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Catherine of Siena's Teaching on Self-Knowledge*

Thomas McDermott OP

Abstract

One of Catherine of Siena's principal teachings is self-knowledge, i.e., knowledge of oneself and knowledge of God. Catherine adapted the Christian spiritual tradition on the subject and presented it anew using a number of ingenious images such as a well, a cell within a cell, a peaceful sea, a mirror. So important was self-knowledge in her life and teaching that she came to regard it as virtually prayer itself.

Keywords

Catherine of Siena, self-knowledge, spirituality, mysticism

One of Catherine of Siena's most well-known but frequently misunderstood teachings is that of the "cell of self-knowledge" (*cella del cognoscimento di sé*).[1] Declared a Doctor of the Church in 1970 by Paul VI, Catherine (1347-1830) taught that self-knowledge is vital to the spiritual progress of the "pilgrim traveler." The teaching pertains to the intellect (which, for Catherine, means the soul's powers of "understanding" and "memory") and the will (the soul's third power).[2] For Catherine, prayer is founded on and flows from

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[1] "Cell" (*cella*) connotes a monastic cell. Catherine also uses a variety of other words to describe self-knowledge: e.g., a house, tomb, valley, stable, night, moonlight, grace, abyss, tug, wood, enclosed garden, dew, fire, light, vessel, cave, well. An excellent biography of Catherine of Siena is Arrigo Levasti's *My Servant, Catherine* (London: Blackfriars, 1954).

[2] *Catherine of Siena. The Dialogue*, trans. and intro. Suzanne Noffke, O.P. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York and Mahweh: Paulist Press, 1980), 1, p. 15. Henceforth abbreviated as *D* followed by chapter and page number. In the Augustinian triad of memory, understanding, and will, "the soul's three powers" or faculties, Catherine found a useful image to reflect the soul's creation in the image and likeness of the three divine Persons of the Trinity. The convergent progression ("gathering together") of the soul's three powers gradually leads to union with God. See *D* 13, p. 49. "Love follows knowledge" (*al cognoscimento seguita l'amore*) is a recurring theme in Catherine's spiritual thought, e.g. see *D* 1, p. 25.

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self-knowledge. We may be surprised at how seldom Catherine explicitly mentions prayer in the *Dialogue*. The reason is that self-knowledge, to a large extent, *is* prayer.[3]

The theme of knowledge of self and God was a familiar one in medieval spirituality and was derived largely from St. Augustine.[4] Benedict Hackett notes its place in Augustine's spirituality:

> Possibly the best introduction to, if not the very basis of, Augustine's spirituality is his *nouerim me*, *nouerim te* ("May I know myself. May I know you!). To know the soul and to know God was, he said, the whole endeavour. The soul and God are the twin poles around which his reflections of the spiritual life revolve . . .. It has been noted that Augustine's quest for self-knowledge is directed towards *amor* as distinct from *appetitus* for other kinds of knowledge. In simple terms, to know oneself is humility—the antidote to the wrong kind of love, *amor sui*, meaning perverse self-love. But self-knowledge also leads to knowledge of God, since the soul is made in the image of God, and knowledge of God inevitably generates love of God and, when perfected, union with him, in other words, direct vision and enjoyment of God himself, the supreme good. But there can be no advance towards the perfection of charity, unless perverse self-love is eradicated.[5]

Many of the medieval writings on the subject were anonymous and associated not only with Augustine but also Anselm, Bernard, Hugh of St. Victor, and several others.[6] The theme was, to a degree, inspired by Scripture:

> It is not good for a man to be without knowledge, and he who makes haste with his feet misses his way. (Prov 19:2)
> Before judgment, examine yourself, and in the hour of visitation you will find forgiveness. (Sir 18:20)

[3] "And find your pleasure in prayer, where you will come to a better knowledge of both yourself and God." Letter T264 in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans., intro. and notes Suzanne Noffke, O.P. 2. vols. to date. (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-2001), Vol. II: p. 483. Henceforth all citations to Catherine's letters will be indicated by *L* followed by the number of the letter according to the numbering system of N. Tommasèo (T).

[4] See P. Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality in the Middle Ages*, trans. S.P. Jacques (New York: Kenedy, 1924), Vol. 2, p. 291; Louis de Bazelaire, "Connaissance de soi," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1953), Vol. II, cols. 1511-1543.

