

St Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380)

LETTERS

Letter 49 – To Monna Alessa dei Saracini

In the Name of Jesus Christ crucified and of sweet Mary:

Dearest daughter in Christ sweet Jesus: I Catherine, your poor unworthy mother, want you to attain that perfection for which God has chosen you. It seems to me that one wishing to attain [this perfection] should walk with and not without moderation. And yet every work of ours ought to be done both without and with moderation: it befits us to love God without moderation, imposing on that love neither limit nor measure nor rule, but loving him immeasurably. And if you wish to reach the perfection of love, then you must set your life in order. Let your first rule be to flee the conversation of every human being, in so far as it is simply conversation, except as deeds of charity may demand; but to love people very much, and talk with few of them. And know how to talk in moderation even with those whom you spiritually; reflect that if were not to do this, you would, perhaps before noticing it, place a limit on that limitless love which you ought to bear to God, by placing the finite creature between you: for the love which you ought place in God you would place in the creature, loving it without moderation; and this would hinder your perfection. Therefore you ought to love [the creature] spiritually, in a disciplined way.

Be a vessel, which you fill at the source and drink from at the source. Although you may have drawn love from God, who is the Source of living water, were you not to drink it continually in him, your vessel would remain empty. And this shall be the sign to you that you are not drinking wholly in God: when you reap sufferings from that which you love, either by some conversation you had, or because you were deprived of some consolation you were used to receiving, or for some other accidental cause. If you suffer, then, from this or anything else other than some sort of offence against God, it is a clear sign to you that this love is still imperfect, and drawn far from the Source. How, then, can you make the imperfect perfect? Like this: by correcting and chastising the movements of your heart with true self-knowledge, and with hatred and distaste for your imperfection, that you are such a peasant as to give to the creature that love which ought to be given wholly to God, loving the creature without moderation, and God moderately. For love toward God should be without measure, and that for the creature should be measured by that for God, and not by the measure of one's own consolations, either spiritual or temporal. Act, then, in such a way that you love everything in God, and correct every disordered affection.

Make two homes for yourself, my daughter. One actual home in your cell, so that you do not go flitting from place to place, except out of some necessity, or in obedience to the prioress, or for charity's sake; and another spiritual home, which are to carry with you always--the cell of true self-knowledge, where you will find within yourself knowledge of the goodness of God. These are two cells in one, and when abiding in

the one it is fitting that you should abide in the other, for otherwise the soul would fall into either confusion or presumption. For if you were to rest only in knowledge of yourself, confusion of mind would fall on you; and if you were to abide only in the knowledge of God, you would fall into presumption. The two, then, must be built together and made one same thing; if you do this, you will attain perfection. For from self-knowledge you gain hatred of your own fleshliness, and through this hatred, you will become a judge, and sit upon the seat of your conscience, and pass judgment; and you will not let a fault go without giving sentence on it.

From such knowledge flows the stream of humility; which never seizes on mere report, nor takes offence at anything, but bears every insult, every loss of consolation, and every sorrow, from whatever direction they may come, patiently, with joy. Shames appear to us then as glory, and great persecutions as refreshment; and [such a soul] rejoices in everything, seeing itself punished for that perverse law of self-will in its members which forever rebels against God; and it sees itself conformed with Christ Jesus crucified, the way and the doctrine of truth.

In the knowledge of God you will find the fire of divine charity. Where will you rejoice? Upon the Cross, with the Spotless Lamb, seeking his honour and the salvation of souls, through continual, humble prayer. Now herein is all our perfection. There are many other things also, but this is the most important, from which we receive so much light that we cannot err in the lesser works that follow.

Rejoice, my daughter, to conform yourself to the shame of Christ. And watch over the impulse of the tongue, so that the tongue may not always respond to the impulse of the heart; but digest what is in your heart, with hatred and distaste for yourself. Be the least of the least, subject in humility and patience to every creature through God; not making excuses, but saying: 'The fault is mine.' In this way, vices conquered in your soul and in the soul of him to you ought so to speak: through the virtue of humility.

Set your time in order: the night to keep vigil, when you have paid the debt of sleep to your body; and the morning in church with sweet prayer; do not spend it in chatting until the appointed hour. Let nothing except necessity, or obedience, or charity, as I said, draw you away from this or anything else. After the hour of eating, recollect yourself a little, and then do something with your hands, as you may need. At the hour of vespers, go and keep quiet; and do as much as the Holy Spirit enjoins on you. Then go back and take care of your old mother without negligence, and provide what she needs; let this be your burden. More when I return. Act in such a way as to fulfil my desire. I say no more. Remain in the holy and sweet grace of God. Sweet Jesus, Jesus Love.

