

**SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN THE WRITINGS OF
CATHERINE OF SIENA**

by

PATRICIA ANNE FRESEN

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PROMOTER: PROF J S KRÜGER

JOINT PROMOTER: PROF C E T KOURIE

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**To the Dominican Sisters
of St Catherine of Siena
of King William's Town**

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SUMMARY

This thesis is a study of self-knowledge in the writings of Catherine of Siena. The introductory chapter clarifies the kind of self-knowledge she is describing, viz. metaphysical self-knowledge which, in the case of mystics such as Catherine, blossoms into mystical self-knowledge. Catherine is then situated within the framework of her own era. A survey of catherinian literature follows. Since her major symbol for self-knowledge is the *cell*, the concept of the *cell* in the Church tradition of the West, and its influence on Catherine, is explored.

The major aspect of the enquiry is the tracing of the chronological unfolding of Catherine's doctrine of self-knowledge, working with the texts themselves. This is done under the headings of her three main symbols for self-knowledge, *la cella* (the cell), *la casa* (the house) and *la città dell'anima* (the city of the soul). Each of these sections is concluded with an interpretation of the significance of the unfolding of that symbol within Catherine's thought and the chapter itself is rounded off by an interpretation of the three symbols for self-knowledge in their integration and interconnectedness.

Catherine communicates her experience of mystical self-knowledge by means of a complex system of images and symbols, all of which fit together to form a whole. This warrants an investigation into the role of the imagination, imagery and symbol in mysticism, and explores Catherine's use of imagery and symbol.

The study shows Catherine's own gradual integration of mystical experience and ministry as it takes place within her experience and in the development of her thought. What we are able to see, by studying the texts, is the formation and strengthening of the underlying unity in Catherine between the inner movement of mystical love and outgoing concern for others which is redemptive love. These two are really one.

KEY TERMS

Catherine of Siena, self-knowledge, spirituality, mysticism, cell of self-knowledge, integrated spirituality, medieval spirituality, medieval mystic, mysticism and imagination, image and symbol.

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REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

An adapted version of the Harvard method of referencing is used in this thesis. All references and citations are in the footnotes, so as not to interrupt the flow of the text. The layout of the bibliography follows the Harvard method.

However, since Catherine's writings, in Italian and the English translation, are so frequently cited in this thesis, the following abbreviations will be used:

Dialogo: Cavallini's 1980 Italian edition of *S. Caterina da Siena, Il Dialogo*. (Details in bibliography.) This is followed by the chapter, in roman numerals as in the book, and the page number.

Dial. : Noffke's 1980 English translation of the *Dialogo*. (Details in bibliography.) This is followed by chapter and page number.

Oraz. : Cavallini's 1978 Italian edition of the prayers, entitled *S. Caterina da Siena, Le Orazioni*. (Details in bibliography.) This is followed by the number of the prayer and the page number.

Noffke 1983: This refers to Noffke's 1983 edition of *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*. (Details in bibliography.) Prayer number and page number follow.

Italian letters: T indicates Tommasèo's numbering, DT refers to Dupré Theseider's. (Explanation in Chapter 3.) This is followed by the number of the letter.

Noffke 1988: Noffke's English translation of the *Letters* (vol.1) DT's numbering is used by Noffke in these first eighty-eight letters. Other English translations of the letters are by Noffke, from as yet unpublished translations.

Note: The Italian text is cited whenever this writer considers it necessary or useful. English translations following Italian texts are all Noffke's translations, taken from the corresponding passage in English in her published translations, or supplied by her from as yet unpublished sources.

Other Abbreviations and References

PL : *Patrologiae Latinae Cursus Completus*. Migne.

Scripture references in English are from the Jerusalem Bible.

CHAPTER ONE

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

1. Nature and Aim of the Investigation

This study explores Catherine of Siena's doctrine of self-knowledge as expressed in her writings. Her extant writings are her *Letters*, of which we have almost four hundred, her *Dialogue*, which is her mature theological work and twenty-six of her spoken *Prayers*, which were taken down by her disciples during the last four years of her life, most of them during the last seventeen months.

The particular focus on Catherinian self-knowledge in this thesis will be to discover its meaning within Catherine's thought by tracing the chronological unfolding of the theme of self-knowledge in her writings. This has not been attempted before, since the dating of the letters, in particular, has never until the present been correctly established. The earliest collections of Catherine's letters were much smaller than the three hundred and eighty-two (and some duplicates) which we now have. Usually they were arranged hierarchically rather than chronologically: letters to popes were placed first and to laywomen last. The *cella del cognoscimento di sé* (cell of self-knowledge) was very much in evidence in everything Catherine wrote but there was no way of tracing its development.

Of all Catherine's works, the dating of the letters is the most difficult to establish. Chronology was not an issue in the early collections. The manuscripts show no attempt at chronology. The earliest printed edition of the letters was published in Bologna in 1492 containing thirty-one letters¹. The next edition was by Aldo Manuzio of Venice in 1500. It contained three hundred and sixty-six letters,

¹ Von Behren 1973:291. The dating of these early editions is taken in each case from Von Behren's thesis.

arranged hierarchically. The Gigli-Burlamacchi collection² of Catherinian works appeared in the early eighteenth century. In the volumes on the *Letters*, Gigli attempted chronological order within the letters to each correspondent.

It was Tommasèo who, in 1860, first attempted to arrange the letters chronologically. Tommasèo, however, was old and almost blind and unable to undertake the extensive research required. He drew some worthwhile conclusions from the little evidence he was able to assemble but it was insufficient for the task.³ Despite this, Tommasèo's numbering, indicated by a T before the number of the letter, is still widely used today and features largely in this study. Subsequent editions, such as those by Misciattelli in 1912, Fawtier's new versions of fourteen letters (1914) and Ferretti's five-volume edition published between 1918 and 1930 added little to the chronological approach to the *Letters*.⁴

In 1928, the *Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo* in Rome funded Eugenio Dupré Theseider to undertake a modern critical edition of the letters. An integral part of his research was the numbering and arranging of the letters as precisely as possible in chronological order. Volume I, containing what Dupré Theseider considered the first eighty-eight letters, was published in 1940. He had also established with some certainty the dating of another hundred and twenty letters before his unexpected death in 1975. His dating and numbering of the letters is indicated by DT before the number.

In 1980 the *Istituto* entrusted the continuation of the task to Professor Antonio Volpato, whose work continues as of this writing. An English translation of the critical edition of the *Letters* is presently being done by Professor Suzanne Noffke, who is working in conjunction with Volpato.⁵ By means of sophisticated

² The collection consisted of Raymond's life of Catherine, the *Legenda Maggiore*; the *Libellus de Supplemento* of Caffarini, the *Dialogo*, the *Letters* and a *Vocabolario Cateriniano*. (For more on the first two of these, see ch. 2, *Major Secondary Sources*).

³ Noffke 1988:19

⁴ Misciattelli's edition was a reprint of Tommasèo's, with no improvements or corrections, although it did have an additional volume with newly-discovered letters and fragments. (cf Noffke 1988:19).

⁵ Noffke's research in the U.S.A. has been made possible by a grant from the Translations Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities and by funds contributed by the Dominican Order in the United States.

analytical computer techniques, the correct dating of the *Letters*, the *Dialogue* and the *Prayers* is in the process of being established, based on the internal evidence of shared linguistic patterns, the opening and closing protocol for each letter and historical data. More accurate use of historical sources makes possible a greater precision in dating Catherine's works. It is on this current research that the present study depends for the chronology of Catherine's writings.

The Italian texts used for the purpose of this thesis are as follows:

- CATERINA DA SIENA: OPERE EPISTOLARIE. Tommasèo/Misciattelli edition corrected by E. Dupré Theseider, A Volpato and S Noffke.
- DIALOGO ed. G. Cavallini, Roma, 1968. (A revised edition of this work is about to go to print).
- ORAZIONI ed. G. Cavallini, Roma, 1978.

The English translation of the *Dialogue*, the *Prayers* and eighty-eight of the *Letters* is that by S. Noffke, as listed in the bibliography. The English translation of the *Letters* is still in progress and so far only the first volume, published in 1988, of a projected four-volume edition of the letters in English has appeared.⁶ With a few exceptions, there is no published English translation of the other two hundred and ninety-two letters. For these, the Italian text cited above will be used.

Tracing the development of Catherine's doctrine of self-knowledge, requires finding every reference to self-knowledge in Catherine's writings. It is opportune, at this point, to acknowledge the role of computer technology in the research necessary for this task. Computer files of words and word combinations are much more accurate than we are and the work can be done very much faster. The computer printout of the word combinations in reference to self-knowledge therefore form the raw material of this thesis.

The first step was to identify which key words and images and their combinations would be required for this research. Thus, for instance, every occurrence of *cella* (cell) in combination with the following has been found:

⁶ Volume I of the *Letters* is a translation of Dupré Theseider's first volume, published in 1940.

cognoscimento di sé (self-knowledge), *sangue* (blood), *ama-* (the root of 'to love'), *verità* (truth), *mentale, attuale*, (mental, actual or physical), *cuore* (heart). Some of these words and images appear in combination. Other word combinations were sought in the same way for *casa* (house) and *città* (city), both of which are pertinent to Catherine's doctrine of the cell of self-knowledge.

The finding of these word-patterns is no small task, since the computer printout has already established that there are four hundred and sixty-eight occurrences of some form of *cognosc-* to be found in Catherine's writings. Three hundred and fifty of these occur in the *Letters*, a hundred and fourteen in the *Dialogue* and four in the *Prayers*. And this does not take into account the *casa* and *città* images. Each occurrence of one of these key words or word combinations must then be dated according to the chronology chart. Only then will it be possible to trace the theme of self-knowledge from its earliest appearance in Catherine's writings, between 1371 and 1374, to the last references in the final *Letters*, dictated about two months before Catherine's death in April 1380.

The entire central section of this dissertation is founded, then, on the current updating of the chronology of Catherine's writings. The focus is on the development of only one theme: self-knowledge in the Catherinian sense, which includes knowledge of God. The aim of such an undertaking is to discover the meaning and development of Catherine's doctrine of 'the cell of self-knowledge' as it is usually called. An unfolding of Catherine's thought is to be expected as she matures, both in her lived experience of the reality of self-knowledge and knowledge of God, and in her teaching of the doctrine to others.

The undertaking inherent in this thesis presents an enormous hermeneutical challenge, since it is an attempt to understand and interpret someone who lived six centuries ago. How bridge a gap of six hundred years with as little distortion as possible in interpretation? How search for Catherine's relevance for today without doing violence to her medieval mentality? How approach the world of Catherine from the viewpoint of our own world?

In order to bring these two worlds closer together, it is necessary to enter her world, to try to understand her and to allow her to speak her truth. It is also necessary to elucidate the relevant aspects of our world so that the two can meet. In the attempt to understand and interpret Catherine of Siena, the present study is indebted to the hermeneutical approach of Gadamer and its general

phenomenological application as used in the human sciences. The phenomenological approach employed is an attempt to understand the world as Catherine understood it, with an awareness of the presuppositions and the personal, theological and cultural bias which the present writer brings to this study.

Gadamer, building on the philosophy of Nietzsche and Husserl, developed the concept of horizons in hermeneutics. 'The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point'.⁷ In historical understanding our task is to attempt 'to see the past in terms of its own being, not in terms of our contemporary criteria and prejudices, but within its own historical horizon'.⁸ What hermeneutics aims at is a fusion or merging of horizons: the historical one and our own. In order to understand Catherine of Siena, then, do we attempt to place ourselves within her fourteenth century horizon, in order to see with her eyes and from her perspective? Clearly this is not possible. We exist in our own time and our own horizon and it is as impossible to be transported into another time as it is to outrun one's own shadow. The fusion of the two horizons, the historical one and our own, comes about through sharing truth.

All knowledge of the truth is shared knowledge, and all knowledge of the truth of history is shared truth ... This fact implies that all understanding of history posits ... a single shared horizon that embraces times ...⁹

The only sense in which we need to place ourselves within the horizon of the historical other, in this case, Catherine of Siena, is to try to understand what she is saying as true. And the truth is what is true from within our contemporary horizon as well as what was true for Catherine from her viewpoint. It is shared truth. 'Understanding is always the fusion of these two horizons, supposedly existing in themselves'.¹⁰ Our horizon is not fixed nor static, but is constantly in process of formation, often through our encounters with the past. Coming to a

7 Gadamer 1975:269

8 Gadamer 1975:269-70

9 Weinsheimer 1985:183

10 Weinsheimer 1985:183

shared understanding 'always means rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but that of the other as well'.¹¹

Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein, the awareness that our understanding is affected by history, is the consciousness that we do have an horizon and therefore understand from a particular viewpoint. In this awareness we do not, Gadamer points out, assume the identity of past and present but rather that there is tension between the two.¹² 'The hermeneutic task consists not in covering up this tension in a naive assimilation, but in developing it consciously'.¹³ In order to arrive at a fusion of horizons, which is a shared understanding, we have to apply our own standards. Yet we cannot assume that our criteria are correct or that they are univocally applicable to the past, nor that those of the past are totally applicable to the present. We shall endeavour to bear this in mind as we enter into dialogue with Catherine and seek a fusion of her horizon and ours.

We approach Catherine in this thesis, then, with an open question: What did the concept of self-knowledge mean to you? Since this is an open rather than a closed question, the answer uncovered in Catherine's text is not definitive; in fact, it raises further questions which are still open to discussion. The opening of the text to interpretation, which is what the core of this thesis is about, leads to further conversation. For the opening up of a text in this way leads to a 'reciprocity of questioning'¹⁴ by which we in turn are put in question by the text.

The writer of this thesis sees herself as a participant in an ongoing conversation, one which began long before Catherine herself and will surely continue as long as human beings live and continue the search for self-knowledge.

11 Weinsheimer 1985:183-4

12 Weinsheimer 1985:184

13 Weinsheimer 1985:184

14 Weinsheimer 1985:210

2. Plan of the Thesis

The first chapter lays the foundations for the development of the theme. It consists of three sections. The first sets out the nature and aim of the investigation. The second is a brief discussion of spirituality and mysticism, two basic terms in this thesis. The third section explains the type of self-knowledge which is the topic of the thesis, viz., metaphysical and ultimately mystical self-knowledge.

Chapter Two places this study in the context of Catherine's life and times.

Chapter Three offers a survey of the literature on Catherine and her writings, showing the point of insertion of this thesis.

Chapter Four gives the background to the 'cell of self-knowledge' by considering the concept of the 'cell' within the tradition of the Church in the West, with particular stress on the classical 'cell-dwellers' of Christianity, the fathers of the desert. Their influence on Catherine is considered.

Chapter Five, the central chapter of the thesis, traces the theme of *la cella del cognoscimento di sé* (the cell of self-knowledge) as it unfolds chronologically in Catherine's writings. The same is then done with *la casa del cognoscimento di sé* (the house of self-knowledge) and *la città dell'anima* (the city of the soul).

Since Catherine, like all mystics, is writing of depth experiences of reality, she necessarily makes extensive use of image and symbol. Chapter Six discusses the relation between mysticism and imagination, and Catherine's use of imagery and symbol in communicating her mystical experience.

Chapter Seven, the concluding chapter, attempts to distil the essence of what has been said, to explicate latent implications and point out avenues to explore in future research as the conversation is taken up by others.

This thesis then, traces the theme of self-knowledge in Catherine's writings as it unfolds chronologically. Up to the present it was not possible to do this, since

the correct dating of the *Letters*, which form a substantial part of the writings, had not been done. This task is, however, currently under way and is nearing completion. With the aid of computer technology, every reference to self-knowledge in Catherine's works has been listed. These were then carefully dated and arranged in chronological order, using the dating now available. Thus the chronological development of the theme emerges.

The next section of this chapter will clarify the terms 'spirituality' and 'mysticism'.

