

**St. Catherine of Siena, doctor of the Church, on Blood, Fire, the Garden,  
and Other Things. A selection and translation by E.G. Chávez from:**

**O**= *Le orazioni di S. Caterina da Siena, a cura di Giuliana Cavallini* (Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 1993).

**D**= S. Caterina da Siena, *Il Dialogo della Divina Provvidenza, ovvero Libro della Divina Dottrina, a cura di Giuliana Cavallini* (Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 1995).

**EM**= Emanuele Musso, *La corporeità del “Cristo dolce Gesù” in Caterina da Siena* (Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 2004).

[f.om.] = footnote omitted (the footnotes are by Sr. Cavallini, except those in **EM**);

p.= page numbers in the above editions (except in citations from **EM**).

---

And what does this bride of [i.e., which is] obedience eat and drink? She eats knowledge of herself and of me . . . in which she tastes and eats my truth, which is known in my Truth, incarnate Word. And what does she drink? Blood: in which blood the Word has shown her my truth and the ineffable love which I have for her. In that blood she shows the obedience placed on him for you by me, his eternal Father, and therefore she gets drunk; and after she is drunk on the blood and obedience of the Word, she loses herself and all her opining and knowing, and possesses me by grace . . . **D** CLXV 1451-1461 (p. 577).

And if I gaze on you, light, oh eternal Trinity, man has lost this flower, that is, grace, by the fault committed, because of which he was not suitable nor could he give glory to you in that manner and for the purpose for which I had created him. Therefore by this fault you did not enter into your glory in the manner ordained by your Truth; your garden was locked<sup>1</sup>; and because of this we could not receive your fruits. You therefore have made the Word door-keeper, that is, your Only-Begotten, to whom you have given the key of deity, and [his] humanity was the hand<sup>2</sup>; (both of) which you have joined together so that they would open the door of your grace, since deity could not open without humanity - the humanity which had locked up [paradise] by the sin of the first man – nor could mere humanity open without the deity, because its work would have been finite and the offense committed against the Good [was] infinite, and punishment should follow guilt; wherefore no other means was sufficient<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Under the same image Catherine touches on three salient moments in human history: from the garden of God's holy mind (creation) she relocates to the paradise of delights which is locked (the fall), to then go on to the garden next to the empty tomb (redemption).

<sup>2</sup> In the Easter atmosphere which pervades this Prayer, at the gate of the garden there is no longer an angel with a flaming sword to prevent entry (Gen 3:24), but the Redeemer who, by divine power, by means of his humanity, has reopened it.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *S. Th.* III q. 1, a. 2 ad 2<sup>m</sup>.

Oh sweet door-keeper, o humble lamb, you are that gardener who, having opened the gates of the heavenly garden, that is, of paradise, hands on to us the flowers and fruits of the eternal Deity . . . **O XIII** (p.118).

Let your place, where you are, be Christ crucified my only-begotten Son, dwelling and hiding yourself in the cavern of his side [fn.om.], where you will taste, by affect of love, in that human nature my divine nature. In that open heart you will find my charity and that of your neighbor, because for my honor, [i.e., that of his] Eternal Father, and in order to fulfill the obedience that I lay on him for your salvation, ran to the ignominious death of the most holy cross. Seeing and tasting this love you will follow his doctrine, nourishing yourself atop the table of the cross, that is, bearing your neighbor through charity with true patience: pain, torment and fatigue, from whichever side they come. In this way you will carry on and avoid leprosy». [fn.om.] <sup>4</sup> **D CXXIV** 1525-1539 (p. 363).

And since all, from the first old man everyone contracted death, thus all, who want to carry the key of obedience, have contracted the life from the new man, Christ sweet Jesus, of whom I have made a bridge for you because the way to heaven was broken. **D CLXVI** 94-98 ) pp. 582-583).

In the blood you have washed the face of your bride, that is, of the soul, with whom you have joined yourself by the union of divine nature in our human nature. Thereby you clothed her when she was naked, and with your death you have given her life. **O XII** (p. 106).

