

*The Christian Meaning of Suffering:
As Found in the Writings of*



St. Catherine of Siena

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**THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF SUFFERING:
AS FOUND IN THE WRITINGS OF
ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA**

by

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FOREWARD

Dear friends, the culmination of my academic work in completing the License in Spiritual Theology was writing a thesis on the writings of St. Catherine of Siena. As the title of the thesis indicates, the focus was to explore her own spirituality through the lens of suffering. Over the years, several people have asked for a copy of this work. Now that I have a page on my blog to host pastoral letters, I thought it would be helpful to now add this thesis to allow greater access to whomever may be interested.

This paper has not been updated or edited since it was submitted in 1995. Some images have been added as an enhancement; one of St. Catherine and a series of pictures which depict the Corporal Works of Mercy. Since St. Catherine's spirituality revolved around an ever growing love of God as manifested in the love of neighbor, it seems these images would be a good way to compliment this academic writing. The images are pictures I took of windows which are in the school library of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton parish in Anchorage, Alaska.

Papers submitted as a thesis are typically not published, so I am happy to now make this available on this blog, along with the pastoral letters written during my episcopal ministry.

St. Catherine of Siena, Pray for us!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul D. Etienne". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "P" and "E".

Most Reverend Paul D. Etienne, DD, STL
Archbishop of Seattle

Feast of St. Catherine of Siena
29 April 2021

INTRODUCTION

People too often today avoid suffering rather than embrace it. Suffering is looked upon as an evil that needs to be eliminated from human experience. If people view this world as the be all and end all of existence, it is easy to see why they avoid suffering. However, Christians view this world as passing, not the final goal, and not the only experience of life. This places suffering in an entirely new light. For Christians, the source of this Light is none other than Jesus Christ. Christ alone answers the ultimate mysteries surrounding the life issues of suffering, dying and death.

Though Christ was incarnate, and lived a human life, many feel he had a distinct advantage, as the Son of God, in bearing his many hardships and sufferings. Even though such thinking is flawed, it is impossible to attribute this “benefit” to the saints. They, too, were human, and by God’s grace (which is just as readily available to all men and women today as it was in the past), were capable of bearing their burdens out of love for God and the well being of their neighbors. The teaching and example of these saints can shed great light on the meaning of suffering.

One such shining star has passed through this world, but her brilliance remains, and can still penetrate the darkness that all people experience in the midst of suffering. This saint is Catherine of Siena, one of only two women Doctors of the Church. Her doctrine teaches that instead of running from suffering one should embrace it as a gift from a loving God. Suffering is an invitation to love; it sets the stage for great acts of love.

There are many forms of suffering known to the world. There are wars, famines and incurable diseases such as AIDS and cancer. There are the economically marginalized who

suffer from lack of food, housing, and medical care. There is social deterioration causing many to suffer from violence, the break up of the family, child abuse, and abortion. This list barely reveals the countless forms of suffering known to humankind.

In short, suffering is a part of what it means to be human. Some suffering is a direct result of the sinful choices people make, which causes suffering in their lives, and regrettably, directly results in the suffering of others. Some experience more suffering than others, but each and every person in this life will experience suffering in some shape or form.

This study will not answer the question of why there is suffering in the world, but it will seek to provide instruction for a proper, Christian response to suffering. Christians must embrace their suffering freely and lovingly because it entails several positive elements. For those who endure it willingly, out of love, it is an occasion of great grace for both themselves and their neighbors. The trials permitted people in this life conform them more closely to the image of Christ crucified. Suffering is an invitation to grow in virtue and love, thus holiness.

A review of the reality of suffering is essential precisely because there is so much suffering in the world today. For a greater appreciation of this reality and the role it plays in the human situation, there is need to place the discussion in the context of God's love. The aim of this study will be to place the contemporary discussion of suffering, in the light of St. Catherine's teaching. Within this study, a review of Christ's incarnation, passion, death and resurrection serves as a framework to examine Catherine's thought. These same mysteries serve as the bold backdrop to present Catherine's teaching as something relevant today.

ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA (1347-1380)

St. Catherine of Siena lived in a tumultuous time. The Church in the fourteenth century stood in great need of reform. Spiritual prestige and papal authority had crumbled. Between the years of 1305 and 1378, Avignon became the seat of the papal court, ignoring centuries of strong, traditional ties to Rome. The French kings during this time held no small amount of control over the popes, while growing secular influences infiltrated the papal court. Bishops sought benefices and financial gain more than the spiritual welfare of their people. Affected by the pursuit of worldly wealth and often uneducated, many priests were incapable of celebrating the sacraments in a reverent and respectable manner. Preaching and teaching, where they existed, lacked the necessary caliber of excellence to instill and sustain the faith. Monastic spiritual life and practice decreased sharply during this time. St. Catherine was one of many who called for reform and she worked diligently to answer the challenge.

The Italian peninsula during the time of St. Catherine consisted of numerous city states, including the papal states. There were great tensions between these republics, and St. Catherine worked tirelessly for unity among them. Gifted not only with spiritual fortitude, but political prowess as well, she traveled on numerous occasions to Pisa, Florence, Luca and other cities and provinces around Siena to preach and call for reconciliation.

In 1376 she journeyed to Avignon for a meeting with Pope Gregory XI. She focused on strengthening relations between the Papacy and Florence, Church reform, the crusade, and urging the Pope's return to Rome. Though this particular trip to Avignon was considered a failure on most accounts, her efforts along with the prompting of many other people, bore fruit in late 1376, when Gregory XI departed from Avignon for Rome. In the final years of her life,

after years of personal effort and sacrifice offered for the unity of the Church, she undoubtedly must have suffered greatly to witness the beginning of the Great Western Schism in 1378.

St. Catherine staunchly supported the papacy, and called the Pope “sweet Christ on earth.” She dedicated much energy, physical and spiritual, to head off a separation between the republics of the Italian peninsula and the papacy. She longed for unity within the Church and did much to promote a crusade, seeing it as a way to bring an end to the fighting among Christians and expel the Muslims from Europe.¹

In addition to the Church, the secular world also knew much suffering. War, famine, and plagues occurred quite regularly in fourteenth century Italy. St. Catherine had first hand experience of all these sufferings within her home town of Siena, and responded with an apostolic zeal to do all she could to bring about relief. On the practical level, she provided food, clothing, medical care, shelter and personal comfort to those in need. On a spiritual level, she appealed with humble and constant prayers to the Lord out of love for him and a desire for the salvation of his people. She not only challenged her followers to live virtuous lives, but she instructed them through the example of her own charitable and generous life.

St. Catherine not only suffered because of the sorry state of the Church and the suffering of the world around her, but also because of her own life experience. She was the twenty-fourth

¹ Pope John Paul II, “St. Catherine burned with love for the Church,” L’Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English, N. 7 (1378), 15 February, 1995, p. 2, in his Sunday Angelus address, February 12, 1995, referred to St. Catherine’s preaching of a crusade in the following words: “Of course, we must recognize that she was also a daughter of her time, when, justly eager to defend the holy places, she adopted the then prevailing mentality that this task could be accomplished even by recourse to fighting. Today we ought to be grateful to the Spirit of God, who has enabled us to understand ever more clearly that the appropriate way to deal with problems that can arise in relations between peoples, religions and cultures, one which is also most in harmony with the Gospel, is that of patient, firm and respectful dialogue. Nevertheless Catherine’s zeal remains an example of brave, strong love, an encouragement to devote our efforts to all possible strategies of constructive dialogue in order to build an increasingly stable and far-reaching peace.”

of twenty-five children. She knew the joy of being loved, but she also knew the sorrow that accompanied the death of loved ones. By the time she was twenty-one, she had lost several members of her family, including her father.

From an early age, she entered into an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, and resolved at this time to live her life wholly for God, determining to live a life of virginity.² As a result of this promise, she suffered at the hands of her family, who tried their best to force her to marry. Later in life, she suffered physically, being unable to eat food or even take water. Her love for Christ caused her to suffer at the hands of the *Mantellate*, a group of third-order Dominican laywomen, of which St. Catherine was a member, dedicated to serving the sick and poor of Siena. Some, out of jealousy for her charitable manner and virtuous life, spread vicious rumors denouncing her virginity, but even this betrayal was not enough to make her turn from loving her neighbors.

St. Catherine endured all of these sufferings patiently and lovingly, recognizing in them an opportunity to grow in self-knowledge. In this self-knowledge, she became more aware of her sinfulness. She viewed her sin as the cause of all the evil and suffering in the world.³ St. Catherine was equally aware of God's love, and his great desire for the salvation of souls. She suffered greatly at the sight of so many abuses in the Church for she knew it left many souls in jeopardy of losing God's grace and thus, eternal life.

² Raymond of Capua, *The Life Of St. Catherine Of Siena*, 2nd ed., Translated, Introduced and Annotated by Conleth Kearns, O.P. (Washington, DC: Dominican Publications, 1980), #35, p. 34.

³ All future references to *The Dialogue* in this study will cite the Italian edition of Giuliana Cavallini, *Il Dialogo* (Roma: Edizioni Cateriniane, 1968), followed by the English translation of Suzanne Noffke, OP, *Catherine of Siena, The Dialogue* (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 1980). References will follow this format: "D" (*Il Dialogo*), Roman numerals for chapters, and then page numbers; followed by "N" (Noffke), then page number. Example for this reference: D II, p. 4; N, p. 27.

St. Catherine enjoyed the grace of an intense spiritual life, as is evidenced in the following words: “For her union with God was more intimate than was the union between her soul and her body.”⁴ This spiritual union was not only the driving force behind her extremely active apostolate, but surfaced throughout her action as a continuous thread of patient, humble service. She was a mystic, which accounts for her detailed knowledge of God and His ways. Through this mystical relationship of love with the Lord she gained a greater knowledge of God, a deeper love for His people, and sacrificed her life’s energy for the glory of God and the Church she loved so fiercely.

In the midst of her lived experience, then, St. Catherine came to know the Lord Jesus Christ in a very real, and personal way. Conformed to Christ crucified and his will, St. Catherine in 1375 received the stigmata during a visit to Pisa. It is in the context of this love that she chose to live, suffer, and die. This love Catherine came to know is the Wisdom who both embodies and explains the meaning of human suffering. Christ is the Word who speaks to the heart of suffering. He is the Peace encountered in the midst of suffering. Christ crucified is the One all humanity is to know and make present through suffering. The Christian response to suffering must be the response of Christ, a response of loving, humble obedience to the Father’s will.⁵

As a helpful note to the reader, The Dialogue is exactly that, a dialogue between St. Catherine and God, so often in this study, citings of this text will actually appear as coming from the mouth of God, while sometimes, the reference will be the words of St. Catherine.

⁴ D XCX, p. 47; N, p. 57.

⁵ For more information on Catherine’s life and this particular period of history see: Raymond of Capua, The Life of St. Catherine of Siena, already cited; Louis Bouyer, A History of Christian Spirituality, The Spirituality of the Middle Ages II, trans. The Benedictines of Holme Eden Abbey, Carlisle, (London: Bums & Oats, 1968), pp. 407-486; Mary Ann Fatula, Catherine of Siena’s Way (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), pp. 13-39; Catherine M. Meade, My Nature is Fire (New York: Alba House, 1991), pp. 3-83; and Walter Ullman, A Short History of the Papacy in the Middle Ages (London: Butler & Tanner Ltd., 1972), pp. 251-305.

ARGUMENT OF THE STUDY

As noted above, it is essential to place the discussion of suffering in the context of God's love, which finds its fullest expression in Jesus Christ. This is a dominant and recurring theme in St. Catherine's writings, which this study will investigate through the mysteries of the incarnation, passion, and death of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation demonstrates not only the love of God the Father, but also his desire that humanity share fully in this love. God wants his people to lead holy lives and obtain the promise of eternal salvation, through his Son, Jesus Christ. When individuals die to their own selfish self will, and unite their will with God's will, they realize God's plan. This study will demonstrate the importance St. Catherine places on the personal will, growth in virtue and hatred for sin, and the role each of these play in the saga of human suffering.

In order to respond to God's salvific love, one must first discover it, which entails following the way of Jesus Christ, since he is the revelation of God's love. The way of Christ is the way of the cross, the way of suffering. This study will examine St. Catherine's insights concerning the effects of suffering in the human experience, more specifically, how she understood God's purpose in allowing his people to suffer. The main elements of her thought are knowledge, (of God and of self), desire, prayer, virtues and free will. At the center of her teaching is Christ, freely embracing his suffering, in order to fulfill the Father's will. This is the greatest expression of His love for the Father and humanity.

With a clearer understanding of redemptive suffering, people are more capable of facing the perennial challenge of suffering. Through the experience of suffering, people bear more perfectly the image of Christ, indeed they bear his wounds in their bodies,⁶ and enter more

⁶ 2 Cor 4:11 "Indeed, while we are still alive, we are consigned to our death every day, for the sake of Jesus, so that in our mortal flesh the life of Jesus, too, may be openly shown."

deeply into his love. At the same time, human suffering, freely accepted and embraced out of love for God and neighbor, is a participation in the salvific work of Christ.

Finally, the study will discuss the implications of suffering for people today. It will seek to demonstrate how suffering when accepted out of love for God and neighbor leads one to eternal life. The suffering endured in this life allows each person to participate more fully in the resurrection and glory of the Risen Christ. Having reviewed the purpose of the study, a brief description of its method and sources will follow.

METHOD

For a woman who did not know how to read and write until sometime near her thirtieth year, St. Catherine produced some of the richest documents in the history of the Church. Pope Paul VI recognized her writings as a great source of theological wealth and reflection and declared her a Doctor of the Church on October 4, 1970. Her main theological works are divided into three categories. *The Dialogue* contains the body and summation of her theological thought. In this work she summarizes the instruction that resulted from her years of learning received directly from the Lord through visions, ecstasies and regular prayer. She wrote *The Dialogue* during the last three years of her life. *The Prayers*,⁷ were recorded by her followers during her numerous ecstasies, which occurred most often after she received Communion. These represent for Catherine a personal transformation of theology into prayer.

⁷ Two editions of the *Prayers* will be used in this study: The Critical edition of Giuliano Cavallini, *Le Orazioni* (Roma: Edizioni Catheriniane, 1978), referred to as “O” followed by the prayer in Roman numerals; *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, edited and translated by Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), referred to as “N” followed by the prayer in Arabic numerals.

Twenty-six prayers exist today, most of which are from her final years in Rome. *The Letters*,⁸ give evidence to the fact that Catherine was in correspondence with a multitude of people, from every station in life. As with most of her writings, Catherine did not write them herself, but dictated them to secretaries. These works demonstrate how St. Catherine applied her theology to the lived experience of many different people. The 381 letters available today represent the activity of the last eight to ten years of her life.

This study proposes to review these writings of St. Catherine to discover how she spoke of suffering within the context of her own world and life experience. It will attempt to see how she perceived the hand of God at work within these various experiences. Having found such texts, this study will seek to open them up and better understand what St. Catherine said about suffering. Since she refers to suffering at different times and in different circumstance within the theological teaching of her writings, this study will seek to draw these various elements together within the framework of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Finally, after drawing upon the wealth of knowledge and insight that St. Catherine sheds upon the Christian meaning of suffering, this study will make application of the salient points to the modern day experience of human pain and misery. The final goal is to reveal that there are some very basic values to be learned from suffering, and more importantly, to express the reality that suffering continues to play a significant role in humanity's participation in the salvific work of Jesus Christ.

⁸ Three editions of the Letters will be used in this study: The Critical edition of Eugenio Dupre Theseider, *Epistolario di Santa Caterina da Siena*, Volume Primo, Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, (Roma: Tipografia del Senato, 1940) referred to as "DT" followed by the letter in Roman numerals; *Le Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, with notes by Niccolò Tommaseo and edited by Piero Misciattelli, (Firenze: Giunti, 1940 [reprinted 1970]), referred to as "L" followed by the volume number in Roman numerals followed by letter number in Arabic numerals; *The Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, translated with notes by Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1988), referred to as "NL" followed by the letter number in Arabic numerals.

