light reveals God, or makes Him visible to our souls. In creation, light is different from what the light reveals. But in prayer, God is the light, which reveals Himself to us. The differences that bother us here on earth disappear into unity with God.

Then we see what Catherine sees: “Good above every good”! Good is exactly what we desire. Good is the desirable itself. Each created good is too limited to satisfy us. After the good of breakfast, we go for some other good. We can’t get satisfaction because the goods we obtain are not good enough. We need the Good above every good, or God. God is the Good we desperately need. As St Augustine reminded us, “The heart is restless until it rests in Thee, O God”. Only God satisfies. The trouble with us here on earth is that we do not obtain God. Instead, we grow closer to God in prayer, but always fall short of Him. Every good that we attain lets us down, because it is not good enough.

But God as: “joyous Good, Good beyond measure and understanding”. God is delightful, so when we gain a glimpse of Him, this glimpse fills us with joy. We are overjoyed by God. But here on earth all our joys end in yearning for more of God. All goods that we can measure are goods that end, that have a limit. We can measure that limit in space, in time, in flavor, or by intensity. God is the Good beyond understanding. He is above understanding because He is infinite. So God is a treasure of understanding that we cannot exhaust.

Catherine tells us that God is beyond comprehension, but that we continue to learn more about Him as we pray. This is a foretaste of our eternal joy, which is to love Infinite Goodness for infinity. There is no end to God. That's why our satisfaction is guaranteed if we unite with God, for His Goodness never ends. We have an infinite need for Infinity Himself. We will spend eternity feasting, so to speak, on God's infinite Goodness.

So Catherine describes God as: "Beauty above all beauty; wisdom above all wisdom; indeed You are Wisdom Itself". Many people find beauty irresistible. So Catherine reminds us that God is Beauty above all beauty. In fact, God is Beauty Itself. All the things we like about creatures come from God. He is the source of all Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Because God is One, He is Truth Itself, Beauty Itself, and Goodness Itself.

When Catherine tells us all these things, she gushes because she is overjoyed. She radiates all this reality in superabundant speech. Her expression is superabundant because God is superabundant. He surpasses all creatures, no matter how True, Good or Beautiful they might be. You know this for sure, because God is creator. All creatures resemble Him. So whatever we find to be true, good or beautiful in creation is just a chip off the old block. God is full being, and creatures are partial being. No wonder that creatures do not satisfy us!

Then Catherine uses another pair of symbols: "You who are the angels' food are given to humans with burning love". Angels are pure spirits, so they do not need food like bacon and eggs. But God sustains their spiritual beings, rather like food sustains our bodily life. So Catherine's symbol is the best we can do with language. How is God given to us, to sustain us as food does? In the Eucharist. This is the bread of angels that St. Thomas celebrated in the hymns for Corpus Christi.

While the Eucharist is like a symbol, it **is** what it symbolizes. That makes it a sacrament, which is way beyond a symbol. Catherine understood all this, but does not go into it in detail. She knew it because Jesus said: "This is my body; this is my blood". All the Gospels say the same thing: Mt. 26:26-28 Mk.14: 22-24, Lk, 22: 19-20 Jn. 6: 55-56. Jesus knew what a symbol was, but he said "this is my body". In John 6, He loses a lot of followers because of this identity, so it was clear to anyone who reads the Gospels that Jesus meant what He said. Angel's food is a symbol of God nourishing angels spirituality. But the Eucharist is the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ, Who is God. This is the food given to us humans, real spiritual food instead of a symbol.

Catherine uses a symbol when she says that this food is given to humans "with burning love". God's love is much more intense than any love we experience from humans. So if human love is warm, God's love is burning or flaming forth into the world. This symbol is a great way to identify God's love, and we bask in this burning love, which warms us and enlightens us. No other love will do for us. All other loves are too cold. That understanding reminds Catherine of covering us when we are cold. So she exclaims: "You, Garment Who cover all nakedness". This symbol expresses God's tender care for us poor humans who discovered our nakedness in the Garden after eating the apple, Gn. 3:7. She adds: "pasture the starving within Your sweetness, for You are sweet without trace of bitterness". Good Shepherd that He is, He pastures his starving sheep, feeding them His sweetness, which has no trace of bitterness, as sweet creatures hide great bitterness. In this symbol, Catherine refers back to the Eucharist. These passages show how integrated her view was, and how we can profit from union.

Introduction to Catherine's Organization

Given Catherine's great love for God, expressed in her flood of images, symbols, and hearty interactions, we can think that she is disorganized. Certainly, a casual reading of her *Dialog* will lead us to say so. But, with the exceptionally accurate translation that Sr. Susan Noffke, OP provides, we learn that these conversations with God follow a regular pattern. God speaks 90% of the words, usually in response to Catherine's requests.

Organization

Catherine requests 4 things: 1) that God help her sanctify herself; 2) that God help men reform the Church; 3) that God save the entire world; and 4) that God help her understand Divine Providence. Because she overflows with love for Him, she often gushes. If we look past her passionate passages, we find order. For example, she asks these four favors in the first two dialogs, which introduce her way of conversing. God answers her first request in dialogs 3-12. He answers request 2 in dialogs 110-134. He replies to request 3 in dialogs 26-87, and petition 4 in 135-153. The rest is lively interaction, as lovers converse.

Love is the topic of dialogs 13-25. Love necessarily includes sorrow, which is the point of dialogs 88-97. Catherine's great love of truth occupies dialogs 98-109. Within these dialogs, Catherine sketches how to integrate feeling and thinking. The outcome of this integration is loving obedience to God, expressed in dialogs 154-165. Obedience is the ultimate mark of love, as Jesus shows during His agony in the garden: "Not my will, but thine be done", Lk 22-42. This is quite natural because loving is willing the same as the beloved. The last 2 dialogs conclude this extended conversation. As we noted earlier, Catherine rounds out the *Dialog* with love of truth.

So she asked for something, God responded, and she gushed with thanksgiving. This is the reliable pattern of the *Dialog*, showing more organization than is immediately apparent. Fr. Kevin Foster, OP finds 3 themes that anchor *Dialog*. They are: 1) self-knowledge as a way to God; 2) the Trinity creating man in its image; 3) Christ on the cross. When we read the *Dialog*, we can orient ourselves by connecting them to these themes.

Catherine uses a fine symbol to express our bodily existence. It is the cell. You remember that she joined the third order, and spent 2 years in nearly total solitude and prayer. This is the cell of separation from mad dashes around creation. As we dash we seek God where He is not. If we retire inside the cell, or house of our body, to find God at our center, then we find the One we love. This cell, or house separating us from distractions, is exactly what the soul needs, so Catherine has high regard for this place of solitude. In this cell, we find God.

When we find Him, we recognize Him as Love. Since He is Love, all God does is love. One thing we know He does is create, so that must be love. One thing He created is me, so I must be love. In this way, I am in God's image and likeness. He is love and I am love. Once Catherine realizes God's love, she gives herself to God in return. No wonder that we burn with and for love. No wonder that Catherine goes into ecstasies of love so often. Every person burns to love and be loved. Love is the core of our being. Love Himself is our source, and in His image we are like Him. God's love for us is infinite, and our love for Him is infinite. Fire describes God's infinite love well, since fire consumes without end. At least once per page, Catherine refers to love burning.

God expresses His burning love by creating creatures. Therefore we should appreciate all creatures as acts of His love. Once we open a little to this love, expressed in creatures, we can see why Catherine was so loving. We can see her openness to God allowing His burning love to pour forth. These days, people strive for the same answers that Catherine sought. The way people ask them differs, but we all want to know who we are, where we came from, where we're headed and what we ought to do to get there. Catherine saw that we are the love of God, coming from His creation, going to perfect union with Him, and should tune into His love by freely loving Him. This is the law and the prophets, as Jesus pointed out, "To love God with your whole heart and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself", Mat. 22-38-39, Mk 12:30-31.

Knowing ourselves as God's beloved creatures provides profound answers to our basic questions. When we answer these fundamental questions, we can advance to detailed question. With correct answers, we can live them in God's love, as Catherine did. Her good example inspires us to follow her lead. Her disciples profited from her

good example and teaching. In our times, Mother Teresa of Calcutta accepted God's love, and spread it around. Mother Teresa is a modern example of love at work. Where did they both see this love?

In the cross of Christ. We venerate the cross because it is the ultimate expression of God's love for us. Christ shows His incalculable, mad, love on the cross. This reality inspired Catherine to exclaim: "It wasn't the nails; it was love that kept Jesus on the cross". When we get to the cross, we get to the fullest expression of God's love for us. "Greater love than this no man has than to give his life for his beloved", Jn 15: 13. Catherine takes these steps: 1) faith is the light to God, given at Baptism; 2) in faith we take our first step to God, to learn His love in the cross; 3) from this good example of God's love, we realize that we ought to love Him in return, so that faith and love nourish each other; 4) as Christ seeps into our open soul, we know Him more, and see how we should give our sins to Him, so He can wash us clean with His blood; 5) the more He cleanses us, the better we know and love him. This unceasing back and forth becomes eternal reciprocation of love. It mirrors forever.

A fine example of loving reciprocation is dialog 153

Catherine speaks: "Then that soul was as if drunk with love of true holy poverty. She was filled to bursting in the supreme eternal magnificence, and so transformed in the abyss of His supreme and immeasurable providence that though she was in the vessel of her body, it seemed as if the fire of charity within her had taken over, and rapt her outside her body. And with her mind's eye steadily fixed on the divine majesty, she spoke to the high eternal Father:

"O eternal Father! O fiery abyss of charity! O eternal beauty. O eternal wisdom, O eternal goodness, O eternal mercy! O hope and refuge of sinners! O immeasurable generosity! O eternal, infinite Good! O mad lover! And You have need of Your creature? It seems so to me, for You act as if You could not live without her, in spite of the fact that You are Life itself and everything has life from You, and nothing can have life without You. [See Jn. 1:3-4] Why then are You so mad (with love)? Because You have fallen in love with what You have made! You are pleased and delighted over her within Yourself, as if You were drunk (with desire) for her salvation. She runs away from You, and You go looking for her. She strays, and You draw closer to her. You clothed Yourself in our humanity, and nearer than that You could not have come.

"And what shall I say? I will stutter: "A-a", because there is nothing else I know how to say. [See Jeremiah 1:6] Finite language cannot express the emotion of the soul who longs for You infinitely. I think I could echo Paul's words: 'The tongue cannot speak, nor the ear hear, nor the eye see, nor the heart imagine what I have seen', 1 Cor 2:9. What have you seen? 'I have seen the hidden things of God!', 2 Cor 12: 4. And I; what do I say? I have nothing to add from these clumsy emotions (of mine). I say only, my soul, that you have tasted and seen the abyss of supreme eternal providence.

"I thank You now, high eternal Father, for the measureless kindness You have shown me, though I am miserably undeserving of any favor.

"But because I see that you are a fulfiller of holy desires, and that Your Truth cannot lie, I wish now that You would speak to me a little about the power and excellence of obedience just as You, eternal Father, promised me You would, so that I might fall in love with this virtue, and never cut myself off from obedience to You. Please, in Your infinite kindness, tell me how perfect it is, where I can find it, what would take it away from me, who gives it to me, and what is the sign that I do or do not have it."

We will see her consideration of obedience later. For now, it is enough to notice how loving her experience was, as witnessed by her loving words.

Commentary

Catherine uses the symbol of alcoholic intoxication. To be drunk is to lose control of your body. Love overwhelms her, so that she is spiritually drunk. God overtakes her, and she loses control to Him. “The soul was as if drunk with love”. Love is like that. Love is free gift of self to the beloved. Free gift of self to the beloved gives control to the beloved. When the lover takes control, to love His beloved, the soul is so fulfilled that nothing else counts. Nothing beyond this loving gift matters. Nothing else can compare to this union. Nothing else is as satisfying. Catherine focuses upon love “of true holy poverty”. This is the ultimate expression of love, saying that nothing except the beloved is important. Christ shows us that kind of love by possessing no material goods. Christ’s poverty expresses surpassing love, which makes us richer than any possessions ever could. To be rich in creatures is false richness. To be rich in beloved people is genuine richness.

What is the effect of being drunk, or completely given to love? “She (the soul) was filled to bursting in the supreme eternal magnificence”. Catherine assures us that being drunk in love, being entirely given to Love Himself, is so filling that the soul seems to burst. If the soul were a container, it would be so full of God that it would split. This is ultimate satisfaction. Though the soul is not material, and cannot burst, it is so activated that it is like a container bursting from the abundance of God that fills it.

Hidden in this description is the fact that the soul grows by being filled with God. Every experience of complete free gift of love almost bursts the soul, but expands it to accept more of God. This is a great gift indeed. It’s true that the experience of God’s love is overwhelming, and that we seem unable to accept it. However, this abundance expands us to accept more in the future. Catherine does not develop all this, but implies it.

Notice that Catherine calls this experience “the supreme eternal magnificence”. There is no better magnificence, and it lasts forever. Given the failure of language to express spiritual experiences, this is as close as we can get to describing love. God gives Himself to us, and we give ourselves to Him. It’s magnificent beyond all limits. This love stretches us, “and so transformed in the abyss of His supreme and immeasurable providence that, though she was in the vessel of her body, it seemed as if the fire of charity within her had taken over, and rapt her outside her body”. Catherine realizes that she was still in her body, or alive, but God had transported her beyond all bodily experience. It’s rapture, or God taking her away from everyday experiences into divine Love.

The Greeks invented a word for this: ecstasy. The first 2 letters stand for *ex*, or outside, and the *stasy* refers to *stasis*, or stand. So to stand outside yourself is to have an ecstasy. In her ecstasy, Catherine extends toward God from earth. This experience rips the soul out of the body, but not entirely. Entire ripping away would be death. This ecstasy is like death, because the person dies to common activities, and is taken away to uncommon activities, or to heavenly activities. These activities are union with God, and the enjoyment of perfect Goodness.

Nothing nearly so magnificent happens when we interact with creatures. But our interaction with God is so magnificent that we expand toward eternal bliss. As long as Catherine was alive, she expanded, and when she died, she escaped all limits to this expansion. That’s the bliss of heaven. The wonder is that we can get a foretaste of heaven while still confined to earth. In this condition, Catherine says: “And with her mind’s eye steadily fixed on the divine majesty, she spoke to the high eternal Father”. This is a fine way to say what happens in prayer. The mind does not have an eye, but it understands, which is like seeing. So we can use the symbol of the mind’s eye to say that our intellect focuses upon God. Remember that Catherine saw both herself and God in her soul. It is like a mirror. So watching the reflection of God in that mirror, Catherine speaks to Him.

What she says is quite different from our usual speech. She gushes many respectful names for God: “eternal Father, fiery abyss of charity, eternal beauty, eternal wisdom, eternal goodness, eternal mercy, hope and refuge of

sinners, immeasurable generosity, eternal infinite Good, mad lover”. This list is a set of complements for God. In her stream of consciousness, these complements connect. Let’s unpack this stream a bit. He is the perfect being, so He does not depend upon another being to be created. He is eternal. He is the creator of all other beings, so He is their Father. Included in father is His loving care of His creatures. This loving care reminds Catherine of His perfect love, which she describes as fiery abyss of charity. His love is fiery because it is without limit, like a wild fire. It is an abyss because it cannot be measured; it can’t be confined. This love is beauty beyond compare, so it is eternal. But human notions of beauty are restricted, not including how wise God is. So Catherine adds eternal wisdom to this stream of consciousness list. From a human perspective, wisdom does not say good, so she adds eternal goodness. Since this leaves out mercy, but God is all in one, she adds eternal mercy. Because He is so merciful, he is the refuge of sinners. He is the one who loves us anyway, so we run to Him for protection from our sins. This generous forgiveness urges her to add immeasurable generosity. God is all this and more because He is everything unified. His unity is the perfect good, she emphasizes that by saying eternal, infinite, Good. It is amazing that so perfect a being loves us. It is so amazing that it’s crazy, insane, or mad. Catherine rounds out her cascade of descriptions with “O mad lover”.

Catherine frequently calls God a mad lover. By human standards, God is indeed not rational. At one extreme, not rational is crazy. God is actually at the other end. He is super-rational. But all we can tell is that God is not rational in the way that we are rational. So we can say that he is mad, or irrational, or crazy about us. Because God is perfect being, and we are imperfect, He is beyond our comprehension. However, He is beyond comprehension in exactly the direction we want to go. His crazy behavior makes increasing sense, as we pray about it. Prayer allows us to know more about God. He is the ultimate in making sense. So as we approach Him, we find more and more about Him that makes sense. We also find more and more that exceeds our understanding.

While this is a strange experience, it is just what we desire. God is our ultimate destiny, our finish-point, and our completion. He is our heart’s desire. So the more He astounds us, the more we like it. The more His infinity puzzles us, the more we are at home. He made us for Himself, and nothing else satisfies. Nothing else fulfills us. It’s true that God’s love can be painful, as if we were going to burst. But this bursting feeling is just right for us. That’s why Catherine calls it supreme eternal magnificence. It is crazy, but just the “crazy” we need.

Clearly, we need God. But His love appears to need us. So Catherine asks: “And you have need of Your creature?” She wonders about this because God’s love seems to need her. She goes further and says: “You act as if You could not live without her”. God’s love is ardent, much more insistent than any human love. Our personal experience shows that love includes need. God definitely loves us, and shows it in more ways than we can count. Does He need us? Catherine considers this question seriously.

She notes that “You are Life Itself and everything has life from You, and nothing can have life without You”. As Creator, God needs nothing. How can He love us as if He needed us? We can be sure that God is the source of all beings, as Jn 1: 3-4 points out. As source, He existed before creatures. This is enough evidence to show that He does not need creatures. But why would He show such great love that He would die for us? Catherine proposes that He is so “mad with love because He has fallen in Love with what He has Made!” In our limited way of understanding, this is accurate. God loves us more than we can comprehend, which looks like mad love to us. There is no doubt that He loves us, having taken on human flesh and died for love of us.

Catherine addresses God: “You are pleased and delighted over her (a human soul) within Yourself, as if You were drunk (with desire) for her salvation”. It is certain that God loved to save us. This surpassing love is beyond our understanding, but definite. We cannot be mistaken that God loved to be one with us, because he took

on the debt of our sins. He paid the wages of sin when He died in our place, to save us from sin. Greater love than this no one has. From our viewpoint, this is crazy. Since God did this, we know that He loves us madly.

Catherine reminds us that we run away from God, but God goes looking for us. God even becomes human. Nearer than that, He could not come. This Incarnation is crazy love. Some thinkers reject Incarnation because it seems to degrade God, to reduce Him to a less dignified existence. We can agree that humanity is less dignified than divinity. But we notice that God brought his dignity with Him. He could hardly have lost it. Utterly simple that He is, He is His dignity. So the more realistic way to say what He did is that he divinized the humanity he took. That's what Jesus meant when He said: "Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me", Jn 12: 45. Jesus is God in the flesh. God dignifies the flesh of Jesus Christ. He is God among us, for Love's sake.

Among creatures, we do not see this kind of activity. Only all-powerful God can do it. Perfect being that God is, He has no limits, therefore He can do anything. His behavior extends our knowledge of what is possible. We grow along with what God does to surpass our imagined limits on God. As Infinite Being, God has no limits at all. When we extend our limits by prayer, we see more of what God has done. We marvel at His power to accomplish so much, and we delight in these marvels. We finally do what God created us to do. We get on track, and enjoy being, at last, where we ought to be. We act as God made us to act. We praise God, and we love it.

Catherine notices that we marvel, and are stunned into silence. So she says "I will stutter". As when we are surprised speechless by some created marvel, so the Uncreated reduces us to stuttering when He acts among us. Indeed, "there is nothing else I know how to say", except to stutter. What words could explain what God has done? There are none, so we can't think of what to say. This is the same point that Jeremiah made: "Ah, Lord God, I know not how to speak. I am too young", Jr 1:6. We are always too young to express what God does.

So Catherine says it well: "Finite language cannot express the emotion of the soul who longs for You infinitely". This expression communicates because it shows the reason we can't say what we have experienced. We have experienced the infinite God, so no finite language can say what we have experienced. True, we have not experienced **all** of the infinite God. But what we have experienced is far beyond the capacity of language to express. That's why we shall be busy experiencing God, ever new, for all eternity. We can't exhaust His infinite Goodness, so we shall love forever more and more of God. Meanwhile, we don't know how to say all we have seen.

But we are not totally silenced. Catherine is a fine example of saying things that help us identify what we have experienced. This is our great advantage. We have noticed God's love. Perhaps in a sunrise, or in a rose, or in a friend who helped us so generously that God's love shone through. Mothers are great examples of God's love. They so love us that they risk their own lives to birth us. Throughout life, we seldom find anyone who loves this much. Mothers care for us when we are totally helpless and disagreeable. What love does it take, to feed us at 4am? God's love shines through mom. God's love is peeping around every corner. We can point to it by words.

For sure, we cannot say it all. But we can point to it, enjoy it, and remind ourselves and others of God's surpassing love. Catherine is correct to say the **emotion** of the soul. Frequently, all that we notice about experiencing God's love is the emotional charge that overwhelms us. The impact of the emotion tells us that something unusual has occurred. But as we mature, emotions fade, and we become fascinated by more spiritual aspects of our experience. Truth and goodness occupy more of our attention, and spiritual beauty. But we have no words for these profound spiritual activities. It's clear that we prefer them to all other activities, but we can't say how.

That's why we have negative words like infinite. Until we experience God, everything we encounter has limits. In Latin, limit = *finis*. In Latin, *in* = without. So infinite means without limits. God exceeds all limits. We search for God's boundary, but there is none. We have finally arrived at our destiny. At last we have infinite Truth, infinite Good, and infinite Beauty. But we lose Him here below. We can't confine Him, and we drift off to distractions. But our experience of God is so profound, that we seek Him again. Gradually, we find Him more and more, and realize that only He can satisfy us. As we pray, we know and love Him more.

Then, as Catherine says, we echo St. Paul: "tongue cannot speak, nor ear hear, nor eye see, nor heart imagine what I have seen" (experienced), 1 Corinthians 2:9. Like Paul, we are rapt up to the third heaven, 2 Corinthians 12:2. This is a way to point at our surpassing activity, as God draws us closer to Himself. Then we see the hidden things of God. Catherine finds another way to say the same thing: "you have tasted and seen the abyss of supreme eternal providence". Words fail, but they urge us on, encouraging us.