[5] Michael B[enedict] Hackett, O.S.A. "The Augustinian Tradition in the Mysticism of St. Catherine of Siena," in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine, Mystic and Mystagogue*, ed. Frederick Van Fleteren, Joseph C. Schnaubelt, O.S.A., and Joseph Reino (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 494. "In books VIII-X [of *De Trinitate*] Augustine seeks to discover the true nature of man: the first step in search of God is to seek to discover one's self. Without true self-knowledge man has only a distorted idea of the image of God in himself, and so the way to God is flawed from the start." Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 148.

[6] Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality in the Middle Ages*, Vol. 2, p. 291.

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The ancient Greeks, as is well known, also had great appreciation for self-knowledge as reflected in the famous inscription on the shrine at Delphi: "Know thyself."[7] To what extent these antecedents may have influenced Catherine's own teaching is unclear, but, as Domenico Abbrescia observes, Catherine elaborates the basic elements of the tradition in a form which is personal and which has a practical function in the spiritual life.[8]

Catherine's personal understanding of herself and of God undoubtedly developed in the course of her lifetime, as did her teaching on self-knowledge. However, in its initial stage the teaching was directly related to a mystical experience which occurred at the beginning of her three years of solitude in the "cell" of her family house when she was about sixteen years of age. Raymond of Capua, her confessor, disciple, and friend, records it in his *vita* of Catherine, the *Legenda major*:

> The life of the Spirit is received and lived out in practice through the word of the Lord. Accordingly I take as my starting-point that pithy word of doctrine which was spoken to her at the outset by her Teacher, the Creator of the universe. She often recounted for her confessors, including my unworthy self, what took place when our Lord Jesus Christ first began to appear to her. He appeared to her one day while she was at prayer, and said: "Do you know, daughter, who you are and who I am? If you know these two things you have beatitude in your grasp. *You are she who is not, and I AM HE WHO IS.* Let your soul become penetrated with this truth, and the Enemy can never lead you astray . . ..[9]

This is the "fundamental maxim" which would become the cornerstone of Catherine's spiritual life and teaching. Its importance is underscored by Raymond:

> Take note, Reader, that this is the solid foundation which our Lord laid down in the beginning for Catherine's life of union with him. This is his betrothal pledge to her. Assuredly it is a foundation fit to carry a building of the loftiest spiritual perfection, holding it erect and unshaken, come what may of wind or tempest.[10]

[7] "The Greeks say: Know thyself that thou may'st know that thou are not a god, but only a mortal. The Christians say: Know thyself that thou may'st know thyself a mortal, but the image of God." Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*, trans. A.H.C. Downes (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1940) p. 232.

[8] Domenico Abbrescia, O.P., "La conoscenza di sè," in *Lineamenti di spiritualità cateriniana* (Roma: Coletti Editore, 1964), p. 8.

[9] Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. and intro. Conleth Kearns, O.P. (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1980), §92, p. 85. Italics mine. Henceforth abbreviated as *Legenda major* followed by chapter and page number. Bl. Raymond of Capua (c. 1330-1399) was Master of the Order of Preachers from 1380-1399.

[10] Ibid., §96, p. 89.

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"You are she who is not, and I AM HE WHO IS." The second part of the maxim is an adaptation of God's words to Moses in the burning bush:

> Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM."[11]

The first part of the maxim, "You are she who is not," is its antithesis. What could this possibly have meant to a teenage Tuscan girl of the *trecento*? Giacinto D'Urso says it meant simply that "at the root of our being there is nothing of ours, but only a gift of God."[12] Ignazio Paci says that its meaning is consistent with 1 Cor 4:7, "What have you that you have not received from God?"[13] Years later, the words of the fundamental maxim would appear in the *Dialogue* with Catherine's own commentary:

> [F]or I am who I am, 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.[14]

> [F]or I am she who is not. And if I should claim to be anything of myself, I should be lying through my teeth. . . . For you alone are who are, and whatever being I have and every other gift of mine I have from you, and you have given it all to me for love, not because it was my due.[15]

> I want her to be humble, to see that of herself she is nothing and to recognize that her existence and every gift beyond that comes from me, that I am her life.[16]

As Ann Walsh points out, the maxim was much more than a philosophical understanding for Catherine whose "whole life was a witness

[11] Ex 3:13-14. Scriptural quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

[12] Giacinto D'Urso, O.P., "Santa Caterina da Siena,"*Temi di predicazione* XVI: 84 (1970), p. 29. The late Padre D'Urso's excellent 112-page study represents his lifelong study of Catherine's life and teaching. See also Sr. Mary Jeremiah, O.P., "'To Be or Not to Be:' Catherine of Siena on Sin and Salvation," *The Canadian Catholic Review*, September 1990: p. 298.