CHAPTER ONE

GOD'S LOVE: CONTEXT FOR SUFFERING

St. Catherine became aware of God's overwhelming love through her intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. Her knowledge of this powerful love was so vivid that she did all in her power to keep from offending such love, and she desired nothing but to lead others to such understanding so they too would rather suffer the worst possible abuse in this life rather than risk defacing the image they bear of Christ. The key to a proper concept of God is knowledge of his ineffable love.

A greater understanding of God's love is achieved through an examination of Christ's role in salvation history. This chapter will emphasize how awareness of God's love leads one to respond with love. In the knowledge of God's love, one arrives at a deeper self-understanding, and such knowledge leads one to proclaim his or her sinfulness before God. When these two forms of knowledge are properly balanced, people grow in the virtues of humility and charity and trust totally in God's providential care to provide for all their needs.

Appropriately equipped with such knowledge and virtue, it is easy to recognize that God wants nothing but humanity's well being. Human will is thus called into conformity with God's will. Suffering is a reality, and is experienced whether the human person participates in God's plan of salvation or turns away in sin. The main life project for all humanity, then, is to grow in virtue and conform their will to God's will by following Jesus Christ crucified. In this proper understanding of God's goodness, each person is able to see that suffering is *permitted* by a loving God as a path that leads to salvation. In this knowledge, a greater reason exists to look for the loving hand of God which is always at work in the midst of suffering.

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND SELF: PREREQUISITE FOR SUFFERING

God's love is the necessary backdrop for a proper understanding of St. Catherine's teaching on suffering. God manifests his love and our dignity by creating humanity in his own image and likeness. In *The Dialogue*, St. Catherine expresses this truth by questioning God about this love: "Why did you so dignify us? With unimaginable love you looked upon your creatures within your very self, and you fell in love with us. So it was love that made you create us and give us being just so that we might taste your supreme eternal good."⁹

From the beginning of time, God has been madly in love with his people, and this love is the creative force that calls all life into existence. This love is constant; it does not change. God invites all people to participate in this love by showing their love for him and their neighbor. St. Catherine speaks of the depth of God's love in the following prayer:

Why then, eternal Father, did you create this creature of yours? I am truly amazed at this, and indeed I see, as you show me, that you made us for one reason only: in your light you saw yourself compelled by the fire of your charity to give us being, in spite of the evil we would commit against you, eternal Father. It was fire, then, that compelled you. O unutterable love, even though you saw all the evils that all your creatures would commit against your infinite goodness, you acted as if you did not see and set your eye only on the beauty of your creature, with whom you had fallen in love like one drunk and crazy with love. And in love you drew us out of yourself, giving us being in your own image and likeness.¹⁰

Catherine not only makes clear the love God has for his children, but vividly illustrates the intimate union that exists between them. God drawing his children from himself conjures up the image of a mother giving birth.¹¹ The very existence of humanity takes root in God.

⁹ D XIII, p. 36; N, p. 49.

¹⁰ O IV, pp. 44-46; N 13, pp. 112-113. Note, the prayer numbers vary between editors.

¹¹ For more on maternal images of God in St. Catherine's writings, see Donna Orsuto, "The Mystery of Christ Crucified: The Use of Maternal Imagery in the Trinitarian Experience and Reflections of Julian of Norwich and St. Catherine of Siena," in *Esperienza e Spiritualita*, ed. Herbert Alphonso, S.J. (Roma: Lito Pomel, 1995), pp. 125-154.

Human existence depends upon God's love for life itself. In the face of suffering, when tempted to doubt God's love, this primordial truth and reality is a great source of consolation. The moment people need to be most secure in the knowledge of God's love is precisely the moment it is most difficult to call to mind. In time of trial and temptation, when they are undergoing difficulties they do not understand, this is when a person needs to rely most on a well-rooted faith in God's providential care and concern. The knowledge of God's love, his constant presence and desire to provide for his children, supplies the necessary support in crucial moments of trial and temptation. Often individuals feel God has not answered their prayer in times of trouble. They need only open the eyes of faith to recognize that God's response resides in the strength required to bear the cross.¹²

Charity conceived in knowledge of God's love

A central element of St. Catherine's teaching revolves around the importance of a heightened awareness of God's love, or as she prefers to say, growing in knowledge of God. As the object of this study is to place the discussion of suffering within the context of God's love, it is essential to review this element of Catherine's teaching, particularly as it relates to the reality of suffering. However, knowledge of God goes hand in hand with knowledge of self. As difficult as it is to separate these two aspects, because they are inseparable, it is nonetheless helpful to view them in their separate parts.

The element of knowledge is so central to St. Catherine that she speaks of it in the first paragraph of The Dialogue:

¹² L 221, III, p. 278. St. Catherine asks the Lord: "O sweet and gentle Jesus, where were you when my soul was in such affliction?" and gentle Jesus responded: "I was in your heart. I am unmoveable, and I never leave my creature, if the creature has not departed from me by mortal sin." Translation mine.

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.¹³

St. Catherine seeks to know God's will in all things, and the only way she can do this is to increase her knowledge of God. Interestingly, she sees the path to greater knowledge of God residing in greater knowledge of self. This discovery is universal, and benefits all people. Self-knowledge is a heightened awareness of God's goodness and action within a person's life. As one becomes more aware of God's presence within every moment, whether enjoyable or difficult, there follows an increasing understanding of one's own sinfulness and need for God's love and mercy.



Feed the Hungry

By residing in this “cell of self-knowledge,” individuals become aware of God's goodness, thus their own love for God and his creation increases all the more, “since upon knowledge follows love.”¹⁴ In the midst of this burning desire and love, St. Catherine seeks truth. Knowing that truth and goodness reside in Jesus Christ, she dedicates herself to “continual humble prayer, 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”¹⁵ Thus, in an authentic loving relationship with God, each person has the possibility to

¹³ D I, p. 1; N, p. 25.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ D I, p. 1; N, p. 25.

become “another himself,” another “christ”. This is the love that exists between Christ and the Father; the love that sustained Christ during his passion and death. This is the love God invites his children to share and embrace in the midst of their trials and distress.

Knowledge of God’s love is the driving and creative force enabling a person to conceive and give birth to the virtue of charity, the mother of all virtues. This Dominican influence permeates St. Catherine’s thought. Virtues hold a central position in her theological teaching, and will be discussed at greater length further on in this study. In reference to the current topic of discussion, St. Catherine saw two essential virtues stemming from knowledge of God and self-knowledge. She expresses this thought in a letter to Don Cristofano, a Carthusian monk who was experiencing certain temptations and trials and sought counseling from St. Catherine. The letter demonstrates how suffering causes virtue to grow within the soul. It also speaks of the virtues that flow from knowledge:

Understand, therefore, that this pain must be ordered, as has been said; that is, founded in the knowledge of self by humility, and in the knowledge of God’s goodness, In this way, the pain will be fattening, which enlarges the soul through virtue; and will not consume the soul in desperation. Draw, then, this small virtue of humility from self-knowledge and the virtue of charity from the knowledge of God; because these two virtues are the wings on which the soul flies to eternal life.¹⁶

The connection between suffering, knowledge of self and God, and growth in virtue is evident. Knowledge of self leads to knowledge of God, and more specifically, his goodness and love. Knowledge of God’s love gives birth to charity, for as the burning fire of divine love consumes individuals, their desire to share this love with their neighbor increases all the more. Suffering, permitted at the hands of the Master Craftsman, serves as a tool to carve this virtue of charity into the hearts and lives of those who follow his Son. Knowledge of God and his ways

¹⁶ L 335, V, pp. 107-108. Translation mine.

helps individuals embrace suffering. Even though suffering itself is no gift, the graces and good accomplished through it can be seen as a gift from a loving God who wants nothing but our salvation.

Humility conceived in self-knowledge

This particular part of St. Catherine's teaching reveals yet again the tightly woven fabric of her doctrine and how each particular element is incapable of bearing fruit if taken by itself. Yet, the main focus of the study at this point is to reflect upon the particular aspect of self-knowledge. As knowledge of God leads to a greater awareness of his love, self-knowledge leads individuals to acknowledge their weakness and sinfulness. Apart from God, the human person is capable of nothing. St. Catherine expresses this teaching in a letter to Sr. Bartolomea, a nun at St. Stephen's Monastery in Pisa.

So that we might arrive at perfect love and humility, supreme eternal Goodness permits many battles and darkness of mind so that the creature recognizes herself and sees that she is nothing. If she could do anything (of herself), she would lift herself from pain whenever she wanted, but because she is nothing, she cannot. So, knowing herself, she is humbled in her nothingness, and she recognizes God's goodness.¹⁷

Once individuals recognize their "nothingness", they see that they are capable of absolutely nothing if they seek to rely on their own resources. Armed with such self knowledge and self acceptance one is ready to place complete trust in God and thus reach his or her authentic potential in life, accomplishing all that God's plan entails. Self-knowledge helps people see that God, in his goodness, provides for their well being, thus making it easier for them to identify his providential hand at work in all events of life, and drawing them closer to himself.

¹⁷ L 221, 111, p. 277. Translation mine.

It is in the midst of weakness, where the human person is most vulnerable, that God becomes “incarnate” within the person. Human weakness is the fertile soil where God sows the seed of his power.¹⁸ In the midst of human weakness God speaks to each individual as he spoke to St. Paul: “My grace is enough for you; my power is at its best in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9) Filled with this grace, the human response may be the same as St. Paul’s: “I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me, and that is why I am quite content with my weaknesses, and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and the agonies I go through for Christ’s sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong.” (2 Cor 12: 9-10) When we accept our weakness and open it up to the power of God we have a taste of death and resurrection; death to self and life in Christ. In the midst of human foolishness and weakness, God reveals the power of the cross.

Growth in self-knowledge also leads to a healthy spiritual life and growth in perfection. All people must reach a point where they are able to see themselves as sinful before a loving God. This is the proper stance before God, for only then can people honestly admit their failure to love. In the face of such sinfulness, humanity sees that God’s love is all the more incredible. Once they are ready to acknowledge their sinfulness before God, their hearts are open to receive God’s forgiveness.

Only with such an understanding can people humbly recognize they are nothing, that they are sinful and that everything is a gift from God. Only at this stage of self-knowledge does

¹⁸ There are numerous Old Testament accounts of people who placed their trust in God’s power, rather than human strength. A favorite of this author is David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17) The letter to the Hebrews gives a good summation of this point: “.... These were the men who through faith conquered kingdoms, did what was upright and earned the promises. They could keep a lion’s mouth shut, put out blazing fires and emerge unscathed from battle. They were weak people who were given strength to be brave in war and drive back foreign invaders.... These all won acknowledgment through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, since God had made provision for us to have something better, and they were not to reach perfection except with us Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection.” Hebrews 11:33 - 12:2.

a person begin to grow in humility and love. God speaks this truth to St. Catherine in the following words:

After the soul has come to know herself, she finds humility and hatred for her selfish sensual passion, recognizing the perverse law that is bound up in her members and is always fighting against the spirit. So she rises up with hatred and contempt for the sensuality and crushes it firmly under the foot of reason. And through all the blessings she has received from me she discovers within her very self the breadth of my goodness. She humbly attributes to me her discovery of this self-knowledge, because she knows that my grace has drawn her from darkness and carried her into the light of true knowledge.¹⁹

This “perverse law” is not sin in itself, but it does lead people to rebel against God. Only when the will gives its consent to follow the prompting of this perverse law does the person fall into sin. The Creator speaks to Catherine of this perverse law: “Not that this law can force any one of you to commit the least sin unless you want to, but it certainly does fight against the spirit. Nor did I give this law that my people should be conquered, but so that they might increase and prove virtue in their souls.”²⁰

St. Catherine was able to identify the reality and presence of this human weakness within herself and others. She was painfully aware of her inability to live a holy life separated from God. She wrestled with the reality of sin in her own life, just as all people do. She benefited from recognizing her sinfulness, when this “perverse law” led her to go against her

¹⁹ D VII, pp. 16-17; N, p. 36.

²⁰ D XCVIII, p. 234; N, p. 185. Also in regard to this “perverse law”, cf. D LXXXIII, pp. 188-189; N, p. 153, where God spoke to St. Catherine about St. Paul and his struggle against this “law”: “This is why it seemed to him that everything, as long as he was in his body, was for him a perverse law that fought and rebelled against his spirit. It was not a question of struggling with sin. I have already told you that I gave him a guarantee when I said, ‘Paul, my grace is enough for you.’ (2 Cor 12:9) It was a question of struggling with what blocked him from spiritual perfection, from seeing me as I really am. That vision was blocked by his body’s law and heaviness, and that is why he cried, ‘Unfortunate man that I am, who will free me from my body? For I have a perverse law bound up in my members, and it fights against my spirit.’ (Rm 7:24, 23) And this is the truth: Memory is beleaguered by the body’s imperfection; understanding is blocked and fettered by this heaviness of the body and kept from seeing me as I really am; and the will is chained, for weighted down by the body it cannot come to enjoy me, God eternal, without pain.”

good will. Knowing that only God had the power to forgive and heal her, St. Catherine did not hide her sin from him, rather she revealed it, allowing him to enter with his mercy. This in turn opened her heart to receive God's Spirit, grace, and forgiveness, and led her to be all the more compassionate with his people as she says: "You want us, merciful and compassionate Father, to look at your boundless compassion for us, so that we may learn to be compassionate, first of all to ourselves and then to our neighbors."²¹ God imparts a proper understanding of sin to her in these words:

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.²²

Sin, then, is "nothing" because it exists apart from God, from whom all "being" has its origin. Sin does not enjoy the benefit of grace, except in the moment individuals confesses their sin and receive the grace of Christ's forgiveness within the sacrament of Reconciliation. Sin has no participation in God's being or love, and as such is unworthy of love. God makes it clear that those who insist on separating themselves from him in this life, will experience his justice; while those who acknowledge their sin, and continue to seek his forgiveness will know his mercy. The balance between God's mercy and justice, between self-knowledge and knowledge of God is the focus of the next section.

²¹ O VIII, p. 82; N 15, p. 128.

²² D XVIII, p. 46; N, p. 56.

Balance between self-knowledge and knowledge of God

In recent years, in an effort to balance a theology that placed too much emphasis on the sinfulness of humanity, more attention has been focused on God's love. Regrettably, thought now seems to have moved too far in the direction of God's capacity and desire to forgive, leaving out the human capacity and potential for sin. There is seemingly no need for God's forgiveness in the minds of many people today, because they are no longer capable of taking the first step of recognizing their sinfulness. There is a great need in the Church today for the formation of conscience and a personal sense of responsibility. What is needed is a proper sense of balance between sin and grace; between the human capacity to offend God and his ardent desire and power to forgive.

St. Catherine held such a balance in her own life. Being human, she was well aware of her sinfulness. She was also conscious of the powerful role of grace and could identify with St. Paul who said: "and so, just as sin reigned wherever there was death, so grace will reign to bring eternal life thanks to the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 5:21) In a letter to Monna Costanza, wife of Nicholas Soderini, she delineates a clear understanding of the delicate balance required between these two areas of knowledge. Morena Costanza was enduring much suffering at the hands of her family, as well as personal temptations. St. Catherine offered her the following advice:

Come now, take the remedy for these evils that come to you from the demon. Respond within yourself to the conflicts that come along, by turning your eyes to your Creator saying: "I confess that I am mortal; which to me is a great grace, because through death I will arrive at my end, to God, who is my life. I also confess that my life, with all that I have done, merits nothing but hell. But, I have faith and hope in my Creator, and in the blood of the consumed and bloodied Lamb, who will pardon my sins, and give me his Grace. And I will endeavor to continue my life for the present moment. And if death arrives before I have run

my life, before I can do proper penance for my sins, then I say I place my trust in Jesus Christ. I know there is no comparison between the divine mercy and my sins.”²³

In this passage St. Catherine demonstrates her hallmark of constant vigilance. She always has her eyes on the Lord, and never misses an opportunity to encourage the same practice to her followers. She teaches here that an excessively developed sense of one’s sinfulness can lead to confusion and despair.²⁴ On the other hand, knowledge of God alone leads to presumption. God the Father gives to Catherine the formula for maintaining this balance: “The soul, then, should season her self-knowledge with knowledge of my goodness, and her knowledge of me with self-knowledge.”²⁵

Igino Giordani concisely summarizes Catherine’s teaching on self-knowledge and knowledge of God:

To the real knowledge of one’s self is always joined the knowledge of God: taken by itself, the former would simply discourage us; taken by itself the latter might make us proud; taken together, they establish equilibrium. In substance Catherine seeks the knowledge of self in God. To know God is to discover that He is love and that He has created us and redeemed us through love: ‘a mad and ineffable love,’ in return He wants our love.²⁶

INCARNATION: GOD ENTERS HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING

Having seen how a greater knowledge of God’s love leads to a deeper knowledge of self, this section will demonstrate that according to St. Catherine, the only way to truly come to know God is to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Christ’s incarnation was

²³ L 314,V, p.26. See also D LXVI, p. 146; N, p. 125.