3. Spirituality and Mysticism

This thesis is a study of the foundational dynamic of Catherine of Siena's *spirituality*, namely self-knowledge and knowledge of God.¹⁵ However, since the self-knowledge of which she speaks is, in fact, metaphysical and ultimately *mystical* self-knowledge rather than ordinary or psychological self-knowledge, it is appropriate to define the terms 'spirituality' and 'mysticism'.

3.1 What is Spirituality?

*Spirituality*¹⁶ is a broader concept than *mysticism*. It is the way in which a person lives out his or her response to God within their cultural and historical situation. Spirituality has to do with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God as well as the spirit which motivates or drives a person. It is a matter of being led by the Spirit, of becoming increasingly sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit of God. Spirituality is based on and grows out of one's life-experience. It is the harmony

¹⁵ Self-knowledge and knowledge of God, for Catherine, are two sides of the same coin. Whenever she speaks of self-knowledge, she always intends to include knowledge of God. The two are inextricably bound together, since both have their source in her mystical experience of God.

¹⁶ In this section, the writer is indebted to Cornelius P. Murphy, S.M.A., for ideas discussed and notes compared.

between what someone believes to be of ultimate importance and the way he or she acts out of that belief. Sandra Schneiders gives her well-known definition:

... Spirituality refers to the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.¹⁷

Spirituality always bring about change, transformation. There is growth, greater integrity, more unity within the individual and in his or her relationships.¹⁸

Christian spirituality is characterized by the basic tenets of Christianity. It is thus Trinitarian, Christological and pneumatological, though the emphasis that each of these receives will vary from one individual or group to another, Christian spirituality is also ecclesial: lived out within the Church. This includes, in pre-Reformation Christian spirituality such as Catherine's and usually in post-Reformation Roman Catholicism, a deep liturgical and sacramental life. Christian spirituality is founded on the teachings of Jesus.

That all of the above is true of Catherine of Siena's spirituality will become apparent in the course of this study. The spirituality of any individual, as it matures, begins to stress certain aspects of spirituality more than others and this gives it its particular flavour. The flavour of Catherine's spirituality: Christian, Dominican and with the special emphases that make it uniquely hers, will also emerge in this thesis. This is especially so because the theme, self-knowledge and knowledge of God, is the foundation of her spirituality.

3.2 Mysticism¹⁹

Within the entire spectrum of an individual's spirituality, the highest or deepest point, the unifying element, is mysticism. It is the acme of the spiritual path, not

¹⁷ Schneiders 1986:266

¹⁸ Some of these comments were made in a talk by Henk Hoekstra, O. Carm., at St John Vianney Seminary in August 1995.

¹⁹ For some ideas in this section the writer is indebted to Prof Celia Kourie for her talk on mysticism at the University of South Africa in September 1995.

reached by everyone. However, those who are recognized as having had mystical experience hold a deep fascination for us. They are our prophets, our interpreters of life and its meaning, since they have had experience of ultimate Reality, of Truth at its source.

Mystical experience is the breaking through of the awareness that there is another, greater Reality than that which is known to our ordinary consciousness. It is the experiential knowledge that all phenomena of life are in fact united. It is a consciousness of union with the divine. The mystic becomes open to the diaphany of the divine and this leads to the abolition of narrow selfhood, or what Catherine calls *propria sensualità*. It is the highest state of human consciousness in which the mystic reaches a calm clarity of vision far beyond what is ordinarily attainable. Mystical experience brings with it a sense of timelessness, of bliss and serenity and results in an increasing integration of body, mind and spirit and of all aspects of the mystic's life. It brings, too, an increased zest for life in the service of others.

Butler makes the point²⁰ that there is probably no more misused word than 'mysticism'. It has been applied to many things and experiences within the range of theosophy, spiritualism, occultism and strange psychical experiences. It has been watered down to refer to a state of dreaminess and impracticality in worldly affairs or to the statement that mysticism is the love of God, or Christian life lived on a high level. Yet against all this stands the testimony of the mystics down through the centuries, expressed so pithily by Augustine:

'My mind in the flash of one trembling glance came to Absolute Being - That Which Is'.²¹

For the Christian mystic, the One who Is, is God, and mysticism is union with God:

'... a union that is not merely psychological, in conforming the will to God's will, but, it may be said, ontological, of the soul with God, spirit with spirit. And (the

²⁰ Butler 1967:1

²¹ *Confessions* vii, 23

mystics) declare that the experience is a momentary foretaste of the bliss of heaven.²²

‘(Mysticism) is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality ... purely from an instinct of love.²³ It is direct communion with the divine. It has been called ‘the experimental perception of God's Presence and Being’²⁴ ‘a vivid innermost experience of divine things’.²⁵ It is the discovery of God's unrestricted love and a total response of being in love with God.

It is evident, then, that mysticism is not simply a number of momentary passing experiences, flashes of blinding light, intuitive perceptions of God's Presence and Love; it arises rather, from a total way of life.

Mysticism is a manifestation of a deeper, permanent way of life, in which the purifying, illuminating and transforming power of God is experienced, effecting a transmutation of the mystic's entire being and consciousness.²⁶

Catherine of Siena's spirituality is profoundly Christian and ecclesial. She stands also as one of the great mystics of the West. As such, the Truth which she came to know as ultimate Truth and which we find expressed in her writings, holds a timeless validity which speaks to the human mind and heart across six centuries and will continue to do so, since God is the object of every human being's *desiderio infinito* (infinite desire).

The next section of this first chapter will clarify the mystical self-knowledge which is the core of Catherine's spirituality.

22 Butler 1967:5

23 Underhill 1974:71

24 Butler 1967:5

25 Arintero: (1949)/1978:21

26 Kourie 1990:17

4. Mystical Self-knowledge

4.1 Self-knowledge as Catherine's starting-point

O'Driscoll writes:

In her journey towards God it seems that Catherine's first question is not 'who is God?' but 'who am I?' This question, 'who am I?' is a haunting question for people today. In our time, more and more people speak of an inner emptiness within themselves, a sense of meaninglessness in their lives. 'Who am I?' or 'what is the meaning of my life?' can at times become a terrifying, tormenting question ...

As she develops her teaching, (Catherine) explains paradoxically that we will never come to a deep self-knowledge if we look only at ourselves. Rather, in order to know who we are or what the meaning of our lives is, we need to go to the God who made us. By gazing at this God, we understand best who we are.²⁷

Looking only at ourselves, even in relation to one another, gives us no ultimate answers about our identity or the meaning of our lives. We find these by using what Catherine calls *l'occhio dell'intelletto* (the eye of the mind), that inner eye which can gaze into God and enables us to see ourselves primarily in relation to the One who created us.

4.2 Metaphysical Anthropology

Lest we assume that knowledge of self and of God is reserved only for the mystics, Rahner suggests²⁸ that there is a fundamental human experience of the self and of God on which all other knowledge is built. He prefers the term *experience* of the self

²⁷ O'Driscoll 1994:21

²⁸ Rahner: *Theological Investigations* 13, 1975:122-132

and *experience* of God to knowledge of God and the self, because he wishes to stress the experiential, non-reflective nature of this basic human experience. For Rahner, all human knowledge, including experiential, mystical self-knowledge and knowledge of God forms a continuum, starting with the most basic experience of the self as transcendental. He speaks of a *metaphysical anthropology*, by means of which we are in touch with the very roots of human cognition. Such knowledge, for Rahner, is the pre-condition for all reflective knowledge.

What we are treating of is that kind of knowledge which is present in every man [sic!] as belonging essentially to the very roots of cognition in him, and as constituting the starting-point and prior condition for all reflexive knowledge, and for all derived human knowledge in its function of combining and classifying.²⁹

This fundamental experience of the self and of the transcendent is built into the human condition. Without this most basic experience of God, says Rahner, however intuitive and non-reflective, no real experience or knowledge of the self is possible.

... the original and ultimate experience of God constitutes the enabling condition of, and an intrinsic element in, the experience of self in such a way that *without this experience of God no experience of self is possible*³⁰. (Italics mine.)

Catherine's self-knowledge and knowledge of God is an unfolding and development of the fundamental human experience of God and of the self in God. Rahner lays the groundwork of metaphysical anthropology, which is built into human nature. Catherine's work in the 'cell of self-knowledge' shows the full flowering of the experiential knowledge of God and the self.

Much of what Rahner says of the experience of self and the experience of God corroborates what Catherine says of self-knowledge and knowledge of God. As Catherine's basic experience of knowing herself in God was to know God as the 'One who is', and herself as 'she who is not', so Rahner speaks of a 'finite subject

²⁹ Rahner 1975:123

³⁰ Rahner 1975:125

which is nevertheless open to the infinite.³¹ Catherine *knows* her finitude experientially as she comes to know herself in God who, as Rahner says, is the 'inconceivable Mystery, the ultimate basis enabling absolute love and responsibility to exist ...'³² As human beings, says Rahner, we have a transcendental orientation to the 'incomprehensible and ineffable Mystery which constitutes the enabling condition for knowledge and freedom.'³³ In Catherine and the other mystics we see the human person face to face, as it were, with this inconceivable and ineffable Mystery.

Mystical self-knowledge and knowledge of God is immediate and not the result of reflection. Rahner speaks of a very basic 'non-reflexive' experience of self and of God which is the pre-condition of all human knowing. He claims that we always experience more of ourselves at the non-thematic and non-reflexive levels in the ultimate and fundamental living of life than we know about ourselves by reflecting upon ourselves. Our fundamental orientation to God implies a real though non-thematic experience of God. Catherine shows us what this experience looks like as it unfolds and develops. The experience itself may be non-reflective, but when she writes about it, doing so mostly by means of image and symbol, she is then reflecting on the experience.

Catherine keeps insisting that knowledge of self and knowledge of God are two aspects of one mystery. Rahner expresses this by saying that experience of self and of God constitute a unity. This unity, he explains, is not an absolute identity. Although at the height of mystical experience, Catherine feels almost 'another you' in reference to God, there remains, for the most part, a distinction between herself and God. In fact, her overpowering knowledge of herself is, as Rahner puts it, that her very nature is constituted by God and she experiences herself as being so constituted.

Seen from this perspective, Rahner also asserts that the personal history of the experience of the self is the personal history of the experience of God. This thesis

³¹ Rahner 1975:122

³² Rahner 1975:126

³³ Rahner 1975:123

traces Catherine's personal history of the experience of herself; it is at the same time the history of her experience, or knowledge, of God.

One further point made by Rahner is relevant to Catherine's doctrine of self-knowledge and knowledge of God. The intrinsic unity between experience of self and experience of God makes possible a further unity: that which exists between love of God and love of neighbour. Rahner reminds us that life in its fullness is always achieved in the knowledge and freedom with which an 'I' relates to a 'Thou'. In our interaction with others we come to know ourselves as different from them but we are also able to identify with them. It is in encounter, most fundamentally with the divine Other and then, necessarily, with human others, that the self grows to maturity. Catherine's image for this most traditional of Christian teachings is that we must learn 'to walk on two feet: love of God and love of neighbour'. She gradually achieves a remarkable integration between mystical experience and active ministry.

There is a close correspondence, then, between Catherine's self-knowledge and knowledge of God and Rahner's experience of self and experience of God. Rahner gives the concept a broad human base by pointing out that what is at issue is metaphysical anthropology. It is on our experience of ourselves as transcendental that all experience of the self is built. Catherine like the other mystics who speak of self-knowledge, shows how the initial stages of metaphysical anthropology unfold into the mystical knowledge of God and of the self in God.

4.3 Mystical Self-knowledge

It is in the light of the above that it can be said that the self-knowledge of which Catherine speaks is metaphysical, and ultimately mystical, self-knowledge. This must be distinguished from ordinary or psychological self-knowledge, although all self-knowledge begins with the non-reflective metaphysical experience of the self and of God.

Catherine of Siena's 'cell of self-knowledge' suggests a deeper level of self-knowledge than the ordinary level. This is made clear by Catherine's constant

reminder that it is knowledge of the self in God, that it includes knowledge of God. Julian of Norwich, Catherine's contemporary, explains:

When we come to know and see truly and clearly what our self is, than shall we, truly and clearly, see and know our Lord God in fullness of joy.³⁴

Mystical self-knowledge is at the same time knowledge of self and knowledge of God. It is a depth experience, an experience at the core of one's being. Many mystics have found images for the deepest recesses of the self, where God dwells. They use metaphors of height, depth, secrecy or isolation, such as an abyss, a room, a house or a castle. Plotinus, who has had a notable influence in this regard, speaks of the innermost sanctuary, the centre of the soul, the apex of the soul, indicating that essential divine bestowal which links the soul with God.³⁵ Eckhart uses the symbol of the little castle, Tauler speaks of the ground of the soul, Teresa of Avila of the inner castle, John of the Cross of his house, reached by the secret ladder, and Elizabeth of the Trinity of the abyss.³⁶ It is in the mystical experience of the deepest part of the self, what Catherine calls the 'cell of self-knowledge', that she comes to knowledge of herself in God.

Julian of Norwich writes that not only is mystical self-knowledge the only way to reach true self-knowledge, it is the easiest way:

It is easier for us to come to the knowledge of God than it is to know our own soul, for our soul is so deeply grounded in God that we cannot come to knowledge of it until we first have knowledge of God. Our soul is naturally rooted in God in endless love. And therefore, if we want to have knowledge of our soul, we must seek it in our Lord God in whom it is enclosed.³⁷

'Our soul is naturally rooted in God'. The experience of this is Rahner's fundamental human experience of the self and of God.

³⁴ Walsh 1961:123 (The forty-sixth chapter of the long text of Julian of Norwich's *Shewings*).

³⁵ cf O'Brien 1964:29

³⁶ Kourie 1990:166

³⁷ cf Walsh 1961: 153. (This is chapter 56 of the long text of Julian of Norwich's *Shewings*).

Mystical self-knowledge is:

A knowledge of ultimate selfhood, an immediate awareness of presence to oneself and to the transcendent source of the self. Such a direct intuition bypasses the channels of sensation and judgement by which the awareness of the self is usually attained ... (There seems to be) a direct mental intuition in the mystical state.³⁸

It is this 'direct mental intuition' of 'ultimate selfhood' in God which Catherine and other mystics experience. For Catherine this is the core experience, the pivot of her entire spirituality.

The immediacy and clarity of the experience is outside 'the categories of ordinary consciousness'.³⁹ Ordinary self-knowledge is the result of reflection on the operations of the self. In mystical self-knowledge, however, 'we attain a direct, explicit awareness of the self as *such*'⁴⁰. This, for Catherine, is the self perceived in its ontological dependence on God.

Philosophers have long posited two levels of the self: Kant spoke of the transcendental ego, Fichte of the pure 'I', Husserl of the transcendental reduction.⁴¹ Yet on the whole, philosophers have seldom attempted to give this deeper self a positive content and, in the case of Kant and his followers, have explicitly denied that such a content could be given'.⁴²

Depth psychology has gone beyond the conscious into the unconscious self and found stored there what the conscious self has forgotten or blocked out. The mystics, however, go much further than the psychologists: they experience the transcendental, mystical self, the self in union with God. The transcendence of the self 'becomes manifest in the mind's self-understanding

38 Dupré 1974:508

39 Dupré 1974:508

40 Dupré 1974:508

41 cf Dupré 1974:496

42 Dupré 1974:496

when the ordinary consciousness starts losing its grip'.⁴³ Catherine calls this 'losing' herself.⁴⁴

Lonergan, so well-known for his work on levels of consciousness, recognizes that there exists a level of consciousness beyond the ordinary levels. He describes the four levels of consciousness as experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding.⁴⁵ This is the core cognitional structure of ordinary self-knowledge. He then suggests a fifth level, which he says is a dynamic state of knowing oneself as being loved and of loving without restriction. He says that the unrestricted quality of this love implies the love of and for a divine being.⁴⁶ Knowing oneself as loved without restriction reflects Catherine's oft-repeated *amore inestimabile* (boundless love). She speaks of love for God being *senza fine e senza modo*⁴⁷ (without limit and without condition).