Catherine so enjoys this experience that she bursts out with: "I thank You now, high eternal Father, for the measureless kindness You have shown me, though I am miserably undeserving of any favor". Thanks make sense, especially since we are miserable sinners. We do not deserve the favor that God grants us by His presence. But God is the lover so madly in love with us that He provides this gift of Himself anyway. Give thanks for how freely, lovingly, God gives Himself to us. His generosity is infinite, His love unending.

He pours Himself forth to us, like a lover who tries to convince a beloved to return His love. He takes the initiative, like a bold suitor. But we want to be swept off our feet. That's why Catherine combines these two realities in the statement: "But because I see that you are a fulfiller of holy desires". He loves us first, and our holy desire is that He love us. The fit is perfect. We unite. This intimate oneness fulfills us totally. God does not need fulfillment. But He does what He is: He loves. We acknowledge how fitting Love is for both of us.

Recalling "that Your Truth cannot lie", Catherine asks a question about how she can live out the union of God's love. The Old Testament and the New agree that God's gift of love is free, and that our appropriate response is obedience to God's will. Her question is: "I wish now that You would speak to me a little about the power and excellence of obedience, just as You, eternal Father, promised me". If love is union of two persons, then the lover wants to fulfill the beloved's will, and the beloved wants to fulfill the lover's will. Each act of love is an act of will. So naturally they want to blend their wills into one. In practical terms that is obedience.

Whoever obeys the beloved, illustrates his love. The closer the obedience, the closer the wills, or the more the love. So Catherine wants to "fall in love with this virtue (obedience), and never cut myself off from obedience to You". Once we notice that obedience is unified wills, and that love is unified wills, we see that obedience is love. We could picture a single coin, whose practical side is obedience and whose theoretical side is love. Since we can't have one without the other, we want both. That's why Catherine so ardently wants to obey.

In her lyrical way, she says: "Please, in Your infinite kindness, tell me how perfect it is, where I can find it, what would take it away from me, who gives it to me, and what is the sign that I do or do not have it (obedience)". This is a fine way to say that she pursues obedience wholeheartedly. For now, we emphasize that obedience acts out love. If Catherine's will is one with God's, then she wants to obey His every wish. The ancient religious of the first century put it poetically: "To be obedient is to be like a straw in the hand of an old man".

You know that a straw offers hardly any resistance, and an old man's hand offers hardly any force. So to go with the slightest impulse is to be obedient. This is the mark of love. Since love is invisible, we need to trace it in its

visible effects. Fortunately, we can notice these visible effects in obedience. Whoever claims to love God, but refuses to obey Him, shows us his lie, Jn 14:15; 15:10. Whoever obeys God obviously loves Him.

But obedience arouses resistance. There are umpteen arguments against obeying commandments. All of them show that people try to separate themselves from the practical consequences of love. Notice that we usually complain when we must obey commandments. We hide the fact that we obey God. When someone reminds us that we must obey God, we try to depersonalize God, making Him a mere demand instead of a person Who loves us. In Catherine's loving dialog, she goes right to God as lover. Love is why we should be obedient.

Notice that Catherine wants to determine whether she obeys. To obey is so loving that she worries about whether she has obeyed well enough. Perhaps she does not understand how perfect obedience is. That's a great place to start. Do we really comprehend that obedience is love in action? Are we sure that perfect love would be perfectly obedient? Do we recognize that union of wills in love must match union of wills in obedience?

Catherine remembers sinning, and breaking her love by preferring her will to God's will. So she asks God to enlighten her about "the power and excellence of obedience". She wants to "fall in love with this virtue" because she sees it as love in action. As love acts, it shows how much love there is, by the extent of obedience. As love acts, it grows. Just like a muscle that grows by exercise, so love grows by acting out its union with God. If Catherine loves God, whatever God wants, Catherine wants. It all fits together quite well. As we grow together with God, we become more obedient to Him.

Introduction: Catherine's Growth in Love

Catherine's great love for God overflowed in obedience. Remember that love is united wills, so obedience simply expresses love. Whoever I love, I obey. If you say that today's people don't agree, I must agree with you. But the profound misery of people today shows us that their disagreement pains them. They do not see how love works. It's fair to say that most people today are starving to death for love. Often it's because they reject obedience, which is the way to grow in love. As we noted, Catherine's time and ours are much alike. She saw disobedient people rejecting love in outrageous ways also. So we will follow Catherine's account of obedience near the end of *Dialog*. There she shows that the way to love God is to obey Him.

Dialog 154

"Then the high eternal compassionate Father looked on her with mercy and said: 'O dearest, gentlest daughter! Your holy longing and just petitions deserve to be heard. I am supreme Truth, and I will fulfill My truth by keeping My promise, and granting your wish. You ask me where you may find obedience, what can take it away, and how you may know whether or not you have it. My answer is that you will find it in its fullness in the gentle loving Word, My only-begotten Son. His obedience was so eager, that to realize it He ran to His shameful death on the cross.

"What takes obedience away? Look at the first man. What took away the obedience that I, the eternal Father, had laid on him was the pride that came from his selfish love, and his desire to please his companion. This is what gave him disobedience in place of the perfection of obedience, death in place of the life of grace, wretched filthiness in the place of innocence. And it was not only he who fell, but the whole human race with him, as I have told you.

"The sign that you have this virtue is patience, and impatience is the sign that you do not have it. As I tell you more, you will find that this is so.

“Notice that there are two ways of observing obedience. The one is more perfect than the other, but like the commandments and the counsels, the two are not separate but united. The one is good and perfect, the other is most perfect. But only the obedient can attain eternal life, for eternal life, which had been locked by Adam’s disobedience, was unlocked by the key of obedience.

“When I saw that humankind, whom I so loved, were not returning to Me, their End, My infinite goodness constrained Me to put the key of obedience into the hand of the gentle loving Word, my Truth, and He, like a doorman, unlocked heaven’s gate. Without this key, and this doorman, my Truth, no one can enter. This is why He said in the holy Gospel that no one can come to me, the Father, except through Him, Jn 14:6. When He rose beyond human companionship through His ascension to return triumphantly to Me in heaven, He left you this sweet key of obedience. As you know, He left it in the hands of His vicar, Christ on earth, whom you are all obliged to obey, even to the point of death. Whoever refuses to obey him is, as I have told you elsewhere, living in damnation.

“This vision fostered most perfectly in Him that fidelity which the light of most holy faith effects imperfectly in you. Because He was faithful to Me, His eternal Father, He ran like one gloriously in love along the way of obedience. Love never stands alone, but has as her companions all the true solid virtues, because all the virtues have life from charity’s love. (The virtues existed differently in the Word, however, from the way they do in you.) And among love’s companions is patience, the very marrow of love, and the clear sign of whether the soul is in grace, and is loving in truth or not. This is why charity, the mother, has given obedience patience as a sister, and has so joined the two together that the one can never be lost without the other. Either you have both, or you have neither. [*En Espagnol: Los dos, o ningun.*]

Commentary

In her loving way, Catherine says what the Father would say if He were conversing with her. First He expresses his profound love for her: “dearest, gentlest daughter”. Then he affirms the holiness of her request. He acknowledges that He is supreme Truth, and will keep His promise and grant her wish. She wants to know where to find obedience. God says that it is in its fullness in the “gently loving Word, my only-begotten Son”. He obeyed to death on the cross. “No greater love than this can any man have”, Jn 15:13. Total self-giving expresses love.

The Gospels describe Jesus dying for us. We can consider all Christ’s pains and sufferings of betrayal, derision from corrupt politicians, spitting and striking, scourging, crowning with thorns, carrying the cross, and death upon it. Jesus shed His very last drop of blood for love of us. This is the real thing. This is incontestable love. Jesus did it in public, in tangible ways that we could not mistake. Surely, the Blessed Trinity also loves us, and each Person gives Himself away totally to each of the Others. However, we can barely conceive this loving union. Therefore, Jesus reveals the Loving Trinity. He incites us to learn much more as we pray our way to God.

Christ shows the totality of Love. Because Jesus was human like us, we can experience, by watching Him, His complete gift of Self. Starting with His human life, the divine dimension of His love leads us ever onward into infinite depths. He bridges the gap between God and us. Catherine tells us a lot about Christ the Bridge. For now, we see perfectly united wills as Jesus obeys the Father unto death. Praying about this infinite Love will never cease. Here below, we pray to learn more, and to cooperate more. Above, we pray to praise God for His perfection. Because His perfection is infinite, we will never finish praising Him, and loving every praise.

God answers Catherine's second question, which is "what takes obedience away?" God gives the original example of Adam disobeying God, and thereby shattering the universe. The apple symbolizes refusal to obey God. Adam's sin shook nature to its foundation. Nature trembles still in vast disorder, groaning for the goodness that God originally created. Adam, made good by God, set his goodness against God. In pride, he promoted himself to God's level. Adam would show God who was really in charge.

Loving himself more than God, Adam sinned at our origin. Satan, symbolized by the snake, lied about how to equal God. Satan claimed that Adam would get to God's level by gaining the knowledge of evil, Gen 2:17. This knowledge of evil is the absence of knowledge of good. Ever since Adam chose evil, he and his descendants have lost the good they had. Evil plagues us still. Catherine shows that God calls these sins "pride and selfish love". Each sin is misplaced love. Instead of loving God or one of His creatures, we impose "self love".

Adam rejected loving obedience, and chose hating rebellion. This decision cost him all of his most treasured possessions. He lost unending life, and fell into inevitable death. He lost innocence, and fell into sin. God adds: "And it was not only he (Adam) who fell, but the whole human race with him". God shows what disobedience did. Adam's pride and exaggerated self-love refused to love God. A tangle of specific sins followed, producing our shame, denial, lies, and misery. The details scatter out in sickening profusion. Disobedience and pride reinforce each other. At their base these evils are one. Each is lack of love of God. If Adam had accepted God's love, he would have obeyed Him. If he had obeyed Him, original sin would not have happened.

God's answer to Catherine's third question is: "The sign that you have this virtue is patience." Whoever loves God so much that he wants to do God's will, is so busy doing God's will that he is patient about other things. God's will in action is the universe as God created it. So our own obedience reflects original harmony. We are so satisfied by this outcome that we stop rushing and cursing. Patience enables us to possess our souls.

Impatience is the mark of disobedience because it reflects our frustration. Every rebellion disrupts the peace that obedience produces. Every rebellion fails. If we win the war, we must clean up the mess. Fidel Castro said that winning the Cuban war was the easy part. Rebuilding society was the hard part. It's so hard that Fidel failed.

Back to the positive, God shows Catherine two ways to be obedient. One is better than the other. Keeping the commandments is familiar to us, and a good way to be obedient. Jesus commands them. But he recommends, or counsels, us to be as He was. He was poor, chaste and obedient. If we follow His counsels, we can renounce material supports. As Christ said: "Observe the birds of the air, they sow not, nor do they reap, but your heavenly father takes care of them", Mt 6:26; Mk 8:20; Lk 9:58. Only a few follow His counsels, but it's the better way to obey. When Jesus recommended this way, His disciples at first rejected it, Mt 19:24-25; Mk 10:25-26; Lk 18:25. Only after Christ's resurrection, and the Spirit's inspiration at Pentecost, did they obey completely. Similarly, His disciples at first rejected chastity, or total commitment to Jesus, instead of to a marriage partner. If we love Him enough, all our intimacy is for Him, Mat 19:2. This level of obedience requires more love, and is therefore more perfect obedience. Not many can manage it. Together, those who obey the commandments, and those who obey the counsels form a strong, mutually reinforcing, community. Catherine inspired people by keeping her vow of virginity from age seven until death.

The counsel of obedience means that a person follows more strictly the human leadership that Jesus arranged. Christ commanded us to obey Church leaders. All Catholics therefore obey the Pope, who is Christ's visible successor, and various Church officials who manage God's flock. But Jesus did not command strict obedience

to a spiritual director. He recommended this step, so it's a counsel. It is the hardest counsel to keep. But people who keep these counsels, like Catherine did, get much more than they give. God is generous, infinitely.

Whether we follow commandments or counsels, the key to life is obedience. Catherine notes: "Only the obedient can attain eternal life, for eternal life, which had been locked by Adam's disobedience, was unlocked by the key of obedience." This key was Christ's obedience, even unto death, Phil 2:8. This obedience makes Christ the new Adam, doing what Adam should have done. Jesus lives the obedience that God deserves. That's how He unlocks eternal life, which Adam had locked by disobedience. Remember the beginning of *Dialog*. Catherine shows: it's not the act that counts, but the love that initiates the act. Christ's perfect love, acted out in perfect obedience, saves us from Adam's sin, redeems us from eternal punishment, and opens heaven.

Catherine tells us that God the Father cooperated intimately with the Son to redeem mankind. "When I saw that humankind, whom I so loved, were not returning to Me, their End, My infinite goodness constrained Me to put the key of obedience into the hand of the gentle loving Word, My Truth, and He, like a doorman, unlocked heaven's gate." Because God is love, He longed for us, and sought us even though we did not seek Him. His "infinite goodness constrained" Him. It's as if His goodness forced Him to save us. His love insisted on redeeming us. So God's love impelled Him to do what lovers do: to obey the beloved. The Son obeyed the Father, to pay the redemption price for us reprobates.

Each sin against God offends His Infinite Being. So each sin is an infinite offense. Humans are definitely finite. So we can't repair this infinite offense. Only God can do that. God the Son obeyed God the Father to become man, and pay sin's price: death. He Who was sinless, made Himself a man to take our sins upon Himself, and pay the debt in full. What a divine accomplishment! As Catherine dwelt in this magnificent mystery, she knew it better and better, and loved it more and more. No wonder she gushed grateful thanks.

Catherine distills many hours of prayers into words we can follow. She shows us how everything fits together. The main meanings of life come into focus. This remarkable unity inspires us, vivifies our life, and strengthens our faith. It echoes Jn 14:6, where Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Thank God for Catherine's profound prayer and excellent expression of truth.

Expanding on this unity, Catherine shows that when Jesus rose into heaven, He left the key to His apostles. "I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven", Mt 16:19. The chief apostle, Peter, was the father of the Church, called Papa, or Pope. Catherine worked hard to help the Pope regain his diocese of Rome, and his universal jurisdiction, free of French kings. Her inspiration flowed from Christ's obedience. We learn from Jesus to obey authentic authority. We obey the Pope as we obey Jesus.

Catherine notes that Jesus obeyed perfectly, because He loved perfectly. His vicar, Peter, obeyed imperfectly, because he loved imperfectly. Catherine also obeyed imperfectly, but a lot better than we do, because she loves better than we do. If we pray more, we accept God's love more, and grow in love. His love is irresistible. So give Him a chance by praying more often. Then we join the bonfire of His many saints, and the entire Church is better for our loving unity.

To belong more fully to Christ's loving community, look frequently, intently, and truthfully upon Jesus. He is the Word of God, the Son Who leads us to the Father. Gradually, by these loving looks we love more. The mark of increased love is improved obedience, visible by extended patience. Patience is "the very marrow of love". It is the living support of love, the sign that we truly love. Catherine poetically describes patience as a sister to

obedience, given by charity, the mother. These ladies so love each other that they never part. “Either you have both, or you have neither”. Isn’t this a good way to describe the unity of love and all virtues?

Continuation of Dialog 154

God speaks to Catherine: “Obedience has a wet nurse, true humility, and the soul is as obedient as she is humble, and as humble as she is obedient. This humility is also charity’s governess and wet nurse, and she nurtures the virtue of obedience with the very same milk. The garment this nurse gives the soul is self-abasement, the clothing of disgrace and mockery and abuse, the choice of My pleasure over her own. In whom will you find all this? In the gentle Christ Jesus, My only-begotten Son. Who has ever been more humble than He? Phil 2:7. He was saturated with disgrace and abuse. To please me, He despised His own pleasure, that is, His bodily life. Rom 15:3. And who has ever been more patient than He? He was never heard to cry out in complaint. Is 53:7. No He embraced insults with patience. In love, He fulfilled the obedience that I, His eternal Father had laid upon Him.

“In Him, then you will find this virtue in her fullness. He left her to you as a rule and teaching that He first lived Himself. She is a straight path leading to life. And He is Himself the Way. This is why He said that He is Way and Truth and Life, and that whoever walks by this way walks in the light. Those who walk in the light cannot unwittingly stumble or be tripped up, because they have cast off the darkness of selfish love that had been the cause of their falling into disobedience. Jn 14:6; 8:12; 11:9-10. For, as I have told you, the source and companion of obedience is humility. But disobedience comes from pride, which in turn comes from selfish love for oneself, and deprives one of humility. Selfish love gives disobedience impatience as a sister, and pride as wet nurse. And in the darkness of infidelity, she runs along the darksome way that leads to eternal death. All of you ought to read this glorious book [the Word], for here you will find this and all the other virtues written.”

Commentary

In prayer, Catherine saw the unity of all these virtues. This unity enables her to give us a memorable picture of how these virtues fit together. After showing that obedience is love in action, she notes that humility nourishes obedience, rather like a wet nurse feeds a baby. So the soul grows in obedience by growing in humility, which is truth. The humble person states the truth, without exaggerating or short-changing it. The person who can sing well neither claims more singing talent than he has nor claims less. Truth nourishes all good, especially the virtues. They grow together as your hand grew from infancy. No finger outgrew any other.

In Catherine’s unified view, humility provides the milk of love which enables our power of obedience to grow fully. Along the way, we tend to exaggerate our goodness, so we develop a false self. This false self needs to be put away, lowered to its proper position. So Catherine symbolizes that process as clothing the soul in self-lowering, or self-abasement. This is the clothing of disgrace and mockery and abuse. This is precisely the clothing of Christ during his last day of earthly life. The scum of the earth insulted Him, struck him, spit upon Him. Mel Gibson’s movie, the Passion, was brutal, but not nearly as vicious as the real thing.

God closes this section by reminding us that we can find all this in the glorious book of Scripture, where all we need for life is written. That’s a fine way to say that the words of Scripture provide us with what we need to advance in virtue. The New Testament expresses the work of the Word, of Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus is revelation in the flesh. “Who sees me sees the Father”, Jn 5:19.

Dialog 155

God speaks to Catherine: “Your entire faith is founded on obedience, for it is by obedience that you show your fidelity. My Truth imposed on all of you in general the commandments of the Law, the chief of which is to love Me above all things, and your neighbors as your very self. And the others are so bound up with this one that those who observe this one necessarily observe them all, and those who let go of this one let go of them all. Cf Mt 22:37-40 Those who observe this double commandment observe all the others; they are faithful to Me and to their neighbors; they love Me, and are affectionate toward My creatures. Therefore they are obedient and submit themselves to the commandments of the Law and to other people for My sake. And they humbly and patiently endure every sort of labor and slander.

“The Word’s obedience was so superb that all of you draw grace from it, just as you had drawn death from disobedience. Rm 5:19 But it would not be enough for it to be in Him alone and not be exercised by you here and now. I have already told you that this obedience is a key that unlocked heaven, a key that He put into the hands of His vicar. This vicar puts it into the hands of each of you when you receive holy baptism, promising to obey [Me] and to renounce the devil, the world, and all their pleasures and ostentation. So each of you individually has it, the very Word’s key. And unless you walk by the light of faith, and with the hand of love, to open heaven’s gate with this key, you will never enter there, even though it has been opened by the Word. For I created you without your help, without your ever asking Me, because I loved you before you even existed, but I will not save you without your help.

“You must, then, carry the key in your hand; you must walk, not sit, along the way of my Truth’s teaching, and not sit down by setting your heart on finite things, as do those fools who follow the old man, their first father. They do what he did, for he threw the key of obedience into the filthy mire, and smashed it with the hammer of pride, and let it get rusty with selfishness. Not until the Word, my only-begotten Son, came, was this key of obedience picked up again. He purified it in the fire of divine charity, after He had picked it out of the mire, and washed it with His blood. With the knife of justice, He straightened it, and, on the anvil of His body, He hammered out your iniquities. Ps 129:3 He repaired it so perfectly that no matter how you might damage it with your free choice, by your same free choice you can, with the help of My grace, and using these same instruments, repair it again. ...

“Know, My daughter, that many people have taken hold of the key of obedience when they have seen, by the light of faith, that in no other way can they escape eternal damnation. But they hold it in their hand without tying it with this cord, or fastening it to their belt. In other words, they do not clothe themselves perfectly in the desire to please Me, but are only interested in pleasing themselves. They have not tied on the cord of lowliness by desiring to be considered lowly. Rather, they have found their pleasure in being praised by others. They are likely to lose the key. Let them only experience a little too much physical or spiritual weariness, and unless they are very careful, they will all too often lose the grip of their desire, and lose it. Is 11:5 This is a loss that can be recovered, if they are willing, so long as they are alive. But if they are not willing, they will never find it. And who will show them that they have lost it? Impatience. For patience was joined with obedience, and the absence of patience shows that obedience is not in the soul.

Commentary

What a powerful statement: “Your entire faith is founded on obedience”. This is new to us. We think that our faith is founded on Jesus, or on the Gospel, or on seeing faith in our family. But obedience is love in act, and as Catherine mentioned at the start, love enlivens what we do. Since we must love to believe, and belief acts out this love, belief is love in action. That’s exactly what obedience is. So Catherine shows us the foundation of all our acts. Thank God for her prayerful experience, her love to share, and the clarity of her dialogs.

“It is by obedience that you show your fidelity”. Anyone can say “I believe”, but only those really believe who live this belief. The only way to live this belief is to do what we believe, or to obey God. So, at bottom, everything fits together perfectly. Because God loves us, and wants us to love Him, He tells us what His will is, in His commandments. Then we can obey, or put our love into action, or we can disobey, and lose the gift of love that God provides. Jesus summarized the entire Law in a two-part commandment: Love God, and love your neighbor, Mat 22:37-38; Mk 12:30-31; Lk 10:27-28.

Her contemplation of Christ, shows Catherine the ineffable unity of the Church. “The others (commandments) are so bound up with this one that those who observe this one necessarily observe them all, and those who let go of this one let go of them all”. Moreover, Catherine knows the reason for this unity. It is because: “they are faithful to Me and to their neighbors; they love Me, and are affectionate to all My creatures. Therefore they are obedient, and submit themselves to the commandments of the Law, and to other people for My sake”.

This is the integrity of Christ-life. If we accept the Love that Jesus offers, we love Him in return by keeping His commandments. This loving activity increases love, so we love God more, and better understand that He is Love, and His creatures are acts of His love. So we love Him and all that He made. It all fits together. In prayer, Catherine became so real that she saw God’s creative action, and loved it. Really, God shares Himself with us, made as we are in His image and likeness. But He is Love, so we are the image and likeness of Love. Really, we are love. So are all His creatures. So when we love, we live out our basic act. Then everything unites in the basis for all creation: Love Himself. Obedience is our way to express love, and to tune in to Love.