Therefore I will see myself in you, so that I become pure . . . <sup>5</sup>

In your nature, eternal Deity, I will know my nature. And what is my nature, inestimable love? It is fire, because you are nothing but fire of love, and from this nature you have given to man, since because of the fire of love you created him [fn.om.] **O XXII** (pp. 58, 60).

In some way the body of Jesus is paradise itself. The soul, and, after the resurrection of the flesh, the body of the one who has deserved eternal life, enters into the always-open side of the crucified and risen Lord, whose body is the true temple (cf. John 2:21). It is a matter of *communion* which is at the same time *contemplation* and *conformation* to the body of the Word. . . . The privileged place of this *admirable interchange*, at once carnal and virginal, is the pierced and always-open side of Jesus. **EM** p. 95.

From the effect [of divine charity] – the heat – she goes to the cause – the fire of love, that is the Holy Spirit -, she in fact speaks of «blood [fn.om.] spread with so much fire of love». <sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *Letter 81*: “... the humble and immaculate Lamb ... in order to wash the face of his bride ran to the ignominious death of the cross; whereby with the fire of his charity he purified her of guilt ... and the blood was color for her, which made the face of the soul vermilion [bright red], having been all pale.”

<sup>5</sup> Seeing ourselves, in God, loved by Him, kindles in us that fire of love which is purification.

<sup>6</sup> *Letter 75*. The Angelic Doctor writes in this regard: «In place of material fire, however, in the holocaust of Christ there was the fire of love»: *S. Th.*, IIIa, q. 46, a. 4 ad 1um. And it is precisely in the Spirit-Love that the sacrifice of Christ crucified is consumed, as if in an eternal fire (cf. Heb 9:14): Only this love has maintained Christ nailed to the cross: the material instruments of crucifixion – the wood of the cross, the earth in which it was planted, the nails – would have refused, if they would have been able, to harm their

The blood spread for us with so much fire of love.<sup>7</sup>

Why is the fire to be found in the Blood? Because the blood was spread with a most ardent fire of love. Oh glorious and precious Blood, you have become for us bath, and ointment placed on our wounds. . . . he [Jesus] is bath; because in the bath you find heat and water, and the place where he is. Thus I tell you that in this glorious bath you find the warmth of divine charity, that he has given it for love . . . you find the water in the blood, that is, that from the blood issues the water of grace . . . **EM** p. 39, from Letter 73.

Thus he said when he cried out in the temple [John 7:37-38]: “Whoever thirsts, come to me, and drink, since I am the fountain of living water.” He is truly a fountain: since, as the fountain has in itself water and spills over the surrounding embankment; thus this sweet and loving Word, clothed in our humanity; his humanity was a wall which contains in itself the eternal deity united in that humanity; spilling out the fire of divine charity through the open wall of Christ crucified; because his most sweet wounds shed blood mixed with fire, since it was spread because of fire of love.

We draw from this fountain the water of Grace . . . **EM** p. 42, from Letter 318.

«The side shows you the secret of the heart: since that which he did for us, he did precisely out of love. There you find true and deep humility, which is the oil that nourishes the fire and the light of the heart of the bride of Christ.» **EM** p. 42, from Letter 112.

The open side of Christ is, furthermore, compared by Catherine to a cavern, where the disciple can hide himself and even take up a stable dwelling: «Let your place, where you are, be Christ crucified my only-begotten Son, dwelling and hiding yourself in the cavern of his side [fn.om.], where you will taste, by affect of love, in that human nature my divine nature» [fn.om.]. . . . **EM** p. 43.

Besides being a teaching chair (cathedra), the cross is also a pulpit, nay, even the “pulpit of the cross ablaze;» Letter 198. **EM** p. 25, in footnote 1.

For St. Catherine, therefore, redemption is an aesthetic work, it has to do with beauty, nay, it's beauty itself, insofar as the Redeemer - «the loveliest among the sons of men» (Ps 45 [44]:3) – destroys on the cross the ugliness of sin. **EM** p. 25, in footnote 2.