*La discrezione non pone legge nè termine all'amore col quale egli ama me, ma bene el pone con modo e con carità ordinata verso il prossimo suo.*⁴⁸

Discernment sets neither law nor limit ... to the love it gives me. But it rightly sets conditions and priorities of love where other people are concerned.

Lonergan's fifth level of consciousness, which he calls the level of 'ultimate enlargement' approximates to Catherine's experience of the transcendent self in the 'cell of self-knowledge'. Like everyone else, Catherine also had the first four levels, the ordinary levels of consciousness and knowledge of oneself which everyone has to a greater or lesser degree. But what Catherine writes about with passion is the knowledge of ultimate selfhood, Lonergan's fifth level, in which the mystic knows herself, in an immediate way, to be in God and infinitely loved by God. Evelyn Underhill says that:

43 Dupré 1974:498

44 See chapter 6 on imagery and symbol in the section 'Like two drunks' for a discussion of the two meanings of 'losing' oneself in Catherine's thought.

45 Gregson 1988:16

46 Vertin 1994:1

47 Dialogo XI:28

48 Dialogo XI:28

the central fact of the mystic's experience ... is an overwhelming consciousness of God and of (his) own soul: a consciousness which absorbs or eclipses all other centres of interest'.⁴⁹

There is a clarity of insight about the soul's union with God which evidently goes far beyond what can ordinarily be perceived. 'Whatever else this knowledge may contain, it includes a unique and direct awareness of the self'.⁵⁰

Thus the ultimate message of the mystic about the nature of selfhood is that the self is *essentially* more than a mere self, that transcendence belongs to its nature as much as the act through which it is immanent to itself.⁵¹

It is to this knowledge of the transcendent essence of her being that Catherine gives witness in writing of the 'cell of self-knowledge'.

4.4 The Self that Catherine discovers in the 'Cell of Self-knowledge'

The self Catherine discovers in the 'cell of self-knowledge' is the true self at the level of her innermost being. In this interior home of the heart, she penetrates beneath the self caught up in the flux of everyday affairs and she comes into contact with the transcendent self attested to by all the mystics.

At this level the finite ego, which Catherine calls *propria sensualità* (selfish sensuality or self-centredness), is seen for what it is. The 'knowledge' attained in the 'cell of self-knowledge' is the highest state of human consciousness, in which narrow selfhood is transcended and there is consciousness of union with the divine. It is an immediate rather than a reflective self-knowledge, which is an important distinction between mystical and ordinary self-knowledge. Catherine describes this immediacy by speaking of opening *l'occhio dell'intelletto* (the eye of the understanding) in order to gaze into God:

⁴⁹ Woods (ed) 1980:27

⁵⁰ Dupré 1974:507

⁵¹ Dupré 1974:511

*O Dio eterno, o Dio eterno, tu dici ch'io raguardi in te, alta ed eterna Deità, e raguardando in te vuogli che io cognosca me ...*⁵²

O God eternal!
 O God eternal!
 You tell me to gaze into you,
 high eternal Godhead,
 and you want me
 when I gaze into you
 to come to know myself.⁵³

There is bliss in this experience, sheer delight, and the loss of self Catherine describes as an essential part of ecstasy. This is because it is an experience of union, the intimate union of the self with God. Catherine calls it *la mansione, dolce sopra ogni dolcezza, con perfetta unione...*⁵⁴ (the dwelling-place, lovely beyond all loveliness, of perfect union). Often the experience is so intense that the physical effects are overwhelming. At times, Catherine would faint and lie unconscious when her spirit was rapt in God⁵⁵

*Allora quella anima, come ebbra e quasi fuore di sè, crescendo il fuoco, stava quasi beata e dolorosa. Beata stava per l'unione che aveva fatta in Dio, gustando la larghezza e bontà sua, tutta annegata nella sua misericordia; e dolorosa era vedendo offendere tanta bontà ... Sentendosi rinovare il sentimento dell'anima nella Deità eterna, crebbe tanto il santo e amoroso fuoco che il sudore dell'acqua, il quale ella gittava per la forza che l'anima faceva al corpo - perchè era più perfetta l'unione che quella anima aveva fatta in Dio, che non era l'unione fra l'anima e il corpo ...*⁵⁶

52 Oraz. XXII:250

53 Noffke 1983:99

54 Dialogo XCVI:29

55 See Chapter 2 in the section 'Persecution from women in the *Mantellate*', which recalls that Catherine was sometimes thrown outside the church during siesta time when they wanted to lock up and she was still lying unconscious, having been there since her reception of communion during the morning Mass.

56 Dialogo XIX:47

The fire within that soul blazed higher, and she was beside herself as if drunk, at once gloriously happy and grief-stricken. She was happy in her union with God, wholly submerged in his mercy and savoring his vast goodness, but to see such goodness offended brought her grief As she felt her emotions so renewed in the eternal Godhead, the force of her spirit made her body break into a sweat. (For her union with God was more intimate than was the union between her soul and her body).

God is known in an immediate way as the 'One who is'⁵⁷ and Catherine knows herself as 'the one who is not', who does not hold existence absolutely but has God as the ground and source of her being. It is the direct mystical intuition of this most profound reality that Catherine means by the self-knowledge and the knowledge of God which she experiences in the 'cell', which is the cave or womb of the heart. Cell, cave and womb suggest deep, secret places (that is, knowledge of oneself at depth as opposed to ordinary self-knowledge) and the womb is the source of life, as the self-knowledge of the 'cell' is the source of Catherine's spiritual life.⁵⁸

4.4.1 Knowing Oneself as created in the image of God

For Catherine, knowledge of the transcendent self is knowledge of being in the image and likeness of God:

*Perchè nel cognoscimento che l'anima fa di sè cognosce meglio Dio, cognoscendo la bontà di Dio in sè, e nello specchio dolce di Dio cognosce la dignità e la indignità sua medesima, cioè la dignità della creazione, vedendo sè essere immagine di Dio, e datole per grazia e non per debito; e nello specchio della bontà di Dio, dico che cognosce l'anima la sua indignità nella quale è venuta per la colpa sua.*⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See ch. 5.1, *La cella del cognoscimento di sè*: Letter T41, The Well.

⁵⁸ See ch. 6, the first section on the 'cell' symbol, where womb is mentioned.

⁵⁹ Dialogo XIII:34

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. And in the mirror of God's goodness she sees as well her own unworthiness, the work of her own sin.⁶⁰

Catherine sees and *knows* her own dignity and her unworthiness. Her mystical knowledge of self enables her to see herself as created in the image of God. She sees herself in God as in a mirror and this reveals her beauty as well as her sinfulness.

Catherine sees us as having been drawn forth from God's very being, bearing God's image:

*... per amore la (i.e. tua creatura) traesti di te dandole l'essere alla imagine e similitudine tua.*⁶¹

... in love
 you drew us out of yourself,
 giving us being
 in your own image and likeness.⁶²

The Flemish mystic, Ruusbroec, another contemporary of Catherine's, also describes self-knowledge and self-transcendence in terms of the divine image of the soul. According to Ruusbroec, each of us, before our creation, exists in God as pure image. Our self-transcendence consists in regaining our uncreated image.

In this divine image all creatures have an eternal life apart from themselves, as in their eternal Exemplar.⁶³

⁶⁰ Dial. 13:48

⁶¹ Oraz. IV:46

⁶² Noffke 1983:112

⁶³ Wiseman (transl.) 1985:149

Ruusbroec explains that the whole purpose of life is to pursue this divine image. In so doing we come to participate in God's uncreated life. This is mystical self-transcendence.

It is to this eternal image and likeness that the Holy Trinity has created us. God therefore wills that we go out from ourselves⁶⁴ into this divine light, supernaturally pursuing this image which is our own life and possessing it with him both actively and blissfully in a state of eternal blessedness. We will find that the bosom of the Father is our own ground and origin, in which our life and our being have their beginning.⁶⁵

4.5 Trinitarian focus of Catherine's Self-knowledge⁶⁶

For Catherine, we image God's trinity and unity in the three powers of the soul. *E sì come si assimiglia ancora si agiognesse*⁶⁷. (And as we image, so we may find union). Through our memory we image and are united to the Father, to whom we attribute power; through our understanding we image the Son, to whom is attributed wisdom, and we are united to him; and through our will we image the Holy Spirit who is the love between the Father and the Son.⁶⁸ Our transcendence is built into our very nature.

Catherine often uses Augustine's three categories to describe the powers of the soul: memory, understanding and will.⁶⁹ Augustine calls these three powers

⁶⁴ Compare Catherine's expression 'lose myself', especially in the image of drunkenness in ch. 6.

⁶⁵ Wiseman (transl.) 1985:149

⁶⁶ Catherine's mysticism is both trinitarian and christological. In its trinitarian dimension, her mysticism is an experience of God as Trinity and an experience of herself as imaging the triune God. However, unlike Elizabeth of the Trinity whose main focus is the Trinity, Catherine's overarching, integrating symbol is the blood of the crucified Christ, as is discussed in Chapter 6.

⁶⁷ Oraz. XXIII: 264

⁶⁸ Noffke 1983:42

⁶⁹ See ch. 4, section on Augustine of Hippo, and ch 5.3, section on the three main gates of the city of the soul: memory, understanding and will.

the 'realization of self-knowledge'.⁷⁰ The memory, says Augustine, contains the mind's latent knowledge of itself and of God.⁷¹ By the gift of wisdom 'distinct from knowledge, conferred by God's gift through a partaking in God himself'⁷² the mind is able to recognize what it implicitly knows. Immediate knowledge of God throws light on and begins to coincide with immediate knowledge of the self as transcendent. The mystical self-knowledge of which Catherine speaks includes the gift of wisdom which is conferred by God; it also includes the recognition of what it knows. This recognition leads to the delight, the bliss, the ecstasy which so often accompanies mystical experience, since it was for this that we were created.

Ruusbroec's experience of the bosom of the Father as our ground and origin is similar to Catherine's experience of God as the 'One who is'. In fact, in Orazione XXIII, Catherine calls God *el principio*, the origin from which all things come. Our transcendence consists in the fact that we have our life and our being in God. Mystical self-knowledge is immediate perception of this reality. For Catherine it is *tasting* and *seeing* the abyss of the Trinity:

*Però che io ò gustato e veduto, col lume de l'intelletto, nel lume tuo l'abisso tuo, Trinità eterna, e la bellezza della creatura tua. Unde, rguardando me in te, vidi me essere imagine tua ...*⁷³

For by the light of understanding within your light I have tasted and seen your depth, eternal Trinity, and the beauty of your creation. Then, when I considered myself in you, I saw that I am your image ...⁷⁴

Catherine takes this even further. In mystical self-knowledge, she not only sees that she is in God's image, but by the union of love, God makes of her *un'altro sé*⁷⁵ (another himself). She becomes *una cosa*⁷⁶ (one thing) with God:

⁷⁰ See ch. 4, section on Augustine of Hippo.

⁷¹ *De Trinitate* XIV, 13, 17

⁷² *De Trinitate* XV, 3, 5

⁷³ Dialogo CLXVII, 499. Compare Psalm 34:8: *Taste and see that the Lord is good...*

⁷⁴ Dial. 167:365

⁷⁵ Dialogo, Proemio:1

⁷⁶ Dialogo, Proemio:1

*... Tu se'esso medesimo amore. Adunque l'anima che per amore seguita la dottrina della tua Verità diventa un altro te per amore.*⁷⁷

...You are love itself.
So the soul who follows your Truth's teaching
in love
becomes through love
another you.⁷⁸

Catherine is echoing other mystics such as Ruusbroec and Bernard of Clairvaux, who describe union without distinction.⁷⁹ Catherine, echoing Bernard's image of being drunk with divine love, speaks of 'losing' yourself. Bernard's expression is 'losing yourself as if you did not exist.'⁸⁰ In this state, the mystic comes close to losing track of the distinction between herself and God.

4.6 Ultimate enlargement

Since Catherine's mystical experience of self-knowledge is also knowledge of God, it opens out into what Lonergan calls 'ultimate enlargement'. In one of her most beautiful passages, Catherine describes it as 'always more':

*Tu, Trinità eterna, se' uno mare profondo, che quanto piú c'entro piú trovo, e quanto piú trovo piú cerco di te. Tu se' insaziabile, chè saziandosi l'anima nell'abisso tuo, non si sazia, perchè sempre permane nella fame di te, assetisce di te, Trinità eterna, desiderando di vederti col lume nel tuo lume.*⁸¹

⁷⁷ Oraz. XXI:238

⁷⁸ Noffke 1938:90

⁷⁹ In Chapter XI of *The Book of Supreme Truth*, Ruusbroec says 'uplifted spirits are melted and naughted in the Essence of God'.

⁸⁰ *Treatise on Loving God*, par. 27

⁸¹ Dialogo CLXVII: 499

You, eternal Trinity, are a deep sea: the more I enter you, the more I discover, and the more I discover, the more I seek you. You are insatiable,⁸² you in whose depth the soul is sated yet remains always hungry for you, thirsty for you, eternal Trinity, longing to see you with the light in your light.⁸³

Catherine experiences an ever-greater hunger and thirst for God, finding that the more she tastes of God, the more her desire is inflamed. She becomes intoxicated with God's love and loses herself.⁸⁴ This loss of self indicates slipping into ecstatic union with God but also 'losing myself' in the sense that everything in me comes out (Catherine uses the image of vomiting) over the heads of my brothers and sisters. I give them all I have. Though not an appealing image, it is key to Catherine's understanding of the inevitable connection between mystical experience and service of others. Just as a person who has drunk too much will 'lose it' by bringing up, so the one who is drunk on God's love through the blood of Christ will 'lose herself', her very self, not only as her self becomes lost in God but also in the pouring out of herself in ministry and loving concern.

4.7 Self-knowledge as the Integrating Factor in Catherine's Life

Metaphysical, and ultimately mystical self-knowledge, is the integrating factor in Catherine's spiritual life. In coming to know herself as transcendent in the 'cell of self-knowledge', Catherine discovers that the entire spectrum of her faith and praxis is drawn together at this point. It is from her experience of mystical self-knowledge that she is compelled outwards in proclamation and ministry. Self-knowledge is Catherine's point of departure and serves to unify and simplify her life. There is a wholeness of the self as body, mind and spirit are drawn into

⁸² *Insaziabile* carries both the sense of God's being insatiable and of God's never oversating us. Cavallini, in a lecture, said that she leans more towards the latter translation and suggested 'God is unclothing/unwearing'. When this was passed on to Noffke, her reply was: 'On reflection, I do believe Cavallini's interpretation is more in keeping with the text and with parallel passages. (There is the image of God's thirst in Catherine, but here it is a question of our thirst). I'll correct my translation to 'You can never over-fill us' if there's a future edition of the *Dialogue!*

⁸³ Dial. 167, p. 367

⁸⁴ See ch. 6, section 'Like two drunks'.

unity. Catherine knows her own beauty and dignity, and that of the whole creation, in being made in God's image. Through the blood of Christ she begins to understand how deeply, madly, she is loved. She drinks deeply of this love until she herself becomes drunk, and 'out it comes over the heads' of her brothers and sisters: she is impelled into ministry. Her experience of overwhelming love is the reason for her ceaseless prayer and her untiring energy in service. Her hunger for 'eating souls' finds many forms of expression, from intercession to preaching to peacemaking. The Trinity, whom she images in her threefold powers of memory, understanding and will, is also her rest and refreshment on the journey. The Church, entrusted with nourishing the pilgrims on the blood of Christ and with his truth, is her love and concern.