We learn to love from Christ because: “The Word’s obedience was so superb”. We all “draw from it” when we live in love. By comparison, we “had drawn death from disobedience, Rom 5:19. When we act out love, we increase our lives. So God invites us to join in the basic activity of the universe: to love God by obeying Him. In this completion of our creation, we attain our purpose. This attainment is heaven, or eternal life. Jesus lived the key to eternal life by His obedience unto death, Phil 2:8. So obedience is the key to heaven.

If we were baptized when we were adults, we received this key by promising to obey God, and renounce the devil, whose disobedience our ancient ancestors, Adam and Eve, adopted so long ago. If we were baptized when we were infants, our parents and God-parents promised to obey for us. Either way, we received the key of obedience. “Each of you individually has it, the very Word’s key.” Now each of us must use it. Catherine expresses God very well, saying that He made us without our free consent, but respects that freedom, and asks us to use it to accept and use the key of obedience. Jesus moved to save us, now we must second that motion.

At first, we pay scant attention to the key of obedience. We do not safeguard it, so we have all lost it on occasion. But we can retrieve it, through the sacrament of reconciliation. That’s how we get back into living love with Love Himself. Catherine does not mention it, because it was so fully understood at her time. But she describes how fools lose obedience by rebelling, just as Adam, our first father, did. Her account is poetic, but tells the complete truth of Jesus reliving obedience to reverse Adam’s sin. Forever, now, this obedience will survive sin. Jesus has completely overcome sin. So if we second His motion, we can wash away our sins in His blood. This is what Catherine means when she says: “by your free choice you can, with the help of My grace, and using these same instruments, repair it again”. These instruments are Christ’s obedience unto death poetically expressed by His knife and anvil. His free choice to take all our sins upon Him, and to pay the price for them in suffering and death, reconstituted obedience that Adam had thrown away. What a glorious redemption!

Catherine examines people who superficially accept the key of obedience, but merely keep up appearances. All times have these people. In our time we call them social climbers, politicians, or con-men. They specialize in fooling us. They especially trouble us if they appear to be religious. If they seem to obey God, but are “only interested in pleasing themselves”, they abandon lowliness, but desire “to be considered lowly. They have found their pleasure in being praised by others.” Naturally, this reverses the value of everything that they do. So Catherine says: “They are likely to lose the key”, because “they do not clothe themselves perfectly in the desire to please Me”. The real is very simple, in this case simple love is the core of reality. Lies ruin reality.

Once these deceivers devote themselves to appearing to obey, without the love that is obedience, they attack reality. They put in place of God’s plan their own image. They want their deceitful plans to work. If anything goes wrong, as they are not living the love of God, they get impatient. After all, it’s the superficial appearance that they care for, and this appearance is not appearing as they want. So impatience shows that they need to re-orient toward love. They can do it. “But if they are not willing, they will never find” the key of obedience. As usual, Catherine’s prayer has revealed the simple truth, and she has expressed it with poetic symbols. Her clarity inspires us. It grows from the love that God gives her, and she gives back to Him. This is the exchange we long for, and whose growth satisfies us along the way to perfect satisfaction in heaven. Though we are never completely satisfied here on earth, we become increasingly delighted as we grow in Christ. So Catherine gives thanks for this progress. The virtue of obedience is so delightful that she gushes the following words.

Continuation of Dialog 155

“Oh, how delightful and glorious is this Virtue! She embraces all the other virtues because she is conceived and born of charity. In her is laid the foundation stone of most holy faith. She is a queen, and whoever espouses her will never know evil, but only peace and calm. No matter how the sea’s stormy waves may pound her, they cannot hurt the marrow of the soul. She feels no hatred when she is hurt because she wants to be obedient, and knows that she has been commanded to forgive. She does not suffer when her own wishes are not fulfilled, because obedience has set her priority in desiring only Me, and I know how to, and can and will, fulfill her desires. Obedience has stripped her of worldly joys. And so in all things – it would take too long to tell you everything – she finds peace and calm once she has espoused this queen, obedience, whom I have given you as a key.

“O obedience! You sail on without weariness until you arrive safely at the port of salvation. You pattern yourself after the Word, My only-begotten Son, boarding the ship of the most holy cross to suffer so as not to violate the Word’s obedience or depart from His teaching. You make it your table, where you feast on souls in your affection for your neighbors.

“You are anointed with true humility, so you do not hanker after your neighbors’ possessions, against My will. You are straight, not winding, because you keep your heart direct and true, loving My creatures freely, and without guile.

“You are a dawn bearing the light of divine grace. You are a warming sun, never without charity’s heat. You make earth blossom. The instruments of soul and body all bring forth fruit for the soul’s own life, and that of others.

“You are wholly joyous, for you have not marred your face with impatience, but have kept it pleasant with the pleasantness of patience, wholly and strongly serene. You are great in your perseverance – so great that you reach from heaven to earth – for it was with you that heaven was unlocked. You are a pearl hidden and unknown, trampled on by the world, humbling yourself in submission to others. Cf Mat 11:44-46; 7:6.

“Your authority is so great that no one can have authority over you, because you have left behind the deadly servitude of selfish sensuality that had deprived you of your dignity. Once this enemy was slain by contempt for doing your own will, you regained your freedom.

Commentary

Catherine sings this hymn of praise to obedience, reviewing some blessings that flow from it. Obedience is so “delightful and glorious” that we could stop there to enjoy obedience. But Catherine tells us why obedience “embraces all the other virtues, because she is conceived and born of charity”. As love in act, obedience grows directly out of God’s love given to us. So all other godly acts, or virtues, are particular expressions of obedience to God’s commands or counsels. As Catherine showed earlier, obedience is the “foundation stone of most holy faith”. Faith is the life of Christ in us. This is another way to say living love, which we freely accept. Since God wants us to accept this love, we are obedient when we accept it, and faith grows in us.

Just as a worldly queen protects her subjects from evil, so does obedience, so “whoever espouses her will never know evil, but only peace and calm”. Whoever is obedient will get pounded, like the rest of us, by life’s storms. But at her core, or “marrow” the obedient soul is calm. It cannot be otherwise, since what happens is God’s will, and the soul obeys God’s will. In particular, the obedient soul “feels no hatred when she is hurt, because she wants to be obedient, and knows that she has been commanded to forgive”. Two reasons urge the obedient soul to feel no hatred. First, God wants the soul to love, so the soul wants to love, not hate. Second, the soul might lose track of this first reason, and become offended. Then the soul knows that Christ told us to forgive, so the soul immediately forgives, and regains love, with its peace and calm.

Catherine can connect these basic principles with all details because she sees the whole wholly. She sees the universe universally by God’s view. So Catherine can understand any temptation, and analyze them all. Her next example is: “She (the soul) does not suffer when her own wishes are not fulfilled, because obedience has set her priority in desiring only Me (says God), and I know how to fulfill her desires”. If we do not fulfill our own wishes, we are horribly frustrated. But the obedient soul is not, because the obedient soul prefers to desire God alone. He alone fulfills her desires. Catherine learned early in life that her own desires were distractions from the only being who is truly desirable: God. So obeying God unites us with Him, Who is our Desire.

In this process, obeying God has been more satisfactory than fulfilling personal desires. To say this even better, our false personal desires distract us from our genuine personal desire for God. But obedience fulfills our real personal desire by uniting us with God. We often lose God by pursuing false personal desires. This loss is terribly frustrating. The false good lets us down. But we attain God by pursuing our true personal desire for Him. In this experience, “obedience has stripped her (soul) of worldly joys”. We fear that losing worldly joys, we will have no joy at all. The reverse occurs, because worldly joys cost us eternal joys, which are genuinely satisfying.

Since “it would take too long to tell you everything”, Catherine stops with these few examples. But it’s clear to us that all choices work in the same way. If we choose false goods, we are disgusted. Real goods delight us. So the soul “finds peace and calm once she has espoused this queen, obedience, whom I (God) have given you as a key”. In spite of our confusion, we can emerge into peace and calm if we obey, and gradually learn how everything in God’s will fits together. It’s all one in obeying God, and it’s all delightful, so Catherine celebrates.

Catherine exalts: “O obedience! You sail on without weariness until you arrive safely at the port of salvation”. This is a fine way to affirm that obedience carries us through tempests to heaven. Like a boat going through the storm to a safe port, obedience gets us to our destiny. Jesus shows us to obey God, especially by dying on the

cross, so Catherine combines these images. “You pattern yourself after the Word, My only-begotten Son, boarding the ship of the most holy cross”. As Jesus obeyed God unto death, so we want to follow Him by obeying God. The cross of obedience that Christ bore is the unsinkable ship of our salvation.

Jesus obeyed the Father to suffer in obedience, so we will not depart from God’s will, no matter what suffering appears. We will remain faithful to His teaching. The wood of the cross reminds Catherine of the wood of the supper table. We gather around this table to nourish each other. It is as if we feast on souls by our love for them. How true this is! As we serve others in love, they nourish us. We do not see this nourishment coming, but it arrives, and we banquet on this love around the Eucharistic table. Catherine’s images sweep across the whole.

As obedience grows, Catherine describes how true humility takes over, and the commandments direct us away from sins like desiring “your neighbors’ possessions, against My will”. By obedience, we become “straight, not winding”. This is the natural consequence of keeping our “heart direct and true, loving My creatures freely, and without guile”. The more we obey, the more we become united with God. So the more godly we become, and the less sinful, leaving its horrible twists behind, to be straight in Christ.

Then we are like “dawn bearing the light of divine grace. . . . a warming sun, never without charity’s heat”. In this way the obedient soul “makes earth blossom. The instruments of soul and body all bring forth fruit for the soul’s own life, and that of others.” Catherine expresses well how obedient souls grow into holiness. God wills this growth for all of us. Only a few of us obey enough to bear light and warmth to make earth blossom. If we obey, then our soul and body function as God wills, so we flourish, and all souls around us improve.

God describes the obedient soul: “you are wholly joyous, for you have not marred your face with impatience, but have kept it pleasant with the pleasantness of patience, wholly and strongly serene”. What a wonderful way to describe how obedience fulfills life. If we obey God, we become as full of God’s life as God wants. This is the simplicity of God’s creation. He wants us to flourish. If we obey Him, then we flourish. If we flourish, we are joyous. If we are joyous, we are serene. Everything fits so beautifully. It’s like coming home to Love.

If we are this joyous, we “are great in perseverance”, great enough to reach from heaven to earth. If we reject the false goals of life, then most people can’t locate us on their map. Many of these people ignore us. Some of these people trample us. Either way, we submit to them to serve them as Christ served us all. So Catherine describes obedient souls as pearls. The people who pursue false goals trample pearls. If they were not so blind, they would rejoice to find pearls. But they sink themselves into the mire of their false desires, and trample any pearl they find. Obedient souls remain calm, even when trampled.

People who pursue false goals tell themselves that they achieve great power. They are in charge; they are authorities. But you see that they have no real authority, no real power. The main reason is that they do not pray. They abandon the only satisfying act they could perform. They give up on loving God. They “can’t get no satisfaction”, Mick Jaeger says. That’s why Catherine tells us that: “your authority is so great that no one can have authority over you, because you have left behind the deadly servitude of selfish sensuality that had deprived you of your dignity. Once this enemy was slain by contempt for doing your own will, you regained your freedom.”

How powerful that statement is! No wonder Catherine sings her hymn of praise to obedience. Once we obey God, we acknowledge the real authority. That realization saves us from domination by false authority. The little power-hungry functionaries reach up as high as they can, and hit you right in the ankle. In their blindness, they think that they are trampling you in the mud, but they see only the mud in which they are mired.

For a while, we may have been in this mire ourselves. But once we leave behind our “selfish sensuality”, we regain “freedom”. This is the freedom of the children of God, Rom 8:21; Jn 3:1-2. Catherine expresses well how obedience frees us to be God’s children. His children obey Him in every detail, and flourish by living lives of love. This is the message of Christ, whose obedience opened heaven for us, and is our key to eternal life.

Catherine continues her review of obedience by describing the disobedient souls in dialog 156, which we shall skip. In dialog 157, she describes how love grows by obeying the counsels. God speaks to Catherine:

Dialog 157-158

“There are some, dearest daughter, in whom the gentle loving fire of love for this obedience grows so strong that for love they are not content with ordinary obedience to the Law’s commandments. These you are all obliged to obey if you wish to have life, and otherwise you would have death. But these souls take on a special obedience that allows great perfection: They become observers of the counsels in fact as well as in spirit.

“They bind themselves more strictly in self-contempt and to slay their will completely. Either they bind themselves to the yoke of obedience in a religious order, or they submit their will outside religious life to some other person so as to advance more speedily to unlock heaven. These have chosen the most perfect obedience.

“I have told you about ordinary obedience. Now, because I know you want me to speak about the more special and most perfect kind of obedience, I will tell you about it. This second kind of obedience does not leave the first behind; it is simply more perfect, for the two are so bound together that they cannot be separated. ...

158 “The soul who has lovingly taken on the yoke of obedience to the commandments by following My Truth’s teaching and exercising herself in virtue, will from there attain the second kind of obedience by the same light by which she came to the first. For by the light of most holy faith she will have come to know My truth in the blood of the Lamb: the truth of My ineffable love for her, and her own inability to respond to Me as perfectly as she ought. So with this light, she begins seeking how and where she might better pay her debt to me, trampling underfoot her own weakness, and killing her (selfish) will. Her search leads her by the light of faith to the religious life. The Holy Spirit made this (way of life), and set it there like a ship ready to receive souls who want to race on to perfection, and to bring them to the port of salvation.

“The captain of this ship is the Holy Spirit, Who lacks nothing. His religious subjects who violate His orders can hurt only themselves, never this ship. Yet the captain may let it run into the waves through the fault of those who are at the helm, the miserable wicked shepherds he had appointed to be superiors and pilots of the ship. In herself, this ship is so delightful that your tongue could never describe her.”

Commentary

By prayer, and obedience, God’s love in us can become so strong that we want to obey Him more. Catherine uses the symbol fire to describe this all-consuming love. This symbol strikes us because fire consumes wood, making it useful as flames and coals, which light and warm us, cook our food, and fascinate us by their faithful flickering. Souls in this profound love of God want closer union. They have learned that union increases with obedience. So they want to obey not only God’s commandments, but His counsels as well. They want to be poor, chaste, and obedient as Jesus was.

Catherine describes this progress clearly: “The soul who has lovingly taken on the yoke of obedience to the commandments by following My Truth’s teaching and exercising herself in virtue, will from there attain the second kind of obedience by the same light by which she came to the first. For by the light of most holy faith she will have come to know My truth in the blood of the Lamb: the truth of My ineffable love for her, and her own inability to respond to Me as perfectly as she ought.” Only religious life, or a close approximation, will do.

The obedient soul has trampled underfoot all the false goals, due to pride and selfish love, and has grown in faith by constant obedience. Now this soul wants to be more obedient. In a fine picture, Catherine has the Father describe the Holy Spirit as making religious life for these obedient souls. This life is a more direct and perfect way to God. The entire Trinity is involved, as the Father creates and attracts, the Son shows us Himself, the Way, and the Spirit guides and supports our journey through life. Religious life is the swift ship to God.

The Holy Spirit made this (way of life), and set it there like a ship ready to receive souls who want to race on to perfection, and to bring them to the port of salvation. The captain of this ship is the Holy Spirit, Who lacks nothing.” This is the fast-track to heaven, so obedient souls long for it. As they find it, they obey in a more perfect way because they take orders more frequently. A leader of the religious order commands them to do many details that ordinary people decide for themselves. This exercise of obedience is much more demanding. But it’s also much more liberating, much more loving, and much more satisfying. Catherine goes into great detail, which we shall skip, but you can find it in dialogs 158-165.

Introduction to Christ Our Bridge

Our first sessions with Catherine show an exceptionally loving woman, with great intelligence, penetrating deeply into God’s love, and sharing it with all those people she met. Her prayer is definitely the secret of her spiritual development. But how did her prayer work? What was the secret of her effective prayer? It was Jesus, who bridged the gap between God and man. Catherine visited a great town called Florence. There she saw the most marvelous bridge joining the two sides of the Arno river that flowed down the middle of this city. It inspired her to picture Jesus as the great bridge from heaven to earth. Catherine used this image throughout her dialogs. So we will trace most of her pictures of Christ the bridge.

Dialogs 20-23

God speaks to Catherine at the end of dialog 20: “I will make my Son a bridge by which you can all reach your goal, and there receive the fruit of all the labors you have borne for my love. So carry on courageously!

21 “I told you that I have made a bridge of the Word, My only begotten-son, and such is the truth. I want you to realize, my children, that by Adam’s sinful disobedience the road was so broken up that no one could reach everlasting life. Since they had no share in the good for which I had created them, they did not give me the return of glory they owed me, and so my truth was not fulfilled. What is this truth? That I had created them in My image and likeness, so that they might have eternal life, sharing in My being, and enjoying My supreme eternal tenderness and goodness. But because of their sin, they never reached this goal, and never fulfilled My truth, for sin closed heaven and the door of My mercy.

“This sin sprouted thorns and troublesome vexations. Cf Gen 3:18. My creatures found rebellion within themselves, for as soon as they rebelled against Me, they became rebels against themselves. Their innocence lost, the flesh rebelled against the spirit, and they became filthy beasts. Cf Gal 5:17. All created things rebelled against them, whereas they would have been submissive if all had been kept as I had established it in the beginning. But they stepped outside My obedience, and so deserved eternal death in both soul and body.

“With sin there came at once the flood of a stormy river that beat against them constantly with its waves, bringing weariness and trouble from themselves as well as from the devil and the world. You were all drowning, because not one of you, for all your righteousness, could reach eternal life. But I wanted to undo these great troubles of yours. So I gave you a bridge, my Son, so that you could cross over the river, the stormy sea of this darksome life, without being drowned. See how indebted to me my creatures are! And how foolish to choose to drown rather than accept the remedy I have given!

22 “Open your mind’s eye, and you will see the blinded and the foolish, the imperfect, and the perfect ones who follow Me in truth. Then weep for the damnation of the foolish, and be glad for the perfection of My beloved children. Again, you will see the way of those who choose light, and the way of those who choose darkness.

“But first I want you to look at the bridge of my only-begotten Son, and notice its greatness. Look! It stretches from heaven to earth, joining the earth of your humanity with the greatness of the Godhead. This is what I mean when I say it stretches from heaven to earth – through My union with humanity.

“This was necessary if I wanted to remake the road that had been broken up, so that you might pass over the bitterness of the world, and reach life. From earth alone I could not have made it great enough to cross the river, and bring you to eternal life. The earth of human nature by itself, as I have told you, was incapable of atoning for sin and draining off the pus from Adam’s sin, for that stinking pus had infected the whole human race. Your nature had to be joined with the height of Mine, the eternal godhead, before it could make atonement for all of humanity. Then human nature could endure the suffering, and the divine nature, joined with that humanity, would accept My Son’s sacrifice on your behalf, to release you from death, and give you life.

“So the Height stooped to the earth of your humanity, bridging the chasm between us, and rebuilding the road. And why should He have made Himself a roadway? So that you might in truth come to the same joy as the angels. But My Son’s having made Himself a bridge for you could not bring you to life unless you make your way along that bridge.

23 “Here the eternal truth was showing that, although He had created us without our help, He will not save us without our help. He wants us to set our wills with full freedom to spending our time in true virtue. So He continued: You must all keep to this bridge, seeking the glory and praise of My name through the salvation of souls, bearing up under pain and weariness, following in the footsteps of this gentle loving Word. There is no other way you can come to Me. Cf Jn 14:6

Commentary

This bridge is probably the best-known of Catherine’s many images. It fits our experience of struggling on to God, and provides something definite to hook them all into. As such, it’s tremendously valuable, and well-appreciated down the centuries. The image is wonderful, but the reality it represents is even more impressive. God established a tangible link with Him, and we can travel across it to bridge an otherwise infinite gap. Without Christ the bridge, we are lost. But since He crosses this infinite gap, and brings us over, we can reach Him.

Catherine reviews the reasons for the gap. Though created in God’s image and likeness, the first man preferred himself to God. Adam turned his will against God, and disobeyed. This is original sin, the chasm between God and man. On top of that, we humans committed our personal sins, choosing self over God. That excludes us from “eternal life, sharing in My (God’s) being, and enjoying My supreme eternal tenderness and goodness”.

Our experience is clear: nothing created satisfies us. Only the Creator is good enough for us. We can attain God because of His mercy, lived out by Jesus, the bridge to eternal joy.

As we look at the sinful side of human experience, we want to keep sin in the context of God's goodness and the joy of living His life of love. Sin is worse than Catherine describes it; more troublesome than thorns and various vexations. She goes right to the heart of sin as rebellion. And she shows us that a rebel against God can't do God any harm, but can do a lot of harm to himself, and his fellow humans. As St. Paul says in Galatians 5:17, the flesh wars against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. If we can rebel against perfect good, then we surely will rebel against created good. The chief victim of the sinner is the sinner himself.

Rebelling against the gifts God gave them, humans rejected their unity with God. Because God is infinitely Good, this rebellion separates us infinitely from God. This produces "eternal death in both soul and body". All this is perfectly true, and Catherine provides an image for it that helps us make this separation visible. A stormy river overwhelms rebels, drowning them in isolation from their loving Creator. Adam upset God's plan for man to freely accept the gifts of creation and union with Love Himself. Most of Adam's children second his motion by freely choosing rebellion. Man did himself great harm, and hurt creation as well. All creatures rebelled against man, imitating his rebellion against God. We live in the resulting mess.

That's what Catherine means when she says "This sin sprouted thorns and troublesome vexations". Her image distills the spiritual results of Adam's disobedience. The turbulent river aids our imagination to picture the gap between God and us. We are indeed drowning, and need salvation. God "wanted to undo these great troubles of yours". Creatures, whether men or angels, might let us drown. Restricted justice would leave humans to their fate. But God's infinite goodness redeemed fallen man, undid his troubles, satisfying both Justice and Mercy.

Catherine rejoices at God's mercy. "See how indebted to me My creatures are!" We cannot calculate our debt to God for redeeming us, and continuing to forgive our sins. This is the most magnificent achievement of God: He brings good out of evil. He saves man from his sins, and provides a bridge for us to get from our sinful present into our holy future. God has indeed provided the remedy for sin. If we refuse, how foolish we are. If we accept, the blood of the Lamb washes us perfectly clean. Perfection is not too strong a word for our redeemed condition, because we are perfectly cleansed. Even greater perfection lies ahead: union with Love.