²⁴ D LXVI, p. 145; N, p. 124.

²⁵ D LXVI, p. 146; N, p. 125.

²⁶ Igino Giordani, Saint Catherine of Siena — Doctor of the Church (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1980), Translated from the Italian by Thomas J. Tobin, p. 132.

the beginning of a new relationship, the fullest expression of love between God and his people. As Christ's entire mission depended on his relationship with the Father, so the successful realization of any Christian life rests on repeating the incarnational process of giving birth to virtue and conforming one's own will with the will of God. Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life,²⁷ and so every life, in order to find meaning, must follow his Way.

Jesus Christ: example of salvific love

Jesus Christ became man for the salvation of humanity. Christ's presence on earth fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament and initiated a New Covenant of love between God and his people. Christ is the heart and center of humanity's relationship with God. In Christ, the Father reveals not only his love, but his very self. In other words, Christ revealed the Father through his loving relationships. Christ invites all people into the loving relationship of the Triune God, through a participation in his love. This mystery of the incarnation is the point of participation, where all humanity experiences the presence of the living God. St. Catherine exclaims this in the following prayer:

And when did I become capable of reaching up to your charity's affection? When? When it was time. When the fullness of sacred time had come.... When the great doctor came into the world, then -- I mean your only-begotten Son. When the bridegroom was joined with his bride -- the divinity in the Word with our humanity -- and the medium of this union was Mary, who clothed you, the eternal bridegroom, in her humanity.²⁸

In the mystery of the incarnation, God accomplishes the perfect intersection of the divine and human natures. In Christ, all humanity is "capable of reaching up to charity's affection." Christ, joining his divinity with human nature, demonstrates his great love and

²⁷ Cf. In 14:6.

²⁸ O XII, pp. 138-140; N 19, p. 171.

desire to grant a greater possibility for people to enter into this love. His love for us is the revelation of God the Father.

Virtues rooted in Jesus Christ

Virtues play a significant role in the spiritual life, and much of what St. Catherine says about suffering involves virtue. Thus, it is necessary to understand her teaching on virtue.

Each person is called into a loving relationship with Christ, since he is the point of participation. Embracing God's will and living a virtuous life leads to growth in love. St. Catherine lived and taught how to keep heart, mind and eyes constantly fixed on Christ, who alone can lead us to the Father.²⁹ Christ alone can teach us how to love. He alone is the source of all virtue. God continues to instruct Catherine in these words:

You see this gentle loving Word born in a stable while Mary was on a journey, to show you pilgrims how you should be constantly born anew in the stable of self-knowledge, where by grace you will find me born within your soul. You see him lying among the animals, in such poverty that Mary had nothing to cover him up with. It was winter, and she kept him warm with the animal's breath and a blanket of hay. He is the fire of charity but he chose to endure the cold in his humanity.³⁰

Catherine teaches here that just as Christ was born in human time and existence, so by grace he is born in each person. In Christ, God is present within each person, and this is discovered through self-knowledge.

God's presence brings more to the soul than good feelings and peace, though certainly this is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.³¹ Through the Holy Spirit, God is present to strengthen

²⁹ Cf. John 14:6.

³⁰ D CLI, p. 434-435: N, p. 320.

³¹ Cf. Galatians 5:22-23.

the relationship each person has with Christ, and to encourage each individual to follow Christ and imitate his life. Christ's was a way of suffering, and he embodied perfectly the virtues: love, patience, obedience, and humility. Through a relationship with Jesus Christ, virtues are conceived and come to birth within the human person.

God calls all humanity to give birth to Christ by giving birth to virtue, just as Mary was united with the Son in her own flesh. For Catherine, the Incarnation of the Son was not a single event in history, but one that continues until the end of time. In a letter to the Abbess and Suora Niccolosa of the Monastery of Santa Marta in Siena, she draws out the truth of the continuation of the incarnation by establishing a correlation between Mary and all humanity:

But — oh fire of charity! — I see another union here. He (Christ) now has the form of flesh, and she (Mary) like warm wax has received from the seal of the Holy Spirit the imprint of loving desire for our salvation. By that seal and engrafting the eternal divine Word became incarnate. She like a tree of mercy receives within herself the soul of the Son — that soul consumed, wounded, pierced through by the Father's will. She, like a tree receiving a graft, is wounded by the knife of hatred and of love.³²

[...] Dearest sister and daughters all in Christ Jesus, if we have not up to now been set aflame by the fire of this holy desire of mother and Son, now may our hearts remain stubborn no longer. I beg you in the name of Christ crucified: let this stone be melted in the hot overflowing blood of God's Son, in that blood whose warmth is enough to melt the hardness and frigidity of any heart! How does it make us melt? Only in the way we've been talking about -- with hatred and love. This is what the Holy Spirit does when he enters the soul. I urge you then, I command you: show your willingness to be pierced by this sword.³³

Christ's love was for humanity, and for our salvation. Mary's love was for her Son, and fulfilling God's will. This is why St. Catherine implores, even "commands" her followers to allow Christ's love to fill their hearts and participate with him in the work of saving souls.

³² Here St. Catherine is speaking of hatred of self and love of God; hatred of sin and love of virtue. See also D II, p. 4, N, p. 27; VII, p. 17, N, p. 36; DEG, p. 139, N, p. 120; L 257, IV, p. 93.

³³ L 30, I, pp. 112-113. Translation, NL 1, pp. 38-39. Note, Noffke's numeration of the letters differs from Misciattelli. DT I, pp. 7-8.

Christ's consuming love draws them to keep their eyes only upon him and his cross. This was the way the Father chose to accomplish humanity's salvation; it is the way Christ obediently followed; and it is the path he gives his disciples as a means of participation.³⁴ As people grow in a loving relationship with Christ, the practice of virtue increases.

Virtue conceived in love

Since St. Catherine proclaims that Jesus Christ is the source of all virtue,³⁵ and is the revelation of God's love, it follows that he came to draw all people into the relationship of love that exists within the Triune God. He accomplishes this by taking root, by becoming "incarnate" in the heart of the human person. This is a process of continual conversion, a process whereby Christ dwells within each human person through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Virtue is conceived in love of God. As has already been seen, humility comes from knowledge of self and charity springs from knowledge of God. St. Catherine continues to enlarge this thought in The Dialogue:

Virtue, once conceived, must come to birth. Therefore, as soon as the soul has conceived through loving affection, she gives birth for her neighbors' sake. And just as she loves me in truth, so also she serves her neighbors in truth. Nor could she do otherwise, for love of neighbor has its source in me, the more the soul loves me, the more she loves her neighbors.³⁶

³⁴ Luke 9:23 "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me."

³⁵ D CLIV, p. 446-447; N, p. 328: "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? He was saturated with disgrace and abuse. To please me, he despised his own pleasure, that is, his bodily life. And who has ever been more patient than he? He was never heard to cry out in complaint: no, he embraced insults with patience. In love as he was, he fulfilled the obedience that I his eternal Father had laid upon him."

³⁶ D VII, p. 17; N, p. 36.



Give Drink to the Thirsty

Here the commandments of God come full circle; love of God leads to growth in virtue which leads to love of neighbor. Virtue comes to life through concrete acts of love. One's expression of love for God must go beyond mere words. The more authentic one's love is, the more fully he or she enters into the service of the human family. Love recognizes Christ in others and at the same time, allows others to see the image of Christ more clearly in the one who serves. Christ's salvific love acts like a magnet drawing all those who come into personal contact with him into a participation in his love, which involves a participation in his suffering. In order to participate in Christ's love and suffering, the human person must grow in love, for "it is charity that gives life to all virtue."³⁷ A person grows in love by drawing near to Christ.

Thus is seen the central role played by Christ. His love reveals the Father's love, for the Father and the Son are one.³⁸ Christ is the great teacher of virtue, for he is the perfection of love and every other virtue. Living a Christian life means living in Christ. Suffering is part of every life, and to suffer as a Christian is to suffer out of love for God and for the well being of

³⁷ D VII, p. 16; N, p. 35. Also L 258, II, p. 258. "I long to see you bound fast in holy desire to the wood of the most holy and revered cross. It is there that we will find the spotless Lamb, roasted in the fire of gentlest charity. On that tree we find the source of the virtues. For charity is the fruitful tree; charity was the cross and the nails that held God's Son. No other cross, no other bond could have held him. There you find the slain Lamb, feeding on the Father's glory and our salvation -- for his love is so great that he could not express it in [mere] physical suffering." Translation NL 37, p. 125; DT XXXVII, pp. 152-153.

³⁸ John 17:21 "May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me."

one's neighbors. This is what it means to live in Christ. St. Catherine helps connect these various elements in the following succinct passage:

When the soul has thus *conceived virtue* in the stirring of her love, and through her neighbors proved it and for their sakes brought it to birth, not all the world can rob her of that virtue. Indeed, *persecution only serves to prove it and make it grow*. But for that very reason, were the soul's virtue not evident and luminous to others in time of trial, it could not have been conceived in truth; for I have already told you clearly that virtue cannot be perfect or bear fruit except by means of your neighbors. If a woman has conceived a child but never brings it to birth for people to see, her husband will consider himself childless. Just so, I am the spouse of the soul, *and unless she gives birth to the virtue she has conceived [by showing it] in her charity to her neighbors in their general and individual needs in the ways I have described, then I insist that she has never in truth even conceived virtue within her.*³⁹

This passage reiterates that virtue is conceived in love, and comes to birth only in love of one's neighbors. It points to the reality of suffering and how God permits these "persecutions" to make the soul grow in virtue.⁴⁰ However, if people do not occupy themselves with love of God and neighbor, they lose ground in the spiritual journey of perfection, as the Father expresses to Catherine: "The soul cannot but move: If she does not go forward, she turns back. So if these souls do not go forward in virtue, rising from the imperfection of fear to love, then they will necessarily go backward."⁴¹

Christ dedicated all his energy to accomplishing the Father's will, and in this process the virtues of love, patience, obedience, humility and all the other virtues reached perfection. This is why those who seek perfection must seek first the way of Christ. God's will for humanity is very much the same as his will for Christ. The difference is that for humanity to accomplish

³⁹ D XI, p. 30-31; N, p. 45, emphasis added. See also L 335, V, p. 105.

⁴⁰ More will be said concerning this later; for now it makes clear just one of several positive roles suffering plays in human existence.

⁴¹ D XL IX, 113; N, p. 102.

God's will, Christ had to first open the way. The next section discusses God's will for humanity and reveals the necessity of conforming human will with the will of God.

SUFFERING & GOD's WILL

Sanctification and salvation

St. Catherine remarks over and over again in her writings that God wants nothing but our sanctification and salvation.⁴² It is for this reason that he sent his only Son to redeem the human race from their sins and to make it possible for them to have access to eternal life. To properly understand St. Catherine's thought, it is essential to see how crucial is this relationship between each individual with the crucified Jesus Christ. First, Christ is the perfect example of obedience to the Father's will. He lived his whole life accomplishing this will. Second, Jesus came to reveal God's love to the world, and only Christ can reveal to each of us what God's will is. This is essential, for only in doing God's will does a person reach the heights of holiness. Finally, it is only in and from Jesus Christ that we will find the strength, courage, perseverance, patience and grace to make the Father's will our own and bring it to fulfillment.

Jesus fulfilled the Father's will through his life, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. What more could a God who is so desperately in love with his creation want than that all of his children return to the one family in eternal life? God draws all things to himself through Christ⁴³ and provides every means necessary for his people to experience the joy of

⁴² D CXXXVI, p. 377; N, p. 281: "How can they (imperfect souls) be so foolish? Ah, dearest daughter, how can they believe that I, supreme eternal Goodness, could want anything but their good in the small things I permit day by day for their salvation, after they have experienced in great things how I want nothing other than their sanctification?" See also L 335, V, p. 108; L 13, I, p. 43; D XLV, p. 99, N, p. 93; D XCIX, p. 237, N, p. 187.

⁴³ Ephesians 1:9-10 "...that he (God) would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth."

eternal life. Saint Catherine expresses her knowledge of God's desire for our salvation, and the important role of Jesus the Son:

O infinite goodness and boundless charity, true God, let humankind, Adam's child, whom you bought back for love alone by the death of your only-begotten Son, blush for shame at not having done your will - you who want nothing other than that we be made holy!⁴⁴

Knowledge of God's will that all people be made holy and achieve salvation is another indication of God's incredible love. However, knowledge of God's desire to reunite his family in eternity is insufficient. All are called to live in cooperation with God's will. All people undoubtedly know from their own experience the difficulties of living according to God's will, yet through prayer and faith, every effort must be made to do so. God has given us his Son and his teaching, so that humanity might know the way to return to God. Yet, when people this is the truth." fall and stray from

this way, as is the human condition, they continue to hope and place their trust in Christ's mercy and love.



Shelter the Homeless

⁴⁴ O III, p. 32; N 3, p. 37; see also D CXXXVIII, p. 380; N, p. 284: "In obedience to his command she gazed into the abyss of his charity and saw how he is supreme eternal Goodness, and how through love alone he created us and redeemed us with the blood of his Son. It is with this very love that he gives what he gives and permits. Trials and consolations and all other things are given for love and to provide for our salvation, and for no other purpose. And the blood she saw poured out with such burning love made it clear to her that this is the truth."

Human will and God's will

Cooperation with God's goodness means individuals must conform their will with God's will. The following exchange between God and Catherine makes this point clear:

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,⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

As already noted, active virtues in the Christian life are essential to fulfill God's will. The path humanity is to follow will not be easy; it includes pain and weariness. However, properly provisioned with virtue and Christ as the guide and spiritual companion, the journey will lead to God himself. Human life is to be spent seeking God's praise and glory and the salvation of souls. By traveling along the "bridge" the person stays on the narrow path of truth and grows in love for God's will.

⁴⁵ The image of the bridge is a favorite image for Catherine. One entire section of *The Dialogue* is dedicated to developing this image; cf. ## XXVI - LXXXVII. The following passage from Letter 75, gives a brief description. "To make it possible for us to climb to this perfection, Christ actually made for us a staircase of his body. If you look at his feet, you see that they are nailed fast to the cross to form the first stair. This is because we have first to rid ourselves of all selfish will; for just as the feet carry the body, desire carries the soul. Reflect that we can never have any virtue at all if we don't climb the first stair. Once you have climbed it, you arrive at deep and genuine humility. Climb the next stair without delay and you come to the open side of God's Son. There you find the fiery abyss of divine charity. At this second stair, his open side, you find a shop filled with fragrant spices. There you find the God-Man. There your soul is so sated and drunk that you lose all self-consciousness, just like a drunkard intoxicated with wine; you see nothing but his blood, shed with such blazing love. Then, aflame with desire, you get up and climb to the next stair, his mouth. There you find rest in quiet calm; there you taste the peace of obedience. A person who is really completely drunk, good and full, falls asleep, and in that sleep feels neither pleasure nor pain." L 75, II, pp. 15-16; translation NL 62, pp. 198199; DT LXII, pp. 261-262.

⁴⁶ D XX1II, p. 51; N, pp. 59-60. See also D CXIX, p. 295, N, p. 226; D CXXXIV, p. 369, N, p. 276; O X, p. 108, N 17, p. 149.

St. Catherine goes to great lengths to explain the role of a person's free will in choosing vice or virtue, embracing God's will or selfishly following their own. Catherine teaches that God wants people to freely and lovingly embrace the trials that come their way, so a discussion on her understanding of human will is necessary.