[13] Ignazio Paci, O.P., "Intelletto, memoria, e voluntà," in *L'anima dominicana di S. Caterina da Siena*. Quaderni Caterinati 39 (Siena: Associazione Ecumenica Caterinati, 1985), p. 17.

[14] *D* 18, p. 56. "I am who I am" (*Io sono colui che so'*) can also be rendered as "I am He (or the One) who is." See Mary John Ronayne, O.P., review of *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena*, translated by Suzanne Noffke, O.P., in *New Blackfriars* 62:730 (April 1981): p. 197.

[15] *D* 134, p. 273. "But these presumptuous wretches do not reflect that I am who I am and they are the ones who are not." *D* 119, p. 226.

[16] *D* 144, p. 301.

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to this basic attitude . . . that man owes his existence to God, and this existence is the gift of a loving Father."[17]

Catherine's understanding of self-knowledge initially may have been only that we participate in God's being and that apart from him we are nothing. In the course of her lifetime, however, her understanding of its truth deepened to the extent that in the *Dialogue*, written years later, the eternal Father now tells Catherine that self-knowledge alone is *not* enough: "So, as I told you in the beginning, knowledge of the truth comes through self-knowledge; *not pure self-knowledge*, but seasoned (*condito*) and united with the knowledge of me in you (*cognoscimento di me in te*)."[18] "Knowledge of me in you" or "knowledge of God's goodness in you" (*cognoscimento della bontà di Dio in te*)[19] becomes a second and deeper dimension of Catherine's doctrine of self-knowledge after that of the fundamental maxim.

Self-knowledge's two dimensions appear for the first time in one of Catherine's earliest extant letters which was written some three years before writing the *Dialogue*. In *L* T41 to Tommaso della Fonte, the cell of self-knowledge is compared to a well (*pozzo*) in which we pass through the dry earth of self-knowledge to the living water of knowledge of God:

> Dearest father, I beg you to fulfill my longing to see you united with and transformed in God. But this is impossible unless we are one with his will. . . . If we were to ask that gentlest most loving young man and most merciful father, this is how he would answer us: "Dearest children, if you wish to discover and experience the effects of my will, dwell within the cell of your soul." This cell is a well in which there is earth as well as water. In the earth we recognize our own poverty: we see that we are not. For we *are* not. We see that our being is from God. Oh ineffable blazing charity! I see next that as we discover the earth we get to the living water, the very core of the knowledge of God's true and gentle will which desires nothing else but that we be made holy. So let us enter into the depths of this well. For if we dwell there, we will necessarily come to know both ourselves and God's goodness. In recognizing that we are nothing we humble ourselves.[20]

[17] Sr. Dominic [Ann Walsh, O.P.], "St. Catherine of Siena: Doctor of the Church," *Supplement to Doctrine and Life* 8 (1970), p. 138.

[18] Caterina da Siena, *Il dialogo della divina provvidenza*, ed. Giuliana Cavallini. 2nd ed. (Siena: Cantagalli, 1995), LXXXVI, p. 226. Italics mine. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

[19] *L* T49, *Le lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. Piero Misciatelli con note di Niccolò Tommaseo. 6 vols. (Firenze: Marzocco, 1939), Vol. I: p. 191. As Walsh says, knowledge of God for Catherine was "seen in terms of the biblical meaning of the word knowledge. This is essentially the knowledge one person has of another." Sr. Dominic [Walsh], "St. Catherine of Siena: Doctor of the Church," p. 136.

