



Knowing the Love of God:

Catherine of Siena's Interior Politics of Tranquility

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CATHERINE OF SIENA (1347–1380) is perhaps best known for her involvement in the return of the Roman Catholic papacy to Rome after its nearly seventy-year hiatus in Avignon, France.¹ She seems lesser known, however, for her mystical teaching, captured in some 387 letters, the *Dialogue*, and countless prayers. For Catherine, God is *pazzo d'amore* (made crazy from love); God's love for creation is without measure, such that the tears of a human being are enough to move God to have mercy on us.² God's love is such that he

willed to come down to our lowly state, to be one of us, in order that we might become divine. Knowledge of God and his immense love are what gave Catherine the strength and passion to work toward peace and tranquility.

For the sake of tranquility, as Catherine understands it, true knowledge of self and of God together are necessary to put an end to the blindness that causes lack of discernment (that is, the ability to understand the effects of one's actions) and, thus, selfish action. In his work *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) develops his idea of two distinct identities, one that is permanent and one that acts and changes, contained in the human experience. These two identities come together naturally, as I will demonstrate, but, in order for a person to attain tranquility, Catherine asserts that true knowledge of God must be added to the knowledge of self (understood as the permanent identity). This addition alone can allow one to develop a life of virtue (through the self that acts), which leads to tranquility, both in one's own interior life and in the world.

THE TWO SELVES OF CATHERINE

PAUL RICOEUR POSITS from the outset the existence of two identities existing alongside one another. The first, the *idem*-identity, gets across the idea of a self that is always the same; it has the character of permanence through time while its opposite, the *ipse*-identity, has the character of innovating through acting in the world. Giacinto D'Urso, OP, stated in his notes on Catherine's teachings that knowing oneself "is not a fruit of introspection or pure psychology, but rather it means entering into the human person as he or she is described by faith," that is, in the way that the human person is known by God. D'Urso continues, saying that knowing the self means "considering the person from the perspective of the interior life of the soul more than in his or her outward history."³ He points in the first place to a certain knowledge of a universal idea, an anthropology, of what the human person is and, in the second place, to the human person who acts in history. Thus, in her thought, one is able to find these two identities proposed by Ricoeur.

This first identity, the *idem*-identity, refers to one that maintains permanence through time; for Ricoeur, this is initially indicated by a

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common word in Western languages—French *même*, English *same*.⁴ This identity recognizes the sameness of a human individual as time goes on, and especially in the manner of uninterrupted continuity (among others characteristics), that is, continuity of identity over time such that, even with large changes, a thing (or a person) can still be identified as being the same.⁵ The only experience that seems to challenge this sameness is time itself, which, Ricoeur states, “is a factor of dissemblance, of divergence, of difference” from what came before.⁶ This is solved, however, using the notion of substance formulated by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) as a “category of relation” by which a thing (in itself) may be related to its perceiver. This allows Ricoeur to assert the existential sameness of the thing over the course of time. One may conceive of change happening to something, but the change does not really take place.⁷

For Catherine to assert the need for self-knowledge also implies that, for her, there is a part of oneself that one does not know, and is, in fact, wholly unknown. It is an entirely different thing, however, to make the case that the content of the identity that is currently unknown perseveres through time. D'Urso points out a few of the characteristics of self-knowledge as Catherine writes about it. He says, “knowledge at times is an interior grace, a light, a realistic consideration of one's own nothingness as a creature and sinner in general; . . . sometimes, it is the very act of self-humiliation, i.e., to recognize and to confess one's own misery.”⁸ Further, Bernard McGinn tells us that Catherine's idea of self-knowledge is the “awareness of the fact that we were created in God's image and likeness through divine

love, but that we have soiled our created beauty by sin.”⁹ This is the content of self-knowledge to which all human persons must come, and is established as an anthropological claim. This knowledge of the human person would, then, persist, not only through space (that is, among persons from Catherine’s own era) but also through time and, thus, the human person in general may be recognized as such through the uninterrupted continuation of this identity from person to person.

