

## Home Retreat on Spiritual Freedom in the teaching of St Catherine of Siena

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*This Home Retreat explains St Catherine's teaching about how to live freely, and therefore happily, in Christ.*

Famed for her mystical experiences, as well as her involvement in public affairs – such as her urging Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome from Avignon – Catherine of Siena, a young Dominican tertiary who died at the age of 33, was canonised in 1461, declared a Doctor of the Church in 1970, and is one of the Co-Patron Saints of Europe. Born in Siena in 1347, from a young age she dedicated herself to God, living for three years as a recluse in a small room in her family house until experiencing in 1368 mystical marriage with Christ and feeling herself called by Jesus to leave her solitude, so as to serve the needy and the poor. Fundamental to her life was her prayer, which included profound mystical contemplation and union with Christ, bringing her to understand and highly esteem the gift of freedom given by the Creator to His creatures, the special dignity of human nature redeemed and restored in Christ.

### Freedom in Christ

For St Catherine, the two most important gifts given to humanity at creation were intelligence and free will. As she exclaimed, 'O inestimable and sweetest fire of love, how clearly [with this gift] you show forth and make manifest the excellence of your creature!' And again, 'Let us acknowledge so wonderful a gift, such boundless generous charity as we have received from divine Goodness.' Whilst the memory or the understanding could be obscured, filled with irrelevancies or the darkness of misunderstanding, Catherine held that the will was 'the [one] gate' to 'the city of the soul' that remained under our control, and that with it we have

the capacity to choose the good. Those who are truly free, she wrote, ‘neither fear nor care about anything except the things of God, whom they love and serve.’

This remarkable capacity of which she said, ‘God has made man free and powerful over himself’, was bestowed at creation when men and women were formed in the image and likeness of God. Although this capacity for freedom was lost at the Fall, it was restored in Christ, ‘The Lamb’, Catherine declared, who ‘gave himself up to the shameful death of the most holy cross in order to restore our liberty and make us free.... and has given us back our freedom of choice.’

### Human Weakness and Self-Knowledge

Yet, despite this exalted view of humanity and its capacity for freedom, Catherine also knew that men and women are weak and remain prone to sin, having a special compassion for the weak and those who felt themselves overburdened by their sinfulness or the circumstances of their life. She was not naïve, recognising how all too easily ‘we lose our mastery and become the servants and slaves of sin.’ Whilst she asserted over and over again with great firmness the innate power and strength of the human will, she acknowledged with no less frequency just how hard it is in practice for us to free ourselves from the bondage of sin and weakness. As she wrote, ‘In Christ’s blood we are made strong, even though weakness persists in our sensuality.’ With those who felt themselves trapped in sin, she recognised that ‘the enemies besieging us are many’ and reminded them of God’s love, saying ‘Stay near your gentle mother, charity, who will free you from all servile fear and all coldness of heart, and give you strength, and breadth, and freedom of heart.’

This acknowledgement of human weakness led Catherine to see self-knowledge as the key to spiritual growth, leading to the true freedom of the sons and daughters of God. Her point was that we can really only open ourselves fully to God’s love and mercy for the healing that we need when we come to know just how much we need it; otherwise, we remain distanced from God, our spiritual blindness

obscuring our sight and preventing us seeing just what it is that God is offering. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well:

If only you knew what God is offering and who it is that is saying to you: Give me a drink, you would have been the one to ask, and he would have given you living water.

And as Catherine wrote:

In holy self-knowledge... we see that we were loved before we came into existence, for God's love for us compelled Him to create us.

This is a remarkable thought, a thing of wonder: that someone, a mere 'nothing', could be loved into existence and held there most tenderly by God. This is the relationship – and the freedom – for which we were made. As she also said:

I have no doubt that if you turn your understanding's eye to look at yourself and realise that you are not, you will discover with what blazing love your being has been given to you. I tell you, your heart and affection will not be able to keep from exploding with love.

But Catherine knew only too well that she was not able to live up to this exalted call; she knew her failures, her weakness and her sin; and over time she came to know herself – to know what she was really like – in relation to God. As she said, 'I am not so virtuous as to know how to do anything but imperfectly.' And yet this did not lead her into despair, let alone to any form of self-hatred, saying that such despondency is 'the devil's trick.' Rather, she knew that this experience of really knowing oneself is essential to any genuine growth in humility. It may even be that at times we feel a failure in our relationship with God – a relationship that we can allow to grow cold or for whatever reason can become arid – but at times like these we need to persevere in both prayer and charity, because Our Lord uses these times to teach us humility, so that we may come to know His love. A number of spiritual writers, including Catherine, refer to this apparent absence of

God as 'night'; but terrible as it can be, it is also a time of real encounter with the Lord and of spiritual growth. As she records God the Father saying to her:

I am telling you not to let these struggles distress you unduly. No, I want you to glean the light of self-knowledge from this darkness, and in that knowledge learn the virtue of humility. Be exultantly happy, realising that at times like this I am living within you in a hidden way.