Human will and consent

The human will is the seat of both sin and virtue. If the will remains good and holds to God's will, the soul keeps virtue intact. If however, the will gives its consent to the many vexations and deceits of the devil, she falls into sin. No one can take this good will away from the soul unless she freely allows it. St. Catherine likens the will to the main city gates so familiar to her in the medieval towns of Europe. The will serves as a gate, keeping the vices out of the city of the soul and granting admittance only to virtue. God speaks of this to Catherine in these words:

I do not allow enemies to open this gate of the will, which is free. I do let the devils and other enemies of humankind beat against other gates, but not against this, which is the main gate guarding the city of the soul. The guard that stands at this gate, free choice, I have made free to say yes or no as he pleases.

The gates of this city are many. There are three main gates - memory, understanding, and will - and the last, if it so chooses, always holds firm and guards the others. But if the will gives its consent, the enemy of selfish love and all the other enemies that follow after it come in. Then understanding surrenders to the darkness that is the enemy of light, and the recollection of injury makes memory surrender to the hatred that is the enemy of loving charity for one's neighbors. The soul harbors memories of worldly pleasures and delights in as many different ways as there are different sins against the virtues.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ D CXLIV, p. 403; N, p. 299.

Catherine views two aspects within the human person; sensuality and reason.⁴⁸

Sensuality's role is to prove and exercise virtue. Humanity has already been freed from sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and thus is free to choose between serving its own selfish, sensual desires or the needs of its neighbors. Selfish love is the enemy St. Catherine refers to that invades the city of the soul, bringing with it all the other vices. So if the will gives its consent by freely choosing to open the gate to selfish sensuality, the individual is led into sin. If, on the other hand, the will holds to reason and remains strong, it dies to selfish self love, unites itself with God's will, and grows in virtue. When individuals wisely choose to hold firm to reason, denying their sensuality, God continues to dwell within them through grace.

However, it is not easy always to choose reason over sensuality; virtue over vice. Virtue is won at a cost, and the cost is nothing short of dying a little (and over time entirely) to one's



Clothe the Naked

⁴⁸ D LI, pp. 116-117; N, p. 105: "There are, then, two aspects to yourself sensuality and reason. Sensuality is a servant, and it has been appointed to serve the soul, so that your body may be your instrument for proving and exercising virtue. The soul is free, liberated from sin in my Son's blood, and she cannot be dominated unless she consents to it with her will, which is bound up with free choice. Free choice is one with the will, and agrees with it. It is set between sensuality and reason and can turn to whichever one it will."

self. Those who would be God's servants must deny themselves, which is exactly what virtue requires.⁴⁹ Often times, when an individual is in darkness and feels all alone, the many strong desires of the body or the temptations of the world rage as an enormous beast at the "gate of the soul." But this beast, no matter what form it takes, no matter how powerful and frightening its presence, has no power of itself to open this gate. This power resides solely with free choice. Each individual holds the key that controls this gate. That is why the will is the seat of both sin and virtue. The responsibility for this decision rests entirely with each individual, nowhere else.

No matter how alone a person may "feel" during times of assault, it is important to remember God's providential love and care. He is still present within the heart, granting the necessary grace to choose virtue over vice. These are truly moments of faith, when a person believes in God's love, even though he is "seemingly" absent at the time he is most needed. To keep one's will aligned with God's requires a great deal of faith and love.

Human will: source of all suffering

Because God chooses to strengthen virtues by testing them, there will be suffering whether the soul unites its will with God's and holds firm in virtue, or abandons God's will and

⁴⁹ D CXXXI, pp. 349-350; N, p. 263: "The virtue of the just goes beyond nature, for this natural fear is extinguished in them. Their holy contempt and their desire to return to their goal is so strong that this natural tenderness cannot do battle against them, and their conscience is quiet because during their lifetime it was a good watchdog, barking whenever enemies came by with a will to capture the city of the soul. Just as a dog stationed at the gate barks when it sees enemies, and by its barking wakes up the guards, so this dog of conscience would wake up the guard of reason, and reason together with free choice would discern by the light of understanding who was a friend and who an enemy. To friends, that is, the virtues and holy thoughts of the heart, they would give warm affectionate love by exercising them with great care. To enemies, that is, vice and perverse thoughts, they would deal out hatred and love by reason's light and free choice's hand. So at the moment of death their conscience does not gnaw but rests peacefully because it has been a good watchdog."

follows its own selfish desires.⁵⁰ Therefore, St. Catherine understands the will to be the seat of all suffering. Since there is suffering involved in either vice or virtue, it is best to choose virtue, both for self and for others, as this is far more pleasing to God.⁵¹ Besides pleasing God, the choice to suffer for the sake of virtue does not involve the pain that vice entails. Plus, an individual enjoys the happiness which stems from doing God's will. There is no such happiness in sinful acts. God instructs Catherine concerning this truth:

I want you to know, then, that the will is the seat of all the pain people suffer, for if the will is fully in accord with my will there is no pain in suffering. Not that the soul is relieved of all burdens, but to the will that carries them willingly for love of me they are not painful because there is gladness in carrying what is seen to be my will. Because of the holy contempt such souls have for themselves, they have declared war on the world, the devil, and their selfish sensuality. So when they come to the moment of death they die in peace because they have conquered their lifelong enemies.⁵²

When people place their will above God's will, which is sin, they cause their neighbor to suffer, as St. Catherine exclaims: "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."⁵³ When individuals live only for themselves, suffering results for their neighbor, due to the lack of love. God created the human

⁵⁰ O XII, p. 146; N 19, p. 175. "It is you then, Passion, who point out the teaching people must follow. So they are mistaken who would rather follow pleasure than suffering, even though no one can come to the Father except through the Son, and we cannot follow you, the Word, without experiencing you in affection for suffering. And if the soul does not endure suffering willingly she will have to suffer against her will. But if she suffers willingly by the light, in the sun, no weariness will overcome her - anymore than the Godhead in the Word suffered in any way, since his Godhead was the willing bearer of his weariness."

See also D XLV, p. 98; N, p. 91, "No one born into this life passes through it without suffering of body or spirit."

⁵¹ 1 Peter 3:17: "And if it is the will of God that you should suffer, it is better to suffer for doing right than doing wrong."

⁵² D CXXXI, pp. 348-349 ; N, p. 263. Also: selfish will as source of all suffering; D XLVBI, p. 107, N, p. 98; D CXXXI, p. 348, N, p. 263; D CLI, p. 439, N, p. 323; L 264 IV, p. 129.

⁵³ D II, p. 4; N, p. 27.

person for community. Thus a part of God's plan entails a dependence upon one another. When one withdraws from the human family (by separating oneself from God, the source of unity), the others suffer.

Not only does the community suffer, but so do the individuals who choose to separate themselves from God's will. No matter what people seek, they cannot find satisfaction apart from God, for God is the final goal of all humanity. God expresses this reality to Catherine in these words: "Without me they (imperfect souls) could never be satisfied even if they possessed the whole world. For created things are less than the human person. They were made for you, not you for them. Only I can satisfy you."⁵⁴ All these people need to do is turn to God and ask him to satisfy their longing and he will do so, but only in his way and in his time.

The claim has been made that the human will is the source of all suffering and sin, and yet it is to be one with God's will. How is this accomplished? The answer is clear; the selfish will must be killed, through hatred of self and love of God, and this is made possible through Jesus Christ. The more each person loves Christ and allows his love to penetrate their hearts, the more they embody his way of love and life. The more a person dies to his own selfishness and sensuality, the more room there is for Christ to work in his life. Catherine stresses the unity that must exist between the human person and Christ in order to share in his salvific work:

I long to see you so totally ablaze with loving fire that you become one with gentle First Truth. Truly the soul's being united with and transformed into him is like fire consuming the dampness in logs. Once the logs are heated through and through, the fire burns and changes them into itself, giving them its own color and warmth and power. It is just so with us when we look at our Creator and his boundless charity. We begin to experience the heat of self-knowledge which consumes all the dampness of our selfish love for ourselves. As the heat increases, we throw ourselves with blazing desire into God's measureless goodness, which we discover within our very selves. We are then sharing in his warmth and in his

⁵⁴ D XLVIII, pp. 107-108; N, p. 98. (addition mine).

power, in that we begin at once to feed on and savor souls. And we in turn change every person into ourselves in love and desire, by giving them the color and taste of virtue that we have drawn from the wood of the most holy cross - that noble tree on which hangs, as fruit, the spotless Lamb, God and human. This is the tender fruit he wants to give us to share with our neighbors. And that is indeed the way it is, for we cannot produce or give any other fruit but the fruit we have taken from the tree of life. We have, in fact, engrafted ourselves onto this tree because we have seen and known the greatness of his measureless charity.⁵⁵

The goal is for all people to discover that this love already dwells within them, as a smoldering ember waiting to burst into a roaring flame, and Christ is the one who nurtures this ember with the gentle breeze of the Holy Spirit. The heat of Christ's flame of love consumes all selfishness and catches the soul up in the same fire of love, which exists only for God's honor and the well being of one's neighbors.

Suffering permitted by a loving God

Since suffering is a reality, it is easier to embrace it knowing that God wants nothing but humanity's good, and he alone knows best how to provide for our well being. Does it not make sense that the God who created humanity out of love will not provide for them with the same love? The previous pages of this study demonstrate that God reveals his love through consolation, or allowing the soul to experience his presence. But, St. Catherine does not limit God to this sphere alone. Because God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, he knew the full range of human emotions, feelings, and thoughts, in short, every experience of being human, except sin. So even in the midst of suffering, humanity can expect to find and

⁵⁵ L 137, II, pp. 260-261; NL 45, p. 142; DT XXXXV, pp. 176-177.

experience his love. God's providential care and design for humanity is manifest also in the midst of suffering.⁵⁶

Confidence in God's goodness and providential care permeate Catherine's writings. In the following letter, she encourages Madonna Mitarella to have faith in God's goodness by trusting that in all events of life, God is at work bringing about his plan of salvation:

Oh the boundless charity of God! First he threatens us by reminding us that he can destroy both body and soul (and he does this to make us humble and wholesomely fearful). But oh the goodness of God! To make us happy he says he does not want our death but wants us to live in him. So, dearest sister, you will show that you are indeed alive when you harmonize and unite your will with God's. This sweet will of his will give you living faith and hope set entirely on God.

If you want to give life to this faith, I ask you to keep two things in mind. The first is that God cannot will anything but our good. To give us that true good - because through sin we had lost it - he gave himself even to the shameful death of the cross. Graciously he humbled himself to restore that grace to us and to do away with our pride. How true it is then that God wills only our good!

The second thing to keep in mind is this: I want you to believe that truly nothing happens to us except by God's will and permission - death or life, sickness or health, riches or poverty, even the wrongs done us by friends or relatives or anyone else. Not a leaf falls from the tree without his consent. So not only should you not fear this thing - because God gives us what we can bear, and no more - but let's accept it with reverence, dearest sister,...⁵⁷

As difficult as it is to understand this truth, St. Catherine never fails to challenge her followers, or anyone else for that matter, to enter into the suffering that is a part of life. She solicits faith and belief in the face of suffering, desolation and trials, knowing they are ways

⁵⁶ D CXXXVII, pp. 378-379; N, p. 283: "Sometimes I let the whole world be against the just, and in the end they die a death that leaves worldly people stunned in wonder. It seems to them unjust to see the just perishing now at sea, now in fire, now mangled by beasts, now physically killed when their houses collapse on top of them. How unreasonable these things seem to the eye unenlightened by most holy faith! But not so to the faithful, for through love they have found and experienced my providence in all those great things. Thus they see and grasp that I do what I do providentially, only to bring about your salvation. Therefore they hold everything in reverence."

⁵⁷ L 31, I, pp. 118-119; NL, 12, pp. 61-62; DT XII, pp. 52-53.

God demonstrates his love. When hearts are closed to God through selfishness, people cannot recognize God's presence or that he permits these trials out of love. Through suffering God invites his people into a deeper experience of love. Suffering is permitted to increase holiness.

Finally, this study comes to the heart of suffering, and learns that it is not inflicted by a vengeful God, nor allowed to exist as something beyond his control or power. Rather, St. Catherine explains that suffering is *allowed* by God to bring his people closer to himself and one another. It is applied as a medicine to heal humanity of the sin that pervades the reality of life, and the Doctor is at the same time the Medicine⁵⁸, Jesus Christ. Thus, suffering finds its proper meaning only when viewed as an instrument in the hands of a loving God, who uses it to bring us to perfection and eternal life.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER ONE

In this chapter, one of the main objectives has been to bring to a conscious awareness the reality of God's providential love for his people. Without a proper concept of God, an understanding of his deep desire to lead his people to eternal life, it is impossible to recognize or believe that suffering is a constructive element in the Christian spiritual life. Knowledge of God's love must truly penetrate human understanding, for his love must be seen as something

⁵⁸ L 246, IV, p.53; NL, 85, p. 258; DT LXXXV, pp. 346-347: "And it seems God's boundless charity wanted to provide as well for our human weakness and poverty, always inclined and ready to offend our Creator, for God saw to it that this medicine for our sickness would be kept for us.

The medicine for our sickness is none other than this fire of love, a love you can never exhaust. This is what we receive as medicine when we see how the standard of the most holy cross is implanted in us. We were, in fact, the rock in which this cross was imbedded, for neither nails nor wood could have held this dear spotless Lamb unless love and affection had held him there. So when we realize how sweet and dear a medicine we have within us, we must never lapse into indifference but must surely rise up in our affection and desire, and stretch out our hands in the self-contempt the sick person has who hates to be sick and loves the medicine the doctor gives.

Oh son and father in Christ Jesus, let's get up with burning blazing love, with self-contempt and deep humility, recognizing our own nothingness and laying our weaknesses before the doctor, Christ Jesus. Let's reach out our hand to receive the bitter medicine he gives."

far more powerful than this life has to offer.⁵⁹ This is the love that so captured St. Catherine and led her to a total and complete response of love. Knowledge and experience of this overwhelming love is the goal that all humanity must seek.

Having arrived at this knowledge, the human person cannot help but be overwhelmed with a sense of great humility, having recognized a love that cannot possibly be repaid. In the face of such love, individuals come to know themselves as totally dependent upon God. They see that their own response of love is far too limited, and their lack of love is offensive to God, and results in suffering on an individual and corporate level. And yet, they do not despair, because they are now capable of trusting in God's mercy, because their self-knowledge has been balanced with the knowledge of God's great desire to see them united with himself.

The incarnation serves as a lasting proof of God's love to all people. In Christ, humanity has seen God and learned his ways; what is pleasing to him and what is offensive. Jesus Christ came to reveal God's love and truth and to teach people how to fulfill the great commandment of love. In Christ, all virtue reaches perfection, and as people follow his way and truth, the process of incarnation continues because this is the way that leads to growth in charity, patience, humility - the good works that accomplish God's will in this life. From Christ's example people learn to live less and less for themselves and more for God and their neighbors.

This is in keeping with God's will, that all people grow in holiness and reach their final goal which is God himself. The way to do this is Jesus Christ. As his will was God's, so the human will must constantly grow in union with God's. The will, separated from God's will, who wants nothing but our well being, leads only to suffering. Even though suffering remains even

⁵⁹ NL 23, p. 90; DT, XXIII, p. 100: "He is our God who loved us without being loved. And once we have discovered and experienced such a gentle love, strong beyond all other strength, we cannot cling to or desire any other love but him. Apart from him there is nothing at all we seek or want."

when people follow God's will, it is seen to be for their greater good and thus is tolerable, even enjoyable to those who see that it is God's will they are accomplishing. As individuals grow in patience, love, and humility, they bear more clearly the image of Jesus Christ. The more they bear this image, the greater capacity they have for carrying the cross, thus demonstrating their love for God and neighbor and fulfilling the great commandments.

CHAPTER TWO

GOD'S LOVE: CONTEXT FOR SUFFERING

Because the passion and death of Jesus Christ is such a central mystery to the Christian faith, a continual reflection upon the Son's suffering is necessary if human suffering is to find any real value and meaning. When human suffering is viewed solely within the confines of this life, separated from the reality of Christ's salvific love which permeates all time, it can only be a source of pain and despair. This is why it is so essential for today's secular society to recognize the true source and destiny of humanity which is God. Only in identifying with Christ's passion and death, indeed uniting today's pain and struggles with those of Christ, will the true value of suffering be discovered.