Catherine gushes about how great this Christ-bridge is. It reaches the infinite distance from heaven to earth, "joining the earth of your humanity with the greatness of the Godhead". During her many years of prayer, Catherine reflected mightily upon the bridge that Jesus is, and rejoices in its span across infinity. Her symbol enables us to expand our reflections, tacking on the details of our own redemption. Our amazement about this magnificent span across infinity sustains us in daily struggles to cross the bridge. It is "darksome" down below!

How generous God is to redeem us, and how we need to furnish our "mind's eye" with pictures to focus our attention, and arouse our appreciation. The mind's eye is our imagination, which occupies us most of the time, so it's the ideal place for us to review what God has done for us. As we fill it with pictures that follow the invisible meanings of God's love, we keep up our conversation with God, and grow in His gift of life. We must exercise this set of images because we are infected with rebellion from Adam's original sin, and from our own personal rebellions. Whether by commission or by omission, our sins blind us to the bridge of Christ, and keep us from advancing along it to eternal life. It is not too strong to say that the pus of Adam's sin spreads through us all.

But Jesus has made humanity sacred by taking it to Himself. Particularly by giving the last drop of His blood to redeem us has he made humanity holy. In Latin, holy is *sacris*, while making is *facere*, so sacrifice is our mispronunciation of these Latin words to express making something holy by giving it to God. That's how Jesus established the bridge that He is, by first coming from heaven to be incarnate man, then offering His humanity to God, in perfect obedience, to make up for Adam's rebellion. This sacrifice on the cross united God with man by reestablishing the love God offered man. All we have to do is second Christ's motion by loving God's gift.

Catherine summarizes all this in a visible way by saying: "So the Height stooped to the earth of your humanity, bridging the chasm between us, and rebuilding the road". If that had been all that Catherine had done, we would have treasured her *Dialog*. But, teacher of the Church that she is, she provided the reasons why all these pictures are accurate. She asks: "And why should He have made Himself a roadway? So that you might in truth come to the same joy as the angels". The reason is that we should be one with God (Truth) the way that angels enjoy union with Him. What a glorious goal! What a stupendous success! What a delightful destiny! Jubilant joy!

But God does not force-feed this glory. As Catherine puts it: "But My Son's having made Himself a bridge for you, could not bring you to life unless you make your way along that bridge". Catherine develops this respect for our freedom. God made us without consulting us, but will not save us without our free choice. In detail, Catherine says: "He wants us to set our wills with full freedom to spending our time in true virtue". The basic problem is that we choose some creature instead of God. Each creature frustrates us because, however good it is, it is not good enough. An example is to will to have a new car. When we get the new car, we enjoy it for a while, perhaps a few days. Then it lets us down. We discover defects in it. Our expectations exceeded the good that the car delivered. Only loving God satisfies us, so we want to get on with those virtues that unite us in love of God.

As we practice these virtues, we love God more, activate our love to the maximum, and grow to love God without end. In Catherine's picture, that's how we advance along the bridge to God. In our actions, we become more loving as we unite with Love Himself. Life is wearisome, and we must bear up "under pain and weariness, following the footsteps of this gentle loving Word. There is no other way you can come to Me." This describes exactly what we must do to unite with God. As a general description, it is perfect. Details vary from moment to moment, but there is no other way to God. Jesus says the same thing: "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me", Jn 14:6. Jesus is the bridge from here to the Father.

Catherine shows that Christ manifests the Father to us, as St. John's Gospel affirms. Jesus also mediates for us by dying for our sins, to free us from bondage. In this way He becomes the bridge that conducts us to God. These three functions inspire Catherine to express her most impressive thanksgivings. Her image of the bridge combines these three acts into a single visual element. We shall see later how this element flexes in Catherine's efforts to complete the picture. Her images merge and morph because Christ's love goes on and on.

Dialogs 25-27

"For I see the Word, your Son, nailed to a cross. And you have made him a bridge for me, as you have shown me, wretched servant that I am! My heart is breaking, and yet cannot break for the hungry longing it has conceived for you! I remember that you wanted to show me who are those who cross over the bridge, and those who do not. So if it would please your goodness to show me, I would gladly see and hear this from you.

26 "Then God eternal, to stir up even more that soul's love for the salvation of souls, responded to her: Before I show you what I want to show you, and what you asked to see, I want to describe the bridge for you. I have told

you that it stretches from heaven to earth by reason of My having joined Myself with your humanity, which I formed from the earth's clay.

“This bridge, my only-begotten Son, has three stairs. Two of them He build on the wood of the most holy cross, and the third even as He tasted the great bitterness of the gall and vinegar they gave Him to drink. You will recognize in these three stairs three spiritual stages.

“The first stair is the feet, which symbolize the affection. For just as the feet carry the body, the affections carry the soul. My Son's nailed feet are a stair by which you can climb to His side, where you will see revealed His inmost heart. For when the soul has climbed up on the feet of affection, and looked with her mind's eye into My Son's opened heart, she begins to feel the love of her own heart in His consummate and unspeakable love. (I say consummate because it is not for His own good that He loves you; you cannot do Him any good, since He is one with Me.) Then the soul, seeing how tremendously she is loved, is herself filled to overflowing with love. So, having climbed the second stair, she reaches the third. This is His mouth, where she finds peace from the terrible war she has had to wage because of her sins.

“At the first stair, lifting the feet of her affections from the earth, she stripped herself of sin. At the second, she dressed herself in love for virtue. And at the third she tasted peace.

“So the bridge has three stairs, and you can reach the last by climbing the first two. The last stair is so high that the flooding waters cannot strike it – for the venom of sin never touched my Son. Cf 1 Jn 3:5.

“But though this bridge has been raised so high, it still is joined to the earth. Do you know when it was raised up? When My Son was lifted up on the wood of the most holy cross, He did not cut off His divinity from the lowly earth of your humanity. So though He was raised so high, He was not raised off the earth. In fact, His divinity is kneaded into the clay of your humanity like one bread. Nor could anyone walk on that bridge until My Son was raised up. This is why He said: ‘If I am lifted up high, I will draw everything to myself’, Jn 12:32.

“When My goodness saw that you could be drawn in no other way, I sent Him to be lifted onto the wood of the cross. I made of that cross an anvil where this child of humankind could be hammered into an instrument to release humankind from death, and restore it to the life of grace. In this way, He drew everything to Himself: for He proved His unspeakable love, and the human heart is always drawn by love. He could not have shown you greater love than by giving His life for you, Jn 15:11. You can hardly resist being drawn by love, then, unless you foolishly refuse to be drawn.

“I said that, having been raised up, He would draw everything to Himself. This is true in two ways. First, the human heart is drawn by love, as I said, and with all its powers: memory, understanding, and will. If these three powers are harmoniously united in my name, everything else you do, in fact or in intention, will be drawn to union with Me, in peace through the movement of love, because all will be lifted up in the pursuit of crucified love. So My Truth indeed spoke truly when He said: “If I am lifted up high, I will draw everything to myself”. For everything you do will be drawn to Him when He draws your heart and its powers.

“What He said is true also in the sense that everything was created for your use, to serve your needs. But you who have the gift of reason were made not for yourselves but for Me, to serve Me with all you heart and all your love. So when you are drawn to Me, everything is drawn with you, because everything was made for you.

“It was necessary, then, that this bridge be raised high. And it had to have stairs, so that you would be able to mount it more easily.

27 This bridge has walls of stone, so that travelers will not be hindered when it rains. Do you know what stones they are? They are the stones of true solid virtue. These stones were not, however, built into walls before my Son’s passion. So no one could get to the final destination, even though they walked along the pathway of virtue. For heaven had not yet been unlocked with the key of my Son’s blood, and the rain of justice kept anyone from crossing over.

“But after these stones were hewn on the body of the Word, My gentle Son built them into walls, tempering the mortar with His own blood. That is, His blood was mixed into the mortar of His divinity with the strong heat of burning love. By my power, the stones of virtue were built into the walls on no less a foundation than Himself, for all virtue draws life from Him, nor is there any virtue that has not been tested in Him. So no one can have any life-giving virtue but from Him, that is, by following His example and His teaching. He perfected the virtues, and planted them as living stones built into walls with His blood. So now all the faithful can walk without hindrance, and with no cringing fear of the rain of divine justice, because they are sheltered by the mercy that came down from heaven through the incarnation of this Son of mine.

“And how was heaven opened? With the key of His blood. So, you see, the bridge has walls and a roof of mercy. And the hostelry of holy Church is there to serve the bread of life and the blood, lest the journeying pilgrims, My creatures, grow weary and faint on the way. So has My love ordained that the blood and body of My only-begotten Son, wholly God and wholly human, be administered.

“At the end of the bridge is the gate (which is, in fact, one with the bridge), which is the only way you can enter. This is why He said: “I am the Way and Truth and Life; whoever walks with Me walks not in darkness but in light”, Jn 14:6; 8:12. And in another place My Truth said that no one could come to Me except through Him, Jn 14:6, and such is the truth.

“I explained all this to you, you will recall, because I wanted to let you see the way. So when He says that He is the Way, He is speaking the truth. And I have already shown you that He is the Way, in the image of a bridge. He says He is Truth, and so He is, and whoever follows Him goes the way of truth. And He is Life. If you follow this truth, you will have the life of grace, and never die of hunger, for the Word has Himself become your food. Nor will you ever fall into darkness, for He is the light undimmed by any falsehood. Indeed, with His truth, He confounds and destroys the lie with which the devil deceived Eve. That lie broke up the road to heaven, but Truth repaired it, and walled it up with His blood.

“Those who follow this way are children of the truth because they follow the truth. They pass through the gate of truth and find themselves in Me. And I am one with the gate and the way that is My Son, eternal truth, a sea of peace.

“But those who do not keep this way travel below through the river – a way not of stones, but of water. And since there is no restraining the water, no one can cross through it without drowning. Such are the pleasures and conditions of the world. Those whose love and desire are not grounded on the rock, but are set without order on created persons and things, apart from Me, run on just as they do. Though it seems to them that it is the created things they love that are running on by, while they themselves remain firm, they are in fact continually running on to their end in death. ...

Commentary

Catherine's picture of Christ-bridge is much too rich to describe. In dialogs 64 and 65 she shows how virtues and prayer fit into it, and lead a person to the house of self-knowledge. There, in the "casa" (cell) of silent prayer, looking at the gentle mirror of God, Catherine learned to live completely. Full life is wide open to Christ. In dialog 75, Catherine shows that our original opening provides great joy, so we can make the mistake of wanting the joy of Christ instead of the Christ of joy. This error shows imperfect love, and must be corrected.

The Bridge Reaching Into Heaven

Introduction

Our first view of Catherine's bridge image included the foundations and lots of information about how we can cross the bridge. The first three steps are up the crucified Christ. The rest of the way is sheltered from tempests by stone walls and roof, nurtured by Christ's redeeming blood. This is a lot to see in the image, but it fits well with the invisible development of God's infinite love overcoming human sin. God brings good out of evil. Consider that carefully. Which is better: 1) Adam and Eve passing the Apple-test, or 2) God overcoming original and personal sins? Divine mercy would not have been as evident if Adam and Eve had obeyed from the start. The world would have remained as good as the first chapter of Genesis describes it. While this unfolding of events is glorious, correcting evil is even more so. Given the cracks and crevices of evil in the universe, there is more to redeem, as Catherine describes now.

Dialog 29-30

God speaks: "When My only-begotten Son returned to Me forty days after His resurrection, this bridge was raised high above the earth. For He left your company, and ascended to heaven by the power of My divine nature, to sit at His eternal Father's right hand. On the day of His ascension, the disciples were as good as dead, because their hearts had been lifted up to heaven along with my Son, Who is Wisdom. So the angel said to them: 'Do not stay here, for He is seated at the Father's right hand', Ac 1:11.

"When He had been raised on high, and returned to Me, His Father, I sent the Teacher, the Holy Spirit. He came with My power and My Son's wisdom, and His own mercy. He is one thing with Me, the Father, and with my Son. He came to make even more firm the road My Truth had left in the world through His teaching. So though My Son's presence was no longer with you, His teaching – the way on which He made for you this lovely and glorious bridge – remained, as did His virtues, the solid stones grounded in that teaching. First He acted, and from His actions He built the way. He taught you more by example than with words, always doing first what He talked about, Ac 1:1.

"The Holy Spirit's mercy confirmed this teaching by strengthening the disciples' minds to testify to the truth, and make known this way, the teaching of Christ crucified, 1 Cor 1:23; 1 Cor 2:2; Gal 6:14. Through them He reproved the world for its injustice and false judgments, Jn 16:8. But I will tell you more about this injustice and judgment later. ...

"So first I made a bridge of my Son as He lived in your company. And though that living bridge has been taken from your sight, there remains the bridgeway of His teaching, which as I told you, is held together by My power and My Son's wisdom, and the mercy of the Holy Spirit. My power gives the virtue of courage to those who follow this way. Wisdom gives them light to know the truth along the way. And the Holy Spirit gives them a love that uproots all sensual love from the soul, and leaves only virtuous love. So now as much as before,

through His teaching as much as when He was among you, He is the way and truth and life – the way that is the bridge leading to the very height of heaven.

“That is what He meant when He said: ‘I came from the Father, and I am returning to the Father’, and ‘I will come back to you’, Jn 16:28; 14:8. In other words, My Father sent Me to you, and made Me your bridge so that you might escape from the river, and be able to reach life. He said also: ‘I will come back to you; I will not leave you orphans, but will send you the Advocate’, Jn 14:8, 26. It is as if My Truth had said: I am going away to the Father, but I will come back; that is, when the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, comes He will strengthen you, and let you see more clearly that I am the way of truth (which is what I have taught you!)

“He said He would return, and He did return. For the Holy Spirit did not come alone, but with power from Me the Father, and with the Wisdom of the Son, and with His own mercy. So you see, He returned, not in the flesh, but in His power, to firm up the road of His teaching. That roadway cannot be destroyed or stolen from anyone who wants to follow it, because it is solid, and immovable, and comes from Me, the unchangeable one.

“So you must follow the way courageously, not in the fog, but with the light of faith that I gave you as your most important adornment in holy baptism.

“Now I have fully described for you, and shown you, the living bridge, and the teaching that is one with it. I have shown the ignorant where to find those who point out and teach this way that is truth. These are, I said, the apostles and evangelists, the martyrs, confessors and holy doctors, who have been set like lamps in holy Church.

“I have shown you how, although He returned to Me, My Son came back to you, but in His power rather than in the flesh. The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. But My Son will not return in the flesh until the final judgment day, when He will come in My divine majesty/power, to judge the world: to reward the good (body & soul together) for their labors, and to punish with eternal suffering those who have wickedly spent their earthly lives.

“Now I want to show you what I, Truth, promised you; that is, those who travel imperfectly, perfectly, and most perfectly, and how they behave, as well as the wicked who drown in the river because of their sinfulness, and so come to excruciating torments.

“So I tell you, my dearest children: travel on the bridge, not underneath it. For the way beneath the bridge is not the way of truth, but of falsehood, It is the way of wicked sinners, and I beg you to pray to Me for them. I ask for your tears and sweat on their behalf so that they may receive mercy from Me.

30 Catherine gives thanks: “Then that soul stood before God as if intoxicated, and, unable to restrain herself, she said: O eternal Mercy, You who cover over Your creatures’ faults! It does not surprise me that You say of those who leave deadly sin behind, and return to You: “I will not remember that you had ever offended me’, Ex 18: 21-22. O unspeakable Mercy! I am not surprised that You speak so to those who forsake sin, when You say of those who persecute You: ‘I want you to pray to Me for them, so that I can be merciful to them’. What mercy comes forth from Your Godhead, eternal Father, to rule the whole world with Your power!

“By Your mercy, we were created! And by Your mercy we were created anew in Your Son’s blood. It is Your mercy that preserves us. Your mercy made Your Son play death against life, and life against death, on the wood of the cross. In Him life confounded the death that is our sin, even while that same death of sin robbed the spotless Lamb of His bodily life. But who was conquered? Death! And how? By Your mercy!

“Your mercy is life-giving. It is the light in which both the upright and sinners discover Your goodness. Your mercy shines forth in Your saints in the height of heaven. And if I turn to the earth, Your mercy is everywhere. Even in the darkness of hell, Your mercy shines, for You do not punish the damned as much as they deserve.

“You temper Your justice with mercy. In mercy You cleansed us in the blood; in mercy You kept company with Your creatures. O mad lover! It was not enough for You to take on our humanity; You had to die as well! Nor was death enough: You descended to the depths to summon our holy ancestors, and fulfill Your truth and mercy in them. Your goodness promises good to those who serve You in truth, so You went to call these servants of Yours from their suffering to reward them for their labors!

“I see Your mercy pressing You to give us even more when You leave Yourself with us as food to strengthen our weakness, so that we forgetful fools should be forever reminded of Your goodness. Every day You give us this food, showing us Yourself in the sacrament of the altar within the mystic body of holy Church. And what has done this? Your mercy.

“O mercy! My heart is engulfed with the thought of You! For wherever I turn my thoughts, I find nothing but mercy! O eternal Father, forgive my foolish presumption in babbling on so before you – but Your merciful love is my excuse in the presence of Your kindness.”

Commentary

The marvel of God is creation: that He overflows goodness to make things from nothing. Even more marvelous is His creating spiritual beings who are persons, knowing and loving. Yet more amazing is His interaction with these persons, loving them, and asking them to freely love Him. Only infinite Love could do these marvels. In American terms: God has business with us. William James expressed God’s interaction with us in those words (*Varieties of Religious Experience*). God adapts His limitless being to our limitations. Somehow He expands our limitations toward His infinity. He Who is timeless comes to us in the “fullness of time”, Gal 4:4. Catherine rejoices in God’s actions in time, and reminds us that 40 days after His resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven, completing His bridge by raising it high above the earth, to “the power of My divine nature”.

Then the Father sent to us the Holy Spirit, representing the Trinity’s mercy. The Spirit makes the road “more firm”, and consoles us along the way to God. Even with this Christ-bridge, the way is infinite. If the Spirit did not sweep us along, we would never cross the bridge. Catherine makes an excellent point here. Christ is not bodily present to us, but is present in the Holy Spirit. Remember that Jesus told Philip: “Whoever sees me sees the Father”. In like manner, whoever sees Him sees the Holy Spirit. They are present in each other. Their simplicity makes them One. Our little notion of one comes from the Big One, Who is the Source of all. God raises us into His Trinity, plunges us into His Infinity. The Spirit guides, encourages, and comforts us along this Bridge. The Spirit shows Christ present in His teaching, which the Spirit clarifies. He shows Christ present in His mercy, which the Spirit extends from Christ’s cross to all of us. The Spirit shows Christ’s wisdom, which He radiates throughout the world, continuing Pentecost every day, everywhere.

By the Spirit, Jesus fulfills His promise to come back to us, Jn 14:8. This completion of the circle complements Christ completing the circle from the Father, and back to Him, after obeying Him unto death. The more we re-view what the Trinity did, the more perfect we see it is.

Catherine Describes Crossing the Bridge

Dialog 75-76

God the Father speaks: “I told you that this soul had gone out, and that this is the sign that she has risen from imperfection and attained perfection. Open your mind’s eye, and watch her run across the bridge of the teaching

of Christ crucified, Who was your rule and way and teaching. It was not me, the Father, that she set before her mind's eye. This is what those do whose love is imperfect. They are not willing to suffer, and since no suffering can befall Me, they want to pursue only the pleasure they find in Me. But the perfect soul does not act that way. Rather, as if drunk and ablaze with love, this soul has gathered herself together, and climbed the three ordinary stairs that I interpreted for you as the soul's three powers, and also the three effectual stairs that I interpreted for you as the body of My only-begotten Son, Christ crucified. Once she had climbed to His feet on the feet of her own affection, she reached His side, where she found the secret of His heart, and came to know the baptism of water that has within it the power of the blood provided the soul's vessel is ready to receive the grace of being joined and kneaded into the blood.

“Where did she come to know this honor of being fused into the blood of the Lamb as she was baptized in the power of that blood? In His open side, where she came to know the fire of divine charity. This is what My Truth showed you, if you recall, when you asked Him: ‘Why, gentle spotless Lamb, since You were dead when Your side was opened, did you want Your heart to be pierced and parted?’

“He answered: ‘There were plenty of reasons, but I shall tell you one of the chief. My longing for humankind was infinite, but the actual deed of bearing pain and torment was finite, and could never show all the love I had. This is why I wanted you to see My inmost heart, so that you would see that I loved you more than finite suffering could show.

“By shedding both blood and water, I showed you the holy baptism of water that you receive through the power of My blood. But I was also showing you the baptism of blood, and this in two ways. The first touches those who are baptized in their own blood poured out for Me. Though they could not have the other baptism, their own blood has power because of Mine. Others are baptized in fire when they lovingly desire baptism, but cannot have it. Nor is there any baptism of fire without blood, for blood has been fused with the fire of divine charity, because it was shed for love.

“There is a second way the soul receives this baptism of blood, figuratively speaking. This My divine charity provided because I know how people sin because of their weakness. Not that weakness or anything else can force them to sin if they do not want to, but being weak, they do fall into deadly sin, and lose the grace they had drawn from the power of the blood in holy baptism. So My divine charity had to leave them an ongoing baptism of blood accessible by heartfelt contrition, and a holy confession as soon as they can confess to my ministers who hold the key to the blood. This blood the priest pours over the soul in absolution.

“But if they cannot confess, heartfelt contrition is enough for the hand of My mercy to give them the fruit of this precious blood. Still, if they can, I want them to confess. And anyone who could confess, but chooses not to, will be deprived of the fruit of the blood. It is true that if at the moment of death a person wanted to confess, but could not, that person would still receive this fruit. But do not be so stupid as to use that hope as an excuse for acting on the assumption that you can set your affairs right at the moment of death. For how do you know that I in My divine justice will not, because of your obstinacy, say: ‘You did not think of Me during your lifetime, when you could have; now I have no thought for you in death.’ No one, therefore, should dilly-dally, but if some in their sinfulness have, let them not put off to the last moment the baptism through hope in the blood.

“So you see, this baptism is ongoing, and the soul ought to be baptized in it right up to the end, in the way I have told you. In this baptism, you experience that though My act of suffering on the cross was finite, the truth of that suffering which you have received through Me is infinite. This is because of the infinite divine nature

joined with finite human nature. It was this human nature in which I was clothed that suffered in Me, the Word. But because the two natures are fused with each other, the eternal Divinity took to itself the suffering I bore with such burning love.