[20] *L* T41, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke, Vol. I: pp. 7–8. Noffke dates the letter to "possibly 1368, but certainly before May 1374." Dupré Theseider dates it to

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Later, in three letters written towards the end of 1377, Catherine uses yet another image to express the two dimensions of self-knowledge: "the cell within a cell (*nella quale cella trova un'altra cella*)"[21] or "the cell of two rooms (*due celle in una*):"[22]

> This is the cell of true self-knowledge, and there you will find knowledge of God's goodness [in you] (*in te*). This cell is really two rooms in one, and while you are in the one you must at the same time be in the other; otherwise your soul would end up either in confusion or presumption. For if you stayed in self-knowledge, spiritual confusion would be the result. And if you stayed only in knowledge of God, you would end up in presumption. So the one has to be seasoned by the other, and the two made to be one. When this is accomplished you will arrive at perfection. Here is why. From knowledge of yourself you will gain hatred for your selfish sensuality, and because of that hatred you will be a judge. You will mount the bench of your conscience and demand an account of yourself, letting no sin pass without doing it justice. From this knowledge issues the spring of humility . . . .
> In the knowledge of God you will discover the fire of divine charity, where you will find your pleasure on the cross with the spotless Lamb, searching out God's honor and the salvation of souls in continual and humble prayer. [23]

The first cell, therefore, is the dimension of the dry earth in the previous image of the well. It is here that we know our poverty and nothingness *apart* from God which results in knowledge and hatred of one's puny rebellion against him by our "selfish sensual will." It is here, especially, that we perceive our vices and "uproot" them. It is in the second cell, the "cell within the cell," that we discover the "living water" and one of the facets of what Catherine calls "the truth of God the Father,"[24] that is, his "true and gentle will which desires nothing else but that we be made holy."[25] Here it is that we

"before May 1374." Caterina da Siena, *Epistolario di Santa Caterina da Siena*, trans. Eugenio Dupré Theseider (Roma: Istituto Storico Italiano, 1940), p. 18. In some of Catherine's prayers and mystical experiences she describes Christ as a youth (*fanciullo* or *giovane*), e.g. see *Legenda major*, §206, p. 196. The risen Christ was held to be a young man. See *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl., 81.

[21] *L* T94, *Le lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. Misciatelli, Vol. II: p. 96.

[22] *L* T49, ibid., Vol. I: p. 191.

[23] *L* T49, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke, Vol. II: pp. 601–602. Noffke dates the letter to "late October or November 1377." See also *L* T94, ibid., p. 672, which Noffke dates to "November or December 1377" and *L* T104, ibid., p. 652, which she also dates to the same period.

[24] When Catherine speaks of truth she is often referring to what she calls "the truth of God the Father": that God created us in his own image and likeness out of love so that he could be in a personal, loving relationship with us in which he would share his life and joy. See *D* 21, p. 58 and also *Le lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. Misciatelli: *L* T195, Vol. III: p. 158; *L* T227, Vol. III: p. 302; *L* T317, Vol. V: p. 42; *L* T259, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke, Vol. II: p. 610.

[25] *L* T41, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke, Vol. I: p. 8.

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also discover "the fire of divine charity," God's radical love for us. We also see the virtues in God, and because God is present in us we also discover the virtues, as if in a germinal state, in ourselves.[26] Catherine urges us to "plant" the virtues; the first of which to begin "growing" are humility, charity, and patience.[27]

The existence of a second dimension of self-knowledge conveys the fact that knowledge of self invariably includes knowledge of God (and his goodness) in oneself, "[j]ust as the fish is in the sea and the sea in the fish."[28] The two dimensions are absolutely inseparable owing to humanity's creation in God's image and likeness. Because the doctrine of self-knowledge in both its dimensions pertains to *all* truth, Catherine can confidently say that it is the fundamental principle of spiritual development: "Herein lies all our perfection. There are many other things, but this is the principal one."[29]

Catherine, however, does not retain the images of the well or the cell within a cell in the *Dialogue*, although the substance of the teaching appears in another form. In "*il libro*" she speaks only of "knowledge of yourself, and of me in yourself"[30] or "the goodness of God in oneself"[31] and of the necessity of keeping both kinds of knowledge together:

> I mean that I do not want [the soul] to, nor should she, think about her sins either in general or specifically without calling to mind the blood and greatness of my mercy. Otherwise she will only be confounded. For if self-knowledge and the thought of sin are not seasoned (*condito*) with remembrance of the blood and hope for mercy, the result is bound to be confusion.[32]

Catherine now leaves behind the images of the well and two cells and introduces her final image of self-knowledge which is more comprehensive and better able to express the various dimensions of truth found in it.