Catherine's advice is that at times like this we should run like a child to its mother's loving embrace. For her, the contemplative focus on divine love is absolutely crucial if we are to find the courage and strength to overcome our bondage to weakness and sin. As she wrote with such confidence, 'There is such immense mercy in [Christ's saving death on the cross] that no human heart or language can possibly describe or even imagine it. Mercy, therefore, relieves us of fear and pain.'

A particular insight of Catherine's was how fear inhibits our free response to God, and this in various ways: fear of other people, of how they judge and treat us; of our own weakness and spiritual and moral failure; and of suffering, death and God's judgement of us. Her teaching was meant to help us overcome this fear, so that it should be transformed by God's love.

### The Transforming Power of God's Loving Mercy

Catherine knew that God's mercy can transform us, but only if we really arrive at a genuine self-knowledge, taking as the basis of her teaching Jesus' saying in St John's Gospel, 'You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' And for her, this meant being set free from 'disordered appetite', 'taking pleasure in dishonourable things', 'listening judgementally', 'gossiping and being disagreeable', 'complaining and judging good deeds as bad and evil ones as good', 'insatiable gluttony' and 'perverse desire'. But it was not simply 'freedom from' things with

which Catherine was concerned, but ‘freedom for’ things – freedom, we might say, to live the life for which we were created and to which we are called.

Taking the celebrated Dominican motto, ‘Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare’ – to praise, to bless, to preach – we might say that for her the first freedom gained from a genuine knowledge and acceptance of the truth was the freedom to worship God – the graced capacity to turn to God not out of duty or fear, but out of loving reverence and joy based on her clear understanding of the saving ‘madness’ (as she called it) of God’s love for the world shown forth in Christ’s passion. Her Gospel path of prayer and contemplation led to her insistence that there can be no authentic worship of God without attention to the needs of one’s neighbour.

The second freedom concerned her relationship with those whom she knew to be among the most wounded and broken in society, her desire to move among them and bring blessing by making God’s love and forgiveness known to them being grounded in her mystical encounter with Christ that opened her eyes to the extravagant tenderness of God’s love for the most lost and wretched of sinners. Though she scandalised some by mixing with sinners, her ability to look beyond the sin to the person meant that Catherine was able to bring comfort and healing, as well as the promise of freedom and new life, to those cast out from society.

Similarly, the third freedom allowed her to address all people at all levels of society in the cause of justice and right, taking her stand on Christian truth rooted in her profound friendship with God and measured by the extraordinary balance of her mystical intuition which enabled her to hold together mercy and justice, humility and confidence, love and fear. She could do these things because she knew what she had been given by God – she knew her need and her total dependence upon Him, the love that He had lavished upon her - and in consequence she knew what she owed Him and how this was to be lived out in the love and forgiveness of others; she knew that the bonds of sin and death had been broken and that she was called into true freedom.

## Suggestions

Read slowly and consider prayerfully the following quotations from St Catherine, reflecting whether you recognise a similar disposition in your own heart.

Christ frees us from weakness and strengthens the heart of the troubled who with gentle humility and confidence ask for his help.

Oh how sweet is this servitude that frees us from the servitude of sin!

Free yourselves from the bond of pride and bind yourselves to the humble Lamb.

We must, then, very conscientiously free our heart and affection from this tyrant, the world, and set it on God, completely free and sincere, letting nothing come between ourselves and him. We must not be two-faced or love falsely, since he is our dear God, and he keeps his eyes on us, seeing our hidden and inmost heart.

I long, with boundless love, for God in his infinite mercy to free you from all half-heartedness and sentimentality and make you a new man.

We will do, then, what the Canaanite woman did. As we see Christ passing through our soul we will turn to him in true holy desire, with sincere contrition and hatred for sin, and we will say: 'Lord, free my daughter – I mean my soul!'

At the end of his chapter on humility, St Benedict gives us an indication as to how we can experience something of the freedom of which St Catherine speaks:

Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Through this love, all that he once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue. All this the Lord will by the Holy Spirit graciously manifest in his workman now cleansed of vices and sins. (RSB 7:67-70)

Perhaps reflect on what it would take for love to cast out all fear from your life.

St John XXIII made a similar to both St Catherine and St Benedict, writing ‘A free heart and a pure intention give birth to a generous love, which is the soul of every virtue and the strength of every sacrifice’; and again, ‘I live by the mercy of Jesus to whom I owe everything and from whom I expect everything.’

Is this not the freedom we all desire?