“For this reason what I did can be called infinite. Not that either the actual bodily suffering or the pain of My longing to accomplish your redemption was infinite, for all of that ended on the cross when My soul left My body. But the fruit was infinite that came from My suffering, and from My desire for your salvation, and therefore you receive it without limit. Had it not been infinite, the whole of humankind, past, present, and to come, would not have been restored. Nor could those who sin get up again if this baptism of blood (that is, the fruit of the blood) had not been given to you without limit.

“I showed you this in the opening up of My side. There you find My heart’s secret, and it shows you, more than any finite suffering could, how I love you. And I show you this without limit. How? Through the baptism of blood poured out in My burning love, and through the common baptism given to Christians, to whoever wants to receive it – the baptism of water that is one with the blood and the fire, where the soul is fused with My blood. It was to show you this that I willed that blood and water should come forth from My side. So now I have answered your question.”

76 “You know that My Truth’s response contained everything I have told you. I have repeated it for you in His own words so that you would appreciate how marvelous is the state of the soul who has climbed this second stair. There she experiences and absorbs such a burning love that she runs on to the third stair, that is, to His mouth, where it is clear that she has arrived at perfection.

“By what way did she come? By way of His heart, that is, through the remembrance of His blood in which she was baptized once again, abandoning imperfect love for the knowledge of the hearty love she drew from seeing and tasting and experiencing the fire of My charity. Now she has arrived at His mouth, and she shows this by fulfilling the mouth’s functions. The mouth speaks with its tongue, and tastes flavors. The mouth takes what is offered to the stomach, and the teeth chew it, for in no other way could the stomach digest the food.

“So it is with the soul. First she speaks to Me with the tongue of holy and constant prayer that is in the mouth of her holy desire. This tongue has an external and an interior language. Interiorly, the soul offers Me tender loving desires for the salvation of souls. Externally, she proclaims the teaching of My Truth, admonishing, advising, testifying, without any fear for the pain the world may please to inflict on her. And she adapts her enthusiastic testimony to the situation of each person she confronts.

“She eats the food of souls for My honor at the table of the most holy cross, Jn 4:34. In no other way, and at no other table, can it be eaten perfectly and in truth. And she chews it (for otherwise she could not digest it) with hatred and love, the two rows of teeth in the mouth of holy desire. There she takes this food and chews it with hatred for herself, and love for virtue in herself and in others. Every sort of assault – derision, insult, slander, reproach, endless persecutions, hunger and thirst, cold and heat, pain-filled longing and tears and sweat for the salvation of souls – she chews them all for My honor as she bears with her neighbors and supports them. And after she has chewed them, she tastes the flavor, savoring the fruit of her labor, and the delight of this food of souls, enjoying its taste in the fire of charity for Me and her neighbors. And so this food reaches the stomach (that is, the heart), which has been prepared by desire and hunger for souls to receive it willingly, with heartfelt charity and affection for others. She delights in it, and chews it over and over in such a way that she lets go of

her delicacy about her bodily life in order to be able to eat this food at the table of the cross, the table of the teaching of Christ crucified.

“Then the soul grows so fat on true and solid virtues, and so big because of the abundance of this food, that the garment of selfish sensuality (that is, the body, which covers the soul) splits apart so far as its sensual appetite is concerned. Now anyone who splits apart dies. So the sensual will is left dead. Because the soul’s well-ordered will is alive in Me, clothed in My eternal will, her sensual will is dead.

“Now this is how the soul acts who has in truth reached the third stair. This is the sign that she has reached it: Her selfish will died when she tasted My living charity, and this is why she found her spiritual peace and quiet in the mouth. You know that peace is given with the mouth (kiss of peace). So in this third stage, the soul finds such a peace that there is nothing that can disturb her. She has let go of, and drowned, her own will, and when that will is dead, there is peace and quiet.

“She brings forth virtue for her neighbors without pain. Not that this is in itself painless, but the dead will feels no pain because it endures pain willingly for my name’s sake. She runs briskly along the way of the teaching of Christ crucified. Nor does she slacken her pace for any assault that may befall her, or any persecution, or any pleasure the world may offer her. All these things she overcomes with true strength and patience, her will clothed in My loving charity, and enjoying the food of the salvation of souls in true and perfect patience. Such patience is a sure sign that the soul loves Me perfectly, and without self-interest, for if she loved Me and her neighbors for her own profit, she would be impatient, and would slacken her pace.

“But she loves Me for Myself, because I am supreme Goodness, and deserve to be loved, and she loves herself and her neighbors because of Me, to offer glory and praise to My name. And therefore she is patient and strong in suffering and persevering.

Commentary

Catherine expresses a lifetime of experience in these simple symbols. She tells us that some people prefer the consolation of God to the God of consolation. This is a big problem for people seeking God. She has God the Son say that it was not His suffering that people set before their mind’s eye, but the Father. He does not suffer, in the way that we consider the Trinity. So His perfect enjoyment of His divinity is painless. But the Son suffers for us, and we shy away from Him. Too often, we choose to feel good in prayer instead of identifying with Christ’s sufferings. Remember that we can feel good without love, but can’t suffer without love. So suffering, especially patience in suffering, is the mark of love.

Patience in suffering agony and death identified Christ’s love. We represent all that suffering by the symbol: blood. By climbing up the first step, the soul shows that it’s committed to loving God. With struggle, the soul climbs up to the second step, or Christ’s pierced side. There, the soul can overcome fear of suffering by dwelling in the blood that Jesus shed, to the last drop. Prayer on Christ’s suffering immerses us in the love that enabled Him to endure all that for us. Catherine first notes that blood and water flowed from his heart. This reveals to us the way that blood and water merge, so that baptism’s water represents Christ’s blood, which washes sins away. “Where did she come to know this honor of being fused into the blood of the Lamb as she was baptized in the power of that blood? In His open side, where she came to know the fire of divine charity.”

Catherine knows that Jesus was already dead, and that the usual way to be sure was to break the victim’s leg bones, so that he could no longer prop himself up to breathe. To preserve Christ’s condition as the unbroken

Lamb of God, the centurion stabbed Him instead. The whole thing seems superfluous, so Catherine asks Jesus why He allowed this wound. Jesus replies that the chief reason, among many, was to better express His infinite love. Nothing in His limited human body could say His infinite love better than pouring out His very last drop of blood, together with the water that surrounded His heart. This is as good an expression as a limited body can provide. “This is why I wanted you to see My inmost heart, so that you would see that I loved you more than finite suffering could show.” It also showed baptism by water and blood, which Catherine develops next.

“By shedding both blood and water, I showed you the holy baptism of water that you receive through the power of My blood. But I was also showing you the baptism of blood, and this in two ways. The first touches those who are baptized in their own blood poured out for Me. Though they could not have the other baptism, their own blood has power because of Mine. Others are baptized in fire when they lovingly desire baptism, but cannot have it. Nor is there any baptism of fire without blood, for blood has been fused with the fire of divine charity, because it was shed for love.” This is profound theology, developing the three witnesses that St. John says are one, 1 John 5:7-8. St. John calls upon three witnesses: Spirit, water and blood. These remain unclear until we consider that Jesus witnesses with them as His final symbol after He had died. The mystery continues.

Jesus then tells us about the “ongoing baptism of blood accessible by heartfelt contrition, and a holy confession as soon as they can confess to my ministers who hold the key to the blood. This blood the priest pours over the soul in absolution.” Here Catherine recommends the sacrament of reconciliation, or penance, or confession. As we sin often in public, so we should in public go to confession. For several centuries, sinners had to repent of their sins in public, naming all their sins for all to witness. By Catherine’s time, some public sinners did public confessions, but most went publicly to church, but privately to confession there. This is practical application of Christ’s blood, or His forgiveness. Nothing can compare with the value of this application of saving blood.

By frequent, even weekly, confession: “you see this baptism is ongoing, and the soul ought to be baptized in it right up to the end, in the way I have told you. In this baptism, you experience that though My act of suffering on the cross was finite, the truth of that suffering which you have received through Me is infinite. This is because of the infinite divine nature joined with finite human nature. It was this human nature in which I was clothed that suffered in Me, the Word. But because the two natures are fused with each other, the eternal Divinity took to itself the suffering I bore with such burning love.” Wow! What can we say?

“I showed you this in the opening up of My side. There you find My heart’s secret, and it shows you, more than any finite suffering could, how I love you. And I show you this without limit. How? Through the baptism of blood poured out in My burning love, and through the common baptism given to Christians, to whoever wants to receive it – the baptism of water that is one with the blood and the fire, where the soul is fused with My blood. It was to show you this that I willed that blood and water should come forth from My side. So now I have answered your question.” Catherine shares her secret of learning Christ’s secret, from His open heart. Wow!

In this infinite love, revealed through His open heart, Christ converts us. The soul that opens to His opening becomes full of His love on this second stair of the Christ-bridge. In Catherine’s words: “There she experiences and absorbs such a burning love that she runs on to the third stair, that is, to His mouth, where it is clear that she has arrived at perfection. By what way did she come? By way of His heart, that is, through the remembrance of His blood in which she was baptized once again, abandoning imperfect love for the knowledge of the hearty love she drew from seeing and tasting and experiencing the fire of My charity. Now she has arrived at His mouth, and she shows this by fulfilling the mouth’s functions. The mouth speaks with its tongue, and tastes fla-

vors. The mouth takes what is offered to the stomach, and the teeth chew it, for in no other way could the stomach digest the food.” Catherine provides practical accounts of what the soul does at this advanced stage of development, finishing the second step up the Christ-bridge. Catherine speaks of spiritual acts in this analogy.

“First she speaks to Me with the tongue of holy and constant prayer, that is in the mouth of her holy desire. This tongue has an external and an interior language. Interiorly, the soul offers Me tender loving desires for the salvation of souls. Externally, she proclaims the teaching of My Truth, admonishing, advising, testifying, without any fear for the pain the world may please to inflict on her. And she adapts her enthusiastic testimony to the situation of each person she confronts.” The loving soul peaks internally by prayer and externally by witness.

Catherine moves to the second mouth-function. “She eats the food of souls for My honor at the table of the most holy cross, Jn 4:34. In no other way, and at no other table, can it be eaten perfectly and in truth. And she chews it (for otherwise she could not digest it) with hatred and love, the two rows of teeth in the mouth of holy desire. There she takes this food and chews it with hatred for herself, and love for virtue in herself and in others. Every sort of assault – derision, insult, slander, reproach, endless persecutions, hunger and thirst, cold and heat, pain-filled longing and tears and sweat for the salvation of souls – she chews them all for My honor as she bears with her neighbors and supports them. And after she has chewed them, she tastes the flavor, savoring the fruit of her labor, and the delight of this food of souls, enjoying its taste in the fire of charity for Me and her neighbors. And so this food reaches the stomach (that is, the heart), which has been prepared by desire and hunger for souls to receive it willingly, with heartfelt charity and affection for others. She delights in it, and chews it over and over in such a way that she lets go of her delicacy about her bodily life in order to be able to eat this food at the table of the cross, the table of the teaching of Christ crucified.”

At first, this sounds very strange, but we recall Jn 4:34. There at the Samaritan town, Jesus and His disciples were tired, thirsty, and hungry. They had walked a long way. While His disciples went into town to get something to eat, Jesus waited by the well. A woman came to draw water, and Jesus wanted to save her soul. This was the spiritual food, her very soul, that He wanted to unite to in perfect love. When His disciples returned with food, He said “I have food to eat that you do not know”. The proper food of souls is souls united in mutual love. With that insight, Catherine’s words make sense. We see that soul food is other souls, united in Love.

“Then the soul grows so fat on true and solid virtues, and so big because of the abundance of this food, that the garment of selfish sensuality (that is, the body, which covers the soul) splits apart so far as its sensual appetite is concerned. Now anyone who splits apart dies. So the sensual will is left dead. Because the soul’s well-ordered will is alive in Me, clothed in My eternal will, her sensual will is dead.” This is a good way to say that we break out of our illusory self, a hangover from original sin and our personal impositions of illusions, or sins.

“Now this is how the soul acts who has in truth reached the third stair. This is the sign that she has reached it: Her selfish will died when she tasted My living charity, and this is why she found her spiritual peace and quiet in the mouth. You know that peace is given with the mouth (kiss of peace). So in this third stage, the soul finds such a peace that there is nothing that can disturb her. She has let go of, and drowned, her own will, and when that will is dead, there is peace and quiet.” Such an exuberant soul as Catherine definitely made lots of noise when she was further from God, and quieted down as she approached close. Oddly, the noise she made when young was not in tune with God, so it did not contribute to the harmony of creation. By contrast, the sounds she made as echoes of God’s love resound through the centuries so that we can hear them and rejoice.

“She brings forth virtue for her neighbors without pain. Not that this is in itself painless, but the dead will feel no pain because it endures pain willingly for my name’s sake. She runs briskly along the way of the teaching of Christ crucified. Nor does she slacken her pace for any assault that may befall her, or any persecution, or any pleasure the world may offer her. All these things she overcomes with true strength and patience, her will clothed in My loving charity, and enjoying the food of the salvation of souls in true and perfect patience. Such patience is a sure sign that the soul loves Me perfectly, and without self-interest, for if she loved Me and her neighbors for her own profit, she would be impatient, and would slacken her pace.” Once confirmed in Christ life, represented by running along Christ-bridge, nothing can deter Catherine, or us.

“But she loves Me for Myself, because I am supreme Goodness, and deserve to be loved, and she loves herself and her neighbors because of Me, to offer glory and praise to My name. And therefore she is patient and strong in suffering and persevering.” Loving God because of Him, instead of because of the joy we get from Him is the final destiny for all humans. In that condition, nothing can deter us from His love. We are in tune, vibrating with the harmonious love that God sounds throughout creation. No cacophony can distract us, and we sail along.

Christ-bridge Finale

Catherine teaches much more about the Bridge. We skip much of it, but I summarize her teaching-topics so that you can find what might interest you. Her image expresses Christ’s promise to come back to us, Jn 14:8. Jesus came from the Father, and returned to Him, as Jn 16:28 notes. Catherine emphasizes the love expressed in all these acts. In God’s perspective, this redemptive going and coming is totally simple. From our perspective, it is complicated with steps that we analyze. As we separate parts, we see how they fit back together, and we synthesize everything into its perfect fit. Then we see more of its simplicity. All the steps we analyze flow together into a single salvation. Catherine shows this simplicity: He said He would, and He did.

In dialogs 31-48, God describes how people travel along the Bridge, and Catherine exalts His Glory for such a wonderful work. Mercy floods the entire world, hell included, says Catherine, in her immense love. In dialogs 49-60 she provides many details of ascending out of the torrent of sin to the Crucified Christ. He is the first three steps up onto the bridge. These steps express the three stages of spiritual growth which St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila develop a couple centuries later.

Catherine concludes her teaching on the Christ-bridge with the reason that God gave it to us. This reason unites all the primary elements of creation. God originally wanted us to be with Him in perfect union. But He wanted us to want that union, to exercise our freedom to be one with Him. At the beginning, there were only Adam and Eve. Each misused freedom to choose an illusion. They chose to know evil, as if it were something to know. Instead, it’s merely the absence of good. As absence, it has no content that we could know. However, Adam and Eve imagined this illusion, and tried to force it into being. This disobedience to the gift of love and being that God provided them, disorganized everything, shattering the universe. Now everything fights everything.

This disobedience was original sin. In the chaos that followed, Adam and Eve lost their innocence, and most of their goodness. In His mercy, God maintained Adam and Eve’s existence, and their functions. While human good remains, all of it is damaged. Our great power, defining us, is intelligence. But the rebellious intelligence that we inherit from Adam and Eve is severely dimmed. An analogy would be a mirror which reflects everything within range until we break it. Then the fragments reflect everything in a disorderly way that confuses us. Though we can piece things together to reduce confusion, this work is difficult, partial, and frustrating.

Our intellect provides views of truth. All truth is good. So we apprehend good, and can choose it. This is our freedom. But freedom is disordered, so that what we choose completely today, we often reject tomorrow, if we wait that long. Something is definitely wrong with us. As if our dimmed intellect and weakened will were not enough, our emotions run wild. Wild emotions send us on roller-coaster rides which disturb us, and too often wreck our plans. Emotions override intellect and will, leaving us painfully disordered. These examples illustrate the effects of original sin. Catherine describes them well as torrential river water tossing us about and drowning most of us. This is a fine way to express sin's effects.

But God loves us so much that He won't abandon us to this tempestuous river of sin. He builds a bridge to extend across the infinite gap of sin that Adam and Eve have committed. This bridge is Christ, Who cures infinite disobedience by infinite obedience. He cures Adam's human disobedience by His human obedience, and the infinite offense by His divine infinity. Jesus reunites us with God because He is human as well as divine.

Dialog 86 and 89 (sections)

God the gentle Father speaks: "I showed you the bridge... And I showed you the three ordinary stairs that are set up in the soul's three powers, and how no one can have the life of grace without climbing all three stairs, without gathering all three powers in My name. Then I revealed to you how these stairs were in a special way a figure of the three spiritual stages symbolized in the body of My only-begotten Son. I told you that He had made a stairway of His body, and showed it to you in His nailed feet, in His open side, and in His mouth, where the soul tastes peace and calm.

"I showed you the imperfection of slavish fear, and the imperfection of love that loves Me for the delight it feels. And I showed you the perfection of the third stage, of those who have attained peace at His mouth. These have run with eager longing across the bridge of Christ crucified. They have climbed the three ordinary stairs, have gathered their souls' three powers, and all their works, in My name, and they have climbed the three special stairs, and passed from imperfection to perfection. So you have seen how they run on in truth. I also gave you a taste of the soul's perfection as she is adorned with the virtues, as well as the delusions she is subject to before she reaches perfection, if she does not use her time well in coming to know herself and me.

"I told you about the wretchedness of those who let themselves be drowned in the river because they will not keep to the bridge of My Truth's teaching, the bridge I built for you so you would not drown. Like fools, they have chosen to drown in the world's wretched filth.

"I told you all this to make you shake up the fire of your holy longing and your compassion and grief over the damnation of souls. I want your sorrow and love to drive you to pressure Me with sweat & tears – tears of constant humble prayer offered to me in the flames of burning desire, not just for yourself, but for so many others of My creatures & servants who will hear you and be compelled by My love to beg and reassure Me to be merciful to the world & to the mystic body of holy Church, the Church for which you so earnestly plead with me.

89 God speaks: "... So she travels calmly over the bridge, following the teaching of My gentle Truth. She passes through this Word, enduring with true gentle patience every pain and trouble that I permit for her own good. She accepts it courageously, choosing My way over her own. And she suffers not only patiently, but gladly. She considers it a glory to be persecuted for My name's sake, so that she might have something to suffer [for Me]. This brings the soul to such joy and spiritual peace, that no tongue could describe it.

Commentary

God refers to three stairs, which are also stages of spiritual development. Christ's body represents all three in a memorable way. The first step to climb is up to Christ's feet, nailed to the cross for love of us. Notice that because His feet are nailed down, He must wait for us. He is not a moving target, but has fastened Himself so that we can reach Him. The whole point of His coming to us from heaven is to be available for us. He anchors Himself to the earth on the cross for love of us. As the bridge from us to God, the cross reaches infinitely far. But the end near to us is fixed. So we struggle to emerge from the turbulent waters of sin onto the bridge. This represents our free efforts to cooperate with Christ, or to second His motion. He moved to save us, and we second that motion by accepting salvation. Catherine represents this spiritual journey as crawling out of the river on to the first step. When we have attained the nailed feet of Jesus Christ, we have a foothold on the bridge.

In general, this is a fine description. But the details of this first step can be described forever. Catherine notices that God is Perfect Being, the only being that could satisfy us who are made in His image and likeness. But we sin, or reject God. This sin is our attempt to substitute some being for God. No being suffices. So our usual way to sin is to substitute a fake being. This being does not exist. So we have substituted zero for All. When we attempt to unite ourselves to zero, we waste some of our being. We diminish ourselves. We lessen the fragment of being that we had left. Adam and Eve tried to force an illusion to be God. Just so, all sin strives to replace something real with some invention. This is a dead loss. There is no value to this sinful rebellion against God. We notice that the attempt to force illusion to be God fails immediately. Every such sin reduces the sinner by using up some of his energy. He dumps something real into something illusory. Catherine describes this as horrifying filth. She describes sin quite forcefully. But she hastens to remind us that God loves the sinner. This balance enables us to overcome sin, or to take that first step out of the morass of disorder into obedience. Because we notice Christ's love in dying for us, we love Him in return. This seconding of His original motion, puts our energy into harmony with World-Energy, alias God. Instead of flailing in the water, we now put foot on solid ground. We can make progress, we can grow in love by loving what exists, by tuning in to God's love.

But doing these positive things means that we give up on the negative things we had been doing. We must give up on sin. That's why other spiritual writers, like St. Therese of Avila and St. John of the Cross, call this the purgative stage. Catherine agrees that we must give up sin, particularly superficial sins associated with sensation. That's the link to St. Augustine's human powers. The first of these is the memory/imagination/sensation power that deals with appearances. Because we are too frequently slaves to sensations, we need to work free of those shackles by giving up on sensation. We have abundant evidence that nothing sensory satisfies us, but we keep trying to force some new sensation into God's place. When we give up on that kind of mistake, we complete the first step, deliver memory power to God, and emerge from the dark night of the senses. All spiritual authors agree about the process and the results. Since this is the simplest correction of sin, it is also the first step, so the all agree on the order of spiritual growth and development. Everything fits on the Christ-bridge.

Catherine then urges us to take the second step up the Christ-bridge, from His feet to His heart. This image is splendid because we associate heart with love. Love is the deepest activity throughout creation and redemption, and is the ultimate act of transformed creation after the second coming of Jesus. Love is our source and our destiny, and our means to advance, all in one. As Catherine shows, Jesus wanted to express His infinite love by some finite sign. Nothing better would do than to shed His last drop of blood, and some of the water from around His heart. This is the ultimate for a finite human body. When we take this step, we must prefer love to various other intellectual activities. We must love God instead of His good creatures.

This is difficult, and not everyone finishes this step. But as we look into Christ's open heart, we see infinite love beyond our wildest dreams. No wonder that Catherine calls Jesus "our mad lover". After many disappointments

in life, we may no longer believe that love is possible. But Jesus shows us that it's not only possible, but available right here in His heart. The more we recognize His love, the more we trust Him to be the bridge to God, and the more we give up attachments to intellectual goods. These include pride, delight in problems solved, exaltation of good decisions made, and stubborn retention of goods earned.