In her experience of mystical self-knowledge, the 'cell' soon broadens out into a 'house' of self-knowledge, the place of prayer where she awaits, with other disciples of Jesus, the gift of the Spirit. And even the house is not big enough and the image becomes the 'city of the soul' - a harmonious, well-ordered, well-defended city in which life is full and productive. The relationship with God is still central, but relationships with others, in discipleship and in ministry, have become the necessary counterpart of an inner life of intense mystical experience.

5. Conclusion

Catherine of Siena's self-knowledge refers, not to ordinary self-knowledge, but to the mystical experience of the transcendent self in union with God. On this level of self-knowledge the mystic knows herself to be created in the image of the Trinity. Self-knowledge and knowledge of God together become the integrating factor in the life of the mystic. There is an integration of body, mind and spirit as well as a unity and simplicity in one's life of faith. Above all, the experience of self-knowledge means, for Catherine, that she knows herself to be loved by God to the point of craziness. This is shown above all in the blood of Christ. Mystical experience of God opens into an ever-widening horizon, for God can never over-fill us. The mystical experience of knowing oneself to be

so deeply loved inevitably, for Catherine, finds expression in service and ministry.

CHAPTER TWO

CATHERINE'S LIFE AND TIMES

1. Social and Cultural Background

Caterina di Iacopo di Benincasa, known as Catherine of Siena, was born in Siena on 25 March 1347,¹ which was the first day of the year according to the Florentine and Sienese calendar.² It was a quarter of a century since the death of Dante Alighieri³ in Ravenna. Petrarch was poet laureate when Catherine was born.⁴ Boccaccio and Chaucer were also Catherine's contemporaries.⁵

¹ This is, at least, the date most commonly accepted as her date of birth.

² Bowsky 1981:xvii

³ Although Catherine never cites Dante, scholars have pointed out similarities between the imagery of Dante's *Paradiso* and that of Catherine. Dante's influence on her would have been indirect, through her educated disciples, who would certainly have been familiar with him. Some of Catherine's favourite images have overtones of Dante: she speaks of the Trinity as a deep sea, a sea of peace (*Dial.* 360) while Dante writes of the 'great sea of being' in *Paradiso* 1,112 (Noffke 1988:271). Catherine loves the image of the fountain (*Dial.* 121) and this is found in *Paradiso IV*, 16. Other Catherinian images which link her with Dante include the table of everlasting life (Noffke 1988:282); the pigs wallowing in fleshly pleasure (Noffke 1988:284); the sin of simony described as 'wolves trafficking in divine grace' (Noffke 1988:324) and the image of the garden and gardener (Noffke 1988:305).

⁴ Gardner 1907:1

⁵ One wonders to what extent, if at all, Catherine was influenced by these poets, or at least the Italians, to write in the vernacular rather than in Latin, which was the written language of the time. Their example may have encouraged her. She could not have written in Latin herself, but could conceivably have asked her educated disciples to translate for her, which she never did. On the other hand, since she was not a scholar and could not have guessed the subsequent influence and wide circulation of her book and her letters, it may not have seemed of any importance to her. She dictated in her own language, using the charm and power of her individual style. Catherine was, in fact, the first woman to have written in any of the Tuscan dialects. (Noffke 1988:7) Her work has a place in Italian literature.

Siena was, and still is, a beautiful city. The central square is the lovely *Piazza il Campo* where the annual medieval festivity called the *palio*⁶ is still celebrated with colourful medieval costume and banners. The imposing palaces, the city walls with their gates, the rich heritage of Sienese art, the fountains, the narrow streets with their gothic archways and the houses built of the typical 'burnt Siena' brown stone, were all part of Catherine's world. It was a city of culture and a thriving business and banking centre in Catherine's day.

In the cities of Tuscany, power had gradually, since the eleventh century, passed into the hands of oligarchies. These were formed by an alliance between the richer merchants within the city and the country barons outside it. The practice in some cities, as in Siena, was for the military to build their castles within the city walls.⁷ These walls, and the role of the military, were to loom large in Catherine's mind as inherent to a city, when she was later to use the city as one of her significant images. While Florence was a republic, the city of Siena was a commune, shaped roughly like an inverted Y, because of its three converging hills. It was accordingly divided into three sections or *terzi*, which were subdivided into *contrade* or wards. The *societates armorum* were the armed militia of the *contrade*.⁸

At the time of Catherine, the commune of Siena was ruled by the *Dodici*, the Twelve, four from each *terzo* of the city. They each held office for two months. One of them served as Captain of the People and Gonfaliere of Justice. The members of this class, called the *Dodicini*, were middle class people, most of them merchants or bankers, who had become fairly well-to-do through commerce. The Benincasa family belonged to this class.⁹ Iacopo di Benincasa was a fairly prosperous cloth-dyer.

The mid-fourteenth century was the end of an era, a transitional time which marked the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance. It was a time of upheaval, of change and disaster. The most devastating of these was the Black Death, which first broke out the year after Catherine was born

⁶ The *palio* involves horseracing in the *piazza*; it is dangerous because of the very sharp angles in the *piazza*.

⁷ Evans 1966:38

⁸ Gardner 1907:34-5

⁹ cf Gardner 1907:38-39

and recurred several times. The population of Europe was decimated and widespread poverty, disease and despair were left in its wake. Famine broke out, contributing to the economic breakdown which had begun earlier as the rural population began their migration to the cities. Those left behind in the rural communities were not paying their taxes and this left a greater burden for the townsfolk.¹⁰ War had dragged on in Europe: the War of the Roses and the Hundred Years' War, and feuding and fighting were the ordinary ways of settling conflict. The practice of hiring mercenary troops had for some time been eroding the structure of feudal society. Mercenary troops ravaged parts of Italy, where, 'around 1350, free companies of soldiers and camp-followers numbering tens of thousands lived off the country, uncontrolled by any political authority.'¹¹ The fabric of medieval society was tearing apart and a new humanistic spirit was emerging. 'The ideal of a Europe united under one emperor and pope began receding before the reality of independent states warring for supremacy ...'¹² Florence, outstanding for its culture and commerce, was determined to be the ruling state in Italy. Both Florence and Siena had achieved their representative governments by means of feuds and revolutions.

Many of these social and political factors are evident in Catherine's life and writings, but none more so than the crisis which was looming in the Church. The religious orders and the clergy were so short of numbers after the Black Death that they accepted many unsuitable candidates; the result was widespread laxity and corruption among the clergy of Catherine's day. The popes had resided in Avignon, France, since 1305.¹³ They ruled Italy through French delegates. This was bitterly resented by many Italian states, none more than those in Tuscany. The struggle between the Tuscan states, especially Florence, and the papacy was one into which Catherine was drawn. Because of the access to the pope which this opportunity afforded her, Catherine also had

¹⁰ cf Hyde 1973:178-181

¹¹ Hyde 1973-178

¹² Fatula 1989:23

¹³ Papal residence in Avignon had been the outcome of the power struggle between King Philip of France and Pope Boniface VIII. When Boniface attempted to gain absolute control over Church and state, Philip had forbidden French bishops to send their financial contributions to Rome. Boniface excommunicated Philip who sent soldiers to attack Boniface. The pope died a few months later and was succeeded by the Frenchman, Bertrand de Got, known as Pope Clement V. The year was 1305. For the next seventy years the popes were French and remained in France.

some influence on the return of the papacy to Rome in 1376. In 1378 the Great Schism broke out; when Catherine died in 1380 there was no sign of a solution and Europe was split as people took sides. Moral corruption and indifference were rife in the Church in Europe.

On the other hand, the fourteenth century is known as the Golden Age of Mysticism.¹⁴ It is the era of the Rhineland mystics, Eckhart, Tauler and Suso, members of the Dominican Order to which Catherine also belonged. The English mystics of the fourteenth century were Dame Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton. Jan van Ruusbroeck in Belgium and Brigid of Sweden also lived in the fourteenth century.

It is against this background, then, that we take up the story of the life of Catherine of Siena. We, too, live in a century of rapid change and immense upheaval in society and in the Church. Perhaps Catherine can speak to us across the centuries.

1.1 Catherine of Siena's Life

1.1.1 Childhood

Catherine was the second youngest of the twenty-five children born to Iacopo and Lapa di Benincasa. Giovanna, Catherine's twin, died soon after birth. A few years later there was to be one more child also named Giovanna; she died at the age of fourteen.

Catherine was a bright, vivacious, joyful child; because of this she was nicknamed *Euphrosina*. The legend of that saint made her dream of disguising herself as a boy in order to become a Dominican friar and go out to preach - a symbolic dream, as this turned out to be, for she later did indeed go about preaching and her role in the Church as a member of the Dominican Order was one which would have been regarded as a male preserve.

¹⁴ O'Driscoll 1994:8

The faith was part of the life and breath of the household and biographers recount some of the devotions she practised even at the age of five. When she was six she experienced a vision of Christ. To what extent her later spirituality and ecclesial involvement coloured her memory of it we do not know, but her adult recollection of it was of Christ dressed in papal robes. With him were Peter, Paul and John.¹⁵ This vision helped to shape her longing to give herself totally to Christ. In Catherine's day, virginity was regarded as the best possible way of doing this and it was some time later that she vowed herself to Christ as a virgin - a fairly common practice among children in medieval times,¹⁶ however little they understood the implications of such a promise.

After this vision Catherine became much quieter and began some penitential practices which were generally regarded as the way to holiness. She gathered her playmates around her and together they used to pray and do penance. But beneath these childish games there was a determination and a strength of will in the young Catherine which enabled her to maintain a penitential aspect in her lifestyle unusual in a child - a fact which alarmed her mother.

1.1.2 Adolescence

When Catherine turned twelve - the age at which parents began to consider finding a husband for their daughter - Mamma Lapa persuaded Catherine's favourite sister, Bonaventura, to influence Catherine to change her mode of life. Catherine began to become fashion-conscious in dress and to dye and adorn her hair. Her practices of penance were mitigated. It was a terrible shock to Catherine when Bonaventura died in childbirth in 1362, when Catherine was fifteen. She not only grieved for her beloved sister, but, to the dismay of her family, she returned immediately to her former ascetical practices, regarding her lapse as a serious one.

¹⁵ Peter symbolized the pope, beloved and defended by Catherine as 'sweet Christ on earth'. Paul and John were Catherine's favourite biblical authors.

¹⁶ Bynum 1987:24 points out that in the Middle Ages 'a disproportionate percentage of female saints (i.e. in comparison to male saints) were certain of their commitment to virginity before age eight.

Catherine's family was determined to find an influential husband for Catherine, one whose alliance would strengthen the position of the family in the city, as Bonaventura's husband had done. In fact, some biographers have it that Bonaventura's husband himself was being considered. Not only was he old in Catherine's eyes, but she knew how her sister had suffered at his uncouth behaviour and she refused absolutely to have anything to do with marriage plans. Instead, Catherine was considering joining a group of lay women in the city called the *Mantellate*.¹⁷ They were widows who were affiliated to the Dominican Order, lived by the Dominican rule and spent their time and resources in caring for the poor and the sick.

Without explaining any of this to her family,¹⁸ Catherine became locked in conflict with them. They found her 'obstinate and undutiful'¹⁹ but she remained stubborn and eventually resorted to chopping off her beautiful hair to make herself unsightly. The domestic persecution that followed was quite severe. Catherine's room was taken from her so that she had to share, and she was made to do all the menial work in the house. She did it without complaining and increased her penance, especially by refusing to eat. The family tried everything possible to break down her resistance but without any effect. What she missed most was some privacy for prayer. Thrown back on herself, Catherine invented the refuge which was to become characteristic of her mature spirituality after undergoing some development: the '*cell of self-knowledge*' which could not be taken from her. This was the 'place' within her own being where she could be at home with herself and where she came to know God. It was her secret cell which she took with her wherever she went and which she never had to leave, no matter what external occupation she was engaged in. At this point, Fra Tommaso dalla Fonte became Catherine's confessor and director.

In 1363 Catherine's younger sister, Nanna, died at the age of fourteen. Catherine stood steadfastly by her decision never to marry and she began to live on a diet consisting only of bread, raw vegetables and water. She was

¹⁷ The name referred to the black mantles these women wore.

¹⁸ With good reason, perhaps, for it is difficult to imagine that the Benincasa household (or any family, for that matter) would have taken seriously the declaration of a twelve-year-old that she had taken a vow of virginity four or five years previously!

¹⁹ Gardner 1907:9

sixteen; an age at which most girls were long since married and had several children. She made enquiries about joining the *Mantellate*. These women, however, were not interested in having a young unmarried woman as a member of their group. It was a most unusual wish on Catherine's part. If she had wanted to become a nun, the family would probably have supported and encouraged her: such a choice would have been regarded as a blessing from God. However, she wanted neither marriage nor the cloister and chose a different path which was to give her, in the end, both the protection of the Dominican order in her ecclesial and political involvement and sufficient independence and freedom to move around as the need arose.

None of this could have been known to her at the time, but she was resolved to find a way of being accepted by the *Mantellate*. Not without some conniving, Catherine won her mother around and it was through her mother's intervention that the *Mantellate* reluctantly agreed to allow her to join them.

1.1.3 Three years of seclusion

Catherine proceeded to make further choices that were unusual. After being received as a member of the *Mantellate*, instead of embarking on the service of the needy and the sick, she began to live a hermit-like existence in her room (which had been restored to her by her father). This strange behaviour elicited a good deal of sharp criticism and alienated many of the women in the group, who must have regretted having accepted her as a member.

For three years Catherine continued in this way, living in her little room, following a severely penitential way of life and emerging only to attend services at the Church of San Domenico on the hill above the family home. Her spirituality at this stage was individualistic, very much a 'Jesus and I' spirituality. Within the 'cell of self-knowledge' she was content to delight in prayer and in coming to know herself as the Father's *figliuola dolcissima* (dearest daughter). Some time during this three year period Catherine learned to read, probably taught by her friend, Alessa. She was very anxious to be able to read the Divine Office, which she would now pray daily as a member of the *Mantellate*. The alternative to praying the daily Office was the recitation of a number of *Paters and Aves* each

day. Since repetitive prayer of this kind did not appeal to Catherine, she was strongly motivated to learn to read.

It was during this time of solitude and prayer that Catherine had the experience of God which was to be the foundational experience of her spirituality of self-knowledge and knowledge of God. God said to her: 'Do you know, daughter, who you are and who I am? You are she who is not; I am the One who is.'²⁰ Catherine never forgot this; from it flowed her profound sense of contingency, of ontological dependence on the One who Is as the basis of all self-knowledge. From it flowed, too, her knowledge of God's goodness, God's providence, the conviction she had of the blazing fire of divine love.

1.1.4 Conversion

After three years of living in this state of withdrawal, the very prayer which was becoming the breath of life to her led to a complete change in her lifestyle. It was at the end of Carnival in 1368. The whole town was out celebrating; Catherine was alone at home in prayer. She had been praying for a deepening of her faith and she received an answer in the words of Hos. 2:21: 'I will espouse you to myself in faith'.²¹ Using the symbolism current in her time, Catherine later expressed her experience of God that day in terms of 'spiritual espousals'. It was a major turning-point in her life, a moment of conversion. She had an experience of God espousing her to himself. She was in a state of ecstatic happiness: this was, she believed, the crowning moment, the high point of all her striving, her penance and her prayer.

But she was mistaken. It was not the end, but the beginning. If she thought she had 'arrived', she was to be speedily disillusioned. For within that very experience of God, it was made clear to her that she must go out of her room and give herself to the service of others. God told her:

²⁰ cf Kearns 1980:85

²¹ Catherine's knowledge of Scripture was of the Latin Vulgate, therefore this is the version to be consulted in considering her use of biblical passages. Our modern translations do not always coincide completely with the Vulgate, since they are based on more thorough research of the original languages. (cf Noffke 1988:26).