This chapter will review St. Catherine's understanding of Christ's suffering, and within this context it will seek to uncover the positive values of human suffering as St. Catherine discovered and expressed them. Having seen how she understands Christ's suffering and the good that God hopes to accomplish through human suffering, the final section will show that for St. Catherine, the only human response to suffering must be to follow Christ crucified, and along this way, to grow in love and virtue, and more perfectly accomplish God's will.

CHRIST'S SUFFERING: CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING HUMAN SUFFERING

St. Catherine's understanding of the Son's suffering highlights the positive value of human suffering. She gives a glimpse of the profound connection between Christ's suffering and human suffering when she shares these words of the Father: "For I have already told you, if you recall, that it is by means of my servants and their great sufferings that I would be merciful to the world and reform my bride. Truly these last can be called another Christ

crucified, my only-begotten Son, because they have taken his task upon themselves.”⁶⁰

In his communication with Catherine, the Father himself calls those who suffer for the good of the Church “another Christ crucified”. The goal of this chapter is precisely to develop this point, that human suffering conforms humanity to Jesus Christ crucified. But what exactly is St. Catherine’s understanding of the suffering’s of Christ? The Father continues to speak to Catherine of his Son’s sufferings in the following passage:

All the while he lived he chose to suffer, whether his disciples joined him or not,...At the end of his life, stripped naked, scourged at the pillar, parched with thirst, he was so poor on the wood of the cross that neither the earth nor the wood could give him a place to lay his head. He had nowhere to rest it except on his own shoulder. And drunk as he was with love, he made a bath for you of his blood when this Lamb’s body was broken open and bled from every part.

Out of his misery he gave you great wealth. From the narrow wood of the cross he extended his generosity to everyone. By tasting the bitterness of the gall he gave you the most perfect sweetness. From his sadness he gave you consolation. He was nailed to the cross to loose you from the chains of deadly sin. By becoming a servant he rescued you from slavery to the devil and set you free.



Comfort the Sick

⁶⁰ D CXLVI, p. 415; N, p. 307.

He was sold to ransom you with his blood. By choosing death for himself he gave you life.⁶¹

How truly, then, has he given you love as your rule by showing you more love than you could ever show, giving his life for you who were enemies to him and to me the high eternal Father.⁶²

This passage reveals a significant point. St. Catherine's understanding of Christ's suffering is that he did not suffer for himself. That is to say, his suffering opened him out to others. He did not allow his suffering to cause him to be isolated, but rather he endured his sufferings so that others would benefit. The suffering did not create a narcissistic attitude in him, thus causing him to despair. Rather than allowing his suffering to isolate him from humanity, he embraced it out of love to demonstrate his union with the human family. From his suffering, humanity received wealth, generosity, sweetness, consolation, freedom from sin, and life.

More than anything, Christ's passion and death was the way for him to give us the Father's love. As has already been seen, it was love that caused Christ to take on human existence. It was love that caused him to suffer and die for the good of all people and for the good of all of God's creation. With love he embraced the suffering the Father held out to him. Through baptism in his blood, all people share in his self-sacrificing love. This is the love that all are called to share in the moments of their own suffering.

⁶¹ A similar list of Christ's sufferings and humanity's corresponding benefit is given in Letter NL 17, p. 69; DT, XVII, pp. 64-65: "What indescribable love! By his death he has given us life. By enduring insult and abuse he has restored our dignity. With his hands nailed fast to the cross he has freed us from the shackles of sin. With his pierced heart he has done away with all our hardheartedness. In his being stripped he has clothed us. With his blood he gives us a bracing drink. With his wisdom he has overcome the devil's malice. By his scourging he has conquered our flesh. In his humble acceptance of disgrace he has vanquished the world's enticements and pride. He has washed us with his overflowing blood. So we have nothing at all to fear. With unarmed hand he has conquered our enemies and has given us back our freedom of choice."

⁶² D CLI, pp. 435-436; N, p. 320.

Because his love for humanity was so strong, Christ also suffered from his great desire to bring God's plan of salvation to completion. As the Son of God, he knew the pain of longing for the hour when God's will would be fulfilled, the hour of his passion and death. St. Catherine explains to her confessor Raymond of Capua that this pain accompanied Christ throughout his life.

She taught me many things about the sufferings of our Savior. Amongst others, she stressed the fact that, deep within his soul, he felt the cross lie heavy on him always.... This, she said, was the result of the consuming desire he had for the salvation of mankind.

[...] She said that in our Lord's words "Father, remove this chalice from me," perfect and heroic souls should see a meaning different from that seen in them by weaklings who shrink from death. These latter understand our Savior as asking that his passion should be removed or kept far from him. But for heroic souls the reference is to the chalice of his yearning for the salvation of mankind, a chalice which he had been drinking all his life long, from the moment of his conception, and which now, as the great hour drew near, he was drinking with greater eagerness than ever. His petition was that he might now at last be let drink it to the dregs without further delay, and so slake that thirst for man's salvation which had tormented him so long. He prayed that the chalice which he had been drinking all his life might now in this great final draught be drunk to the last drop.⁶³

In the midst of his suffering, Jesus always remained faithful to his relationship with the Father. This is the example given for all humanity to follow. He knew it was the Father's will he sought to accomplish, and he knew it was the Father's strength that would accomplish it.

Finally, the Son's suffering was necessary for the fulfillment of the Father's will and for our salvation. Human suffering is no less different. In the following letter to Pope Gregory XI, Catherine brings all of these elements together in one brief passage, and also shows how all people are called to participate in this suffering.

⁶³ Kearns, ## 206, 207, 208, pp. 196-199. See also L XVI, I, p. 52. More will be said of this below under the topic of holy desire.

I long to see you a courageous man, free of slavish fear, learning from the good gentle Jesus, whose vicar you are. Such was his boundless love for us that he ran to the shameful death of the cross heedless of torment, shame, insult, and outrage. He suffered them all, totally free of fear, such was his hungry desire for the Father's honor and our salvation. For love had made him completely let go of himself, humanly speaking. Now this is just what I want you to do, father. Let go of yourself wherever selfish love is concerned. Do not love yourself selfishly, nor others selfishly, but love yourself and your neighbors for God's sake and God for his own sake, since he is worthy of love, and since he is supreme eternal good.⁶⁴

This, then, is the suffering the Son endured. He endured it out of love, to accomplish the Father's will, to provide for the good of humanity, his brothers and sisters, and in the process invites all who would be his followers to suffer with the same great love and desire.⁶⁵

This study has already given great emphasis to the importance of conforming the human will to God's. It has demonstrated that suffering should be embraced out of love for God and neighbor. It now looks to see how St. Catherine encourages others to be conformed to Christ crucified and to bear their sufferings willingly as he did. Jesus accepted suffering as a part of God's loving plan, and, acting out of love, he embraced the many different forms of suffering in his life. Humanity finds its response to suffering expressed in Christ crucified. His way must become the way of any true Christian.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ NL 69, p. 217; DT LXVIII, p. 288.

⁶⁵ Tito S. Centi in "Il mistero della Croce nella vita e nel pensiero di S. Caterina da Siena," Rassegna ascetica e mistica, 24, n. 4., (1975), p. 332, has the following to say regarding this thought of St. Catherine: "Secondo Caterina con quelle parole Gesù non avrebbe chiesto l'allontanamento della passione imminente, bensì la fine di quel suo tormento interiore, costituito dal desiderio ardentissimo di affrontarla al più presto. 'La passione del desiderio', a suo dire, costituisce la vera croce del Cristo.... Ecco perché la Santa senese non riusciva a immaginare la vita di un perfetto cristiano, senza una carica più o meno intensa di codesto desiderio, in cui confluiscono la brama dell'onore di Dio e quella della salvezza del prossimo."

⁶⁶ O XIX, p. 212; N 9, pp. 70-71: "O eternal Truth, what is your teaching and what is the way by which you want us to go to the Father, the way by which we must go? I know of no other road but the one you paved with the true and solid virtues of your charity's fire. You, eternal Word, cemented it with your blood, so this must be the road. Our sin lies in nothing else but in loving what you hate and hating what you love."

Christ crucified, then, is the way that leads to the Father. The cross is where those seeking to make sense of suffering must look. To better appreciate suffering, then, it is necessary to look at St. Catherine's understanding of God's purposes for permitting such pain in the human experience.

HUMAN SUFFERING VIEWED FROM THE CROSS

Because God allowed the Son to suffer in order to accomplish his salvific plan, it makes sense that God must also be accomplishing some good by means of human suffering. This being the case, it is now possible to explore St. Catherine's perception of what God intends to accomplish through human suffering. Carlo Riccardi, C.M., in his book Il Messaggio di Santa Caterina da Siena, Dottore della Chiesa, offers the following list of positive values as expressed in St. Catherine's writings. First, suffering makes people humble, it frees them from pride and helps them better understand God's goodness. Second, recognizing the transitory nature of this world, suffering helps people hold the things of this world with a proper love. Third, suffering strengthens virtue within a person, for virtue is proved by its opposite. Fourth, suffering serves to alert people to their sinfulness and leads them to make restitution. Finally, suffering conforms humanity to the image of Christ crucified.⁶⁷

Conversion through suffering

Where Riccardi distinguishes between suffering that leads to humility and suffering that makes one more aware of his sins, this study will join these two values together. When a person experiences God's absence, what modern spirituality describes as "desolation", there is a certain degree of pain, because the person does not "feel" God's presence. St. Catherine

⁶⁷ Carlo Riccardi, C.M. Il Messaggio di Santa Caterina da Siena, Dottore della Chiesa (Roma: C.L.V. Edizioni, 1988), pp. 841-851.

addresses this situation in the Dialogue in God's own words: "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."⁶⁸

To those who are in a state of sin, this absence of God is real, not merely "felt", and serves as a means to bring them to reconciliation with God and their neighbor, thus serving as an instrument of conversion. The Lord continues to speak to St. Catherine, further explaining how this particular value of suffering leads a person to confession and humility:

When she was in deadly sin she cut herself off from me, and because of her guilt I withdrew my grace. Because she had closed the door of her desire, the sun of grace did not shine on her. It was not the sun's fault. It was the fault of the one who had closed the door of her desire. But when she recognizes herself for what she is, and her darksomeness, she opens the window and vomits out the rottenness in holy confession and then I return to her by grace. After that I withdraw from her feelings only, not withdrawing my grace. I do this to humble her and to exercise her in seeking me in truth and to prove her in the light of faith so that she may attain prudence.⁶⁹

Is it specifically *suffering* that alerts people to sin, which causes them to flee from sin and make atonement? St. Catherine very wisely recognized that sin is nothing, because it is done apart from God, who alone calls into being. Once a person becomes aware of the connection between suffering and sin, suffering can be an *initial motivation* to rise up from sinfulness, and begin to walk in the path of virtue. However, something else plays a significant role, specifically, holy fear. Because individuals fear any further suffering that would be a just reward for having offended God, they want to amend their life. The Lord teaches St. Catherine in the following passage:

⁶⁸ D LXIII, p. 137; N, p. 119.

⁶⁹ D LXIII, pp. 137-138; N, p. 119.

Now there are some, I tell you, who when they feel the pressure of trouble are prompted to remove the cloud from their eyes by their very suffering and by what they see must be the consequence of their sin. In this slavish fear they begin to make their way out of the river. They vomit out the venom with which the scorpion had stung them under the guise of gold.... But to walk in slavish fear is not enough. It is not enough for eternal life to sweep the house clean of deadly sin. One must fill it with virtue that is grounded in love, and not merely in fear.⁷⁰

St. Catherine was fully aware of God's justice and mercy, that is to say, the real possibility of a soul being lost, and condemned to suffer eternal damnation. The healthy role fear of God plays in life is by no means insignificant. Holy fear was present in St. Catherine's life as she felt herself unworthy of any consolation, peace or joy. Note well, even though holy fear is a good motive for wanting to lead a virtuous life, it falls well short of the proper motive, which is the fact that God, because he is the font of holiness and goodness is infinitely worthy of our service and love.⁷¹

Once individuals have received the Lord again through grace (in the sacrament of reconciliation), the Lord continues to perfect them by withdrawing from the "feelings", not in grace. This type of suffering is a common experience in prayer. It is not uncommon for those who pray regularly to sense God's absence on occasion. When this "absence of God" is felt, the person is tempted to abandon prayer. St. Catherine wisely discourages this response, knowing that God is always present in those who remain open to his love. So she encourages those who experience this desolation to remain faithful to their task, whatever it may be, and grow in faith, trusting that God is nonetheless present.

⁷⁰ D, XLIX, pp. 110-111; N, p. 100.

⁷¹ See Nerina Branconi, *La Via Delle Dolci Pene* (Roma: Edizioni Cateriniane, 1966), p. 44. See also D XLIX, p. 111; N, p. 100, where God tells Catherine: "But to walk merely in slavish fear is not enough. It is not enough for eternal life to sweep the house clean of deadly sin. One must fill it with virtue that is grounded in love, and not merely in fear." (Mt. 12:43-45).

Once the person turns from sin, suffering does not cease. God continues to employ this tool for the praise of his name and the well being of others who have not yet turned away from their sins. He explains this to St. Catherine:

Thus, as soon as you and my other servants come in this way to know my truth you will, for the glory and praise of my name, have to endure great trials, insults, and reproaches in word and in deed, even to the point of death. Behave, then, you and my other servants, with true patience, with sorrow for sin and love of virtue, for the glory and praise of my name. If you do, I shall be appeased for your sins and those of my other servants. The sufferings you endure will, through the power of charity, suffice to win both atonement and reward for you and for others. For you they will win the fruit of life: The stains of your foolishness will be blotted out, and I will no longer remember that you had ever offended me. As for others, because of your loving charity I will pardon them in proportion to their receptiveness.⁷²

This passage shows that suffering also serves to increase virtue. The next section seeks to see how this is accomplished.

Virtues increased through suffering

Since each individual is on a spiritual journey towards eternal life, the proper provisions for such a journey are the virtues. God, then, willing to provide for all human need, brings the virtues to life within each person through trials and temptations. St. Catherine explains this mysterious work of God in a letter already referred to in this study. She is writing to the Cistercian monk, Don Cristofano, at his monastery in Naples.

God allows temptations to test the virtues and to provide for the growth of grace; not so that we will be conquered, but that we will be victorious; not trusting in our own strength, but in divine help; saying with the Apostle Paul: “I can accomplish all things in Christ crucified; there is nothing I cannot do in the one who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

⁷² D IV, p. 8; N, p. 30.

[...] God permits this weariness only to test within us the virtues of patience, fortitude, and perseverance; the virtues that come from self-knowledge.... This is why the soul rejoices in these battles - seeing that God grants them to make her virtues grow in strength and number. Because virtue is never proven except by its opposite.... So, if the soul does not give birth to virtue with the test of many pains, from whatever side they come; whether from the flesh, or the devil, or from men, you can never tell if she has virtue.... Whenever God sees desire conceived within the soul, he immediately puts it to the test, to see if her love is faithful or mercenary.⁷³

From this passage it is clear that God permits trials and temptations to strengthen people in virtue. These trials teach individuals not to rely upon their own strength, but upon divine assistance. Not only is this suffering the battle ground where virtues are proven, but it can also be a source of joy for those who are wise enough to recognize what God in his goodness is bringing forth. If people are not tested by trials (of God's own choosing, not the kind and place individuals would choose for themselves),⁷⁴ it is not possible to see whether they truly possess virtue. Desire to do good alone is insufficient.

These trials are granted not that individuals will fall into sin, but precisely to give them an opportunity to grow in virtue and experience God's great goodness and reward.⁷⁵ The more people grow in perfection, the more they are able to bear their suffering for the good of their neighbor. The Lord continues to instruct Catherine in this vein:

Patience is proved in the assaults and weariness I allow my servants, and the fire of charity grows in the soul who has compassion for the soul of her

⁷³ L 335, V, pp.104-105. translation mine.

⁷⁴ D XII, pp. 31-32; N, p. 46: "So I tell you, you must offer me the vessel of all your actual sufferings, however I may send them to you - for the place and time and sort of suffering are not yours to choose, but mine."