No wonder that St. John of the Cross calls this step the dark night of the soul. Though we are actually enlightened, we are blinded by the light, so everything appears to be dark. All our worthy achievements are so small compared to this nearness to God, that they seem to disappear. Truly these accomplishments were great, and well worth doing. But we now advance so far beyond them that we can hardly remember them at all. In our longing for perfect, infinite love, smaller loves vanish. Even God, Who seemed so clearly in focus, seems to be gone. He is actually closer than ever before, but we have not adjusted to His nearness, so He's out of focus. For all we can tell, He no longer exists. This process purges our soul. Augustine uses this same name for our second set of powers. Catherine follows Augustine's description of soul-powers, and says that these steps cleanse them.

This step also cleanses our spirit, the third Augustinian power, and the most profound of all our strengths. As we advance up the three steps along the Christ-bridge, we become more fully ourselves. We are more the way that God created us to be. We are more perfected, as God wanted. We are "gathering all three powers in My (God's) name". Catherine expresses all these mystical processes in ways that we can hold in memory, imagine as unfolding, and appreciate for their truth. So God says that we are advancing along gentle Truth, His Word, or His only-begotten Son. Catherine has climbed these steps, walking in obscurity, and now expresses this journey in ways we can comprehend. Many people share these images, and grow by praying more intently with them.

Notice, we comprehend the overall path, expressed as Christ-bridge. Important parts of it are clear to us. But each person sees different details. Our specific experiences differ from others'. God makes individuals unique. He does not clone us. While we are on our troublesome way, we do not see with these steps as clearly Catherine does. But as we review her words, we fit everything together. If we have not had the experiences that Catherine describes, we can progress to that stage, and then recognize it for what it is. This is the way that saints help us along the Christ-bridge. We can never give enough thanks for Catherine's help.

Though this second stage of spiritual development is very hard to complete, and few people do it, we all will emerge from it eventually. If we do not succeed here on earth, as Catherine did, then we can finish the job in Purgatory. Purgatory is purging us of sinful attachments, so that we can be pure enough to meet God. We will all eventually recognize the map that Catherine left us of the Christ-bridge, and move along it. The only exceptions to this rule are the damned. Catherine believed there were such people. Perhaps St. Therese of Lisieux was correct: "I'm sure that there's a hell. I'm not sure that anyone's in it". Our hope is that love conquers all.

As Catherine describes, when the soul has abandoned all sin, and yielded to God's infinite love, then that soul's powers are united in love, and the person advances to Christ's mouth. There the soul experiences complete love with no reserve. This is mystical marriage. At this point, the person freely accepts God's infinite love, and gives self as completely as that person can manage. This gift increases every day, and every instant, once the person is fully alive to God's love. It is delightful beyond description. That's why Catherine gave such wonderful descriptions, in previous sections, about the taste, the chewing of soul-food, and the joy of full nourishment.

Eventually, this nourishment enables the soul to outgrow all of sin's constrictions. As if sin were a shell around the growing organism, the shell must break to let the expanding soul emerge in full freedom and glory. This is why God created the soul, to grow past all bounds into eternal bliss. At this stage, peace and calm replace anx-

ious striving. The soul becomes serene. Catherine shows the soul after mystical marriage running along the bridge, protected by the structure Christ has built, with His blood binding the stones together. As the soul progresses, no suffering bothers her. In fact, suffering delights her because it unites her with Christ crucified. This transformation from wretched to blessed is a miracle of God's love.

No one could do it without the assistance that Jesus provides. His most important assistance includes many gifts from Christ. Here are a few of them. Jesus provides His Mystical Body the Church. He is the head and we are the members, Rom 12: 5; 1 Cor 6:15; 12:18; 12:20. Jesus provides His good example: His life, death and resurrection to show us our destiny. Jesus saved us by taking our sins upon His sinless self, and paying the price for us. Jesus left us His sacraments. Passing on the key of obedience and power to His Vicar, who passed it on to bishops and priests, Jesus made His ministry available to us. This ministry of sin-forgiveness through the sacrament of confession, and nourishment through the sacrament of the Eucharist, are the most important.

All these details, plus the agony of sinful people locked into their sins, exist so that we can get complete Christ's mission here on earth. He invites us to be minor ministers, following His example. In Catherine's words: "I have told you all this to make you shake up the fire of your holy longing and your compassion and grief over the damnation of souls. I want your sorrow and love to drive you to pressure Me with sweat and tears – tears of constant humble prayer offered to me in the flames of burning desire. And not just for yourself, but for so many others of My creatures and servants who will hear you and be compelled by My love to beg and reassure Me to be merciful to the world and to the mystic body of holy Church, the Church for which you so earnestly plead with me." Everything fits into service to God's people in the Church. Catherine extends beyond the Church to those who need to convert and join. As love flames up, we can hardly stand that so many people are outside the flames of love. It pains us as it pains them. We love to reduce these pains in God's love-fire.

As the soul imitates Jesus, Catherine says: "She travels calmly over the bridge, following the teaching of My gentle Truth. She passes through this Word, enduring with true gentle patience every pain and trouble that I permit for her own good. She accepts it courageously, choosing My way over her own. And she suffers not only patiently, but gladly. She considers it a glory to be persecuted for My name's sake, so that she might have something to suffer [for Me]. This brings the soul to such joy and spiritual peace, that no tongue could describe it." Once the trials of the first two stages are over, the soul truly converted to God's love proceeds serenely over the remaining distance to God. In a moral sense, this gap is infinite, but as the soul goes in Christ, whose infinity bridges the chasm. Catherine does not develop this infinite passage, but she understands that Jesus supplies for our limitations. He is the Savior Who advances us the rest of the way.

Catherine emphasizes the patience that the soul in mystical marriage shows, no matter what outrageous treatment this cruel world imposes. In patience, the soul committed to God at this stage is so joyful that we can't express her delight. This is the fullest foretaste of heaven available here on earth. With death, the soul completes her trek across the Christ-bridge into God. As St. Paul says about mystical experience: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the mind of man, what God has in store for those who love Him, 1 Cor 2:9.

Catherine's Love

Let's delve into Catherine's main theme of love. Since God is Love, everything He does expresses His love. This is very simple. But Catherine looks lovingly at Love in action, and provides us many vibrant descriptions. Now that you're friends with Catherine, you can see how she focuses upon love, and lives love to the fullest.

Dialog 1

Catherine is the soul to whom she refers. “A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God’s honor and the salvation of souls. She has for some time exercised herself in virtue, and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge, in order to know better God’s goodness toward her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.

“But there is no way she can so savor and be enlightened by this truth as in continual humble prayer, grounded in the knowledge of herself and of God. For by such prayer the soul is united with God, following in the footsteps of Christ crucified, and through desire and affection, and the union of love He makes of her another Himself. So Christ seems to have meant when He said: ‘If you will love me, and keep my word, I will show myself to you, and you will be one thing with me, and I with you, Jn 14:21-23. And we find similar words in other places from which we can see it is the truth that by love’s affection the soul becomes another Himself.

“To make this clearer still, I remember having heard from a certain servant of God that, when she was at prayer, lifted high in spirit, God would not hide from her mind’s eye His love for His servants. No, He would reveal it, saying among other things: ‘Open your mind’s eye and look within Me, and you will see the dignity and beauty of My reasoning creature. But beyond the beauty I have given the soul by creating her in My image and likeness, look at those who are clothed in the wedding garment of charity, adorned with many true virtues. They are united with Me through love. So I say, if you should ask Me who they are, I would answer, said the gentle loving Word (Jesus) that ‘they are another Me; for they have lost and drowned their own will, and have clothed themselves, and united themselves, and conformed themselves with Mine’. It is true, then, that the soul is united to God through love’s affection.”

Commentary

Catherine provides an excellent account of her life. Since we’re familiar with it, we will focus upon her explanation of love. Starting at the foundation, she notes that: “upon knowledge follows love”. As we learn about life, we notice that knowing the truth shows us the good. We can’t have one without the other because the truth is good. The more true a thing is, the more good it is. The more good it is, the more we love it. While we could upset this process, and often do, this is the natural unfolding of our learning and loving.

Next, Catherine notes: “And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.” This process envelops itself, and feeds upon itself. The more truth we know, the more good we see, and the more we love what we’re experiencing. The more we love anything, the more we want to know about it. Spiritual activities cascade into each other to mutually reinforce each other. Catherine was into this reinforcing process, and loved it so much that she expressed it beautifully to help us fall in love with Love.

“But there is no way she can so savor and be enlightened by this truth as in continual humble prayer, grounded in the knowledge of herself and of God. For by such prayer the soul is united with God, following in the footsteps of Christ crucified, and through desire and affection, and the union of love He makes of her another Himself.” As we unpack this rich statement, we notice that prayer is the best way to enjoy truth and allow it to further enlighten us. The root of this is the combined knowledge of self and God. This is the mirror that we examined earlier, and which remains the key to learning about all that counts. This prayer activity unites the soul with God. Why? Because knowledge that we come from God unites us to our Source. We see that this union is His gift to us, and a tremendous blessing. So we love Him more. This is reciprocating love activity. Wow.

Jesus gives us the good example to start praying, and to continue to grow in God by love. Love is union with the beloved, so as the soul and God interact in prayer, they become more one. Christ is the greater being, so we re-

joyce to become Him. He makes us into another Himself. Thereby, we expand from small creature into the fullness of our development. As St. Athanasius put it: “God became man so that man could become God”.

Naturally, we do not become God by nature. But we do become God by love. Because love makes one out of two persons, we become God when we let Him love us. In this way, we accept the gift of becoming Christ by accepting His love. Catherine gets to the heart of love’s secret. If we ponder her message, going over her words in prayer, we see that God has been courting us since He created us. His love for us is constant, without end, and infinite. There is nothing lacking in His love for us. We are the ones who lag behind; we refuse His love, or limit it. If we cooperate with His love, He brings us along gently into the fullness of love. Since love unites, Jesus gradually joins with us, making us into Himself.

Catherine realizes that this “becoming one” is obscure, so she elaborates: “Open your mind’s eye and look within Me, and you will see the dignity and beauty of My reasoning creature.” When we look at ourselves in God, especially in God Incarnate, Jesus, we see how much He loved us. He could not be mistaken when He loved us, so we must be lovable. Even if we don’t see how lovable we are, Jesus does. If we yield to his wooing; if we allow Him to love us, we see how lovable we are. From His love, we realize that we were made in God’s “image and likeness”. This is further evidence that we are lovable, and should accept God’s love.

Catherine gives yet a third reason: “But beyond the beauty I have given the soul by creating her in My image and likeness, look at those who are clothed in the wedding garment of charity, adorned with many true virtues. They are united with Me through love.” Jesus gives the saints as examples. Think of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, John Paul II... The secret of the saints is: “they are another Me; for they have lost and drowned their own will, and have clothed themselves, and united themselves, and conformed themselves with Mine. It is true, then, that the soul is united to God through love’s affection.” Wooed by Christ, those who yield to His love unite their wills with His. This union eliminates false will for sinful things, for things which are not what the person had hoped they would be. This false will should be lost and drowned. Then we discover our true will, the one that is one with God’s. What better description can we give for love? Catherine has more clarifying images for us.

Dialog 2-3

After a prolog, Catherine returns to love-making with God. “She found herself eager for the next day’s Mass – it would be Mary’s day – because in communion the soul seems more sweetly bound to God, and better knows His truth. For then the soul is in God, and God in the soul, just as the fish is in the sea, and the sea in the fish. So when it was morning and time for Mass she took her place with eager desire. From her deep knowledge of herself, a holy justice gave birth to hatred and displeasure against herself, ashamed as she was of her imperfection, which seemed to her to be the cause of all the evils in the world. In this knowledge and hatred and justice she washed away the stains of guilt, which it seemed to her were, and which indeed were, in her own soul, saying: ‘O eternal Father, I accuse myself before you, asking that you punish my sins in this life. And since I by my sins am the cause of the sufferings my neighbors must endure, I beg you in mercy to punish me for them.’”

3 “Then eternal Truth seized her desire and drew it more strongly to Himself. Just as in the Old Testament when sacrifice was offered to God, a fire came and drew to Himself the sacrifice that was acceptable to Him, 1 Chr 18:38, so gentle Truth did to that soul. He sent the fiery mercy of the Holy Spirit, and seized the sacrifice of desire she had made of herself to him, saying: “do you not know, my daughter, that all the sufferings the soul bears, or can bear, in this life are not enough to punish one smallest sin?”

Commentary

This paragraph reveals how the sacraments of confession and Eucharist brought Catherine closer to the loving God. So close that they merge as the fish in the sea and sea in the fish. Though she enjoyed being with God, she worried that her sins so offended Him that she hated those sins with great emotion. Justice demanded reparation for them, and she thought that she should do penance to make up for them. However, God explained to her that nothing she could do is enough to make up for even the slightest sin. So Jesus paid the price for all our sins. If accept His gift of salvation, and love Him for redeeming us, He washes sin away. What Love!

God tells Catherine that: “the glorious apostle Paul taught: ‘If I had an angelic tongue, knew the future, gave what is mine to the poor, and gave my body to be burned, but did not have charity, it would be worth nothing to me’, 1 Cor 13:1-3. Finite works are not enough either to punish or to atone unless they are seasoned with loving charity.” Catherine learned gradually how all of salvation history boils down to charity. She tells us how.

Dialog 4-19

4 “No virtue can have life in it except from charity, and charity is nursed and mothered by humility. You will find humility in the knowledge of yourself when you see that even your own existence comes not from yourself but from Me, for I loved you before you came into being. And in My unspeakable love for you I willed to create you anew in grace. So I washed you and made you a new creation in the blood that My only-begotten Son poured out with such burning love.”

11 Catherine wanted to make up for her sins, but God told her what he really wanted was love. “Actions ... I would consider a mere ‘shouting of words’. For these are finite works, and I Who am infinite insist upon infinite works, that is, infinitely desirous love. I want works of penance and other bodily practices to be undertaken as means, not as your chief goal. By making them your chief goal, you would be giving me a finite thing – like a word that comes out of the mouth, and then ceases to exist – unless indeed that word comes out of the soul’s love, which conceives virtue, and brings it to birth in truth. I mean that finite works – which I have likened to words – must be joined with loving charity. Such works, undertaken not as your chief goal but as means, and not by themselves, but in the company of true discernment, would please Me.”

16 “Then that soul (Catherine) stood before the divine majesty deeply joyful and strengthened in her new knowledge. What hope she had found in the divine mercy! What unspeakable love she had experienced! For she had seen how God, in His love and His desire to be merciful to humankind in spite of their enmity toward him, had given His servants a way to force His goodness and calm His wrath. So she was glad and fearless in the face of the world’s persecution, knowing that God was on her side. And the fire of her holy longing grew so strong that she would not rest there, but with holy confidence made her plea for the whole world.” ...

17 “Then God, like one drunk with love for our good, found a way to fire up an even greater love and sorrow in that soul. He showed her with what love He had created us, and He said: ‘See how they all lash out at Me! And I created them with such burning love, and gave them grace and gifts without number – all freely, though I owed them nothing! But see, daughter, how they strike back at Me with every sort of sin, but most of all with their wretched and hateful selfishness, that breeding ground of every evil, and with this selfish love they have poisoned the whole world. I have shown you how love of Me bears every good that is brought to birth for others. By the same principle, this sensual selfishness (which is born of pride just as My love is born of charity) is the bearer of every evil.

“This evil they do by means of other people. For love of Me and love of others are inseparable. And those who have not loved Me have cut themselves off as well from any love of their neighbors. This is why I said that every good and every evil is done by means of your neighbors.”

18 “Know that no one can escape My hands, for I am who I am, Ex 3:14, whereas you have no being at all of yourselves. What being you have is My doing. I am the Creator of everything that has any share in being. But sin is not of my making, for sin is nonbeing. Sin is unworthy of any love, then, because it has no part in Me. Therefore, My creatures offend Me when they love sin, which they should not love, and hate Me, to Whom they owe love because I am supremely good and gave them being with such burning love. But they cannot escape Me. Either I will have them in justice because of their sin, or I will have them in mercy.

“Open the eye of your understanding, then, and look at My hand, and you will see that what I have told you is true. So in obedience to the most high Father, she raised her eyes, and she saw within His closed fist the entire world. And God said: ‘My daughter, see now and know that no one can be taken away from me, Jn 10:28. Everyone is here as I said, either in justice or in mercy, Thes 13:1-5. They are Mine, I created them, and I love them ineffably. And so, in spite of their wickedness, I will be merciful to them because of My servants, and I will grant what you have asked of Me with such love and sorrow.’”

19 Catherine speaks: “The fire within that soul blazed higher, and she was beside herself as if drunk, at once gloriously happy and grief-stricken. She was happy in her union with God, wholly submerged in His mercy, and savoring His vast goodness, but to see such goodness offended brought her grief. She knows, though, that God has shown her His creatures’ sinfulness to rouse her to intensify her concern and longing. And so she offered thanks to the divine majesty.

“And she felt her emotions so renewed in the eternal Godhead, the force of her spirit made her body break into a sweat. Her union with God was more intimate than was the union between her soul and her body. The holy fire of love grew so fierce within her that its heat made her sweat water, but it was not enough. She longed to see her body sweat blood, so she said to herself: ‘Alas my soul! You have frittered your whole life away, and for this have all these great and small evils come upon the world and holy church! So I want you to heal them now with a sweat of blood.

“Indeed, this soul remembered well what Truth had taught her: that she should always know herself and God’s goodness at work in her, and that the medicine by which He willed to heal the whole world and to soothe His wrath and divine justice was humble, constant, holy prayer. So, spurred on by holy desire, she roused herself even more to open the eye of her understanding. She gazed into divine charity, and there she saw and tasted how bound we are to love, and seek the glory and praise of God’s name through the salvation of souls. She saw that God’s servants are called to this – and in particular eternal Truth had called and chosen her spiritual father, whom she brought before the divine goodness, asking God to light within him a lamp of grace by which he might in truth pursue this Truth.

Commentary

Catherine emphasizes God’s love in creating us, and how dependent we are upon His love for all we do. So we are not in complete charge of our existence. Nor can we do anything outside of God’s love. Nor is anything good for us unless we do it in love with God. Since God is love, as Pope Benedict XVI taught us with such simplicity and clarity, everything that really exists exists as some form of love. This profound truth roots all of Catherine’s understanding in love. Then she really gets going by loving so completely that we can’t comprehend

the extent of her love. As she points out later, this is exactly how God loves us: infinitely beyond our understanding. The only way to catch up with God's infinite love is to love Him without limits that we set.

While this unlimited love is infinite in the sense that we put no limits, it is not infinite in the complete way that God is. But once we have done our best to remove restrictions, we are in God's image and likeness by loving as infinitely as we can. Since love unites, God's infinite love for us unites Him infinitely with us. Our loving to our best ability removes all the barriers we could impose on God's love. Then we participate in divine infinite love as much as any creature can. This experience of union with God is what God made us for. He makes us into Himself by His infinite love. But He does not impose Himself. If we want His love, we freely accept it.

God initiates this love affair by loving us into existence. He renews this love affair, when humankind broke it up by original sin, by Jesus redeeming us. He renews this love affair, when we commit personal sin, by forgiving us through the sacrament of confession. This is the sense in which the Christ-bridge shelters us from tempests, then feeds us with the Eucharist when we have cleansed our souls enough to receive Him. These are ways that God "creates us anew in grace". His words state it so well: "I washed you, and made you a new creation in the blood that My only-begotten Son poured out with such burning love." God's infinite love creates us and recreates us in ways that we cannot see. But Jesus made His love visible, in agony on the cross to wash us with His blood. This defines burning love. His stupendous love stupefies us, but energizes to love Him in return.

That's why Catherine was so eager to make up for her sins. Each of us rejects God in some way, and thereby sins. In her estimation, making up for her sins would be imitating Christ, Who made up for all our sins. God reminds her that whatever she does is merely finite. But God is infinite. This is the secret key. Finite acts are not worthy of God. That's why salvation is an infinite work, requiring an infinite person of the blessed Trinity. God the Son saved us, redeemed us. He did the infinite work. Our job, as finite creatures, is to second that motion. If we join our finite acts to His infinite redemption, then we have used the means to the infinite end. That "would please Me". What a wonderful secret to share with us. Thanks Catherine.

This knowledge sends Catherine into ecstasies of joy. This makes sense. God does the heavy lifting, and we cooperate. We are like the sparrows who heard that the sky was falling, so they volunteered to do all they could. They would lie on the ground, with their little feet in the air to do as much as they could to help the other creatures survive. That's the spirit we creatures should have. God loves it, and Catherine rejoiced to participate in His love, His way. Now she could face the falling sky, or any "persecution". Relieved of the wrong job of playing God, she could now do the real job of cooperating with Christ. That filled her with delight.

When she thought she would burst with joy, God fired up His love in her even more by describing his infinite love and the many sins that humans commit. Harsh words about real sins. God calls 'em the way He sees 'em. He provides yet another secret: "Love of Me and love of others are inseparable". How wonderful a statement! In spite of all this evil, God loves us infinitely. That's why He provides another amazing secret: "no one can escape my hands, for I am who I am, Ex 3:14". Catherine then describes a way to see this secret that encourages us to open "the eye of your understanding". All creatures depend utterly upon God.

Those who repent, depend upon Him for mercy. Those who refuse to repent, depend upon Him for justice. But all are in His hand. God's love is ineffable. It is the same for saint and sinner. But each responds freely to that love in different ways. As saints have long remarked: God's love is like sunshine. If it falls upon wax, it melts the wax. If it falls upon mud, it hardens the mud. God's infinite love activates each person, who responds by freely accepting or rejecting this stupendous love. This image expands Jn 10:28, "No one will snatch them out

of my hand". If we pay attention to God's creating us, we realize that we depend totally upon Him. We have no existence beyond His loving will. We are acts of His love.

Upon experiencing this, Catherine's "fire blazed higher". We can see why. These truths enflame us, and would have increased Catherine's ecstasy exponentially. She adds that her delirious joy was not diminished, but was bolstered by grief because so many humans offend God's love. Starting at home, she admitted that she was to blame for many sins. Her grief began with her own offenses. But sorrow spread because of the many others who also rejected God's infinite love. So she wanted to sweat blood, as water "was not enough".

Then she "remembered what Truth had taught her: that she should always know herself and God's goodness at work in her .. humble, constant, holy prayers. So she prayed. She gives us great example, sharing all her spiritual secrets with us. Let us join her in prayer, and ask her to elevate our prayers evermore.