It is in this cell of self-knowledge that one encounters this permanent self that God knows, as Catherine points out: “she knows all that she is and every gift she has is from [God], not from herself.”¹⁰ The creature, according to Catherine, is always contingent before its Creator.¹¹ Without the Creator, as true self-knowledge teaches, the creature is nothing; she has no dignity, and “through no merit of hers but by his creation she is the image of God.”¹² She also comes to know her own imperfection, which is understood to be the cause of, but not the same as, the sins that one commits in the world.¹³ Finally, this self-knowledge grants that one may “find humility and hatred for [one’s] sensual passions, recognizing the perverse law that is bound up in [one’s] members, and is always fighting against the spirit.”¹⁴ These, for Catherine, are anthropological laws, known only when one enters the cell of self-knowledge.

The *ipse*-identity is entirely opposite that of the *idem*. Characterized by otherness, distinction, and diversity, “*ipse* implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality.”¹⁵ This identity is a reminder that “the person of whom we are speaking, and the agent on whom the action depends have a history, are their own history.”¹⁶ This is seen best, for Ricoeur, in the concept of habit, in that habits are formed and become part of that which allows one to be recognized; that is, character. The self that acts in the world, and thus is changed by its actions, takes its place as distinct from the *idem*-identity in the human experience and finds its fullest meaning in an individual acting within the world. But, it is through the formation of habits, according to Ricoeur, that this “acting-self” overlaps with the one that is permanent.¹⁷

For Catherine, the human person is not only inherently sinful, but is also necessarily social. Throughout her *Dialogue*, she reminds her reader of this reality and its implications. McGinn speaks of this in his own reading of her works as well, saying that “Catherine insists on the social character of sin, both the inherited sin of Adam and our own sin-

ning. For her, every act of sin against God involves also a sin against our neighbor."¹⁸ Catherine herself offers a confession of this toward the beginning of the *Dialogue*: "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."¹⁹

The building of a personal history, as Ricoeur attributes it to the *ipse*-identity, relies on the formation of habits, which eventually become those characteristics by which a person is recognized. For Catherine, this happens on the path either to virtue or vice. "Open your mind's eye," God says to her, "and look at those who drown by their own choice, and see how low they have fallen by their sins."²⁰ The habits that the "servants and slaves of sin" have in their lifetime formed within themselves have been, as Ricoeur would say, internalized; these persons have become that which they conceived in their hearts.²¹ Likewise, virtue has been internalized in those "souls who end in loving charity and are bound by love."²² "It is the truth," Catherine says at the very beginning of the *Dialogue*, "that by love's affection the soul becomes another himself," that is, the soul *becomes* divine.²³

Ricoeur's notions of the two distinct identities within the self are present in Catherine as a distinction between the characteristics of a human person in general, and by nature, and the innovations of the individual human person through acting in the world. I arrived here by examining how Catherine understands the content of self-knowledge, which is itself an anthropology—the sinfulness and contingency inherent in the human condition. Since all human persons are expected to come to this knowledge, I asserted a sameness and an uninterrupted continuity therein. And, in the case of the latter, I looked especially at how the introduction of innovations to the self, that is, the formation of habits (of virtue or vice), leads to one being recognized by those habits. We cannot remain in this place, however. It is true that, for Catherine, the path toward discernment, by which one may understand the impact of one's actions on the world, begins in the knowledge of self;²⁴ yet she also believes that this knowledge alone will only end in confusion²⁵ and ultimately self-destruction since one would know oneself only in terms of immense sinfulness.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE LOVE OF GOD

BERNARD MCGINN REMINDS us that, for Catherine, “the night knowledge of our own nothingness must be tempered with the day knowledge of God’s goodness.”²⁶ So, it is toward this that I now turn, and not simply the necessity of the knowledge of God, but what exactly the content of this knowledge is. “What is it about this knowledge of God that is so important?” is the question I address here, having in mind all the while the goal already stated: internal and external peace and tranquility, granted by the cooperation of the two distinct identities (persisting and changing) along with the God-within. True knowledge of the love of God alone grants one the ability to truly love the neighbor, acting in the habit of virtue rather than of vice.²⁷ In this, one enters upon the path of inner tranquility, since, (1) “you are your chief neighbor,”²⁸ and (2) virtue becomes internalized and becomes that by which one is recognized; similarly, external tranquility since the love of God will naturally lead to the love of neighbor.