Letter 50 – To one of the *Mantellate* of St Dominic, called Caterina di Scetto

My dearest sister and daughter in sweet Jesus Christ. I Catharine, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, write to you in his precious blood; with desire to see you a true servant and bride of Christ crucified. Servants we must be, for we are redeemed by his blood. But I do not see that by our service we can be of use to him; we must therefore be of use to our neighbour, for [the neighbour] is the means whereby we prove and

acquire virtue. Know that all virtue draws life from love; and love is acquired in love, that is to say, by raising the eye of our intellect and seeing how much we are loved by God. Seeing that we are loved, we cannot do anything that we do not love; loving him, we embrace the virtues out of a loving disposition, and we hate and despise vice.

So you see that it is in God that we conceive the virtues, and in our neighbour that we give birth to them. You know well that in the needs of your neighbour, you give birth to the child of charity, which is within your soul; and in the injuries that you may receive from him, [you give birth to the virtue of] patience. Bestow upon your neighbour the gift of prayer, especially upon those who do you wrong. And this is what we must do: if they are unfaithful to us, then we must be faithful to them, and faithfully seek their salvation; we must love them by grace and not out of a sense of debt. That is, beware lest you love your neighbour for your own sake; for that would not be faithful love, and you would not be responding to the love he bears toward you. For as God has loved you by his grace, so he would have you, not being able to render this love to him, render it to your neighbour, loving him by grace, and not out of a sense of debt, as it is said. Nor must you diminish or lessen your love towards your neighbour as a result of injustice; nor because you might see love for yourself or your own pleasure or benefit diminished, you; rather, love [your neighbour] charitably, bearing and enduring his faults; you should esteem the servants of God with great consolation and reverence.

See that you do not do as the foolish and senseless do, who wish to set about investigating and judging the acts and behaviour of God's servants. Whoever does so is worthy of great reproof. Know that to do so would be nothing other than imposing a laws and rules on the Holy Spirit, wishing to make the servants of God do *our* will; which could never be done. Any soul that comes to this judgment should reflect that pride has not yet been uprooted, and true love of neighbour [has not yet become established] within it; that is, loving the neighbour by grace, and not out of a sense of debt. Therefore let us love and not judge the servants of God. Also, we ought generally to love every creature that has reason in itself: those who are outside grace, we ought to love with sorrow and bitterness for their guilt, because they offend God and their soul. If you do this, you will agree with the loving and gentle Paul, who weeps with those who weep, and rejoices with those who rejoice: so you will weep with those who weep for the sake of God's honour and their salvation; and you will rejoice with the servants of God who rejoice, savouring God out of loving affection.

See then, that it is in the charity of God that we conceive the virtues and in the charity of our neighbour that they come to birth. By doing this – that is, truly loving your neighbour, without any falsity of love or fitfulness of heart, free, without any respect for your own spiritual or temporal benefits – you will be a true servant, and you will be responding through your neighbour to the love that your Creator bestows on you; and you will be a faithful spouse, and not an unfaithful one. For the bride is unfaithful to her husband, when she gives the love that she should give to him to another creature. You are a bride. Understand, then, that the Son of God married us all in circumcision, when he cut off his own flesh, giving us as much as a ring, as a sign that he wanted to marry the human race. Seeing such ineffable love, you must love him without any means that is outside God. Thus are you made a servant of your neighbour, serving him in all things, according to your ability. In this way, you are really the bride of Christ and the

servant of your neighbour. If you are to be a faithful bride, because we cannot be of use to God or serve him by means of the love that we bear him, then you must serve, as it is said, your neighbour with true and heartfelt love. We cannot serve God in any other manner or means. And so I told you that I desired to see you as a true servant and spouse of Christ crucified. I say no more. Remain in the holy and sweet love of God. Sweet Jesus, Jesus love.

Letter 151 – To Monna Nella, who was the wife of Niccolo Buonconti of Pisa

Dearest Mother in sweet Jesus Christ:

I, Catharine, a servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, write to you in his precious blood, with the desire to see you founded in true and perfect patience; for we could not be pleasing to God in any other way, and in this life we would taste the wrath of hell. O true and sweet patience, the virtue which is never overcome, but always conquers! You alone are that which shows whether the soul loves its Creator, or not. You give us hope of grace: you remove hatred and rancour of heart; you remove the the business of being displeased with others; you strip the soul of sorrow; through you the great burdens [occasioned by] many tribulations become light, and through you bitterness becomes sweet: in you, patience, the royal virtue, acquired through the memory of the blood of Christ crucified, we find life.