Some of Love's Varied Activities

Catherine reveals great secrets about God's love for us. Here is the secret that God's infinite love continues for eternity.

Dialog 41

God shows the souls in heaven: "Forever they rejoice in love at the sight of Me, sharing in that goodness which I have in Myself, and which I measure out to them according to the measure of love with which they have come to Me. They are established in love for Me, and for their neighbors. And they are all united in general and special love³, both of which come from one and the same charity. They rejoice and exult with the angels, and they find their places among the saints according to the different virtues in which they excelled in the world.

"And although they are all joined in the bond of charity, they know a special kind of sharing with those whom they loved most closely with a special love in the world, a love through which they grew in grace and virtue. They helped each other proclaim the glory and praise of My name in themselves and in their neighbors. So now in everlasting life they have not lost that love. No, they still love and share with each other even more closely and fully, adding their love to the good of all.

"For I would not have you think this special good they have is only for themselves. No, it is shared by all their just companions, My beloved children, and by all the angels. For when a soul reaches eternal life, all share in her good, and she in theirs. Not that anyone's vessel can get any larger, or have need of filling. They are all full, and can grow no larger. But they experience a new freshness in their exultation – a mirthfulness, a jubilation, a gladness – in knowing this soul. They see that by My mercy she has been lifted up from the earth in the fullness of grace, and so they are exultant in Me over the good that soul has received from My goodness.

"And that soul finds joy in Me, and in all these souls and blessed spirits, seeing and tasting in them the sweetness of My love. Their desires are a continual cry for Me for the salvation of others, for they finished their lives loving their neighbors, and they did not leave that love behind, but brought it with them when they passed through that gate which is My only-begotten Son, Jn 10:7-9. So you see that in whatever bond of love they finish their lives, that bond is theirs forever, and lasts eternally.

"They are so conformed to My will that they can will only what I will. When time came to an end for them, and they died in grace, their freedom was so bound with the chains of charity that they are no longer capable of sin. Their will is so one with Mine that even if a father and mother saw their child in hell, or a child its parent, it

would not trouble them. They would even be content to see them punished, since they are My enemies. Nothing puts them at variance with Me. All their desires are fulfilled.

“What these blessed ones want is to see Me honored in you who are still on the way, pilgrims running ever nearer your end in death. Because they seek My honor, they desire your salvation, and are constantly praying to Me for you. I do My part to fulfill their desire, provided only that you do not foolishly resist My mercy.

“It is also their desire to have once again the gift of their bodies. But it is not a troubled desire, because although they do not have them now, they are happy in the certainty that their desire will be fulfilled. They are not troubled, for they experience no pain or lack of happiness in not having them. Do not think either that the body’s happiness after the resurrection will add anything to the soul’s happiness. If this were the case, it would follow that the soul’s happiness would be imperfect until the return of the body. But this cannot be, for these souls lack no perfection. It is not the body that brings happiness to the soul. The soul, though, will give happiness to the body: her own fullness will overflow when on the final day of judgment she puts on once more the garment of her own flesh, which she had left behind.

“Just as the soul was made immortal and firm in Me, so in this reunion the body will become immortal, its heaviness cast off and made fine and light. The glorified body could pass through a wall, and neither fire nor water could hurt it. But know that this is not due to its own power, but the soul’s – which is really My own power given her by grace through the unspeakable love with which I created her in My image and likeness.

“The good of these souls is beyond what your mind’s eye can see, or your ear hear, or your tongue describe, or your heart imagine. What joy they have in seeing Me Who am all good! What joy they will yet have when their bodies are glorified! But while they do not have this latter good until the general judgment, they do not suffer. They lack no happiness, for the soul is filled, and in this fullness the body will share.

“I have told you of the good the glorified body will have in the glorified humanity of My only-begotten Son, and this is the guarantee of your own resurrection. What joy there is in His wounds, forever fresh, the scars remaining in His body, and continually crying out for mercy to Me, the high eternal Father, for you! You will all be made like Him in joy and gladness: eye for eye, hand for hand, your whole bodies will be made like the body of the Word, My Son. You will live in Him as you live in Me, for He is one with Me. But your bodily eyes, as I have told you, will delight in the glorified humanity of the Word, My only begotten Son. Why? Because those who finish their lives delighting in My love will keep that delight forever. Not that they can do any further good now, but they rejoice in the good that they have brought with them. In other words, they cannot do anything deserving of merit, for it is only in this life, by the choice of free will, that one can either merit or sin.

“These should wait for divine judgment with gladness, not fear. And the face of My Son will appear to them neither terrifying nor hateful, because they have finished their lives in charity, delighting in Me, and filled with good will toward their neighbors. The different appearances of His face when He comes in My majesty for judgment will not be in Him, but in those who are to be judged by Him. To the damned, He will appear with just hatred, but to the saved, with mercy and love.

Commentary

Human love expands beyond our wildest expectations. But it’s finite. God’s love explodes infinitely. When we accept His love, we explode into dimensions we can’t imagine. Catherine describes this explosion so well that we can delight in it again and again. Everything infinite escapes limits, but remains in proportion to our choices

on earth. Each love for each person remains tuned to what we decided here below. This perfect harmony, even through infinite expansion, amazes and delights us. What a destiny Love has for us!

Dialog 45

God speaks: ... “But after the soul has let go of the body’s heaviness, her will is filled. She longed to see Me, and now she sees Me, and in that vision is blessedness. Seeing Me, she knows Me. Knowing Me, she loves Me. Loving Me, she enjoys Me, the supreme eternal Good. This enjoyment fills and satisfies her will, her longing to see Me and know Me. She longs for what she possesses, and possesses what she longs for, and as I have told you, her desire knows no pain, nor her satisfaction any boredom. Cf Rev 7:16-17.

“So you see, my servants’ chief happiness is in seeing and knowing Me. This vision and knowledge fills their will. They have what their will longs for, and so they are satisfied. This is why I told you that, most especially, the joy of eternal life is in possessing what their will longs for, and so they are satisfied. But know that its satisfaction is in seeing and knowing Me. Cf. Ps 17:15. Even in this life, they enjoy the pledge of eternal life, since they have a taste of the very thing that satisfies them.

“How do they have this pledge in this life? Let me tell you. They see My goodness in themselves, and they know My truth when their understanding – which is the soul’s eye – is enlightened in Me. Cf Mt 6:22-23. The pupil of this eye is most holy faith, and this light of faith enables them to discern and know and follow the way and teaching of My truth, the incarnate Word. Without this pupil, which is faith, they would see no more than a person who has eyes, but with a film covering the pupils that give the eyes sight. It is the same with the eye of understanding. Its pupil is faith, but if selfish love pulls over it the film of infidelity, it cannot see. It may have the appearance of an eye, but it is sightless, because infidelity has deprived it of light. So seeing Me, these souls know Me, and knowing Me, they love Me. And in loving Me, their selfish will is swallowed up and lost.

“Having lost their own selfish will, they clothe themselves in Mine. But I will nothing less than your holiness. So at once they set about turning their backs on the way beneath the bridge, and begin to mount the bridge. They cross through the thorns without being hurt, because their feet (i.e. their affections) are shod with My will. This is why I told you that they suffer physically, but not spiritually, because their sensual will – which affects and pains the spirit – is dead. Since they no longer have a selfish will, they no longer have the pain. So they hear everything with reverence, considering it a grace to suffer for Me. And they want nothing but what I will. ...

Commentary

In her overflowing love, Catherine gushes great symbols of heaven’s joys. She foretasted them here below, so she speaks from experience. Hardly any better descriptions of love exist. Here on earth, we do not see clearly. It’s as if cataracts cover our eyes with a film. But prayer enflames our love, and burns these films away, and we see more of Love, because we love more. What a gift that Catherine gives us, in her magnificent love.

More About Love

Love is inexhaustible, especially when God gives it to us. Catherine loves to call God Father. So she loves for us to love His fatherhood with child-love. In English, this is filial love. At first, we love God because we have vague ideas about His love in creating us. As we get to know Him better, we discover that He cares for us like a father more dear than our earthly father. Catherine encourages us to adopt filial love for our heavenly Father.

Dialog 60-64

God the Father speaks: “... If these souls do not give up the exercise of holy prayer and other good works. But

go on strengthening their virtue perseveringly, they will come to filial love. And I will love them as My children, because with whatever love I am loved, with that love I respond, Pr 8:17. If you love me the way a servant loves a master, I as your master will give you what you have earned, but I will not show Myself to you, for secrets are shared only with a friend who has become one with oneself. Cf Jn 15:15.

“Still, servants can grow because of their virtue and the love they bear their master, even to becoming his very dear friend. So it is with these souls. As long as their love remains mercenary, I do not show Myself to them. But they can, with contempt for their imperfection and with love of virtue, use hatred to dig out the root of their spiritual selfishness. They can sit in judgment on themselves so that motives of slavish fear and mercenary love do not cross their hearts without being corrected in the light of most holy faith. If they act in this way, it will please Me so much that for this they will come to the love of friendship.

“Then I will show Myself to them, just as My Truth said: ‘Those who love me will be one with me and I with them, and I will show myself to them, and we will make our dwelling place together’, Jn 14: 21-23. This is how it is with very dear friends. Their loving affection makes them two bodies with one soul, because love transforms one into what one loves. And if these souls are made one soul with me, nothing can be kept hidden from them. That is why My Truth said: ‘I will come and we will make a dwelling place together’. That is the truth.

61 “Do you know how I show Myself in the soul who loves Me in truth and follows the teaching of this gentle loving Word? I show My strength in many ways, according to her desire, but there are three principal ways.

“The first is My showing of My love and affection in the person of the Word, My Son, through His blood poured out in such burning love. This love is known in two ways. Ordinary people, those who live in ordinary love, know it when they see and experience My love in all the different blessings they receive from Me. But it is known in a special manner by those who have been made My friends. Beyond the knowledge of ordinary love, these taste it and know it and experience it and feel it in their very souls.

“Love’s second showing is simply in souls themselves, when I show Myself to them in loving affection. I do not play favorites, but I do respect holy desire, and I show Myself in souls in proportion to the perfection with which they seek Me. Sometimes I show Myself by giving them the spirit of prophecy and letting them see into the future. This can take many forms, depending on what I see to be their need or that of others.

“At other times – and this is the third showing – I will make them aware of the presence of My Truth, My only-begotten Son, and this in different ways, according to their hunger and their will. Sometimes they seek Me in prayer, wanting to know My power, and I satisfy them by letting them taste and feel My strength. Sometimes they seek Me in the wisdom of My Son, and I satisfy them by setting Him before their mind’s eye. Sometimes they seek Me in the mercy of the Holy Spirit, and then My goodness lets them taste the fire of divine charity by which they conceive true and solid virtues grounded in pure charity for their neighbors.

62 “So you see, My Truth spoke the truth when He said: ‘Those who love me will be one thing with me’. For when you follow His teaching you are united with Him in loving affection. And when you are united with Him, you are united with Me, because He and I are one. And once we are one, I will show Myself to you. So My truth spoke the truth when He said: ‘I will show myself to you’. For when He showed Himself, He showed Me, and when He showed Me, He showed Himself.

63 “Now you have seen what a superb state they are in who have attained the love of friendship. They have

mounted the feet of their affection, and climbed as far as the secret of His heart, and second of the three stairs. I have told you the meaning of the soul's three powers, and now I would suggest to you that the stairs symbolize the three stages through which the soul advances.

“But before I go on to the third stair, I want to show you how a person comes to be My friend, and once My friend, becomes My child by attaining filial love. I want to show you what makes a person My friend, and how you will know that you have become My friend.

“First, I will tell you how a soul comes to be My friend. In the beginning, she was imperfect, living in slavish fear. By dint of practice and perseverance, she came to the love of pleasure and self-advantage, because in Me she found both pleasure and profit. This is the path those must travel who wish to attain perfect love, the love of friendship and filial love.

“Filial love, I tell you, is perfect. For with filial love one receives the inheritance from Me the eternal Father. But no one attains filial love without the love of friendship, and this is why I told you that one progresses from being My friend to becoming My child. But how does one come to this Point? Let me tell you.

“Every perfection and every virtue proceeds from charity. Charity is nourished by humility. And humility comes from knowledge and holy hatred of oneself, i.e. of one's selfish sensuality. To attain charity, you must dwell constantly in the cell of self-knowledge. For in knowing yourself, you will come to know My mercy in the blood of My only-begotten Son, thus drawing My divine charity to yourself with your love. And you must exercise yourself in tearing out every perverse desire, whether spiritual or material, while you are hidden away within your house. This is what Peter and the other disciples did. For Peter wept after he had sinned in denying My Son, Mat 16:75. His weeping was still imperfect, though, and it remained imperfect for forty days, i.e. until after the ascension.

“After My truth returned to Me in His humanity, Peter and the others hid away at home, and waited for the Holy Spirit to come, as My truth had promised He would. They remained locked up because of their fear. For the soul is always afraid until she has attained true love. But they persevered in watching, and in constant humble prayer, until they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they lost all their fear, and they followed and preached Christ crucified, 1 Jn 5:18.

“So it is with the soul who has decided to, or wants to, attain this perfection. After she has risen from the guilt of deadly sin, and recognized herself for what she is, she begins to weep for fear of punishment. But then she rouses herself to ponder My mercy, and in this finds delight and profit for herself. This is imperfect, so to bring her to perfection, after the forty days have passed, I withdraw from the soul now and again, but in feeling only, not in grace.

“My truth showed this when He said to the disciples: ‘I will go away, and I will return to you’, Jn 14:28, and so it was. For when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, He came too. For as I told you earlier, the Holy Spirit did not come alone. He came with My power, and with the wisdom of the Son, Who is one with Me, and with His own mercy, proceeding from name, the Father, and from the Son. So I tell you, it is to make the soul rise from imperfection that I withdraw from her feelings, and deprive her of the comfort she had known. ...

Commentary

This description, using the image of God withdrawing, is a fine account of God's love purifying us of mere feel-

ings. God goes beyond feelings to our profound depths: to our intellect and will. God's love is entire, complete, and can't stop on surface emotions. There is more detail in the rest of dialog 63, and in 64. But on to more love.

Yet More Love

I hope you're not exhausted by God's inexhaustible love. Catherine says more than we can cover about God's love poured forth in torrents upon us. Let us examine how His love pours through the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation . All Catherine's symbols synthesize into one glorious picture of God's love for us.

Dialog 66

... "The soul opens her mind's eye with the light of faith and with her affection steeped in the fullness of My charity made visible in the sight of My only-begotten Son, Who showed it with His blood. That blood inebriates the soul. It clothes her in the fire of divine charity. It gives her the food of the sacrament that I have set up for you in the hostel of the mystic body of holy Church, the body and the blood of My Son, wholly God and wholly human, given to holy Church to be ministered by the hands of My vicar, who holds the key to this blood.

"This is the hostel I had mentioned to you that stands on the bridge to dispense the food to strengthen the pilgrim travelers who go the way of my Truth's teaching, so that weakness will not cause them to fall. This food gives more or less strength according to the desire of those who receive it, whether they receive it sacramentally or virtually. 'Sacramentally' means one communicating in the holy Sacrament. 'Virtually' means communicating through holy desire, both in longing for communion and in esteem for the blood of Christ crucified. In other words, one is communicating sacramentally in the loving charity one finds and tastes in the blood because one sees that it was shed through love. And so the soul is inebriated and set on fire and sated with holy longing, finding herself filled completely with love of Me and of her neighbors.

"Where did the soul learn this? In the house of self-knowledge, in holy prayer. There she lost her imperfection, just as the disciples and Peter lost their imperfection, and learned perfection by staying inside in watchful prayer. How? Through perseverance seasoned with most holy faith. But do not think that such ardor and nourishment is to be had from vocal prayer alone, as many souls believe. Their prayer consists more in words than in affection, and they seem to be concerned only to complete their multitude of psalms and to say a great many Our Fathers. When they have finished the number they have set themselves to say, they seem to think of nothing more. It seems they place the whole purpose of prayer in what is said vocally. But that is not how they should act, for if that is all they do, they will draw little fruit from it, and will please Me little.

Dialog 72

"I have told you this so that you and My other servants may follow the path of virtue for love of Me and for no other reason. Those whose love is imperfect, who love Me for My gifts and not for Myself the giver, can be, and often are, deluded in these ways. But the soul who has entered in truth into the house of self-knowledge, practicing perfect prayer and rousing herself from the imperfect love that goes with imperfect prayer, receives Me in loving affection. She seeks to draw to herself the milk of My tenderness from the breast of the teaching of Christ crucified.

"When a soul has reached the third stage, the love of friendship and filial love, her love is no longer mercenary. Rather she does as very close friends do when one receives gift from the other. The receiver doesn't look just at the gift, but at the heart and the love of the giver, and accepts and treasures the gift only because of the friend's affectionate love. So the soul, when she has reached the third stage of perfect love, when she receives My gifts and graces, does not look only at gifts, but with her mind's eye looks at the affectionate charity of Me, the

Giver.

“And so that you might have no excuse for not looking at My affection, I found a way to unite gift and giver: I joined the divine nature with the human. I gave you the Word, My only-begotten Son, Who is one with Me, and I with Him, and because of this union, you cannot look at My gift without looking at Me, the Giver. See then with what affectionate love you ought to love and desire both the gift and the giver! If you do, your love will be pure and genuine, and not mercenary. This is how it is with those who keep themselves always shut up in the house of self-knowledge.”

Dialog 74-75

“Now it remains to say how one can tell that a soul has attained perfect love. The sign is the same as that given to the holy disciples after they had received the Holy Spirit. They left the house and fearlessly preached My message by proclaiming the teaching of the Word, My only-begotten Son. They had no fear of suffering. No, they even gloried in suffering, Acts 2:4; 5: 41. It did not worry them to go before the tyrants of the world to proclaim the truth to them, for the glory and praise of my name.

“So it is with the soul who has waited for Me in self-knowledge. I come back to her with the fire of My charity. In that charity she conceived the virtues through perseverance when she stayed at home, sharing in My power. And in that power and virtue, she mastered and conquered her selfish sensual passion. In that same charity, I shared with her the wisdom of My Son, and in that wisdom she was, and came to know, with her mind’s eye, My truth, and the delusions of spiritual sensuality, that is, the imperfect love of one’s own consolation. And she came to know the malice and deceit the devil works on the soul who is bound up in that imperfect love. So she rose up in contempt of that imperfection, and in love for perfection.

“I gave her a share in this love, which is the Holy Spirit, within her will by making her will strong to endure suffering and to leave her house, in My name, to give birth to the virtues for her neighbors. Not that she abandons the house of self-knowledge, but the virtues conceived by the impulse of love come forth from that house. She give birth to them as her neighbors need them, in many different ways. For the fear she had of not showing herself, lest she lose her own consolation, is gone. After she has come to perfect, free, love, she lets go of herself, and comes out, as I have described.

“And this brings her to the fourth stage. That is, after the third stage, the stage of perfection in which she both tastes and gives birth to charity in the person of her neighbor, she is graced with a final stage of perfect union with him. These two stages are linked together, for the one is never found without the other, any more than charity for Me can exist without charity for one’s neighbors, or the latter without charity for Me. The one cannot be separated from the other. Even so, neither of these two stages can exist without the other.

75 ... “There is a second way the soul receives this baptism of blood, figuratively speaking. This My divine charity provided because I know how people sin because of their weakness. Not that weakness or anything else can force them to sin if they do not want to, but being weak, they do fall into deadly sin, and lose the grace they had drawn from the power of the blood in holy baptism. So My divine charity had to leave them an ongoing baptism of blood accessible by heartfelt contrition and a holy confession as soon as they can confess to My ministers who hold the key to the blood. This blood the priest pours over the soul in absolution.

“But if they cannot confess, heartfelt contrition is enough for the hand of My mercy to give them the fruit of this precious blood. Still, if they can, I want then to confess.”

Dialog 78

“Now I would not refrain from telling you with what delight these souls enjoy Me while still in their mortal bodies. For having arrived at the third stage, they now reach the fourth. Not that they leave the third. The two are joined together, nor can the one exist without the other, any more than charity for Me without charity for your neighbor. But there is a fruit that comes from this third stage, from the soul’s perfect union with Me. She receives strength upon strength, until she no longer merely suffers with patience, but eagerly longs to suffer for the glory and praise of My name.

“Such souls glory in the shame of My only-begotten Son, as My trumpeter the glorious Paul said: ‘I glory in the hardships and shame of Christ crucified’, 2 Col 12:9-10. And in another place he says: ‘I bear in my body the marks of Christ crucified’, Gal 6:17. So these also run to the table of the most holy cross, in love with My love, and hungry for the food of souls. They want to be of service to their neighbors in pain and suffering, and to learn and preserve the virtues while bearing the marks of Christ in their bodies. In other words, their anguished love shines forth in their bodies, evidenced in their contempt for themselves, and in their delight in shame as they endure difficulties and suffering however and from whatever source I grant them.”

Commentary

As these quotes from *Dialog* indicate, Catherine used her secrets to work out a complete view of spiritual life. Her profound fundamental insights enabled her to understand minute details, and fit them all together. All begins and ends in love. This divine charity shows most clearly in the life death and resurrection of Jesus. That’s why Catherine says that; “the fullness of My charity made visible in the sight of My only-begotten Son, Who showed it with His blood”. This perfect outpouring of divine love in the visible blood invites our falling in love with such a God. “That blood inebriates the soul the soul. It clothes her in the fire of divine charity.” This fascinating infinite love drives us into excesses of love that resemble being drunk, and set us afire, as if clothed in Love Himself. Her many mystical experiences convinced Catherine that this is God’s will for all of us.

But what will sustain us in this wicked world? “the food of the sacrament what I have set up for you in the hostel of the mystic body of holy Church, the body and the blood of My Son, wholly God and wholly human, given to holy Church to be ministered by the hands of My vicar, who holds the key to this blood.” What a load of holy meaning in those two sentences. The food of Christ-life is Christ Himself, given under the appearance of bread and wine, dispensed by the Pope and his helpers the priests. The Eucharist is the key to this blood. Communion at Mass sustains us in our trials and temptations. What a gift! What bread of angels provided for us men!

Catherine reminds us that she described this sacrament in the Christ-bridge symbol. It’s the hostel dispensing food to support those who run along the infinite bridge to God. The usual way to receive this nourishment is in Mass at Communion. This is the sacramental presence of Christ. When we are prevented from this reception, we can receive Jesus virtually by holy desire. If we long for communion and esteem the body and blood of Christ crucified, we can obtain spiritual sustenance. This participation in Christ-love enflames our love, and supports our lives of service to God, Whom we can’t see, by serving His people, who are all too visible.