Catherine's teaching on self-knowledge comes to maturity in her image of the peaceful sea (*mare pacifico*) which appears in both the

[26] "Through that way we come to virtue, that is through knowledge of the goodness of God, and through the light of which we see his humility and charity. In him we will acquire them, looking for them inside our soul; elsewhere, in no other way, will we ever find them." *L* T345, *Le lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. Misciatelli, Vol. V: p. 160. Catherine emphasizes that the virtues *must be* enacted in our relationships with our neighbors if they are said to exist at all. See *D* 11, p. 45.

[27] Patience, for Catherine, is the litmus test of whether or not one is really humble and loves God. See *D* 95, p. 178.

[28] *D* 112, p. 211.

[29] *L* T49, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke, Vol. II: p. 602. "The soul cannot have two foundations; either one or the other will be thrown to the ground." *L* T213, *Le lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. Misciatelli, Vol. III: p. 233.

[30] *D* 10, p. 141.

[31] *D* I, p. 1. (Cavallini edition)

[32] *D* 66, p. 124.

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letters and in the *Dialogue*. In *L* T226 to Raymond of Capua, which Foster and Ronayne date to April 14, 1378, Catherine writes:

> For when a soul sees not self for self's sake, but self for God and God for God, inasmuch as he is supreme eternal Goodness, all-worthy of our love—contemplating in him the effect of his fiery and consummate love—it finds in him the image of his creature, and in itself, that image, it finds him. That is, the love a man sees that God has for him, he, in turn extends to all creatures, and so at once feels compelled to love his neighbour as himself, for he sees how supremely he himself is loved by God, when he beholds himself (*sagguardando sè*) in the wellspring (*fonte*) of the sea of his divine Essence. He is then moved to love self in God and God in self, like a man who, on looking into the water, sees his image there and seeing himself, loves and delights in himself. If he is wise, he will be moved to love the water (*fonte*) rather than himself, for had he not first seen himself, he could not have loved or been delighted by himself; nor removed the smudge on his face revealed to him in the well.
>
> Think of it like this, my dearest sons: we see neither our dignity nor the defects that mar the beauty of the soul unless we go and look at ourselves in the still sea (*mare pacifico*) of the divine Essence wherein we are portrayed; for from it we came when God's Wisdom created us to his image and likeness.[33]

Four moments can be identified: when one "sees how supremely he himself is loved by God," "beholds himself in the wellspring of the sea of the divine Essence," is "moved to love the water" and sees "the defects that mar the beauty of the soul." Let us look more closely at each.

1. "*He sees how supremely he himself is loved by God*." Catherine repeatedly stresses the importance of our "opening the eye of the intellect" (*l'occhio dell'intelletto*), the pupil of which is faith, to see the truth about God and his love for us.[34] The blood of the Crucified reveals this truth most clearly:

> Your mind's eye, illuminated by faith, ought to be fixed on my only-begotten Son, Christ crucified . . ..[35]
>
> O dearest daughter whom I so love, you who are my bride, rise above yourself and open your mind's eye. Look at me, infinite Goodness, and see my unspeakable love for you and my other servants.[36]

[33] *L* T226, *I, Catherine*, ed. and trans. Kenelm Foster, O.P., and Mary John Ronayne, O.P. (London: Collins, 1980), pp. 171–172. Noffke, however, dates the letter to "about 17 February 1376." *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke,Vol. II: p. 2.

[34] See *D* 45, p. 92.

[35] *D* 126, p. 246.

[36] *D* 98, p. 184. See *D* 100, p. 187; *D* 111, p. 209; *L* T184, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke, Vol. II: p. 310.

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In other words, one begins by "contemplating in [God] the effect of his fiery and consummate love." God wants us to take this first step; indeed, he invites us to gaze into him.[37] The fact of God's love is so arresting that it causes us to continue gazing.

2. "*He beholds himself in the wellspring of the sea of the divine Essence*." Catherine saw the sea apparently for the first time in 1375 when she went to Pisa and was so taken by its beauty that thereafter she would often refer to God as a peaceful sea.[38] If the *mare pacifico* is beautiful, then the human person's image reflected in it is also beautiful: "He is then moved to love self in God and God in self, like a man who, on looking into the water, sees his image there and seeing himself, loves and delights in himself." The reflecting water is compared to a mirror in the very last chapter of the *Dialogue*:

> This water is a mirror in which you, eternal Trinity, grant me knowledge; for when I look into this mirror, holding it in the hand of love, it shows me myself, as your creation, in you, and you in me through the union you have brought about of the Godhead in your humanity.[39]