One now understands Catherine's invitation: «Drown yourself then in the blood of Christ crucified, and bathe in the blood, and clothe yourself with the blood» [fn.om.]. **EM** p. 40.

---

creator»: G. CAVALLINI, «Cristo-Verità», in AA.VV., *Caterina e il Mistero di Cristo* [(Quaderni del Centro Nazionale di Studi Cateriniani, 6; Roma 1998, 33-44)], p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> **EM** 26, from Letter 317. Translator's note: Though “spread” (or “scattered,” *sparto* in the Italian) seems unusual (we expect “shed,” in Italian it would be the verb *versare*), keep in mind that this is the sense of the Hebrew verb in Lev 16:16 and Isa 52:15 (usually translated “sprinkled, as in the Vulgate, *asperget*”; interestingly, in light of Catherine's usage, the Nova Vulgata (1998) has *disperget* instead, “spread”).

The side is a mouth which gushes out fire of love, that is Holy Spirit. We must bring our own mouth up to this mouth of the side. **EM** p. 43.

Elsewhere, Catherine herself speaks of the pierced side of Christ crucified as a channel: «This is a punctured table, full of veins that sprout [*germinano*; unusual, but cf. Isa 55:10; Jer 23:5; Zech 6:12; translator's note] blood; and among the others there is a channel, that puts out blood and water mixed with fire; and to the eye which rests itself upon this channel are manifested the secrets of the heart»: Letter 208. **EM** p. 75.

Augustine of Hippo, on his part, writes: “The evangelist has used a careful word, so as not to say: his side was struck, or wounded, or some such other; but: opened [however, the Greek in John 19:34 has *énuxen*, “stabbed, pierced,” different in John 19:37 (and LXX very different!); translator's note]; so that thereby in some way the door [*ostium*, also “mouth, entrance;” translator's note; ] of life would be opened, whence the sacraments of the church would flow forth, without which there is no entry into the life which is true life. That blood was shed for the remission of sins . . . Because of this the first woman was made from the side of the sleeping man, and called life and mother of the living. It certainly signified a greater good, before the great evil of collusion [*praevaricationis*]. This second Adam slept on the cross with his head bowed down, so that from this a spouse would be fashioned for him, that from the side of the sleeper flowed out. Oh death from which the dead revive! What is cleaner than this blood? What is healthier than this wound?”: *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus* 120, 2, 6-21: *CCSL* 36, p. 661. **EM** p. 45, in footnote 31. (*Biblia Clerus* consulted for corrections).

We are called then to dwell, to enter into the body of Christ right from this life, in order to remain there forever. During this life *sacramentally and really* – particularly by means of the eucharist -, in eternal life only *really*.

[In what is] perhaps Catherine's most famous letter: letter 273 addressed to Raymond of Capua [fn.om.] . . . the Sienese sees, after the capital execution of Nicolò Toldo, the latter's soul enter into the side of the Risen One, who still retains the wounds of his passion. The means to enter into the open side is the Holy Spirit, uncreated Love. This same Spirit which is gushed out of the open side of the Crucified One (cf. John 7:37-39; 19:31-34) [fn.om.]. **EM** p. 47.

The mention of the pierced-through side of Christ [in Thomas Aquinas, in *S. Th.*, IIIa, q. 4, s.c., in a phrase borrowed from Pseudo-Augustine, “It's by you and for you that this side has been opened, says the Christ, and you have not wanted to enter it”] is habitually accompanied by the patristic commonplace regarding the birth of the Church at the cross; but, here it is the contrary: the heart of Christ is open so that the sinner may take shelter in it. This privileged topic of the future devotion to the heart of Christ is by no means previously unknown, but one does not expect to find it in Thomas; it is thus not without interest to see him echo it, and it could be that this merits further research.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Le Christ en ses mystères. La vie et l'œuvre de Jésus selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Jésus et Jésus-Christ, 79), vol. II, Paris 1999, pp., 578-580. **EM** p. 54, in footnote 16.