Receiving Christ, Who is Love Incarnated “is communicating sacramentally in the loving charity one finds and tastes in the blood because one sees that it was shed through love. And so the soul is inebriated and set on fire and sated with holy longing, finding herself filled completely with love or Me and of her neighbors.” Catherine experienced this spiritual fire that detached her from ordinary things rather like drunk people detach. The big difference is that drunk people detach by losing contact, while spiritual people detach by gaining contact. Drunk

people fail to register what's happening, while spiritual people register more than creaturely happenings. Besides, there's no hangover from spiritual expansion. Because God made us in His image and likeness, and we unify with Him, we finally get the satisfaction we're built for. It's a foretaste of ultimate satisfaction: heaven.

Some people experience this union with God during Eucharist, but are not aware what it is. They just love to receive communion. The place to learn all about what's happening in this sacrament is in prayer, the house of self-knowledge, where the soul looks into the mirror of God present in love. Catherine describes how prayer makes us real by removing illusions (losing imperfections), and growing into Christ-life (holy faith). She relates our limited responses to the fuller inspiration of the Apostles. Prayer begins with vocal recitation of memorized statements, but grows into person-to-person conversations with God. There are many steps to take, but the final condition is contemplative gazing at each other, growing in love by God's infinite presence.

Catherine emphasizes love because that's the core secret to all spiritual life. All our efforts aim at loving Love Himself just because He is Love. "But the soul who has entered in truth into the house of self-knowledge, practicing perfect prayer and rousing herself from the imperfect love that goes with imperfect prayer, receives Me in loving affection. She seeks to draw to herself the milk of My tenderness from the breast of the teaching of Christ crucified." As the psalm says "deep calls unto deep", Ps 42:7. The adapted meaning of this statement is that our created deep soul yearning calls out to God's uncreated depth of love. Prayer is being real to this deep yearning, to this union-to-be, that is becoming during prayer, and will be completed when we enter heaven. It's completed in the sense that it becomes irrevocable at that point. As Catherine says, the size of our container for Love is fixed, but the freshness of love increases eternally, since God is infinite. We cannot exhaust Truth, Good, and Beauty Himself. So we continue to call, deep to deep, but in a perfected way yet to be.

Love expands beyond all limits, even here among humans. The person who genuinely loves another finds that this other becomes another self. So the self of the lover expands to include the qualities of the beloved, and vice versa. Love is bigger than both of us, the poet says. The resulting friendship is massively more love than either lover could provide. Being accepted as another self by the beloved increases the range of our being, just as we increase the range of the beloved. This multiplying effect is hard to consider because we can't find its limits. In the case of creatures, we know it's limited, but when we love God, we enter the real deep of infinite love. His willingness to unite with us lifts us to infinity. His quality becomes ours in some way that we can spend eternity exploring. We will never finish appreciating infinite Love, Who makes us one with Him.

At this stage, which Catherine calls the third one, merged with the fourth, the beloved becomes most important. The lover no longer wants anything from the beloved except to be one with the beloved. So Catherine reminds us that the soul's love "is no longer mercenary. Rather she does as very close friends do when one receives gift from the other. The receiver doesn't look just at the gift, but at the heart and the love of the giver, and accepts and treasures the gift only because of the friend's affectionate love. So the soul, when she has reached the third stage of perfect love, when she receives My gifts and graces, does not look only at gifts, but with her mind's eye looks at the affectionate charity of Me, the Giver." What a fine way to express this infinite relationship!

Genius that He is, God created the perfect way to invite our love. "And so that you might have no excuse for not looking at My affection, I found a way to unite gift and giver: I joined the divine nature with the human. I gave you the Word, My only-begotten Son, Who is one with Me, and I with Him, and because of this union, you cannot look at My gift without looking at Me, the Giver. See then with what affectionate love you ought to love and desire both the gift and the giver! If you do, your love will be pure and genuine, and not mercenary. This is how it is with those who keep themselves always shut up in the house of self-knowledge." What more to say!

Catherine says that the remaining point is: “Now it remains to say how one can tell that a soul has attained perfect love. The sign is the same as that given to the holy disciples after they had received the Holy Spirit. They left the house and fearlessly preached My message by proclaiming the teaching of the Word, My only-begotten Son. They had no fear of suffering. No, they even gloried in suffering, Acts 2:4; 5: 41. It did not worry them to go before the tyrants of the world to proclaim the truth to them, for the glory and praise of my name.” Catherine always goes to what exists, for that is most real. Existing love acts like Jesus. Jesus went out fearlessly to all the people. He is our example. We imitate Him. In the measure that the apostles and disciples imitated Him, they demonstrated their love. We come along 2000 years later, but do the same, if we love God.

God’s love exists, and makes all creation exist. If our love exists, it makes loving things happen. Among the loving things that we make happen, the best is serving our fellow humans. To serve as Christ served. God enflames our hearts with this loving service. The Father by creating us, the Son by redeeming us, and the Holy Spirit by sustaining us in service to others. Along the way, suffering is inevitable, so the Spirit sustains us in the troubles that are unavoidable on the way to making our love exist. “After she has come to perfect, free, love, she lets go of herself, and comes out, as I have described.” Perfect, free, love exists in serving all those around us.

“And this brings her to the fourth stage...., the stage of perfection in which she both tastes and gives birth to charity in the person of her neighbor, she is graced with a final stage of perfect union with him. These two stages are linked together, for the one is never found without the other, any more than charity for Me can exist without charity for one’s neighbors, or the latter without charity for Me.” Genuine love is service to the people around us. The more we accept this love, the more serviceable we are. Think of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. All the saints exemplify this creative service. They find ways to share the Christ-life in them with every person they can reach. Catherine shone as a magnificent example of living for others. Her love attracted thousands of people. Some of these folks joined the Dominican order. Others prayed with her, recorded her prayers, and shared God.

Catherine considers the details, and reviews them in Dialog. Starting with redemptive Baptism, we share in Christ’s blood. Then we pour His blood upon us to cleanse us of sin by Confession. Once cleansed, we partake of His blood in the Eucharist. Dialog 75 emphasizes confession. Wherever we are on Christ-bridge, we can profit by applying Christ’s blood to wash and to nourish ourselves. Then we can get right back into existence, serving others. As we do this, our service in the image and likeness of Christ, increases our love.

Our biggest distraction from this Christ-life, from advancing along Christ-bridge, is serious suffering. We often imagine that once we reform, and avoid the horrors of sin, pain will no longer affect us. This is not a wise approach to life. Jesus suffered more than the movie Passion could depict. If we love Jesus, we must not be frightened by the necessary suffering of life. It’s unavoidable anyway, so we might as well use suffering to be like Christ. If we overcome the distraction of suffering, and employ it to unite with the Suffering Savior, then we arrive at the top of the three steps. Here we breathe together with Jesus. His exhalation is our inhalation. This intimate sharing of breath represents spiritual union. Catherine expresses the result of this as fruit.

“But there is a fruit that comes from this third stage, from the soul’s perfect union with Me. She receives strength upon strength, until she no longer merely suffers with patience, but eagerly longs to suffer for the glory and praise of My name. Such souls glory in the shame of My only-begotten Son, as My trumpeter the glorious Paul said: ‘I glory in the hardships and shame of Christ crucified’, 2 Col 12:9-10. And in another place he says: ‘I bear in my body the marks of Christ crucified’, Gal 6:17. So these also run to the table of the most holy cross,

in love with My love, and hungry for the food of souls. They want to be of service to their neighbors in pain and suffering, and to learn and preserve the virtues while bearing the marks of Christ in their bodies. In other words, their anguished love shines forth in their bodies, evidenced in their contempt for themselves, and in their delight in shame as they endure difficulties and suffering however and from whatever source I grant them.”

This is the mark, out there in existing events, of genuine love. If suffering makes us happy, then we have arrived at perfect union with God. Then we are as happy in agony as Jesus was. The agony did not distract Jesus, nor should our lower degree of suffering distract us. Instead, we carry through whatever happens because the core of all happenings is union with God. He Who is Love has become our love. Love has become our life. So any amount of pain is a joy because God has provided our existence out of His love, and we have accepted that existence for His love. Our little love unites us with His infinite love, and nothing else matters. Love that looks beyond agony is the real thing. Love even rejoices in suffering because love applies it to unite with the beloved.

Some sessions back, we noted that mother-love is a fine example of this at our low level of existence. Mom does not mind child-birth because she loves her child. Her love includes her husband, other children, parents who will be grandparents again with this child. Love imposes no limits. Love explodes past all restrictions. So we celebrate mother-love, and hope to extend it. God-love is even less limited. God-love is infinite. Amazing as it is, God applies His love to us, and invites us to join in Him by loving as He loves. This is the basic secret of all Christ-life, and Catherine expresses it consistently in her *Dialog*. What could be better? How'd we improve?

I propose to you that we can improve by extending God's perfectly infinite love to ourselves first. So that we see His Love in the mirror which He is. There we will learn the unity of the Father and Son, and the great gift of both in Christ, Who reveals to us the Holy Spirit. All three involve themselves with us in perfect love. If we accept this immense gift, then we can share it with those around us. They so need Love Himself that our improvements will make huge differences. Try it; you'll like it.

Last Session with Catherine

I'm sad to leave our interactions with Catherine. She is so loving, so refreshing, so encouraging, and so enlightening, that I miss her. She's a great friend to have, and I hope that you will be with her often. I recommend her other writings as well. She provides us with many more insights than I have reviewed for you. She offers several more delightful images to help us along the Christ-bridge. We're thankful for her conclusion to the *Dialog*.

Dialog 166

God the Father speaks: “Now, dearest daughter, whom I so love, I have satisfied your desire from your first request right up to this last about obedience. If you remember well, in the beginning you asked me with restless longing, and it was I who made you ask in order to make the fire of My charity grow within your soul. ...

“I also showed you, to enlighten you even more with My Truth, how the bridge is mounted by three stairs, the soul's three powers, and concerning this Word, the bridge I showed you, I also used these three stairs as an image of His body. In His feet, His open side, and His mouth, I in tern suggested three spiritual stages: the imperfect, the perfect, and finally the most perfect state in which the soul attains the excellence of unitive love. At each stage, I showed you clearly what it is that takes away the soul's imperfection, and makes her attain perfection, what is the way by which she travels, and what are the hidden deceits of the devil, and her own spiritual selfishness. And in these stages, I spoke to you about the three reproaches My mercy gives. The first, I told you, is given during this life. The second is given at death to those who are dying in deadly sin without hope; I told you that these travel beneath the bridge along the way of the devil, and I told you about their miseries. The third

reproach is that of the final general judgment. And I told you something of the punishment of the damned and the glory of the blessed, when all will have back the endowment of their body. ...

“Now, in conclusion, I the eternal Father, supreme eternal Truth, am telling you that in the obedience of the Word, My only-begotten Son, you have life. Just as all of you contracted death from the first man, so all of you who are willing to carry the key of obedience have contracted life from the new man, the gentle Christ Jesus. I made of Him a bridge for you because the road to heaven had been destroyed. If you travel along this delightful straight way, which is a lightsome truth, holding the key of obedience, you will pass through the world’s darkness without stumbling. And in the end, you will unlock heaven with the Word’s key.” ...

167 Catherine: “Now that soul had seen the truth & excellence of obedience with the eye of her understanding, & had known it by the light of most holy faith; she had heard it with feeling, tasted it with anguished longing in her will as she gazed into the divine majesty. So she gave Him thanks, saying: “Thanks, thanks be to You eternal Father, that You have not despised me, your handiwork, not turned Your face from me, nor make light of these desires of mine. You, Light, have disregarded my darksomeness. You, Life have not considered that I am death, nor You Doctor, considered these my grave weaknesses. You, eternal Purity, disregarded my wretched filthiness. You, Infinite, have overlooked the fact that I am finite. You, Wisdom, overlooked my foolishness.

“For all these, and so many other endless evils and sins of mine, Your wisdom, Your kindness, Your mercy, Your infinite goodness, have not despised me. No, in Your light, You have given me light. In Your wisdom, I have come to know the truth; in Your mercy, I have found Your charity and affection for my neighbors. What has compelled You? Not my virtues, but only Your charity.

“Let this same love compel you to enlighten the eye of my understanding with the light of faith, so that I may know Your truth, which you have revealed to me. Let my memory be great enough to hold Your favors, and set my will ablaze in Your charity’s fire. Let that fire burst the seed of my body, and bring forth blood, then with that blood, given for love of Your blood, and with the key of obedience, let me unlock heaven’s gate. I heartily ask the same of You for every reasoning creature, all and each of them, and for the mystic body of holy Church. I acknowledge and do not deny that You loved me before I existed, and that You love me unspeakably much, as one gone mad over your creature.

“O eternal Trinity! O Godhead! That Godhead, Your divine nature, gave the prince of Your Son’s blood its value. You, eternal Trinity, are a deep sea. The more I enter You, the more I discover, and the more I discover, the more I seek You. You are insatiable, You in Whose depth the soul is sated, yet remains always hungry for You, thirst for You, eternal trinity, longing to see You with the light in Your light. Just as the deer longs for the fountain of living water, Ps 47:2-3, so does my soul long to escape from the prison of my darksome body, and see you in truth. O how long will you hide your face from my eyes?

“O eternal Trinity, fire and abyss of charity, dissolve this very day the cloud of my body! I am driven to desire, in the knowledge of Yourself that You have given me in Your truth, to leave behind the weight of this body of mine, and give my life for the glory and praise of Your name. For by the light of understanding within Your light, I have tasted and see Your depth, eternal Trinity, and the beauty of Your creation. Then, when I considered myself in You, I saw that I am Your image. You have gifted me with power from Yourself, eternal father, and my understanding with Your wisdom – such wisdom as is proper to Your only-begotten Son and the Holy Spirit, Who proceeds from You and from Your Son, and has given me a will, and so I am able to love.

“You, eternal Trinity, are the craftsman, and I Your handiwork have come to know that You are in love with the beauty of what You have made, since You made of me a new creation in the blood of Your Son. O abyss! O eternal Godhead! O deep sea! What more could You have given me than the gift of Your every self! You are a fire always burning, but never consuming. You are a fire consuming in Your heat all the soul’s selfish love. You are a fire lifting all chill, and giving light. In your light, You have made me know Your Truth. You are that light beyond all light Who gives the mind’s eye supernatural light in such fullness and perfection that You bring clarity to the light of faith. In that faith, I see that my soul has life, and in that light receives You Who are Light.

“In the light of faith, I gain wisdom in the wisdom of the Word Your Son. In the light of faith, I am strong, constant, persevering. In the light of faith, I have hope. It does not let me faint along the way. This light teaches me the way, and without this light I would be walking in the dark. This is why I asked You, eternal father, to enlighten me with the light of most holy faith.

“Truth this light is a sea, for it nourishes the soul in You, peaceful sea, eternal Trinity. Its water is not sluggish, so the soul is not afraid, because she knows the truth. It distills, revealing hidden things, so that here, where the most abundant light of Your faith abounds, the soul has, as it were, a guarantee of what she believes. This water is a mirror in which You, eternal trinity, grant me knowledge; for when I look into this mirror, holding it in the hand of love, it shows me myself, as Your creation, in You, and You in me through the union You have brought about of the Godhead with out humanity.

“This light shows You; in this light I know You, highest & infinite Good: Good above every good, joyous Good, Good beyond measure & understanding! Beauty above all beauty: Wisdom above all Wisdom – indeed You are Wisdom itself! You Who are the angels’ food, are given to humans with burning love. You, garment Who cover all nakedness, pasture the starving within Your sweetness, for You are sweet without trace of bitterness.

“O eternal trinity, when I received with the light of most holy faith Your light that You gave me, I came to know therein the way of great perfection, made smooth for me by so many wonderful explanations. Thus I may serve you in the light, not in the dark; and I may be a mirror of a good and holy life; and I may rouse myself from my wretched life in which, always through my own fault, I have served you in darkness. I did not know Your truth, and so I did not love it. Why did I not know You? Because I did not see You with the glorious light of most holy faith, since the cloud of selfish love darkened the eye of my understanding. Then with Your light, eternal trinity, you dispelled the darkness.

“But who could reach to Your height to thank You for so immeasurable a gift, for such generous favors, for the teaching of truth that You have given me? A special grace, this, beyond the common grace You give to other creatures. You willed to bend down to my need, and that of others who might see themselves mirrored here. You responded, Lord. You Yourself have given, and You Yourself answered, and satisfied me by flooding me with a gracious light, so that with that light I may return thanks to You. Clothe, clothe me with Yourself, eternal truth, so that I may run the course of this mortal life in true obedience, and in the light of most holy faith. With that light I sense my soul once again becoming drunk! Thanks be to God! Amen.

Commentary

Catherine concludes by reviewing God’s answers to all four of her main questions. The primary answer is how profoundly He loves her. Because we identify with her in these dialogs, we know that God also loves us infinitely. By prayer, dwelling in the house of self-knowledge, and looking at the mirror of God within us, we come to know Christ-bridge, and how to advance up the three steps, and across the infinite gap to God. Our review of

Dialog did not include the reproaches that God alludes to in the second paragraph. Also omitted for lack of time to deal with all her themes, were the many descriptions of sinful pride, and the tears we should shed for our personal sins, and those of our family, friends and neighbors. Later on, perhaps, you can investigate those themes.

God's description clarifies that life is a love story, all about uniting our wills with His. He wills our best growth and development into union with Him. When we will along with Him, we experience fullness of being proportional to our present condition, and prophetic of our eternal condition. The bliss of growing in love with God often sends Catherine into gushing gratitude, and praise to God Almighty. Equating wills is a way to say obedience. Catherine's symbol for this is the key, the precious key that Christ refurbished, and provided for us to use to regain oneness with God. If we obey because we love, then our love explodes into more and more love, which eventually culminates in total merging of our wills with God's. This satisfies. This union perfects us. It is precisely what God wants, and what we want. Our wants are the same. As we coordinate wills, our actions become the same, and eventually we unite in perfect harmony. This conclusion expresses that union marvelously.

In dialog 167, Catherine bursts into ecstatic thanksgiving. Though humans would have turned away from her, God has loved her so mightily that He continued to pursue her, and to eventually woo her. When she responded freely by loving Him in return, their unity expanded without limits. This is precisely our infinite desire for Infinity Himself. Only He can satisfy our infinite need. As He progressively satisfies us, we increase our capacity for Him, as if we were breaking apart from the fullness of Him He grants to us. Because all this is so far from our daily enterprise, it appears mad. Most people think that Catherine is crazy for being so in love with God. So she refers to Him as her mad lover, because He does more than any human could expect from any other lover.

God the Son became a man for love of us. He Who is entirely sinless took all our sins upon Himself, so that He could pay the price for them all. The wages of sin is death, so He died for love of us. Since He is infinite God, He made infinite satisfaction for all sins. All we need to do is accept this loving gift, and we are washed clean. Instead of these abstractions, Catherine refers to His blood washing our sins away. The blood of the innocent lamb cleans us entirely. But this cleansing depends upon our free acceptance of God's free gift. When we accept, we give our sins away to Jesus Who died for love of us. What a great gift from God. How much we should rejoice in this gift, and celebrate that Love Himself provided it. Catherine ring forth hymns of thanksgiving.

She longs to be one with this Mad Lover, and hopes to throw herself totally into the holocaust of infinite Love. But, as God wills her to remain on earth, and she loves God, she loves to unite her will with His. So she stays here to serve Him in His beloved children, us. All the fragments of our faith that we have learned piecemeal come together in Catherine's synthesis. With that unified vision, we can see unity, and can expand that unity without limit. Such is God's will, which we obey because we love Him and strive to please Him. Rejoice! Such love is much too vigorous for any symbol besides fire. Fire unites with the wood it burns, activating the inert wood to serve up heat and light. So God's love activates our true being, bring it alive to produce worthwhile results by loving along with Love Himself. Thus we attain so much truth that we become wise. Wisdom unites all the particles of truth that we have learned, to imitate Truth Himself. Faith is our light on this path to Truth, and faith enflames hope that we shall attain Truth ever more fully.

This light is so vast that it is a sea, and like a sea it nourishes the soul. The sea is God, and God is our nourishment. He is also our mirror, so that when we look at our true selves, we see His image and likeness. This is our deepest self, where we see Him in us, and us in Him. The sea is infinite, as is the mirror. That's perfect, since we images and likenesses of God can be satisfied with no less than infinite God. In her final hymn to her beloved God, Catherine summarizes all that she has taught in *Dialog*. She provides a full account, distilled down to the

most important central theme: love. Love is true, good, and beautiful because God is Love, and He is Truth, Goodness and Beauty Himself. He reveals Himself in His beloved Son, Who reveals God's inner life.

This life is a Trinity of loving persons showing the unity of God as one being, so simple that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct in their unity and unified in their distinctions. The Nicene Creed develops this relationship as well as language allows. Athanasius of Alexandria wrote that creed to correct many errors floating around in 325 AD. Catherine uses different expressions, depending more upon the heart than the brain, but celebrating the same Trinity. Catherine emerges from the darkness of Original Sin through baptism, then escapes the shadows of personal sin by confession, to let the light of faith shine. As it shines, she follows so that she can advance ever across in the infinite gap between her and God. Thanks be to Him, He provides an infinite bridge in Christ, Who whisks us across what we cannot traverse on our own. None of us could "reach to Your height to thank You for so immeasurable a gift". But Jesus does that infinite job for us, and takes us to God.

Though we do not deserve this blessing, God gives it as perfectly free gift. If we freely accept it, we can stride along the bridge with Christ's protection and nourishment, and let Him take us to heaven. So Catherine asks God to clothe her with Himself, a neat way to say that we want to become God. Just as Athanasius said long ago: God became man so that man can become God. Without this Christ-bridge, we would remain infinitely away from God. With this Christ-bridge, we can unite with God. He initiates this loving union, and invites us to accept that invitation. If we do, then He takes us to Himself. This completes the circle from Creator to creature, made for the Creator, back to Creator. Glory and praise to God, Whose infinite love cannot be restrained.

As she completes her summary, she finds herself elevated into ecstasy again. In simple symbolic terms, her soul is once again becoming drunk! She could go on and on, but this is the end of *Dialog*. No doubt, you have found her presentation rich in spiritual secrets, and are enlightened. Her loving way to say all this has probably enlivened you as well. That's a great combination of ingredients, from which you can enrich your spiritual life. If you do, then Catherine has loved you across the 631 years since her death, and you can love her in return. This is great practice for loving God, Who reaches across infinity to love you, so that you can love Him in return.