⁷⁵ D CXLI, p. 390; N, p. 290. "This is why in my providence I allow the world to bring forth so many troubles for them, both to prove their virtue and that I may have reason to reward them for their suffering and the violence they do themselves.... Therefore, if it is beauty you want, I am beauty. If you want goodness, I am goodness, for I am supremely good.... I am the just and merciful God.... I am joyful, and I keep the soul who clothes herself in my will in supreme joy. I am the supreme providence who never betrays my servant's hope in me in soul or body. (cf. Rm. 10:12)."

abuser. For she grieves more over the offense done to me and the harm done to the other than over her own hurt. This is how those behave who are very perfect, and so they grow. And this is why I permit all these things. I grant them a stinging hunger for the salvation of souls so that they knock day and night at the door of my mercy, so much so that they forget themselves...And the more they abandon themselves, the more they find me.⁷⁶

Values prioritized through suffering

St. Catherine's teaching is consistent. Everything leads to God and eternal life. All that is experienced in this life is to that end. Once again, she perceives God's use of suffering as a way to show his people the passing nature of this life and that their ultimate goal is heaven. Therefore they are not to love the things or people of this life with a disordered love. The dialogue between Catherine and God reveals this value of suffering: "I send people troubles in this world so that they may know that their goal is not this life, and that these things are imperfect and passing. I am their goal, and I want them to want me, and in this spirit they should accept such things."⁷⁷

The Lord gives a fuller description of this disordered love to Catherine, telling her of the suffering that is a result of placing trust in earthly things:

Do you want me to tell you why they (imperfect souls) suffer? You know that love always brings suffering if what a person has identified with is lost.... Some have identified with their wealth, some with their status, some with their children. Some lose me in their slavery to creatures. Some in their great indecency make brute beasts of their bodies. And so in one way and another they hunger for and feed on earth. They would like to be stable but are not. Indeed they are as passing as the wind, for either they themselves fail through death or my will deprives them of the very things they loved. They suffer unbearable pain in their loss. And the more disordered their love in possessing, the greater is their grief in loss. Had they held these things as lent to them rather than as their own, they could let them go without pain. They suffer because they do not have what

⁷⁶ D CXLV, p. 410; N, pp. 303-304.

⁷⁷ D XLIX, p. 110; N, p. 100.

they long for. For, as I told you, the world cannot satisfy them, and not being satisfied, they suffer.⁷⁸

Thus, people, wealth, status, or things of any kind, are to be recognized as gifts of God. They are certainly to be appreciated and loved, but loved in and for God, not for self. This teaching indicates the great balance that is necessary for a Christian life. Suffering the loss of a loved one is normal, whether a husband or wife, child or best friend. Part of the great commandment is to love your neighbor. But when people are loved for one's own gratification, and not for love of God, the proper priority and spiritual balance is lost. St. Catherine encourages her followers to love all people and all things *in and with the love of Jesus Christ*. Only then is human love directed to its proper end.

In brief, then, these are the various positive purposes God intends in the human experience of suffering.⁷⁹ Perhaps, though, someone would say that knowing God's reasons for permitting suffering is insufficient to be able to bear them patiently, in a manner that is in keeping with God's will. *How* to bear sufferings in this life has not yet been addressed. St. Catherine gave a brief answer to this question in a letter to her brother, Benincasa:

I, Catherine, useless servant, bless and encourage you, and challenge you to a sweet and most holy patience, for without patience we cannot please God. I beg you then to take up this patience as your weapon so that you may receive the fruit of your troubles. And if bearing so much pain seems hard to you, I remind you of three things that may help you bear it more patiently. First, I would have you consider how short your life is, that you cannot be sure of tomorrow. We can truly say that we aren't bearing the sufferings of the past nor those of the future, but only the moment we're living right now. And since time is so short, we surely ought to suffer patiently. Secondly, consider the fruit that follows these sufferings. Saint Paul says there is no comparison between our sufferings and the fruit and reward of heavenly glory. (Rm. 8:18). Thirdly, reflect on the loss incurred by those who suffer angrily or impatiently, for the consequence is not

⁷⁸ D XLVIII, p. 108; N, p. 99. Additions within italics are mine.

⁷⁹ The final value of suffering, which conforms us to Christ crucified, will be discussed in greater length at the end of this chapter.

only what they lose here but eternal suffering hereafter as well. I beg you, then, dearest brother, to suffer patiently.⁸⁰

Here, St. Catherine offers the three basic ingredients for successfully bearing pain and torment. In this way suffering brings forth the good fruit of charitable works that God asks of his people. When the people recognize the shortness of life, the brief span of time on earth, it is easier to bear the pain of trials, putting them in the proper perspective of the entire span of creation. Consciousness of the brevity of time is also another way people can keep death before them, knowing the trials born today may be the last opportunity to demonstrate their love for God and neighbor. The length of a lifetime is short, so St. Catherine encourages people to bear their cross patiently.

Second, the sufferings endured in this life play a significant role in God's plan of salvation. They should therefore be accepted with great joy, because they allow the human person to participate in God's work; no more honorable work can be found. Even more importantly, the sufferings of this life, according to St. Paul, pale in comparison to the great reward of eternal life. God, by allowing his people to suffer, calls them to work to free all creation from slavery to sin, as St. Paul expresses in his letter to the Romans.⁸¹

Finally, when people fail to suffer patiently, two things result. The individuals miss a great opportunity to embrace God's will, thus showing their love for God and working for the

⁸⁰ L 18, I, pp. 60-61; NL, 14, p. 64; DT XIII, pp. 56-57; also in another letter to the same brother, L 20, I, p. 64; NL, 16, p. 66; DT XVI, p. 60, she gives further advice: "Take heart, take heart, dearest brother, and don't falter under God's discipline. Trust that when human aid fails, divine help is at hand. God will provide for you. Recall how Job lost his possessions, his children, his health; only his wife was left him, and she was a constant torment! But after God had tested his patience he returned everything doubly, and in the end gave him eternal life. Patient Job was never confounded. No, always exercising the virtue of holy patience, he would say, 'God gave it to me and God has taken it away from me. Blessed be God's name!' (Job 1:21)."

⁸¹ Rm. 8: 20-21: "It was not for its own purposes that creation had frustration imposed on it, but for the purposes of him who imposed it - with the intention that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God."

spiritual (and corporal) benefit of their neighbor. These tremendous opportunities of grace are precisely what God intends. Also, when people choose to avoid suffering, or to suffer impatiently, they close their hearts to the possibility of ever finding God in the midst of such experiences and do not fulfill his will. Those who persist in such actions never reach their full potential for good, they never attain their authentic identity in the eyes of God, because they refuse to love. They do not allow their image of God to reach perfection in Jesus Christ, for this is only accomplished through love.

In the Dialogue, the Father instructs Catherine concerning the link between suffering and Jesus' own path and teaching: "You have good reason, then, to take comfort in the teaching of the gentle loving Word, my only-begotten Son, in times of great trouble, suffering, and adversity, and when you are tempted by people or the devil. For these things strengthen your virtue and bring you to great perfection."⁸²



Visit the Imprisoned

⁸² D XC, p. 210; N, p. 168.

St. Catherine does more than grant some insight into the great mystery surrounding suffering. She also outlines the necessary attitude and practices that assist people in bearing their sufferings in an acceptable manner. The answer is simple: follow Jesus Christ crucified since he is the gentle teacher of the ways of God. His way was a way of suffering, and so is the Christian way. The path is difficult, but not impossible. The more people cultivate a holy desire, prayer, and true contrition for sin, the more fruitful their suffering will be. The next section, therefore, will examine Catherine's imperative to follow Christ crucified and the spiritual ingredients that are necessary for those who would be his disciples.

HUMAN RESPONSE TO SUFFERING: CLING TO CHRIST CRUCIFIED

This entire study revolves around Jesus Christ, since nothing that is essential for the Christian pilgrimage through this life can be learned from anyone else. Those who wish to be pleasing in the sight of God must fix their sight on Jesus Christ. This section focuses primarily on the understanding of holy desire, and includes a brief section on contrition and prayer. Desire is the infinite element that brings satisfaction to humanity's finite acts of love. This desire, though, can only be learned from the love of gentle Jesus. Therefore, before reviewing the role it plays in the human response to suffering, it is necessary to discover its presence and function in the life of Christ.

Holy desire

The concept of holy desire is an important element in St. Catherine's spirituality. Just as it revealed the infinite nature of Christ's love for humanity, so it is the "infinite" element of human love, which can only be expressed and experienced in finite ways. God grants this infinite desire to his people to give them the capacity to make satisfaction for sin against him,

who is infinite, thus making any offense against him an infinite sin. Just as virtue and love must be learned from Christ, so must desire.

This “cross of holy desire” was mentioned earlier as one of the things Christ suffered during his life, anxious as he was to fulfill the Father’s will. Now is the appropriate time to discover what St. Catherine meant to teach with this expression.

God’s Son suffered both physical torments and the pain of desire, and the cross of desire was far greater than the suffering endured on the cross. This was his desire: hunger for our redemption and fulfilling his Father’s will. This desire caused him to suffer until it was accomplished. Also, as the Eternal Father’s Wisdom, he saw those who would participate in his blood, and those who through their own fault would not. The blood was given to all, and therefore he suffered because some through their own ignorance did not wish to participate in it. This was the crucifying desire he carried from the beginning until the end. Because he is the Life, though he finally laid down the cross of desire, his desire never ends.⁸³

This passage shows how strong was the Son’s desire to fulfill the Father’s will. As painful as his passion must have been, the painful desire of his heart was greater. Because his desire for humanity’s salvation was so great, the pain of knowing that many would choose not to share in his blood must have been intolerable. “What heart will be so hard and stubborn as not to be moved at the sight of such infinite love and the great dignity we have been given - and not because God owed it to us, but by his grace?”⁸⁴

As if his physical suffering were not enough to express his love, he allowed the soldiers to pierce his side to reveal the heart which bore such infinite love. These words exchanged between the Lord and Catherine are illustrative:

“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

⁸³ L 242, pp. 38-39. (translation mine).

⁸⁴ NL 52, pp. 160-161; DT LII, p. 205.

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.'

[...] 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.'⁸⁵

The desire of Christ for the salvation of the world was just as important as his physical suffering, for St. Catherine says that without this desire, the finite, physical suffering would have been insufficient. As Christ's desire was infinite, so is the "fruit" that comes from his suffering, namely, "the fruit of the blood" or the salvation that is offered to humankind.

Drawing ever nearer to Christ crucified, humankind learns all that is necessary to follow in his footsteps. Just as desire was essential for Christ to accomplish the Father's will, so it is essential for any who would participate in his salvific work, which is exactly what human suffering offers. St. Catherine learns of suffering and human desire in her conversation with God:

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? For an offense against me, infinite Good, demands infinite satisfaction. So I want you to know that not all sufferings given in this life are given for punishment, but rather for correction, to chastise the child who offends. However, it is true that a soul's desire, that is, true contrition and sorrow for sin, can make satisfaction. True contrition satisfies for sin and its penalty not by virtue of any finite suffering you may bear, but by virtue of your infinite desire. For God, who is infinite, would have infinite love and infinite sorrow.

⁸⁵ D LXXV, pp. 165-167; N, pp. 138-139.

[...] So 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 Co. 13:1-3) Finite works are not enough either to punish or to atone unless they are seasoned with loving charity.⁸⁶

Just as Christ's passion and death would have been insufficient to accomplish the Father's will if it were not seasoned with loving charity and holy desire, so human suffering alone is inadequate to atone for one single sin if not accompanied with loving desire. True love, is divine love, and that is why it is the infinite element that allows human suffering to make amends for sin. Only love is capable of expressing infinite sorrow for offense against infinite Goodness.

Human suffering, united with holy desire for the salvation of souls, appeals to God's mercy, that God may then bring about his will, the salvation of his children. Human suffering, when embraced with love for one's neighbor and with true contrition for sin, cries out to God's mercy, and, as it were, ties his hands of justice.⁸⁷ This was the role that Christ's own suffering played, and when the human heart loves as Christ, when the human will is united to the will of the eternal Father's, as was Christ's, then humanity participates in this mystery of salvation in a very real and beneficial manner. "O compassionate merciful Father, who keeps the angels from taking revenge on this humanity which is your enemy? Your mercy. In mercy you grant us consolation to coax us to love, for the creature's heart is attracted by love."⁸⁸

⁸⁶ D III, pp. 5-6; N, pp. 28-29.

⁸⁷ In reference to God's mercy and justice, Catherine demonstrates how the suffering of God's servants, when accompanied by loving desire, appeals to his mercy, and restrains his justice: "But I have one remedy to calm my wrath: my servants who care enough to press me with their tears and bind me with the chain of their desire. You see, you have bound me with that chain - and I myself gave you that chain because I wanted to be merciful to the world. I put into my servants a hunger and longing for my honor and the salvation of souls so that I might be forced by their tears to soften the fury of my divine justice." D XV, pp. 43-44; N, p. 54.

⁸⁸ O XIX, p. 216; N, 9, p. 72.

Contrition and Prayer

Though desire is the greatest factor which makes satisfaction for sin in the eyes of God, two other elements also need to be mentioned; contrition and prayer. Actually, St. Catherine seems to use contrition and desire interchangeably, as the following passage shows: “However, it is true that a soul’s desire, that is, true contrition and sorrow for sin, can make satisfaction. True contrition satisfies for sin and its penalty not by virtue of any finite suffering you may bear, but by virtue of your infinite desire.”⁸⁹

As the above passages give credit to desire, and contrition for appealing to God’s mercy, so the next passage gives credit to prayer: “The medicine by which he (God) willed to heal the whole world and to soothe his wrath and divine justice was humble, constant, holy prayer.”⁹⁰ It would seem, then, that for human suffering to truly accomplish the purpose for which God intends, it must be accompanied with holy, loving desire, true contrition for sin, and constant humble prayer, each of which play an important role.

SUFFERING: CONFORMITY WITH CHRIST CRUCIFIED

Holy desire, contrition and constant, humble prayer lead one to enter into conformity with Christ. It is necessary to love the Lord if suffering is to bear good fruit. The tree of life is where Christ offered the best of his fruit, so those who would be his disciples must also be willing to join him not only at the cross but on the cross. This is where one is conformed to Christ crucified and learns to suffer and love as he did. Because her theology develops around the crucified Christ, the cross and conformity to Christ are essential to Catherine’s spirituality. The cross is where all Christians are called to encounter and embrace Christ in their suffering.

⁸⁹ D III, p. 5; N, p. 28.

⁹⁰ D XIX, p. 48; N, p. 57. (addition mine).

Catherine mentions on numerous occasions in her letters a desire to see people bathed in the blood of Christ; in other words, share fully in the forgiveness accomplished in his blood, and participate in his salvific work. Only by traveling along Christ's redemptive way of suffering can humanity be truly redeemed.⁹¹ Humanity has an active role to play in working out their salvation, but even their efforts are a gift from God.⁹²

Cross of Christ: source of consolation

As one grows in appreciation for what Christ accomplished in his passion and enters into the passion through his or her own pains and trials, suffering takes on a wholly new significance. Only the cross reveals the true depths of love that Christ has for humanity. Only love can explain why God sacrificed his only Son for the good of his people. Love is the reason all people are called to bear their cross. The cross of Christ is the school this gentle Teacher uses to instruct humanity in the ways of love. Only in the cross is it possible to understand the true meaning and purpose involved in human suffering.

St. Catherine uses the image of the cross to encourage her numerous correspondents to embrace their own suffering. In a letter to Bishop Angelo Ricasoli, she demonstrates how the cross must be embraced.

I long to see you bound fast in holy desire to the wood of the most holy and revered cross. It is there that we will find the spotless Lamb, roasted in the fire of gentle charity. On that tree we find the source of the virtues. For charity is the fruitful tree; charity was the cross and the nails that held God's Son. No other

⁹¹ Suzanne Noffke, *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, p. 146, "Particularly noteworthy...is Catherine's interpretation of the double gift we receive in Christ: his blood and his teaching, both of which call us to an active response. This sacramentality of the Word is very central to Catherine's spirituality: we are not truly redeemed except as we enter into the redemptive way of living patterned for us by Jesus in all that he did and said."