On two feet you must walk my way; on two wings you must fly to heaven.²²

Love for God is not enough; there must also be love for one's neighbour. Catherine resisted leaving her cell with bitter sobbing. For years she had withdrawn herself from human companionship in order to find God; now she felt she had indeed found God, the treasure beyond all price. How could God ask her to give up this treasure and become enmeshed again in the world? She would surely lose God's presence, lose all she had striven and prayed for, lose the enormous happiness of being with God and experiencing God's love. But God reassured her:

No matter where you go I shall not cease my accustomed visits to you, and I shall be your guide in everything it will be your lot to do.²³

The 'cell of self-knowledge', as she was to call it later, would now take on new meaning for Catherine. It was no longer merely her refuge, the place of escape for her private communing with God. 'The cell of self-knowledge' became the very centre of love and energy from which she was impelled outwards in the service of others. She was to discover the truth of God's promise to be with her always and she was to learn to live out of this vivifying centre. She had thought that spirituality was a matter of finding God by withdrawing entirely from society. She discovered the spirituality of God's presence within and around her, through the mysteries of creation, the incarnation and redemption. She eventually arrived at an integration of contemplation and ministry which was possibly her unique charism.

1.1.5 Widening Horizons

Catherine's horizons opened out as she realized that her understanding of God's presence had been too narrow. She had tied God's presence to a place, to the confines of her little room. Her knowledge of God and of herself

²² Kearns 1980:116

²³ Kearns 1980:117

underwent a quantum leap, like that of David in 2 Sam. 7 : 1-16. David wanted to build for the Lord a house of cedar-wood; instead it was God who would build a house, a dynasty for David. Like David, Catherine had to learn that God is always greater, that it is God by whose power and love anything is accomplished and that God's meeting with us can never be reduced or confined to a place, however holy. Like the people of God returning from the exile, a people who had discovered that God's presence was not confined to the temple, Catherine emerged from her self-imposed exile in her room with a clearer knowledge of both herself and God; of her own reductionist spirituality and of the uncontainable, ineffable, almighty God who is the Source of all that is and in whose presence we live and move and have our being.²⁴

As Catherine started going out among people, nursing the sick and caring for the poor, she found that contemplative prayer and external ministry are not mutually exclusive. 'The more deeply contemplative her prayer became ... the more inexorably it directed her efforts outward in service. Likewise, the more intense her external ministry became, the more deeply she was driven into prayer.'²⁵ In her mature spirituality, Catherine achieved a wonderful symbiosis of prayer and action.

Contained within the injunction to 'walk on two feet, fly on two wings' was another aspect of self-knowledge for Catherine. She had to learn that severe fasting and asceticism are less pleasing to God than 'sharing your bread with the hungry and sheltering the homeless poor'.²⁶ This is the fast that pleases God: 'to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke'.²⁷ Learning to moderate her fasting was difficult, if not impossible for Catherine. By now she was twenty-one and had fasted rigorously on bread, raw vegetables and water since she was sixteen. She began to combine generosity towards the poor and care of the sick with her fasting. Ten years later, however, she would write to Suor Daniella of Orvieto that penitential practices, especially fasting, must be governed by discernment and that fasting must never be an end in itself.²⁸

²⁴ Acts 17:28

²⁵ Noffke (to be published): *Vision through a Distant Eye*: Introduction.

²⁶ Is. 58:7

²⁷ Is. 58:6

²⁸ Letter T213

Although Catherine never counselled anyone to an asceticism as severe as her own and gradually mitigated her severe penitential practices, she was never able to change her eating habits much. This early misguided choice in the matter of food was something Catherine had to struggle with for the rest of her life.

Catherine emerged, then, from her hermit-like existence and began to care for the poor and to tend the sick, in their homes and in the hospitals. She was now doing the ministry proper to the *Mantellate*. Her intense prayer life continued and Catherine was discovering that all the people and situations she encountered each day were brought into her prayer, while the very experience of God in prayer urged her into more selfless and loving concern for everyone with whom she came into contact. Wherever she went, she was conscious of God's loving presence within her in the 'cell of self-knowledge'. As she came to know more deeply God's blazing love for her, she was driven to pour out her own love on others and to proclaim the truth out of which she lived. Prayer life and ministry joined and flowed together, each feeding the other; she was discovering how to hold her vessel in the fountain even while she drank, so the vessel was never empty.²⁹

1.1.6 Famine in Siena

In 1370, when Catherine was twenty-three, Siena was struck by famine. It was after this famine that Catherine was unable to tolerate bread, possibly because it had not been available during the famine, when people lived on berries, grass and any scraps of food they could find or grow. It is probable that Catherine would have given away any bread she had. Her stomach, which had already shrunk and become very sensitive after years of fasting, could no longer hold bread, and this reduced her food intake even further. By 1372 she found that, if she tried to eat any solid food, it made her vomit.

²⁹ Dial 121

1.1.7 *La Famiglia*

Despite her meagre diet, Catherine radiated happiness and was always in good spirits.³⁰ Vibrant, intense and joyful as she was, with a strong prayer life and developing a sense of self-confidence in teaching others about God, Catherine showed definite qualities of leadership. People came to her, asking that she be their spiritual guide and clearly regarding her as having a degree of spiritual maturity from which they could learn. By the time Catherine was twenty-four a small group of disciples had begun to gather around her: men and women, priests and layfolk. They called her 'mamma' though most of them were older than she was. They were, on the whole, educated people and themselves leaders in Church or society. The women among them were faithful friends and disciples throughout Catherine's life. Some were members of the *Mantellate*, like Alessa Saracini and Cecca (Francesca) Gori. Both were widows of noble birth and were educated; they often wrote Catherine's letters for her. Catherine's sister-in-law, Lisa, was another beloved companion along with Catherine's own sister, also called Lisa. And there was Caterina di Ghetto, a young unmarried woman who joined the *Mantellate* as Catherine had.

Among the priests there were Dominicans, Franciscans and several Augustinians, one of them, William of Flete, a recluse with a Cambridge degree. The three laymen were to become Catherine's secretaries when she began her immense correspondence; it was they who actually wrote her letters and took down the *Dialogo* as she dictated.

Catherine was the spiritual mother of this growing group of disciples and she thereby became the target of much criticism. Her disciples were sarcastically dubbed '*Caterinati*' - the ones who had been 'Catherined'. Catherine herself called them *la mia famiglia* (my family). People were shocked at the freedom of her ways, at her flouting of convention by going around with this group consisting largely of men and by her boldness in accepting the role of spiritual motherhood of her disciples.

³⁰

Gardner 1907:48. Gardner quotes the testimony of Caffarini in the 'Processus', col 1258.

Two of Catherine's earliest male disciples were Fra Tommaso di Antonio Nacci Caffarini, usually known simply as *Caffarini*,³¹ a seventeen year old Dominican novice in Siena, and Bartolomeo Dominici, a slightly older Dominican friar, who was to accompany Catherine to Pisa in 1375, to Avignon the following year and to Rome in 1378. Raymond of Capua, who at first was Catherine's confessor and spiritual director, gradually reversed their roles as he, too, became '*caterinato*'. Catherine sometimes addressed Raymond, in her letters to him, as 'My revered father in Christ Jesus'³² and in others she calls him 'Beloved father and son in Christ Jesus'.³³

Other disciples of Catherine included the theologian Tantucci,³⁴ the spiritual writer Giovanni delle Celle, the poet Neri di Pagliaresi, the painter Andrea Vanni and the jurist Lorenzo del Pino. Stefano Maconi, possibly Catherine's favourite in the group, was a young Sienese nobleman of the same age as Catherine. He first sought her out in 1376 to settle a feud between his family and the Tolomei. Catherine's mediation succeeded and Stefano became Catherine's disciple and a lifelong friend. He was in the party that accompanied her to Avignon. He was also one of her secretaries and after her death he made one of the earliest collections of her works.³⁵

Catherine was much slandered and criticized for surrounding herself with men, some of them no older than herself. Her being seen with members of her '*famiglia*' gave rise to 'cynical thoughts and slanderous tongues',³⁶ especially on the part of the women in the city. A woman named Andrea, for instance, who was dying of cancer and whom Catherine was nursing, accused her to the

³¹ See chapter entitled 'Literature Survey' under the heading 'Major Secondary Sources' for Caffarini's role in collecting and editing Catherine's writings after her death is discussed.

³² See, for instance, Letter T211, DT70 written in about May of 1376.

³³ Letter T226, written some time between 11 Feb. and 31 Mar. 1376. Sometimes Catherine goes further, as in Letter T104, dated Nov. or Dec. 1377: *Carissimo e dolcissimo padre, e negligente e ingrato figliuolo in Cristo dolce Gesu ...* (Dearest and sweetest father, and negligent and ungrateful son in Christ sweet Jesus ...) This is clearly the loving chiding of a 'mamma'!

³⁴ Tantucci was one of the two friars who examined Catherine on theological matters, since he at first thought her teaching was suspect. He became a devoted follower and was the one who gave her the final blessing when she died. (See 'Put to the Test').

³⁵ cf Noffke 1988:26

³⁶ Gardner 1907:90

members of the *Mantellate* as being guilty of unchastity.³⁷ This was very hard for Catherine to bear.

1.1.8 Put to the Test

Some of the religious people of Siena murmured against Catherine for another reason. They said she was 'an ignorant woman, seducing simple persons with false expositions of holy Scripture and leading them to hell with herself.'³⁸ Two of them, both Masters in Sacred Theology, decided to show her up. They were Fra Gabriele da Volterra, a Franciscan, and Fra Giovanni Tantucci, an Augustinian. In the presence of a group of her friends and disciples, they questioned her on theological issues, hoping to confuse and expose her. As it turned out, both of them underwent a conversion as a result of their encounter with Catherine. Fra Gabriele had been living in great luxury in his convent. He gave away all he had and lived in poverty and humility to the end of his life. Tantucci became one of Catherine's disciples, accompanying her in her travels for the rest of her life. He was later one of the three confessors appointed by the pope to hear the confessions of those converted by Catherine's words.³⁹ It was probably through Tantucci that Catherine eventually met William of Flete, one of the hermits of Lecceto, who was to have a profound influence on her theological and spiritual formation.

1.1.9 Persecution from Women in the *Mantellate*

Among Catherine's most virulent persecutors were *Mantellate* women, who looked askance, not only at her consorting with a group of men and having the effrontery to be their spiritual guide, but also at Catherine's ecstasies and trances. After Catherine had communicated, she would often pass into a state

³⁷ Gardner 1907:91

³⁸ Gardner 1907:92

³⁹ Gardner 1907:92-95

of ecstasy and be totally unconscious for several hours. These women influenced some of the Dominican friars against her. Irritated by her behaviour in Church, and especially by the trances she fell into after receiving communion, they used to throw her bodily out of the Church and leave her lying unconscious in the sun; they kicked her and pricked her feet with a needle. Some of the Dominican friars would refuse Catherine's request for daily communion; this deprivation caused her great suffering.⁴⁰

1.1.10 Florence

In 1374 Catherine went to Florence for the first time. The General Chapter of the Dominicans was being held there, and it is conjectured that Catherine was summoned in order to be questioned about her behaviour, including her political involvement and the growing group of disciples who looked to her for spiritual guidance. The outcome, as far as we know, was that Raymond of Capua was assigned as her director. Thus started a spiritual relationship which was to last throughout her life.

When Catherine returned to Siena, there was another outbreak of the Black Death. She threw her energies into tending the sick and dying and burying the dead, and persuaded, even shamed, some of her followers into doing the same.

1.1.11 Catherine the Mediator

One of Catherine's gifts proved to be the art of mediation, as she was requested more and more often to act as an intermediary in family and political feuds. Naive and unaware as she undoubtedly was of the political complexities involved, her mediation often worked. At first it 'frightened her to the point of tears'⁴¹ but gradually it became a ministry with ever-widening

⁴⁰ Gardner 1907:50-52

⁴¹ John Paul II mentions this in his apostolic letter on the sixth centenary of Catherine's death in 1980, published in *Supplement to Doctrine and Life*, 20.

horizons. In 1375 she went to Pisa in an attempt to dissuade Pisa and Lucca from joining the anti-papal league. She was already engaged in vigorously preaching a crusade to the Holy Land - a crusade which never materialized.

1.1.12 Avignon

It is for her intervention in the return of the papacy to Rome that Catherine is best known, although others, including Bridget of Sweden had already done much in this regard. In 1376, Catherine's aid was enlisted in mediating between Pope Gregory XI and the Florentines, whom he had placed under interdict. Catherine went to Florence and then to Avignon in June 1376, only to discover that she was being used as a pawn by the Florentine politicians to enable them to gain access to the pontiff. She used the opportunity, however, to encourage Gregory to fulfil his promise of returning the papacy to Rome. Catherine was convinced that this was God's will and she expressed her conviction in no uncertain terms to the vacillating pope, who did go to Rome in September of that year.

1.1.13 Preaching, Writing, Reform of Church

Back in Siena, Catherine founded a convent at Belcaro, outside Siena, in 1377 and spent about a month there. For much of the year, she was in the Rocca d'Orcia district on a mission of preaching and reconciliation. By this time she had learned to write,⁴² taught, probably, by Alessa and Cecca and in October she began to dictate her book, later referred to as the *Dialogue*.

She was also engaged in sending letters to Gregory XI, passionately urging him to undertake the moral reform of the Church, beginning with the appointment of

⁴² Noffke believes it is very likely that Catherine did indeed learn to write. (Catherine of Siena: Vision through a Distant Eye, forthcoming, Introduction: 3). Others, however, dispute this, especially Fawtier. (cf Noffke 1988:27).

good pastors. She reproved and denounced disorders, 'but in a sorrowful spirit, manifesting for the Church a motherly tenderness'.⁴³

By this time Catherine was being criticized for being a gadabout and a meddler - behaviour particularly reprehensible in a woman! There exists a long criticism of Catherine in verse, written by Bianco of Siena, in which he upbraids Catherine for her public activities and for accepting homage. Relevant parts of Bianco's poem are as follows:

There have been many holy people
To whom people flocked,
And to avoid being wounded
They fled to their cells.

To flee empty honour
Is pleasing to the Lord.
For their humility of heart,
God planted charity within them.

If you love at such a height,
Keep your spirit pure.
If ... you don't
You'll be dashed to the ground.

If honour fattens your spirit,
Sorrow will emaciate it.⁴⁴

When Raymond one day asked Catherine why, in the face of all the criticism, she allowed her disciples to kiss her hand, she replied that she hardly noticed it. She did what she had to do, regardless of criticism. She did, however, blame her own sinfulness for the evils in the Church while at the same time becoming ever more consumed with her passion for the unity and well-being of the Church. In the 'cell of self-knowledge' she was 'eating souls' with enormous

⁴³ John Paul II 1980:278

⁴⁴ Translation from unpublished notes of Noffke, from lecture on 'Catherine of Siena: a Work in Progress'. (April 1994).

hunger and longing. As her mystical experience of God deepened, so did her redemptive love.

People either loved Catherine deeply and remained faithful to her through all the persecution and criticism, or they could not abide her and used every opportunity to vilify her. No one seemed able to be neutral towards Catherine of Siena.