We see now that we are made in God's image and likeness and that we reflect his beauty and goodness; we also realize that we have no being apart from him anymore than our reflection on the water's surface can exist apart from the water itself. This moment, therefore, includes one's realization of the truth of the fundamental maxim, "You are she who is not, and I AM HE WHO IS," as well as the first part of "the truth of God the Father": we are made in God's image and likeness. Catherine uses the image of "the gentle mirror" (*lo specchio dolce*) to express this last point:

> As the soul comes to know herself she also knows God better, for she sees how good he has been to her. In the gentle mirror of God she sees her own dignity: that through no merit of hers but by his creation she is the image of God.[40]

3. "*Moved to love the water,*" we are, by implication, gradually transformed into it.[41] Because love always tends toward union with the beloved, our desire for union with God emerges. To love the water is to be gradually united with it, the prospect of which Catherine sets before us in the opening chapter of the *Dialogue* when she speaks of

[37] "Oh God eternal! Oh God eternal! You tell me to gaze into you." Prayer 12 in Catherine of Siena, *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, ed., trans., notes Suzanne Noffke, O.P. 2nd ed. (San Jose: Authors Choice Press, 2001), p. 111.

[38] See *L* T146, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke, Vol. I: p. 96.

[39] *D* 167, pp. 365–366.

[40] *D* 13, p. 48.

[41] "[L]ove transforms one into what one loves." *D* 60, pp. 115–116.

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the soul's "continual humble prayer, grounded in the knowledge of herself and of God" by which "the soul is united with God."[42] Furthermore, as the soul progresses towards union with God it perceives another facet of the truth of God the Father: *his* desire to be united with us, "sharing in [his] being and enjoying [his] supreme eternal tenderness and goodness."[43] Union with God, however, will require a response on our part.

4. "*Defects that mar the beauty of the soul*" are also perceived. In the beauty of the peaceful sea we first see our likeness to God and then our dissimilarity to him: "the smudge (*difetto*) on his face."[44]

> And in the mirror of God's goodness she sees as well her own unworthiness, the work of her own sin. For just as you can better see the blemish in your own face when you look at yourself in a mirror, so the soul who in true self-knowledge rises up with desire to look at herself in the gentle mirror of God with the eye of understanding sees all the more clearly her own defects because of the purity she sees in him.[45]

We see how selfish self-love or the "selfish sensual will" has disfigured our personal reflection of the divine beauty and we then grasp the urgent necessity of its removal.[46] As H. McCabe says, "We become more acutely aware of our inadequacy before the mystery as we are brought closer to it."[47] In the light of God's infinite beauty, we also see how sin has prevented the "fulfillment of the truth"[48] in us. Sin is literally "no-thing" and to love it is to be transformed into nothing. "And where does the soul learn the gravity of its sin?" asks Catherine. "[Again,] in self-knowledge."[49] Kenelm Foster notes:

[42] *D* 1, p. 25.
[43] *D* 21, p. 18.
[44] *L* T226, *I, Catherine*, trans. Foster and Ronayne, p. 171.
[45] *D* 13, p. 48.
[46] Hackett suggests that Catherine's teaching on self-knowledge is virtually the same as found in Augustine's *True Religion*, *Expositions of the Psalms*, and *Confessions*. He summarizes the process as (1) the creature knows its own nothingness, (2) then it begins to sense at its deepest point an overwhelming goodness, and (3) it craves union with God. But this misrepresents Catherine's teaching on self-knowledge in its final form. Catherine first stresses our realization of God's beauty *and* his beauty in us and then moves on to the human person's nothingness and sinfulness. Her anthropology, therefore, starts on a positive note. See Benedict Hackett, O.S.A., *William Flete, O.S.A., and Catherine of Siena*, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A.. The Augustinian Series, Vol. 15. (Villanova, Pennsylvania: Augustinian Press, 1992), pp. 110–111.
[47] Herbert McCabe, O.P., *God Matters*. Contemporary Christian Insights series (London and New York: Mowbray, 1987), p. 20.
[48] Sin prevents "the fulfillment of truth," i.e. of God's plan for humanity ("the truth of God the Father") being fulfilled, e.g. see *L* T272, *Le lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. Misciatelli,Vol. IV: p. 162. (See note 24 for "the truth of God the Father").
[49] *L* T362, *I, Catherine*, trans. Foster and Ronayne, p. 255.