O dearest mother, among the other virtues, this one is the most necessary for us. For we do not pass through the sea [of this life] without many tribulations: whichever way we turn, this sea with its waves strikes us; and so does the devil with many temptations; and, what is more, what he cannot do for himself, he does by means of creatures, placing himself on the tongues and in the hearts of his servants. And he sets himself before the eye of the mind, making it see what it is not [really there]; and so he conceives in the heart [of his servant] various thoughts and feelings of displeasure towards the neighbour; and often, in fact, towards those whom he loves most. And when he has conceived them inwardly, he places them upon his tongue and makes them come to birth with words, and by means of these words he arrives at a deed; and in this way he divides the lover from the thing loved. And it is from here that impatience, hatred and rancour come; and they deprive us of the life of love.

Therefore he is not to be believed; also, we must get up onto the seat of our conscience, and keep a hold on right reason, and to protect ourselves before this dangerous wave with hatred and displeasure with ourselves, by opening the eye of your intellect, and by knowing the goodness of God and his eternal will, which neither seeks nor desires anything but our sanctification. And he permits the devil to make us suffer and persecute us, only so that the virtue of love and true patience may be advanced in us, and that imperfect love may come to perfection. And so it is that the love of virtue is developed and strengthened through our neighbour. This teaches us to love God for his own sake, inasmuch as he is supreme and eternal goodness, and worthy of being loved; and to love ourselves for God's sake, and our neighbour for God's sake, and not for our own benefit, nor for pleasure, nor for the pleasure we find in the neighbour, but inasmuch as he is a

creature loved and created by supreme and eternal Goodness, and to serve him, and to serve him in a way that we cannot serve God. Hence, because we cannot serve God, we must serve our neighbour. Now in this way the perfection of love is demonstrated. And when love is perfect, we do not cease to love nor to serve, either because of any insult or displeasure that may be done to us, nor because we do not find delight and pleasure in the neighbour; for we seek only to please God. Therefore, for this purpose God grants us all the tribulations that we have; but the devil does it for the opposite reason, since he does it to withdraw us from the affection of charity. But we, being prudent, will go against the devil's intention, and follow the sweet will of God; and we will also go against the world, which persecutes us with its power with many scourges, and with its lack of firmness and stability, and with its poverty; it is so poor that it cannot satisfy our affection, since all the things of the world are less than us, and are made for our service, and we are made for God. Therefore we serve God alone with all our heart and with all our affection, for he is that good which satisfies the heart and brings it peace.

Therefore, since this patience is so necessary and useful, we must acquire it. But how shall we acquire it? I will tell you: by means of the light, by opening the eye of the intellect, and by recognising that [in a sense] we do not exist, and attributing our being to the inestimable love of God. And thus we come to know his goodness; that is, from the fact that we exist, and for every grace which he hath bestowed upon our existence. When someone sees that he is loved by God, he sees that for love he gave us the Word, his only begotten Son, and the Son gave us life. So, then, if he has given life with so great a fire of love, we must hold fast to the fact that every burden, from whatever side it comes, whether prosperity or adversity, is given for love, and not for hatred, but for our good, and that we may possess the destiny for which we were created. And also we must observe how great the burden is, and we shall find that it is small. For it is only as great as time, and our time is as great as a point of a needle, which both in breadth nor in length is small. Therefore our burdens are small and finite. We no longer have the burdens of the past, because the time has fled; nor do we have the burdens of the future, because we are not sure of having [that] time. So, therefore, once we have seen how short [our burdens] are, we must see how useful [patience] is. Concerning this, we can ask the sweet and loving Paul, who says: 'The sufferings of this life are not worth comparing to that future glory which God has prepared for those who fear him, and who bear with good patience the holy discipline, which is granted them by divine Goodness.' Such a person will taste the earnest of eternal life in this life with his patience.

And if our weakness and impatience would raise its head against its Creator, not wanting to bear [burdens], let it consider within itself, and see where impatience leads it. For, beginning [to taste] the earnest of hell in this life, such a one comes at the last to eternal damnation. And I have never seen that impatience takes away any burdens: indeed, it increases them. So, then, because things are only burdens in so far as our will makes them [burdensome], do away with the sensuous self-will, put on the sweet will of God, and the burden is taken away.

This, then, is how to come to true and perfect patience. And therefore I beseech you, for the love of Christ crucified, that you do not evade these sweet and gentle ways, so that you may acquire the virtue of patience; for I know that it is of great necessity to you and to every person. Therefore, knowing the need, I said that I wished to see you

founded in true and perfect patience. I say no more. Stay in the holy and sweet delight of God. Sweet Jesus, Jesus, my love.