⁹² Philippians 2:12-13: "...so work out your salvation in fear and trembling. It is God who, for his own generous purpose, gives you the intention and the powers to act."

cross, no other bond could have held him. There you find the slain Lamb, feeding on the Father's glory and our salvation - for his love is so great that he could not express it in [mere] physical suffering.⁹³

St. Catherine clearly sees the cross as the point of God's greatest expression of love, and by encouraging Bishop Ricasoli to be bound fast to the same wood, Catherine is saying that only in this fashion can his love for God most clearly be demonstrated. In this way, St. Catherine pleads with the bishop to give his own life for the care of the flock entrusted to him. By embracing the cross of his duties and obligations as a bishop of the Church, he is lovingly bound to the cross with Christ, more perfectly revealing Christ's love and presence. "I beg you, father, to lay down your life for your charges, your little sheep, as a true shepherd.... Be the sort of person who eats and savors souls, because this is the food God is asking for."⁹⁴ In other words, she is asking him to spend his life lovingly caring for God's people, doing all in his power to help them reach their goal, salvation.

The cross in St. Catherine's thought is any source of trial and suffering which God permits. How many graces are lost by not embracing these trials?⁹⁵ They are opportunities to stand at the foot of the cross with St. John and the Blessed Mother and learn from the Master himself. In these trials, Christ is present as at no other time. If people simply look at trials as sources of pain and suffering and beg God to take them away, they will never meet Jesus precisely where the revelation of God's love is the greatest, at the foot of the cross. If, however, they humbly enter into the trial, embrace the cross and not allow it to scare them away, then Christ not only reveals himself; but conforms them more and more to his own image.

⁹³ NL 37, p. 125; DT XXXVII, p. 153.

⁹⁴ NL 37, p. 126; DT XXXVII, p. 155.

⁹⁵ NL 70, p. 219; DT LXX, p. 291: "Such people are like courageous knights. They do not avoid the blows, but even consider themselves unworthy of what seems to them - and is - a very great grace; to bear pain, temptation, and harassment for Christ crucified."

Jesus is the one who wants to *relieve* the suffering of the world. The Gospels show him time and time again healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, expelling unclean spirits: “and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many devils.” (Mk 1:33-34) He invites those who are weary and heavily burdened to come to him. (Cf. Mt 11:28) This is one and the same Jesus Christ who invites his people to take up their cross and follow him. (Cf. Lk 14:27) These are not two separate and exclusive thoughts. Christ is One - The One who brings unity and wholeness to life. It is precisely because He wants to relieve human suffering that he invites people to embrace it and follow him. The cross is a part of human experience, but it need not be a burden. People spend tremendous amounts of energy walking around their crosses - avoiding them - denying them - wringing their hands because of the difficulty they will entail - but this does not make them go away, nor does it bring any relief or consolation.

The minute people pick up their cross, with Christ and his grace, they encounter his presence, his peace, his love, his strength to bear the cross. Simply stated, they encounter Christ. In the midst of suffering people are capable of the greatest gift of love, for surely then it is love freely given. It is in these moments that the gift of self is most pure, and free of ulterior motives (or mercenary love as St. Catherine describes it).

The cross of Christ continues to be the source of strength for those who suffer. In gazing upon the cross, or simply calling it to mind, people are reminded of God’s tremendous love, and find the encouragement to return love for love. Yet, many continue to offend God’s goodness by not embracing his will as found in their sufferings. St. Catherine speaks of this offense to God and what she sees as its cause:

I can see no other reason except that the eye of our understanding is not focused on the tree of the cross. For there is revealed such warm love, such gently persuasive teaching filled with life giving fruits, such generosity that he has torn open his very body, has shed his life's blood, and with that blood has baptized and bathed us. We can and should make use of that baptism every day with continual remembrance and great love.⁹⁶

St. Catherine speaks of the necessity of being conformed to Christ by means of his cross and gives the reasons why as she speaks to her Lord in the following prayer:

We must conform ourselves to you through suffering and anguished desires. So through you who are life we will produce the fruit of life if we choose to engraft ourselves into you. It is clear then that though you created us without our help, you do not want to save us without our help. Once we have been engrafted into you, the branches you gave our tree begin to produce their fruit. Our memory is filled with the continual recollection of your blessings. Our understanding gazes into you to know perfectly your truth and your will. And our will chooses to love and to follow what our understanding has seen and known.⁹⁷

Only by embracing the crucified Christ can people bear good fruit through their suffering. Participation in Christ's suffering is required if people truly wish to experience salvation, for St. Catherine understands God's way as having created humanity for love, and only in sharing in this love will they share in eternal life. The way that St. Catherine recommends to people is to use their memory to keep God's love always before them, to use their understanding to constantly seek to know God's will and by use of the will to participate in this love by choosing to love freely in whatever walk of life God chooses.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ NL 23, p. 88; DT XXIII, p. 97.

⁹⁷ O X, p. 108; N 17, p. 149.

⁹⁸ O X, p. 108; N 17, p. 149. "Our memory is filled with the continual recollection of your blessings. Our understanding gazes into you to know perfectly your truth and your will. And our will chooses to love and to follow what our understanding has seen and known."

Blood of Christ: a participation in Christ's suffering and love

Another way St. Catherine calls people to be conformed to Christ crucified is by inviting them to gaze upon the blood of Christ. But a simple calling to mind of this blood is insufficient. Once again, the *active participation* is a necessary element, for only in sharing in the blood can one be transformed into Christ. St. Catherine wished to see all people participate in this blood of Christ by giving their own blood for the good of the Church. In the following letter she is seeking the assistance of Bartolomeo Smeducci, lord of Sanseverino, in the upcoming crusade in the holy land. Such crusades required great personal sacrifices and held the constant threat of death. Catherine invites him to endure such sacrifices out of love for Christ's Church and for the salvation of the many lost souls of the unbelievers who currently were in control of the holy land:

Let your heart and soul be set afire in Christ gentle Jesus, with love and longing to reciprocate such love, to give him life for life. He gave his life for you: decide now to give your life for him, blood for blood. I am inviting you, in the name of Christ crucified, to give your blood for his blood...Don't be afraid of dying. This is why I said I long to see you a courageous and fearless knight. The blood will be your inspiration and your strength, and relieve you of all fear.⁹⁹

St. Catherine wanted all people to participate in Christ's redemptive work. She saw many choosing to remain in sin and refusing to participate in the blood of the Lamb - so she is fully aware of the need for more servants of God to suffer as Christ, for the salvation of souls.¹⁰⁰ But the only way that these servants can produce good fruit is to be conformed to Christ crucified, by participating in his blood. Being conformed to Christ crucified has everything to do with wanting to suffer for the spiritual welfare of God's family. The more people participate

⁹⁹ NL 52, p. 161; DT LII, pp. 205-206.

¹⁰⁰ D CXLVI, p. 415; N, p. 307. "For I have already told you, if you recall, that it is by means of my servants and their great sufferings that I would be merciful to the world and reform my bride."

in God's love, the more concerned they become about working to achieve God's great desire to have his children reunited with him in eternity. Christ blood is a bath to both wash away sin and strengthen humanity in the continuing work of salvation. "His blood became a bath to wash away our weaknesses, and the nails became keys to unlock the door to heaven."¹⁰¹

St. Catherine expresses the way the blood of Christ conforms people to himself and how it frees them of their own selfish designs to participate more fully in his liberating love:

'How I have longed to celebrate this Passover with you before I die!' (Lk 22:15) This is the Passover I want us to celebrate: I want to see us at the table of the Spotless Lamb, who is food, table, and waiter. The fruits on this table are the true solid virtues. No other table bears fruit, but this one's fruit is perfect, because this table is life-giving. This table has been furrowed, with channels everywhere flowing with blood. But among them all there is one channel flowing with blood and water mixed with fire, and to the eye that rests on this channel is revealed the secret of his heart. This blood is a wine on which our soul gets drunk. The more we drink, the more we would like to drink, and we are never fully satisfied, because his flesh and his blood are joined with infinite God.

Oh dearest son in Christ Jesus, let us eagerly run to this table!...For this blood is shed with the fire of divine charity. It so warms us that out we come from our very selves - and from that point on, we cannot see ourselves selfishly, but only for God, and we see God for God, and we see our neighbors for God.... We have taken our example from the one who is continually pouring out his blood at this table - and not for his own good but for ours. We who eat at this table and become like the food we eat begin to do as he does - not for our good but for God's honor and for our neighbors' salvation.¹⁰²

When people are washed and bathed in the blood of Christ, and participate fully in it, they then hold all in proper reference to the Father, from whom all things flow. Just as Christ shed his own blood for the good of humanity, people may shed their own blood, their life energy for the good of others and for God's honor and glory.

¹⁰¹ NL 68, p. 214; DT LXVIII, p. 283.

¹⁰² NL 6, pp. 49-50; DT VI, pp.30-32

To those who feel that this participation is too costly, that they are not up to the challenge, St. Catherine offers the following words of encouragement:

Your unworthy daughter Catherine, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, sends you greetings, longing to see you bathed and drowned in the blood of God's Son. That blood will make every bitterness seem sweet to us and every heavy burden light. It will enable you to follow in the footsteps of Christ, who said he was the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. So, father, my soul longs to see you a true shepherd, stripped of all self-centeredness. I would have you keep your wide-open eyes fixed on God's honor and the salvation of other people.¹⁰³

The way of Christ is a mysterious one. Those who would be his disciples face a great challenge, but they will be rewarded well beyond their imagination. Suffering at first glance seems beyond all people's understanding and capacity. But as people grow in faith and knowledge of God's ways, they quickly learn that his love can accomplish all things. So it is important to look to Christ to learn why and how to suffer, and as his way becomes the way of all people, the rewards of such love will be felt in this life as St. Catherine describes in the following letter.

This is why God's true servants, realizing that the world has nothing in common with Christ, try conscientiously to avoid any conformity with the world. So they use all their hatred and scorn to become lovers of what God loves and haters of what he hates. They have no other wish than to be conformed with Christ crucified, ever following in his steps, ablaze with love for true virtue. Whatever they see Christ choosing for himself they want for themselves but they receive just the opposite! For they choose poverty and lowliness but are ever honored. They enjoy peace, pleasure, and joy, happiness and every consolation, free from all sadness. This is no surprise to me because they are conformed with and transformed in the supreme eternal truth and goodness of God, in whom all good is found, in whom true and holy desires are fulfilled.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ NL 66, pp. 209-210; DT LXVI, pp. 277-278

¹⁰⁴ NL 7, p. 52; DT VII, p. 35.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER TWO

To be with Christ crucified is to be one with Christ; is to truly know God's love. To know Christ and his truth is to know the Father. To participate in the cross and blood of Christ is to participate in God's will for the salvation of the world. In this context suffering can be seen as a great privilege, to share in God's will, to know Christ in his own Passion and Death. This is not to say that one must go looking for ways to suffer. Certainly Christ did not choose his manner of suffering and death, he simply accepted what the Father held out to him. Thus people need not look for ways of their own to participate in Christ's suffering, but are gently invited by Christ to take up the cross that is placed in their life by a loving Father, and follow him by the power of his grace and to embrace it with the love that he has demonstrated and extended to all the world.

Once one personally encounters Christ crucified, and recognizes in him the great love that God has for all people, the desire for all earthly things will be consumed. These people will want to look no where else and, like St. Catherine, will keep their eyes fixed on Christ and their memory filled with the goodness of God and their will set on living in his love. The passion and desire to serve the Father in whatever role he chooses to offer will be the source of joy and happiness for all who come to know Christ crucified.

CHAPTER THREE

SUFFERING & GLORY

In St. Catherine's spirituality and writing, there is an intimate link between Christ's passion and resurrection. They are almost one event for her, because immediately following the passion and death of Christ, the life of resurrection was poured out upon the earth. For this reason this study would be incomplete without discussing the resurrection; without it, the passion makes absolutely no sense. However, to speak of the resurrection for St. Catherine is to speak also of the passion. For Christians to share in the resurrection of Christ, they must share in his passion; they must become, as it were, another *christ*.¹⁰⁵

This concluding chapter will look solely at one of St. Catherine's prayers, which is a great summation of all that has been discussed up to this point. It also expresses the intimate link between the passion of Christ, the life that is won as a result, and the mandate to all who are washed clean in his blood to become so one with Christ crucified that they suffer willingly for God's honor and the salvation of souls.

PRAYER 19 (O XII): LIFE IN CHRIST CRUCIFIED

On Passion Sunday, March 27, 1379,¹⁰⁶ Catherine's prayer focused on the passion of Christ and the life giving effects it has for humanity. The first part of this prayer discusses in a summarily fashion much of what has been presented in the opening chapter of this study. St. Catherine speaks of God's greatness and of her lowliness, thus indicating the all important first step for any relationship with God, recognizing the glory of God and the "nothingness" of

¹⁰⁵ O XII, p. 152; N 19, p. 178. "...you are calling your servants *christs*,..." More will be said of this later in this chapter.

¹⁰⁶ See the explanation given by Giuliano Cavallini in the introduction to this prayer; *Le Orazioni*, p. 134.

humanity. Yet in the practice of prayer, she sees God's great desire to draw all people to himself and to reveal himself to them, and no matter what great things God reveals to them in this life, knowledge of God will remain "veiled" because humanity is not capable of knowing God as he truly is or seeing him face to face. Yet, humanity is capable of a relationship with God precisely through love, or as St. Catherine says "through love's affection".¹⁰⁷ She continues by pointing out that selfish sensuality and personal will prevent humanity from seeing God's affection.

The prayer continues by speaking of the Incarnation as the point in time when humanity was given the possibility to share in this tremendous love. Here then the union between God and his people reaches perfection, in the union between the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ. The possibility of a true communion in and with God is open to humanity through the Son. Christ came to fulfill the Law, which existed precisely to enable humankind to live in relationship with God. In Christ this union, this relationship of love, reaches perfection. St. Catherine realized that God's great love for his children at the time of the incarnation was still unknown. "But this love, this union, were so hidden that few knew of them. This is why souls did not yet appreciate your exaltedness."¹⁰⁸

At this point in the prayer, the true significance of the passion becomes the central theme, which is the point of interest for the summary of this study.

It was in this Word's Passion
that souls came, by your light
to a perfect knowledge of your charity's affection.
For then the fire
hidden under our ashes
began to show itself

¹⁰⁷ O XII, p. 136; N 19, p. 170.

¹⁰⁸ O XII, p. 140; N 19, p. 171.

completely and generously
by splitting open his most holy body on the wood of the cross.¹⁰⁹

Catherine exclaims here that in the Son's passion is God's love most readily visible. In the height of his suffering God demonstrates the depths of his love. The "fire" of the divine presence, up to now hidden within the humanity of the Son, begins to make its presence known and felt through the heat of his passionate love. The full measure of God's love is poured out through the open side of the crucified Christ. The recreative force of this love and life giving blood streams forth for all to see. Already it is clear that the life God so longed to share with his people could be restrained no longer. The effects of the Resurrection are clearly visible already on the wood of the cross before the Son has been deposed. She expresses in the following way the saving effects of this blood.

In this blood
you have washed the face of your spouse, the soul,
with whom you are joined
by the union of the divine nature
with our human nature.
In this blood you clothed her when she was naked,
and by your death you restored her to life.¹¹⁰

In Christ's blood, humanity finds forgiveness for sin and a participation in the divine. A preview of the intimate link between the passion and its effects in the resurrection is seen. Just as God took on human flesh in the incarnation, now he clothes humanity in the divine presence as Christ offers himself to us by clothing us in his blood. As Christ is one with the Father, he became one with humanity, and now unites humanity to himself through his life giving blood.

¹⁰⁹ O XII, p. 140; N 19, p. 172. Cf. John 19:3 "one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance." Cavallini and Noffke both note the difference between the scriptural tradition of the soldier piercing Christ's side and Catherine's spiritual interpretation which indicates the heat of Christ's love as the cause for his side to burst open.

¹¹⁰ O XII, pp. 140-142; N 19, p. 172.

In Christ, through an active participation in his blood, all are made one and come to share in his divine life.

Catherine continues yet again to expound how all who suffer find their peace in Christ crucified.