1.1.14 Florence Again

In 1378, Catherine was in Florence again, this time at the request of Gregory XI in order to mediate peace between him and the Florentines. She was to negotiate with the leaders of the Guelph party to prevent the extremists on the opposite side from interrupting the peace process. Because of the fear of exciting anti-clericalism, none of Catherine's clerical disciples were with her. There was a great deal of malice towards Catherine on the part of the anti-Guelphs: she was denounced in strong terms. The strong feelings Catherine evoked, either in her favour or against her, are reflected in an excerpt from a Florentine chronicle of the time:

In this year (1378), there came to Florence a woman named Catherine, the daughter of Giacomo di Benincasa. She was reputed to be very holy, pure, good, and honorable, and she began to cast blame on those who were struggling against the Church. Those who managed the (Guelph) Party were glad to see her... She was, either by her own will or maliciously by their instigation, often brought to the Party to say that it was good to 'admonish' (i.e., to bring to civil justice to those of the opposition) so that the Party might be enabled to stop the war. Because of this, she was considered by the Guelphs to be something of a prophet, while the others considered her a hypocrite and a bad woman. People said all sorts of things about her - some out of treachery, and others simply because they thought they were doing well to speak ill of her.⁴⁵

⁴⁵

Marchonne de Coppo Stefani: *Cronica Fiorentina* (rub. 773) Information supplied by Noffke. See also Gardner 1907:230.

On 27 March Pope Gregory XI died and a new pope, Urban VI was elected on April 8. Catherine remained in Florence although the political unrest made it unsafe. A riot broke out in June and a band of armed rioters rushed into the house where Catherine was, declaring they would burn her alive or cut her into pieces. Catherine was not afraid: she thought she would be given the joy of being with her Bridegroom. To her disappointment, however, her would-be murderers went off without harming her. After this, people were afraid to receive her into their homes. One man did, but she was kept there secretly. Catherine would not leave Florence until peace had been proclaimed between Florence and the papacy; this was finally accomplished in late July or early August 1378. Catherine returned to Siena and worked on completing the *Dialogue*, which was finished in October.

1.1.15 The Great Schism

Meanwhile the newly-elected pope, Urban VI, was antagonizing everyone. He insulted and attacked the cardinals and quickly became so violently hated that the question of the validity of his election was raised. This was a very complex issue; to this day, historians have never satisfactorily sorted through the contradictions in the depositions given later about the politics involved. It is possible that the election was anything but 'free and fair'. However, Catherine was unaware of this. She heard the first rumours of schism only days after her return to Siena. On 20 September 1378, schism erupted when Clement VII was elected as a rival pope in Avignon. This marked the outbreak of the Great Schism, which split the Church for the next forty years. The French king declared his support of Clement VII; the Master of the Dominican Order and the French province of the Dominicans supported Clement; Europe was split in two as people took sides. Vincent Ferrer, a great Dominican contemporary of Catherine's who was also later canonized by the Church, supported Clement.

Catherine remained steadfastly loyal to Urban VI, utterly convinced that he was the validly elected pontiff. With her heart breaking at this terrible schism in the Church, she threw herself with all her passionate energy into actively supporting Urban as the legitimate pope. Small wonder that he summoned her to Rome to work for his cause!

1.1.16 Rome

Catherine and a large group of her disciples arrived in Rome on 28 November 1378. She worked tirelessly for the healing of the schism.

Her house at Via del Papa became a centre of diplomatic activity. Letters and messengers departed in all directions: to the powerful of Italy and to the monarchs of Europe, to rebel cardinals and to the servants of God to encourage them. She heartened the soldiers who were fighting for Urban, she curbed the pontiff's impulses, she dragged herself to pray on the apostle's tomb at St Peter's.⁴⁶

The last year and a half of Catherine's life, spent in Rome, was a time of intense activity and agonizing prayer as she spent herself for the Church. She offered her life to God for the healing of the terrible rift in the Church. Against the backdrop of Roman uprisings and deepening schism, Catherine increased the severity of her austere penitential regime. She became extremely weak and then very ill.

1.1.17 Final Surrender

In mid-February, in her last letter to Raymond, Catherine expressed the doubt within her which signified her final, total surrender to God. Confident as she had always been, and secure in her knowledge of God's will, she found at the end that this too, had to be relinquished. She asked Raymond's forgiveness for having written words of bitterness to him, for, she says:

⁴⁶ John Paul II 1980:278

*Perdonatemi, che io v'ho scritto parole d'amaritudine: non ve le ho scritte però per darvi amaritudine; ma perché sto in dubbio, e non so quello che la Bontà di Dio si farà di me.*⁴⁷

(Forgive me for writing distressing words to you. I do not write them to distress you but because I am uncertain and I do not know what the goodness of God means to do with me.)

Catherine still divided her time between the house in S. Chiara and St Peter's basilica, where she prayed intensely each day for the Church. Once, as she prayed in the basilica before Giotto's mosaic of the Church represented as a *navicella* (boat), it seemed to her that the bark of the Church was placed upon her shoulders and crushed her with its weight. She was found lying on the floor, unable to move. Her disciples carried her back to the house, where she lived for eight weeks more. Catherine died on 29 April 1380. She was thirty-three years old. The psychological stress of Catherine's failed involvement in the central ecclesiastical and political issues of the time, combined with the irreversible damage she had done to her health, were no doubt the two major factors that brought about her early death. Those who knew her best and had lived with her for years had no doubt of her sanctity. Many of them set to work soon after her death to publish her writings. Her cult spread rapidly, especially in Tuscany, Rome and Venice. She was canonized in 1461.

1.2 Doctor of the Church

In 1970, her writings having been duly examined for theological accuracy, Catherine was declared *Doctor Ecclesiae* (Doctor of the Church) together with Teresa of Avila. These are the only two women ever to have been accorded this honour. Catherine is also regarded as co-patron of Italy, with Francis of Assisi.

Catherine's greatness is undeniable. Her political influence and her public career, in which she became involved as a result of her mystical experience of God, have left their mark. But it is especially as one of the 'teaching mystics' of

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Underhill 1975:160

the Church, as a doctor of the Church, that Catherine takes her place. Here she is one of the 'greats' alongside Teresa of Avila, Hildegarde of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Genoa, the Rhineland mystics, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux and a host of others who had the gift of reporting something of the immense Truth and Love which they glimpsed and experienced. Catherine's *Dialogue, Letters and Prayers* give ample evidence of a solid grasp of theology, as well as the profundity of her contemplative life:

in passages of marvellous beauty, which take us into those regions beyond thought where Catherine declares that she has beheld 'the hidden things of God' and 'tasted and seen with the light of the intellect in Thy Light the Abyss of Thine Eternal Trinity and the beauty of Thy creatures.'⁴⁸

The measure of Catherine's spiritual health was her 'ever-growing capacity for seeing things as they really are.'⁴⁹ With the clear vision of the inner eye, the eye of the mind, Catherine saw with growing clarity the state of the Church and the clergy, the hearts and minds of people around her, her own self before God and the secret of the very heart of Christ, taking her into the depths of the Godhead. Her self-knowledge is based on clarity of vision:

It is not a niggling introspection, but that clear view of human nothingness matched against the perfection of God which is the sovereign remedy against pride and self-love; the only foundation of that charity which she calls in one of her jewelled phrases 'a continual prayer'.⁵⁰

1.3. Conclusion

Catherine of Siena lived during the time of transition from the late Middle Ages to the early Renaissance. The fabric of medieval society was tearing apart and a new spirit of humanism and democracy was emerging. Church and state were in a process of separation and there was widespread disillusionment with the

⁴⁸ Underhill 1975:161

⁴⁹ Underhill 1975:161

⁵⁰ Underhill 1975:161

Church, which still wielded a great deal of political power. Many of the clergy lived scandalous lives.

Catherine was precocious in her spiritual development. She made some unusual life-choices and was not concerned about the expectations or disapproval of her family and friends. She became the spiritual mother of a group of well-educated people who recognized her spiritual depth.

Catherine also became involved in the conflict between the Tuscan states and the French pope. Her interventions in ecclesial politics were the direct outcome of her mystical experience and her passion for truth. She provoked a good deal of criticism from some, and enormous admiration from others who revered her as a holy woman. However, matters in the Church went from bad to worse. The conflict exploded into full-scale schism and Catherine died in the knowledge that she had failed to bring about any resolution of the rift. However, her mystical experience led to a great clarity regarding the truth of herself, God and the Church. It, led, too, to Catherine's complete self-giving as she spent herself in service of the Church.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE SURVEY

1. Introduction

In this chapter an attempt will be made to give an overview of Catherinian literature, from the primary sources which were the documents dictated by Catherine herself in the fourteenth century, through the major secondary sources (works by people who had known Catherine) and then into the most significant scholarship in Catherinian studies up to the present day. Trends in the literature on Catherine will be identified and traced in order to demonstrate how these have changed through the centuries. Finally, the place of this thesis, as it fits into the larger picture, will be shown.

2. Primary Sources

The source documents which can be traced back to Catherine herself are:

- 2.1 The *Dialogue*, Catherine's book, dictated by her to secretaries over a period of about a year. There is evidence¹ that she began dictating after a significant mystical experience in October 1377 and that the book was complete by November 1378. Most of her contemporaries insist that she dictated while she was in a state of ecstasy; however, even if this was so, she did not leave the

¹ See Noffke 1988): 12-14 for details of Catherine's dictation of the *Dialogue*, and her editing of the book.

book in its raw state: internal evidence points to a fair amount of editing by Catherine herself.² There are about six manuscripts of the *Dialogue* in existence.³

After the invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century and Catherine's canonization in 1461, the first printed edition of the *Dialogue* appeared very soon: Azzoguidi's 1472 edition in Bologna.⁴

2.2 Catherine's *Letters*, of which about three hundred and eighty-two are extant.⁵ Most of the Letters date from the year 1374 to Catherine's death in 1380. The broader time range of the *Letters* allows us to see something of the evolution of their themes and images. These, too, were dictated; the early letters indicate that women disciples often acted as Catherine's secretaries but later letters seem to have been taken down mostly by men.⁶ The letters were addressed to people across the spectrum of society: popes and cardinals, friends and relatives, religious and clerics, prostitutes, soldiers and civil leaders. Catherine's letters, like the *Dialogue*, embody her conviction of God's boundless, passionate love for us, her love of truth and her concern for the Church; they also reveal

² Such editing is an observation made by Noffke: *Dial.* Intro. 14.

³ Although we do not have the actual original manuscript as Catherine dictated it, a number of manuscripts exist which are considered very close to the original. The earliest extant one is Ms 292 (Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome), transcribed by Barduccio Canigiani, who was one of the three secretaries to whom Catherine dictated the *Dialogue*. Since Canigiani died on 8 December 1382, this manuscript was completed within two and a half years of Catherine's death. Cavallini enumerates the reasons why Ms 292 is considered to be closest to the original (*Dialogo* xxxvii ff). Other manuscripts of the *Dialogue* include one apparently signed by Stefano Maconi, who had joined Catherine's group when they travelled to Avignon in 1376 and who was later another of the *Dialogue* secretaries. There are also manuscripts of the *Dialogue* in libraries in Florence, Modena, Milan, as well as some privately owned manuscripts. They are listed in Noffke 1980:20.

⁴ The most important printed editions of the *Dialogue* were Azzoguidi's, followed by three others in the fifteenth century in Italy, then there were two editions in the sixteenth, one in the seventeenth and one in Siena in the eighteenth century.

⁵ There are actually more than 382 because there are some duplicates or near duplicates which were sent to different addressees but numbered by Tommasèo as one.

⁶ The reason for this is that Catherine's earliest letters were transcribed by friends of hers who were literate. These letters often close with greetings from Cecca or Alessa, indicating the person who actually wrote the letter. It is understandable that the friends Catherine had in her early twenties, since she was determined not to marry, would be mostly women. A few years later, however, when a group of disciples had gathered around her - mostly educated men who regarded her as their spiritual mother - they took over the task of transcribing what she dictated.

her insight into the major doctrines of Christianity. The themes and imagery of the *Letters* are closely linked with, and similar to, those in the *Dialogue*.⁷

- 2.3 The *Prayers*, taken down by Catherine's disciples, perhaps without her knowledge,⁸ when she prayed aloud as she so freely did. Twenty-six of these prayers have come down to us, dating from August 1376 when Catherine was at Avignon to 30 January 1380, which was just two months before her death. Prayers, however, are interwoven into all Catherine's writings: she would burst into prayer while dictating both the *Dialogue* and the *Letters*, and her prayers also appear in the narratives of her life. These last may have been written down by others from memory or from notes.⁹

3. Major Secondary Sources

Apart from these three primary sources, there are some important secondary sources, written by people who were close to Catherine. The best-known of these is the life of Catherine written by her confessor and close friend, Raymond of Capua. He began his writing five years after Catherine's death and worked at it, on and off, for ten years. Written in Latin, it was called simply the *Legenda* of Catherine, following the convention of the time concerning the technical term for the biography of a holy person, meaning 'to be read aloud' for the purpose of edification.¹⁰ Later, Raymond's book came to be called the *Legenda Maior* to distinguish it from an abridged version written by Caffarini.

⁷ Noffke 1988:1-31 gives a full introduction to Catherine's *Letters*, including a careful account of scholarly studies of the *Letters* (4-6), their significance (6-8), the early story of the *Letters* (9-13) printed editions (14-19), the critical edition (20-24), the *Letters* in English (24-27) and Notes. (9-13).

⁸ There is a recorded request by Catherine, when she began working on the *Dialogue*, that whatever she might say in ecstasy should be taken down. This in fact may have given her disciples the idea of taking down her prayers too. However, once the book was done she probably no longer kept track of what was written, and in the midst of her (often ecstatic) prayer she would most likely not have been aware of it.

⁹ For details of Catherine's *Prayers*, see the *Introduzione* to Cavallini's 1978 edition. (*S. Caterina da Siena: Le orazioni*) and the Introduction to Noffke's 1983 edition: *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*.

¹⁰ See Kearns 1980:lil for a full explanation in a well-researched introduction to the latest translation of Raymond's book.

Caffarini was responsible for collecting or editing four major Catherinian sources, although in the twentieth century his work was to become the focus of controversy regarding the reliability of documents about Catherine. Caffarini first undertook an expanded version of Raymond's book, using the notes of Tommaso dalla Fonte, who had been Catherine's first confessor and had known her long before Raymond did. This work was the *Libellus de Supplemento*. Later, Caffarini wrote an abridged version called the *Legenda Minor*. Caffarini had been a disciple of Catherine from very early in her public career and it was he who, thirty years after her death, began collecting the testimony of people still living who had known Catherine. This was done for the purpose of promoting her cult and canonization. The collection became known as the *Processo Castellano* having been undertaken at the behest of the Bishop of Castello, because Catherine's cult had begun being promoted without any official diocesan sanction. Finally, with the help of Cristofano di Gano, Caffarini attempted to gather and arrange in order all Catherine's *Letters*, which were bound into two volumes.¹¹

Other secondary sources include letters of Catherine's disciples to her and to one another, the *Miracoli* by an anonymous Florentine, some writings by the English Augustinian, William Flete, the *Memoirs* of one of her disciples, Cristofano di Gano, and poems written in her honour.¹² All these, then, comprise the earliest Catherinian documents.

¹¹ For further details about Caffarini's contribution to the collection and preservation of Catherinian documents, see Noffke 1980:2 and Kearns 1980:lii-iv.

¹² These sources are listed, together with the other major Catherinian writings and sources, in Fatula 1989:207-214.

4. Trends in Catherinian Hagiography

J. Huizinga has stated: for the history of civilization every delusion or opinion of an epoch has the value of an important fact.¹³ The particular trend in hagiography discernible in any epoch is often more revealing of the people of that time than of the saint about whom they write. It expresses their particular horizon of interpretation. This is as true of Catherinian hagiography as of any other.

4.1 Visionary and Miracle-worker: The Cultic Trend

In the work of Raymond and Caffarini there is a clear trend discernible, and in later writings other trends make their appearance. The early fifteenth century writings illustrate a very different view of holiness to that which we hold today. Their horizon was different. This profoundly affected hagiographical writing in general and can be demonstrated by tracing the shifting focus regarding Catherine in particular.