Before addressing our primary question, however, it is necessary that I unpack briefly the assertion I made above, that knowledge of self alone will bring only confusion. There are a couple of reasons for this, according to Catherine. The first is the inherent sinfulness of humanity. The second is that the human person relies fully on God, not only for strength in acting for virtue, but even for one’s very existence. As D’Urso states, “we are nothing by ourselves, having received everything, both our existence and our nature,” and, “we can do nothing by ourselves if God does not give us the strength.”²⁹ These things force us to realize that “sin reduces us to being less than nothing,” for the divine image within us has been tainted by sin; the human person becomes less than she should be and so loses “the right to life in every sense.”³⁰ With knowledge only of this, the human individual falls into slavish fear and, rather than being stripped of selfish love,³¹ continues in the habit of acting in less than true love toward the neighbor. Thus, she remains confused about her actions and nurtures the identity of vice rather than virtue.

It is also the case for Catherine that self-knowledge alone may bring only hatred of self: “From her deep knowledge of herself, a holy justice gave birth to hatred and displeasure against herself, ashamed as she was of her imperfection, which seemed to be the cause of all the evils in the world.”³² This “holy justice” is granted only when

self-knowledge is attained alongside knowledge of God; without this latter knowledge there is indeed hatred, but it leads nowhere. When one enters into God, however, one can “see the dignity and beauty of [God’s] reasoning creature,”³³ the human person.

God, for Catherine, is so much more than the one who instills the human person with “holy justice” and holy hatred of self, more than the one upon whom, like the sea for the fish within it,³⁴ humanity relies for life and sustenance. God is the one who *loved* us into being. Her writings are filled with statements of the immensity of God’s love. She tells her audience of the sinfulness of humanity but later follows with a reminder of God’s immense and insane love for us, as McGinn describes: “For all her attacks on contemporary evils in the church and in Christendom at large, Catherine’s overwhelming sense of God’s goodness and ‘mad love’ for humanity give her writings a fundamental optimism.”³⁵ This God is *pazzo d’amore*, made insane out of love for humanity. Through both self-knowledge and the knowledge of the love of God, one comes to know that, in the first place, “even your own existence comes not from yourself but from me,” and, in the second, “for I loved you before you came into being. And in my unspeakable love for you I willed to create you anew in grace. So I washed you and made you a new creation in the blood that my only-begotten Son poured out with such burning love.”³⁶ At the moment one is given knowledge of the immeasurable love of God for creation, one is able to say to God, as Catherine does, “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.”³⁷

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It is when one has come to know of the love of God, and experience it, that one can then begin to love one's neighbors: "Her loving charity benefits herself first of all, as I have told you, when she conceives that virtue from which she draws the life of grace. Blessed with this unitive love she reaches out in loving charity to the whole world's need for salvation."³⁸ One knows of God's love, and one is able to return the love to God always through one's neighbors, within oneself first, and then, among those outside of oneself, one works toward the goal of tranquility, and, developing the habit of virtue, one becomes divine just as God became human.

CONCLUSION

CATHERINE'S GOAL OF peace and tranquility, both within oneself and within the surrounding world, can be reached only through the mutual cooperation of three realities within the self. The first of these realities is understood especially through the anthropology that Catherine develops, by which the human person is understood as inherently sinful and contingent. The knowledge of this is not something that Catherine alone must come to, but something that all human persons must understand of themselves as it is characteristic of every human person. The second, the "acting-self," is known simply through action in the world, whether in virtue or vice. Through this self, one adopts an identity of either virtue or vice, depending on how it is that one has acted in the world. Without the knowledge of God, however, the process of coming to be identified with virtue, rather than vice, falls apart. Knowledge of self alone does not allow one to act willfully out of true love, and one remains confused. A truly willful act of love for God and for one's neighbor can come only from the knowledge of the love of God. ♦