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> Her insistence on the need for self-knowledge is not only, or even primarily, a way of saying that we must recognize ourselves to be sinners, and so acquire humility. Of course it is that; but Catherine always looks *through* the sin to the goodness that it thwarts and distorts—that is, to the soul's radical 'likeness' to the Creator whose image it bears.[50]

This new knowledge of how selfish self-love has disfigured the soul's divine likeness and prevented it from fully sharing in God's being and happiness causes "holy hatred" to rise up in oneself: "we love God and hate ourselves—not the self that is [God's] creation, but the self we see rebelling against our Creator."[51] Knowledge of our poverty must also be joined with knowledge of God's mercy if despair is to be avoided: "[S]elf-knowledge must be seasoned with knowledge of me, or it would end in confusion."[52]

Let us now briefly summarize Catherine's fully-developed teaching on self-knowledge as found in the image of the peaceful sea. In contemplating God's love and beauty, we see his image and likeness in ourselves; we discover God's presence in ourselves and our presence in him "as the fish is in the sea, and the sea is in the fish." In God (i.e. the Son) we see the virtues and then discover them also within ourselves and realize that they are meant to increase. We also see that we have no existence apart from God; everything that we have is his gift to us. As we contemplate God's love for us, we return love for love. We crave union with God, the ground of our being and supreme Beauty, and come to see that he too desires to be in a personal love-union with us in which he will share more fully his being and joy with us. The more clearly we see God the more we realize how our choice for selfish self-love has disfigured our reflection of the divine beauty and prevented the fulfillment of truth in us and thus the urgent necessity of our "uprooting vice" and "planting virtue." As selfish self-love falls away, we grow towards union with God.

Knowledge of self and of God (or simply "self-knowledge," as Catherine often refers to it) is a theme which appears in the earliest of Catherine's extant letters and then re-appears hundreds of times in all her works. She never tires of insisting on the necessity of one's returning or living in the "cell (or house) of self-knowledge." The exercise of self-knowledge is meant to be ongoing owing to our frailty, proneness to self-love and God's infinite nature. Self-knowledge is a

[50] Kenelm Foster, O.P., introduction to *I, Catherine*, p. 30. Foster's introduction to *I, Catherine* is a superb analysis of Catherine's spiritual thought which builds on his earlier "St. Catherine's Teaching on Christ," *Life of the Spirit* 16 (1962), pp. 310–323.

[51] *L* T101, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke, Vol. II: p. 71. This is an example of Catherine's positive anthropology: we do not hate ourselves as God's creatures *per se* but only as rebels.

[52] *D* 73, p. 135.

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"holy abyss" because knowledge of God is spectacularly endless.[53] Catherine also speaks of the "*grace* of knowledge of ourselves and God."[54] As such, it is meant to grow.

The capacity to enter into oneself for the sake of self-knowledge is what Catherine means by the "interior cell" which is a habit she learned in her youth when her family took away her room and solitude and "she made for herself a secret cell within her own heart, and made up her mind never to go forth from it no matter what the business on which she was engaged in."[55] Years later, in a letter to her close friend and follower Alessa dei Saracini, Catherine recommends the interior cell, a "dwelling place [that] is spiritual, and you carry it with you constantly."[56]

Thomas McDermott OP
Kenrick-Glennon Seminary
5200 Glennon Drive
Saint Louis
Missouri 63119
USA
Email: mcdermott@kenrick.edu

[53] *L* T30, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke, Vol. I: p. 49. In *D* 10, Catherine describes a circle written on the ground with a tree in the center. The tree represents the soul and the circle represents knowledge of oneself and of God within oneself. The circle is broken when the two dimensions of self-knowledge are separated; the circle expands, however, in proportion to the growth of self-knowledge. Nurtured by self-knowledge and the soil of humility, the tree "bears many-fragranced blossoms of virtue" and its fruit is grace for oneself and blessing for one's neighbors. See *D* 10, pp. 41–42.

[54] *L* T30, *Le lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. Misciatelli, Vol. I: p. 111.

[55] *Legenda major* §49, p. 46. See also D'Urso, "Santa Caterina da Siena," p. 40.

[56] *L* T49, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Noffke, Vol. II: p. 601. God's self-knowledge is the Word and his self-love is the Spirit: "God exists as the known in the knower and the beloved in the lover." *Summa Theologiae,* Ia, 43, 3.

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