The trend in the time of Raymond and Caffarini, it seems, was cultic, presenting Catherine as a visionary and miracle-worker. This was to promote Catherine's canonization by portraying her, according to the convention of the times, as a woman of extraordinary, even miraculous, supernatural powers. Although Raymond was more careful to check his sources than was usual among medieval hagiographers,¹⁴ he nevertheless reflects the world-view of his time.¹⁵ The medieval concept of holiness stressed heroic patience, devotion to the Passion of Christ, an immediate, mystical contact with God and a very strong sense of sinfulness combined with evidence of miraculous powers, especially of prophecy and healing, as components of sanctity.

¹³ Huizinga 1954:57.

¹⁴ Kearns 1980:lviii.

¹⁵ Meade 1991:64 characterizes this world view as one shaped by neo-Platonic cosmology. 'Pivotal in his (Raymond's) spirituality, as in that of Catherine, was the interconnectedness between the physical and spiritual worlds, the influence of good and bad spirits, and the essential significance of vision as the integrating element in the ordering of all things'.

Propaganda would have been another compelling motive for Raymond of Capua, bringing his writing of Catherine's life into line with his own twofold lifework of service to the Holy See and the reform of the Dominican Order, of which he was the Master from 1380-1399. It was almost inevitable that these issues, so dear to Raymond's heart, would in some way shape his writing.¹⁶ Catherine's support of Urban VI in the Great Schism and her concern for the reform of the Church and the Order would have served Raymond well, embroiled as he was in these ongoing struggles. It is altogether likely that it was Raymond's influence on Catherine which became a major factor in raising her awareness of these very issues in the first place, since he had been appointed her confessor in 1374 and remained close to her as father, son¹⁷ and dear friend, until her death in 1380. Raymond's overriding concern, however, would have been to inspire the reader with awe and admiration, painting a picture of Catherine as *admiranda* rather than *imitanda*,¹⁸ in the style of the *Golden Legends* of Voragine, with which Catherine herself was familiar and which presented the paradigm of medieval sanctity which Raymond obviously accepted.¹⁹

Catherine of Siena was in fact canonized²⁰ in 1461, thus fulfilling the wishes of those who had promoted her canonization and bringing to an end the need to

¹⁶ Kearns spells this out fully in his Introduction; see Kearns 1980:xxii-xlv.

¹⁷ Catherine often addressed Raymond in her letters as 'Very loved and dearest father and my dear son in Christ Jesus'; see Noffke 1988:108.

¹⁸ Meade 1991:65

¹⁹ Karen Scott points to American scholars of late medieval religion such as John Coakley, Rudolph Bell, Richard Kieckhefer and Caroline Bynum, who have shown how 'Raymond of Capua's picture of St Catherine as a suffering vessel of supernatural power was typical of late medieval attitudes towards female sanctity'. (St Catherine of Siena, Apostola. *Church History*, 61:34-46) Rudolph Bell and Caroline Bynum have much to say on the question of Catherine's so-called anorexia and whether one can in fact impose such modern categories on a medieval lifestyle and view of sanctity. Bynum makes a particularly valuable contribution, to which I shall return later in this study. See Appendix I.)

²⁰ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines canonization as follows:
 'In the Roman Catholic Church the definitive sentence by which the Pope declares a particular member of the faithful departed, previously beatified, to have already entered into eternal glory, and ordains for the new 'Saint' a public cult throughout the whole Church ... Canonization is distinguished from beatification, which allows only a restricted public veneration of the person beatified ...'
 It is noteworthy that many more lay people are being beatified and canonized this century; previously mostly, though not exclusively, bishops, priests and nuns were canonized. This may reflect the approach to holiness expressed by Vatican II: that holiness is for all, whatever their state in life. (cf section vii below: A different vision of holiness.)

lay stress on the miraculous and the marvellous in Catherinian hagiography. Meanwhile, another trend arose concurrently with the cultic one. This was the tendency to emphasize the devotional approach in Catherinian literature.

4.2 The Devotional Trend

This trend reveals another horizon-shift. Devotions in honour of Catherine began to appear soon after Catherine's death. Added to this, the devotional approach to saints and the pietism which grew out of the *Devotio Moderna* of the fifteenth century often led to a somewhat superstitious approach to faith and an excessively affective spirituality which placed much emphasis on relics and devotions. Devotion to Catherine of Siena was no exception.

Devotional books and editions of the *Dialogue*, *Letters* and *Prayers* were printed from the fifteenth century onward, together with biographies of Catherine, poetry in her honour and a reprint of Raymond's *Legenda Maior*. Book titles often referred to Catherine as the 'seraphic virgin'. These works also appeared in translation in France, Germany, Spain, England and the Low Countries. The earliest English translation of the *Dialogue* was an early fifteenth century edition by an anonymous writer who translated it for the nuns in the monastery of Syon in England, and called it *The Orcherde of Syon*.²¹ Noffke remarks that it is 'more a paraphrase than a translation'.²² Algar Thorold's translation of the *Dialogue* in 1856 was reprinted in 1907; it has an introduction on the life and times of Catherine. The text itself is ponderously Victorian in style. It is an almost slavish translation of Gigli's Italian edition of a century earlier; Noffke remarks that it is often inaccurate and difficult passages are omitted or paraphrased.²³ Some entire sections are completely omitted. Naturally, this translation reflects the Victorian spirituality of its time.

²¹ Dane James, ed. 1519. *The Orcherde of Syon*. London. Wynken de Worde. The book was re-edited in 1966 by Hodgson and Liegey.

²² *Dialogue*: Intro: 20

²³ *Dialogue*: Intro: 21

Traces of this continued into the first half of the present century; apologetical works on her stigmata and relics were popular. As late as the 1950's, devotional treatises appeared and practices such as *Devotion to St Catherine: the Five Wednesdays* were encouraged.²⁴

4.3 The Mystical Trend in Catherinian Hagiography

There was a further shift in emphasis in Catherinian writing after the Council of Trent (1545-63). Raymond's *Legenda Maior*, which had become the authoritative work on Catherine of Siena, was seen as portraying Catherine as the mystic, a role-model for contemplatives, especially enclosed nuns. This picture of Catherine supported Trent's insistence on monastic enclosure for all religious women and emphasized mystical elements such as mystical espousals, stigmata and exchange of hearts with Christ,²⁵ all of which came to have increasing significance among women mystics²⁶ of the early modern period.²⁷ This mystical model of Catherine ignored, however, the fact that Catherine was not a nun and that she had never been enclosed; in fact, mobility and preaching were important aspects of Catherine's role and mission in the Church. Mystic she was, and as such she could validly be regarded as a role-model for mystics, whatever their lifestyle, but she was a mystic who was, at the same time very involved in the social and ecclesial affairs of her time. These different aspects of Catherine's life in its integration and balance, as she must have experienced it from the inside, were not successfully held together by

²⁴ cf Homes 1981:83-88 'The fifteenth-century demise.'

²⁵ With regard to bridal mysticism, Catherine herself had inherited much from earlier mystics such as St Bernard (12th century) and St Gertrude the Great (13th century); Gertrude's devotion to the heart of Christ and her love of the Eucharist both find their echo in Catherine. Contemporaries of Catherine who had a significant impact on the mystical tradition were Ruusbroec and Julian of Norwich; of these two, Ruusbroec would be more like Catherine in his spousal imagery. Both these mystics were quoted in Ch. 1.3 on mystical self-knowledge.

²⁶ The best-known of these is probably Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690). She lived in Paray-le-Mondial in central France and became the chief proponent of love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus, around which her mysticism was centred.

²⁷ Underhill 1975:153 names other movements (she calls them a 'network of mystical devotion') which were springing up in Europe at the time of Catherine and which helped to build up the spiritual and mystical tradition of the late Middle Ages.

her biographers through the centuries: rather, in each successive stage, a different trend was emphasized as historical horizons changed. The fluctuations reflected changing movements in Church and society.²⁸

4.4 Historical-Critical Model

The historical Catherine began to emerge more clearly with the gradual development of critical scholarship. The earliest attempt at a more critical approach was the Gigli-Burlamacchi edition in the early eighteenth century.²⁹ The historical studies of the last half of the nineteenth century gave evidence of even more critical scholarship.

These historical works showed Catherine as 'public figure, ambassador and Church reformer',³⁰ and they formed another strand alongside the mystical one. It was particularly in her *Letters* that scholars sought historical material.³¹ One major nineteenth century work was *Storia di S. Caterina da Siena e del Papato*

²⁸ After the surge of interest in Catherine as a mystic in the sixteenth century, there seems to have been a diminishment in the appeal of mysticism from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century. Some of the factors which probably contributed to this are discussed by Jedin in his classic work on the *History of the Church*, vol. VI, 1981. They include:

- (i) the rise of Cartesian rationalism, which led to a distrust of mystical experience (88-89);
- (ii) the condemnation of Fenelon in 1699 on grounds of quietism. Jedin remarks: '(This condemnation) damaged Christian mysticism on the whole and caused it to enter a period of regression for more than a century.' (93) He also says:

Spiritual life itself was impoverished because of the crisis of quietism, which for a long time discredited all mystical elements, cutting off Christian piety from its living sources of inner experience. (429)

- (iii) The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, when the Augustinian concept of the *illuminatio* of God within us was understood as human self-illumination in the light of autonomous reason. (343) Andrew Louth speaks in this regard of the 'self-confidence of the Enlightenment's search for objective truth' (1989:132).

²⁹ Noffke 1988:4

³⁰ Scott 1922:34

³¹ Scott 1992:34

del suo tempo in 1856 by Alfonso Capecelatro. Noffke³² remarks that this study is impressively detailed, though sometimes inaccurate and biased.

Scientific research continued in the early twentieth century.³³ Both Italian and non-Italian scholars made some important contributions in the first few decades of this century. Among the Italians were scholars such as Michieli, Motzo and Fiorilli, while outside Italy Edmund Gardner, the renowned Dante scholar, published in 1907 what is still the best historical study of Catherine in English. Gardner focuses, as the title says, on the religious, political and historical issues of fourteenth century Italy and has a remarkably accurate ability to place Catherine in the context of her own times. The historical strain was continued by Augusta Drane, whose work on the history of St Catherine was published in 1914, just seven years after Gardner's. Drane shows great familiarity with the fourteenth century sources; it is unfortunate, however, that she interprets them so literally. In 1917 the German, Eleanore Freiin von Seckendorff, attempted to date Catherine's letters according to ecclesiastical politics: the emphasis on Catherine is still historical.

The historical approach, then, sees Catherine as a historical figure and attempts to interpret her ecclesial and political interventions in terms of the events of the mid-fourteenth century.

4.5 Popular Biographies

Alice Curtayne wrote a biography of Catherine which went through six editions between 1929 and 1932. In the first three editions there was an appendix in Italian devoted to Fawtier's criticism.³⁴ The appendix is from a study by I. Taurisano, *Le Fonti agiografiche e la critica di R. Fawtier*.

³² 1988:4

³³ Noffke 1988:4-5 gives details of the development of critical scholarship in Catherinian study.

³⁴ See Section (vi) on Fawtier below, under the heading Critical Scholarship.

Curtayne's book initiates the transition from the historical, scholarly works to the popular biographies which began to appear in the 1930's. One of the more complete and readable of these is Joergensen's: it is accurate and has an historical emphasis but is most interested in presenting Catherine herself. The focus on the person of Catherine is evident, too, in Michael de la Bedoyere's biography, published in Milwaukee in 1947. Sigrid Undset's *Catherine of Siena* was written in Swedish and translated into English by Kate Austin-Lund in 1954. Undset depends heavily on Raymond's *Legenda* and seems unaware of the Fawtier controversy. Although it was published after the other two, it is the most gullible and seems to follow an earlier hagiographical model. Other highly readable and popular biographies were written by Levasti in 1954 and Perrin in 1965. Apart from Perrin, who wrote for Dominican tertiaries, these biographies are all aimed at a wide, popular readership. Though well-researched, they are not academic works.

4.6 Critical Scholarship

4.6.1. Fawtier's Contribution

At the same time as these historical studies and popular biographies were appearing, serious work was being done in the academy and was to explode into a major controversy. The Frenchman, Robert Fawtier, a Catherinian scholar, published in 1914 some previously unedited letters and fragments of letters which he had found in various manuscripts. His work on the sources aroused in Fawtier a great concern at what he regarded as unscholarly and untrustworthy writing about Catherine, and he set about debunking Catherinian hagiography. In his opinion, the Catherinian myth had got way out of hand and had lost its character of 'wrap(ping) into story the truth beyond the merely factual'.³⁵ In 1921 he published *Sainte Catherine de Sienne: Essai de critique des sources: Sources hagiographiques*. His attack on the credibility of the hagiographical sources led to a renewed depth of scholarship in critical methodology as others, particularly the Italian scholars, sought to refute him. Fawtier's second volume was published in 1930: *Les Oeuvres de Sainte*

³⁵

Noffke 1980b:4

Catherine de Sienne, in which he revised some of his opinions but remained firmly entrenched in others. In 1948, Fawtier and Louis Canet were the co-authors of *La double expérience de Catherine Benincasa*. Although most modern Catherinian scholars are of the opinion that Fawtier went too far,³⁶ it is clear that he opened the way to serious critical scholarship, which has continued through the past seventy-five years.³⁷ This was the first great breakthrough in Catherinian studies.

It is worth noting that the historical-critical approach in Catherinian studies was contemporaneous, in Catholic circles, with the same trend in Scripture studies and in a critical evaluation of at least one other Italian mystic, Catherine of Genoa. Baron von Hügel, the philosopher and theologian who lived in England at the beginning of this century, was a keen student of biblical criticism and also of mysticism. In 1908 he wrote *The Mystical Element of Religion as studied in St Catherine of Genoa and her Friends*. His demythologizing of Catherine of Genoa was not unlike Fawtier's critical approach to writings on Catherine of Siena. Despite the condemnation of Modernism by Pius X in 1907, and the resultant retardation of the historical-critical method in Roman Catholic biblical studies, the critical approach was in the air in the first quarter of the twentieth century and it was Fawtier who first applied it to Catherinian scholarship.

4.6.2 Dupré Theseider's Response

Eugenio Dupré Theseider is the most renowned of the scholars to take up Fawtier's challenge. In 1923 his *Cronologia delle lettere politiche di S. Caterina e la critica moderna* was published. He showed a high regard for Fawtier's work and was able to advance Catherinian scholarship further by adjusting and correcting Fawtier's views where these were inaccurate or biased. In 1928 Dupré Theseider was invited by the *Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo* to prepare the first critical edition of Catherine's letters and the first volume of eighty-eight letters was published in 1940. This volume has informative and

³⁶ See Noffke 1988:5 and Scott, K. 1992. St Catherine of Siena: Apostola. *Church History*, 61:34.

³⁷ For details see Noffke 1988:4-6; Kearns 1980:1x-1xx. Kearns discusses the Fawtier controversy and his contribution in illuminating detail.

lengthy footnotes of two kinds: historical and ascetic/theological. The latter is not an interpretation of Catherine's spirituality or theology, but an attempt to identify the sources, both direct and indirect, of what she wrote. Most of her sources were indirect, in that she knew of them through the writers and preachers of her time. Dupré Theseider died in 1975. His work was taken over by Professor Antonio Volpato in 1980, who is presently working on the remainder of the volumes of the critical edition.

There have been two editions of selected *Letters* in English: one by Vida Scudder in 1905 and the other by Foster and Ronayne in 1980. Suzanne Noffke is working on the first complete annotated English translation of the *Letters* in English. The first volume was published in 1988, and is based directly on Dupré Theseider's volume. The other three volumes will be based on the manuscripts directly, making some use of Dupre Theseider's notes and in consultation with Volpato.³⁸

4.6.3 The Contribution of Giuliana Cavallini and Suzanne Noffke

It was the scholarship of Giuliana Cavallini which brought about the second great breakthrough in Catherinian scholarship. It had to do with the structure of *Dialogue*. Catherine had almost certainly left it as one continuous narrative, but editors, even in the very early manuscripts, had begun dividing it into chapters. There was also a larger division into tracts or treatises. These divisions, although followed by most subsequent editors, did not correspond with the natural structure of the work. Cavallini uncovered the original structure: a regular pattern of petition, response and thanksgiving, followed in each section by a summary and a hymn of praise. This discovery was validated by the use of large initial capitals at the beginning of each section in the manuscript *Casantense 292*.³⁹ In 1968, Cavallini published her Italian edition of the *Dialogue*, the closest we have to a critical edition, using the newly-discovered

³⁸ More details of research in progress, e.g. of improvements by Volpato are described by Noffke, 1988: Introduction, especially 20-27.