O agreeable, peaceful Passion!
 You make the soul sail on in tranquil peace
 over the waves of the stormy sea!
 O delightful, so sweet Passion!
 O wealth of the soul!
 O refreshment for the troubled!
 O food for the famished!
 O gate and paradise for the soul!...
 The soul who glories in you discovers her fruitfulness.¹¹¹

What a paradox: “O agreeable, peaceful Passion!” This peaceful Passion can only be known by those who have truly come to know Christ crucified and the depths of his love. Only in him can the sick and troubled find comfort. Only those who have faith can possibly see the rationale of this reality and experience the balm of such a mystery. People who find their “glory”, hope, joy, inspiration, in Christ crucified find the love required to offer their own sufferings for the good of others, and this is their own “fruitfulness”.

St. Catherine continues with the theme of new life, “resurrection”, flowing from Christ’s passion.

[Y]ou Passion, restore life to the dead.
 If the soul becomes ill because of the devil’s temptations,
 you deliver her.
 If she is being hounded by the world

¹¹¹ O XII, p. 142.; N 19, p. 173.

or besieged by her own weakness,
you are a refuge for her.¹¹²

Not only is life restored to the dead, but a renewal of the quality of life is felt already in this life. In Christ crucified, those experiencing the temptations of the devil find their strength and liberty. For those who are temporarily distracted by the allurements of this world, Christ crucified restores a proper hierarchy of value and priorities. This does not mean that St. Catherine holds the things of this world in contempt, but when they are sought above and beyond or apart from the love of God, they serve only to separate individuals from their true orientation, thus frustrating the plan of God.

In regards to the desires of this world and of the flesh, again the emphasis is placed in drawing upon the love of Christ crucified for the grace to die to self and live only for him.

O Passion,
the soul who has come to rest in you is dead
so far as her sensuality is concerned,
and so she experiences your charity's affection.
Oh, how exquisite and sweet is the sweetness the soul tastes
who enters beneath this husk,
where she has discovered charity's light and fire
in the sight of the wondrous union
divinity has effected with our humanity!¹¹³

Here the theme of being clothed in Christ begins to develop. The importance of this idea has been emphasized already in recognizing how conformity to Christ is essential if people are to suffer courageously and efficaciously according to the divine plan of God. In entering "beneath this husk" of the crucified Christ, one enters into the suffering of Christ, experiences what he experienced, and appreciates the depth of his love all the more. This image is

¹¹² O XII, p. 144; N 19, p. 173.

¹¹³ O XII, P. 144; N 19, p. 174.

developed even more fully in the following passage, and is connected with the idea that people are reminded of the depths of God's love by gazing upon the pierced side of Christ crucified:

For us
 you have made a cavern in your open side,
 where we might have a refuge in the face of our enemies,
 and in this cavern
 we can come to know your charity
 because by this you have shown
 that you wanted to give us more
 than you could give by your finite actions.
 There we have found the bath
 in which we have washed our soul's face clean
 of the leprosy of sin.¹¹⁴

The power of this image can easily be passed over and missed, particularly for people of the modern world, where devotion to the crucified and bloodied Christ has lost some of its strength. But Catherine sees within this open side of Christ the treasure of the Church, the blood which sanctifies, restores life, and grants entry into the Mystical Body of Christ.

As a result of the Passion of Christ, humanity has received many fruits which result in life (resurrection). Such benefits are in store for all who bear their cross of pain and suffering as did Christ. What is more, God continues to grant such life-giving fruit to those in need as a result of the sufferings his servants bear.

By thus making yourself small
 you have made us great.
 By being saturated with disgrace
 you have filled us with blessedness.
 By enduring hunger you have sated us
 with your charity's affection.
 By stripping yourself of life
 you have clothed us in grace.
 By being filled with shame yourself

¹¹⁴ O XII, p. 148; N 19, p. 176.

you have restored honor to us.
 By becoming darksome in your humanity
 you have given us back the light.
 By being stretched out on the cross
 you have embraced US.¹¹⁵

PASSION AND RESURRECTION: LIFE FROM DEATH

From this point on, the prayer focuses on the mandate that is given for humanity to share in Christ's suffering. Even though the passion and death of Christ is a one time event with effects that permeate all of history; past, present and future, St. Catherine sees a clear mission statement within this event for all of God's people to offer their sufferings for his honor and the salvation of souls. Even though Christ has already fulfilled God's promise to save his people, the work of salvation is on-going. People cannot simply look upon the passion, death and resurrection of Christ as a "free ticket" to eternal life. They must enter into this way and truth of Christ. St. Catherine begins this section with the following observation and question:

O Godhead, my love,
 I have one thing to ask of you.
 When the world was lying sick
 you sent your only-begotten Son as doctor,
 and I know you did it for love.
 But now I see the world lying completely dead -
 so dead that my soul faints at the sight.
 What can there be now
 to revive this dead one once more?¹¹⁶

Here this study comes to a definitive text of the great good that St. Catherine sees resulting from suffering embraced with heartfelt desire: expansion of love for God and neighbor, and a passionate longing to become one with Christ crucified.

¹¹⁵ O XII, p. 148; N 19, p. 176.

¹¹⁶ O XII, p.150; N19, p. 177

Despite Christ's death and resurrection and the salvation achieved in these great mysteries, St. Catherine is still painfully aware of the presence of sin in the world. So closely does she align the sufferings of God's "servants" with Christ crucified that it would be impossible to deny the positive results the sufferings these other "christs" achieve. The very resurrection and life that flows from Christ's passion and death will also be experienced by those who suffer along with and for Christ and his Church. St. Catherine sees the passion and death of Christ and the life he has won as a mandate to participate in this mission to all who would call themselves Christian. To truly belong to Christ is to participate fully in his salvific work and liberating love:

True, your Son is not about to come again
except in majesty, to judge,...
But as I see it,
you are calling your servants christs,
and by means of them you want to relieve the world of death
and restore it to life.
How? You want these servants of yours to walk courageously
along the Word's way, with concern and blazing desire,
working for your honor and the salvation of souls,
and for this patiently enduring pain, torments, disgrace, blame -
from whatever source these may come.
For these finite sufferings, joined with their infinite desire,
you want to refresh them -
I mean you want to listen to their prayers
and grant their desires.¹¹⁷

St. Catherine, seeing the good that will be accomplished by those who will love as Christ loved and suffer as he suffered continues her prayer by begging the Father to send these "christs" into the world. This is why it is so essential for all of God's people to recognize in their sufferings the great opportunity to share in a personal way in Christ's own suffering and to learn from the Master, in the way he chose, how best to demonstrate their love:

¹¹⁷ O XII, p. 152; N19, P, 178.

O best of remedy givers!
 Give us then these christs, who will live in continual watching
 and tears and prayers for the world's salvation.
 You call them your christs
 because they are conformed to your only-begotten Son.¹¹⁸

Although the aim of this study has been to focus upon a particular element of the entire human experience, that of suffering, this does not mean that it is the only way there is to demonstrate one's love for God and neighbor, nor is this what St. Catherine said. However, when suffering inevitably enters into each person's life, they are encouraged by St. Catherine to recognize that it is perhaps the most privileged way to participate in God's love, because it was the way of his Son. For this reason, those who suffer willingly for God's honor and the well being of their neighbors, Catherine rightly refers to them as being "other christs". Suffering truly is a privileged way to share in God's plan.

To close, St. Catherine encourages her disciples, and all followers of Christ crucified to leave complacency behind and enter joyfully into God's service. She gives more than a gentle order, however, for following this command she points out the way to accomplish it:

Rouse yourself
 open the eye of your understanding
 and look into the depth
 within the deep well of divine charity.
 For unless you see,
 you cannot love.
 The more you see,
 the more you love.
 Once you love,
 you will follow,
 and you will cloth yourself in his will.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ O XII, p. 152; N 19, p. 179.

¹¹⁹ O XII, p.154; N 19, p. 180.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER THREE

The life that is experienced by those who enter into the passion of our Lord is nothing short of the divine life of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The ultimate life that results from sharing in Christ's passion and death is the promise of eternal life, but as St. Catherine has adequately demonstrated, the effects of that life are felt in this life as people taste the peace, love, comfort, affection, and grace of this same loving God. As people gaze upon the crucified Christ with eyes of faith and hearts filled with hope in the promises of God, they, like St. Catherine, will be aflame in his love. This love is what leads one to be more consumed with doing God's will and gives the courage necessary to go wherever the gentle shepherd may lead. Then, when trials and temptations come, no matter from what source, these trials can be embraced willingly because, rooted in the knowledge of God's tremendous love, and aflame with desire to do God's will, God's faithful servants know that a life beyond imagination awaits them.

Conclusion

Suffering will always be a part of life. No matter how much insight one gains from St. Catherine's teaching on suffering, it will continue to be a draining, demanding difficulty. She teaches that what is important is not so much the physical suffering as the interior disposition of the one who suffers. This is perhaps the greatest thing to be learned from St. Catherine's example and teaching. Even though she prayed for the grace to suffer for the good of the Church, most people will be satisfied to simply embrace the suffering that comes their way with her same love and infinite desire. What is important is to grow ever deeper in love with God the Father, in the person of Jesus Christ, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is the love that augments, indeed is the holy desire within each person, that permits him or her to accept suffering from the hand of a loving God and recognize that his plan of salvation continues to be mysteriously worked out through the love of his faithful servants.

A great yet subtle contribution of Saint Catherine that must be emphasized for people of the late twentieth century is one of Christianity's eminent truths: all people originate in and from God. As the psalmist says: "from the womb before the dawn I begot you" (Psalm 110: 3). This life is lived by God's grace and its ultimate goal is to return to God. There are elements working in our world today to disintegrate any thought of a "higher being". When God is forgotten, any proper understanding of the human person is no longer possible. When a true understanding of humanity is lost, then certainly the value of suffering is nowhere to be found. Pope John Paul echoes this thought in his latest encyclical.

The eclipse of the sense of God and of man inevitably leads to a *practical materialism*, which breeds individualism, utilitarianism and hedonism.... The values of *being* are replaced by those of *having*....

In such a context *suffering*, an inescapable burden of human existence but also a factor of possible personal growth, is “censored”, rejected as useless, indeed opposed as an evil, always and in every way to be avoided. When it cannot be avoided and the prospect of even some future well-being vanishes, then life appears to have lost all meaning and the temptation grows in man to claim the right to suppress it.¹²⁰

With the knowledge that God is the origin and final end of humanity, it is possible to view suffering in the wider context of an all knowing, all powerful and infinitely loving God.

Knowing that the final goal of humanity is God, suffering can be accepted and entered into with a great sense of hope that it is somehow a part of God’s plan to reunite his people with himself. Surely this knowledge will encourage those who suffer to take comfort in knowing that their contribution to God’s salvific work is a beautiful thing; knowing that they are doing God’s will, they can even find joy in the midst of suffering.

Knowledge of God’s love is essential. Unless one is convinced of this love and that nothing is permitted except by God’s will and permission, it will never be possible to see the positive value St. Catherine sees in suffering. It is necessary to cultivate this relationship with God through holy, constant, humble prayer throughout one’s life, for prayer is the privileged means of communication with God. It is the time-tested proof of one’s fidelity and love for God. Waiting until one has entered into difficulties and trials is not the time to begin to seek God, though, according to St. Catherine’s understanding, he obviously uses suffering for this very purpose, that is, to cause people to return to him.

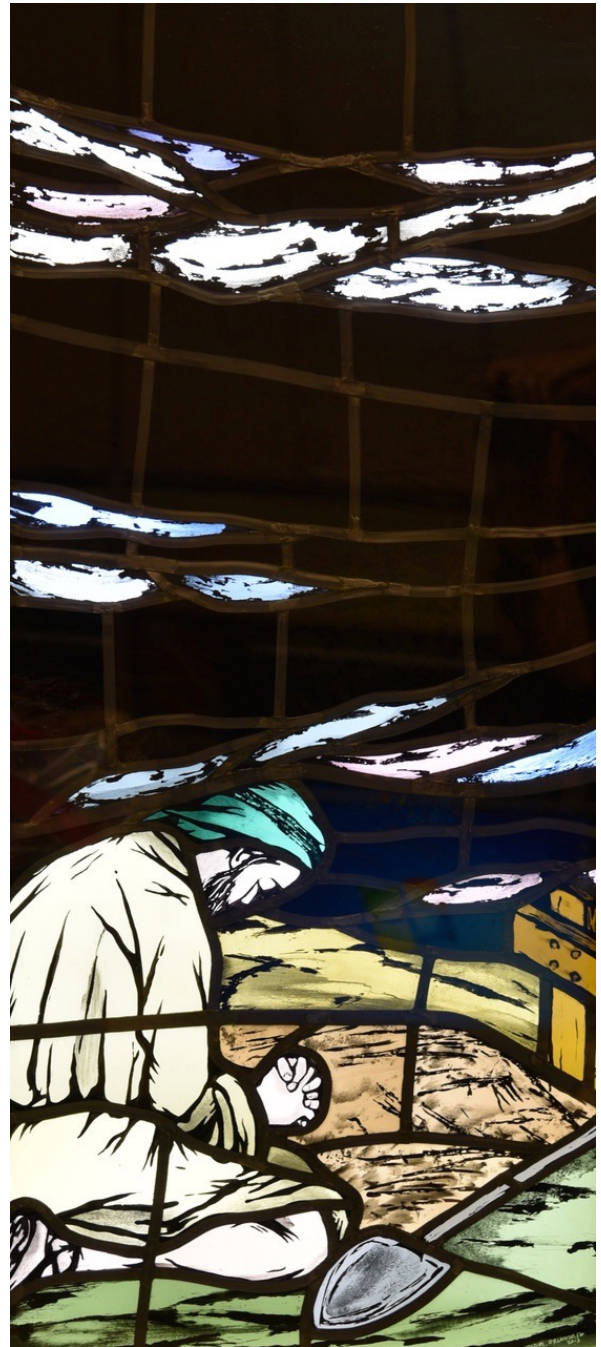
Once this relationship with God is firmly established, it is possible to look to the cross of Jesus Christ and see how his death and resurrection give meaning to this life and the suffering which it entails. According to St. Catherine, suffering does have a positive value, and when

¹²⁰ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, The Gospel of Life, March 25, 1995, #23. italics in original.

people see this and believe it, they will seek constantly to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, even when that process involves bearing the wounds he bore.

St. Catherine teaches that humanity must spend this life traveling along the way of Jesus Christ who is the Truth and the Life. She lived this Truth and invites people of this age to do the same. Christ is the Life that longs to burst forth in every person. Just as his life led to the cross and the life beyond it, so every person must pass through this cross. As his passion and death conquered death, so the life that flows from the tree of life is available now sustaining people in their weakest moments and carrying with it the promise of the life that never ends.

St. Catherine offers two examples to people of this age. First, she demonstrated by her life and apostolic work how to comfort those who are suffering. This serves as a challenge to people today to recognize Christ in the weak and suffering and come to their aid. She not only gave them physical consolation and relief, but more



Bury the Dead

importantly encouraged them to seek Christ crucified, and recognize how he was at work in their life and to see that their suffering was a privileged means of knowing Christ and

demonstrating their love for him and his people. Second, she suffered courageously herself, offering her pain for the good of the Church, and in her suffering she more perfectly reflected the image of Christ crucified to those around her.

The Church needs people willing to repeat Christ's way of self denial and selfless love. The examples of Christ and St. Catherine show how to offer suffering as a sacrifice of love for God's honor and the good of his Church. Many who suffer today would rather end their life because they feel they have nothing more to offer society. Surely there is nothing more beautiful in the eyes of God than those who are willing to repeat the sufferings of Christ out of love for God and neighbor. God knows what is best for his creation, and in his Son, Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, he can and will provide for all. St. Catherine invites us to place our trust in this loving God in all things, following the way and example of Jesus Christ, by making her prayer to the Holy Spirit our own:

O Holy Spirit, come into my heart;
 by your power draw it to yourself, God,
 and give me charity with fear.
 Guard me, Christ, from every evil thought,
 and so warm and enflame me again
 with your most gentle love
 that every suffering may seem light to me.
 My holy Father and my gentle Lord,
 help me in my every need.
 Christ love! Christ love!¹²¹

¹²¹ O XXV, p. 278; N 6, p. 54.

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