³⁹ Cavallini describes her 'almost casual' discovery in the *Introduzione*; Noffke also refers to it in her 1980 English translation, Intro. 15.

genuine structure which found universal consensus among scholars.⁴⁰ Suzanne Noffke based her English translation on Cavallini's⁴¹ and this, together with the fact that Noffke's translation is in excellent, flowing English, brought about a great reawakening of interest in Catherine of Siena in the English-speaking world.

4.6.4 1980: Sixth Centenary of Catherine's Death

1980 was a watershed year in Catherinian studies. The sixth centenary of the anniversary of Catherine's death was celebrated, and there was a wealth of new material available, mainly in the form of articles and studies. Symposia, conferences, workshops and seminars on Catherine were held in that year in Italy and elsewhere, including South Africa. Not only was Noffke's English translation of the *Dialogue* published, but Conleth Kearns' new annotated translation of Raymond's *Life of St Catherine of Siena* came out, and Cavallini's *Il Dialogo* was reprinted. Cavallini had prepared the way for 1980 by two publications in 1978: *Le Orazioni*, the first critical edition of the collection of twenty-six of Catherine's prayers, and *Caterina da Siena: La verita dell'amore*, containing an introduction to Catherine's life and a selection of texts, annotated and with an abundance of references. In 1983, Noffke's annotated English translation based on Cavallini's edition of *The prayers of Catherine of Siena* was published, and in 1988 volume 1 of *The letters of St. Catherine of Siena*. She is presently researching and writing the other three volumes of this major work.

⁴⁰ Cavallini has just about ready for press a revised and more completely annotated edition.

⁴¹ Dial. Intro. 15

5. A Different Vision of Holiness

5.1 Current Popular Studies on Catherine in English

Current writers on Catherine tend to move away from biography and to present interpretations of Catherine, as in Fatula's book, entitled *Catherine of Siena's Way*, first published in 1987 with a revised edition appearing in 1989. It is vol. 4 in the series *The Way of the Christian Mystics*. There is also Meade's *My Nature is Fire: St Catherine of Siena* (1991) and a useful book by Mary O'Driscoll, containing annotated selections from Catherine's writings: *Catherine of Siena: Passion for the Truth, Compassion for Humanity* (1993). O'Driscoll's latest publication (1994) is a beautifully presented book on glossy paper, with photographs and maps in colour. It is entitled simply *Catherine of Siena*.

5.2 Second Vatican Council

The most significant document of the Second Vatican Council of the 1960's was the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, known as *Lumen Gentium*, and the central chapter of this document deals with the fundamental hermeneutic of the Church: the call to holiness. It sets aside the popularly held notion⁴² of a two-tiered concept of holiness: that perfection or holiness (the two were regarded as synonymous) was mainly the vocation of priests and nuns, while the laity could settle for rather less. Caricature though this is, it reflects a presumption often held by clergy and members of religious orders and even, on occasion, taught to the laity. *Lumen Gentium* reiterates the Gospel message that all are called to holiness, each in his or her state of life; that it consists in growing or tending towards the perfection of love by being conformed to Christ.⁴³

⁴² In the Roman Catholic Church, at least, this view was fairly widespread.

⁴³ Flannery 1975:396-402

It seems that this is not unconnected with the horizon-shift regarding a mystic such as Catherine of Siena. If holiness is not (virtually) the prerogative of nuns; she need not be portrayed as one; if holiness does not imply perfection, we can begin to take a hard look at her weaknesses, mistakes and failures instead of glossing over or rationalizing them. And if holiness is significant growth, we can begin to trace Catherine's spiritual growth, to see her development right up to her death.

Critical scholarship from the time of Fawtier to the present day has thus considerably altered our vision of Catherine of Siena. She is being allowed to speak, somewhat more, in her own voice; annotations and footnotes clarify and enrich her voice, rather than muffle it. There is no longer the need to present her as perfect from childhood onwards, or even as totally successful and unblemished. There is an appreciation of discovering in Catherine (and other mystics and holy people) an unfolding, a development and certainly it is possible to trace spiritual maturation in Catherine. Neither is she presented today as having been always right in her judgements or her actions, but rather she is seen within the context of her weaknesses and limitations. There is no need to hide the fact that she was criticised by many in her lifetime and that her passion for the unity and reform of the Church ended in failure. Nor is the transforming power of her mystical experience diminished by her inedia. Our contemporary horizon of holiness does not deny weakness.

Scholarship, therefore, has led to a more integrated approach to Catherine of Siena: not only does it hold together Catherine the mystic and Catherine the public figure, but sees these two aspects as being inextricably bound together in a mutuality which was arguably Catherine's special charism. 'The complementarity of prayer and action ... is one of integration, not of mere alternation', says Noffke.⁴⁴ She continues:

...as the circles of Catherine's involvement widened, her ministry in action intensified her need for prayer in solitude, while her very prayer drove her more and more to concern for others.

She knew with the thirst of the psalmist in the parched desert how essential it is to hold one's jug in the fountain even as one drinks'.⁴⁵ The present approach to

⁴⁴ 1980a:187

⁴⁵ Noffke 1980a:189

holiness in the Roman Catholic Church, as well as developments in the fields of psychology and historical- and form-criticism, have opened the way for studies of the mystics which will present them as more 'rounded' persons: less perfect and more human.

5.3 Genre

Identifying the changing trends in Catherinian writing through the centuries is like walking through a picture gallery looking at the vastly different portraits of her that have been painted in each era. Each reflects the presuppositions and attitudes, the priorities and the limitations, in a word, the horizon, of its own age, and ours is no exception. Differences in style are often no more than that, revealing more about the people who paint the portraits than about Catherine herself. Whether our taste inclines to the romanticism of Caffarini, the muted impressionism of the *Orcherde of Syon*, the stark realism of Fawtier, the well-filled canvasses of Gardner or Joergensen, or the fine, precise etchings of Dupré Theseider, each of them holds something of Catherine, and each has its own beauty and truth, as well as its limitations. Recognition and appreciation of each style, each genre, is essential if we are not to misunderstand and misinterpret what was never meant to be taken literally.

One wonders whether in fact it is possible to get at the 'real' Catherine at all. There is something of her in each portrayal; perhaps we must be content to glimpse one facet of the mystery at a time, and allow these to synthesize within us and form a new whole as we move more deeply into her own writings. We share the truth of the horizon of each age. We need to ask ourselves what presuppositions we bring to *our* portrayal of Catherine. Do we, in our zeal to demythologize, tear away the fabric as we remove the varnish that covers it? Are we so anxious to portray her as relevant that we force on her concepts that she would not have understood, such as feminism?

Noffke⁴⁶ writes about myth:

46

Noffke 1980b:4-5

Myth in its noblest sense is simply the result of any attempt to wrap into story the truth that is beyond the merely factual. There is little truth beyond the nakedly scientific that is not wrapped in this kind of myth. 'Demythologizing' is the corresponding attempt to unwrap that truth ... A myth can be actively distorted by the culture in which it is initially formed, or by transmission of the myth from one culture to another ... In a more passive way, distortion results when the receivers of a myth fail to distinguish the levels of truth, story and cultural conditioning, or are consciously or unconsciously selective in what they absorb and retain.

Many of the methodological questions which the writer brings to this study are suggested in this extract. How detect distortions in the Catherinian myth: distortions from the past and from our own time and culture? How distinguish levels of 'truth, story and cultural conditioning'? How identify selectivity in interpretations of Catherine, whether of others or my own? It is important that these considerations be borne in mind as we enter into interaction with Catherine. We bring to this hermeneutical process our own cultural conditioning, presuppositions, expectations and limitations.

Two essential methodological tools for the task are:

1. An awareness of *genre*, and
2. Working primarily with *internal evidence*.

The first, the awareness of *genre*, is similar to form criticism in biblical studies. Just as one distinguishes the *genre* of Genesis 1 and 2 from Job or Jonah or the Canticle of Canticles or the Letters of Paul, so it is necessary to distinguish the cultic *genre* of Raymond of Capua or Caffarini from the historical approach of Gardner or Drane or the debunking of Fawtier.

The second methodological tool to be used is that this writer will work primarily with the internal evidence of the text itself, rather than simply synthesize and summarize what others have written about Catherine. Demanding as this method is, it is of major importance in understanding and interpreting Catherine.

6. Summary

In the six centuries since Catherine's death, various trends in Catherinian hagiography and scholarship are discernible. The first, the cultic trend, depicted Catherine as a visionary and wonderworker. This was done by Raymond, Caffarini and the early disciples of Catherine in their zeal to ensure her canonization. Growing from this was the devotional model, which attracted certain people from the fifteenth through to the early twentieth century. Trent brought in its wake the cult of Catherine the mystic. Yet another model was the historical-critical one, where stress was laid on Catherine's political and ecclesial activities, and an attempt was made to see her in terms of her historical background. This model is seen as very relevant today, as part of the complementarity characteristic of Catherine's spirituality. It sees in Catherine a model of integrated spirituality, in which mysticism and social involvement interact and are interdependent. Many of us can relate to this model and find hope in it. As Meade says:

Her (Catherine's) search for holiness, though exceptional, intense and more profound than others is so distinctly human that it offers to the world today a spirituality connected to human experience and translatable to every time and place (Meade 1991:xviii).

At the same time it is necessary to acknowledge the debt Catherinian studies owe to the debunking process of Fawtier's scholarship, which led to the critical editions of Catherine's works being published; some of this work is still being done. A changed vision of holiness since Vatican II has given rise to a different perspective on many mystics, including Catherine; more questions are raised about her limitations and weaknesses. And finally, there is a sense of the need for an awareness of genre in our interpretation of previous and current models of Catherine, as well as a need for methodological tools that will help us approach the task with the right questions and some consciousness of possible distortions.

7. Conclusion

This chapter has traced the various historical *horizons* in the interpretation of Catherine which have emerged in the course of the six centuries since her death. These have been referred to as 'trends'. An attempt has been made to capture the truth our age shares with each horizon, so as to arrive at the fusion of horizons of which Gadamer speaks. Tensions between our horizon and each of the ones presented have been pointed out. Essential methodological tools which enable us to arrive at a less distorted portrait of Catherine have been named.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONCEPT OF THE 'CELL' WITHIN THE TRADITION OF THE CHURCH IN THE WEST AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CATHERINE

1. Introduction

This chapter will trace those sources and influences which have some bearing on Catherine's theme of the 'cell of self-knowledge'. A great deal of attention is given to the Desert Ascetics of the fourth century: their influence on late medieval women saints in general, and on Catherine in particular, is considered. They were, after all, the classical cell-dwellers of Christianity. Thereafter, other possible sources and influences are traced, from post-apostolic times, through the major patristic sources, to medieval sources immediately preceding Catherine herself.

2. The Fathers of the Desert

2.1 *Vitae Patrum* Paradigmatic in High Middle Ages

The very concept of the spirituality of the 'cell' brings to mind the Desert Fathers and Mothers of fourth century Egypt. An analysis of Catherine's early adult spirituality in the light of desert spirituality reveals congruences too clear to be ignored. This connection is contextualized and corroborated by recent studies

of late medieval saints. Caroline Walker Bynum in her book on female asceticism and food,¹ focuses particularly on drawing comparisons between these two eras: desert spirituality of the fourth century and the spirituality among women of the late medieval period. She demonstrates the similarities between the two groups, one of the main ones being a spirituality of solitude and fasting, and she explains the connection between them. She writes that

many thirteenth-, fourteenth-, and fifteenth-century women (for example Mary of Oignes, Catherine of Siena, Colette) were seen by their admirers through lenses shaped by patristic legend².

These desert-coloured spectacles are the *topoi*³ widely used by hagiographers of late medieval women saints. It is as well to remind ourselves both that the spectacles are there and that sanctity, in the High Middle Ages, was viewed through them. What Griffiths says about Catherine is true of many holy women and men:

The personality and teachings of St Catherine proved so attractive in medieval Europe that a number of legends grew up around them; these are often as delightful and in spirit as truthful as they are factually untrustworthy.⁴

It is important that we do not miss the truth in the spirit of Catherinian legends in our historico-critical zeal to uncover the facts.

This style of hagiography, one surmises, itself became paradigmatic for sanctity and elicited a response of imitation. The dynamic interaction between styles in hagiography and their influence on the parameters of holiness for any given era, is an area for fascinating further research. It is clear, however, that the spirituality of the desert ascetics of the fourth century was part of the 'horizon' of hagiography for the fourteenth century.

¹ Holy Feast and Holy Fast, 1987.

² Bynum 1987:199

³ *Topos* (pl *topoi*) refers to a traditional motif or theme used in literature; a rhetorical commonplace; a literary convention or formula.

⁴ Griffiths (ed) 1981:14

In attributing reasons to the similarities in spirituality in these two otherwise vastly dissimilar periods, Bynum traces the historical development of fasting, a practice closely tied to prayerful solitude in one's cell. She points out⁵ that it was in the third and fourth centuries that fasting and abstinence were established as widespread Christian practices: there were some individuals who went to great lengths of austerity, sometimes even in a competitive spirit. Bynum then outlines the history of fasting in the Church from the sixth to the twelfth century, showing how it gradually became more legalistic and attenuated. The food asceticism of the late medieval era, she believes, was partly an attempt to recapture the pristine fervour and holiness of fourth century Christianity in the face of mediocrity; Bynum insists, however, that there was more. In the light of a changed understanding of Eucharist, in which the hermeneutic of Christ as food was largely replaced by the hermeneutic of Jesus as suffering flesh, '(i)t (i.e. rigorous fasting) was also imitation of the cross.'⁶

The parallels between the fourth century ascetics of the desert and late medieval women mystics are also drawn by another medieval scholar, Elizabeth Petroff.⁷ Her work takes up the question of literary styles in the portrayal of holiness. Petroff argues that, in considering the two groups in question, we are dealing with two corresponding literary cycles: the collection of stories which constitute the *Vitae Patrum* and the hagiographical writings on medieval Tuscan and Umbrian female saints. She states that the 'authors of works in the latter cycle presume audience familiarity with the *Lives of the Fathers*, and they structure their narratives in accordance with the earlier material'.⁸ This structure, as characterized by Petroff, is a cycle or group of tales 'given coherence by a shared ethic, expressed in a rhetoric that utilizes particular tropes, themes and exempla that highlight the spiritual and social values epitomized by that ethic'.⁹ Some of the lives of the desert ascetics became paradigmatic for medieval

⁵ Bynum 1987:38

⁶ Bynum 1987:47

⁷ Petroff 1994:110

⁸ Petroff 1994:110

⁹ Petroff 1994:110

hagiographers; Athanasius' *Life of St Antony Abbot* is explicitly cited in medieval accounts of the lives of women saints.

Not only did hagiographers look to the desert cell-dwellers for inspiration, but Catherine herself did so. Domenico Cavalca, the early fourteenth century Dominican, translated the *Lives of the Fathers* into the vernacular. It has been established that Catherine was familiar with his work,¹⁰ though his influence on Catherine may have been overrated.¹¹ Cavalca's *Vite dei Padri* as well as the *Golden Legend* of Jacopo da Varagine were probably, says Noffke, the two chief sources of her allusions to the lives of the saints.¹² Both were available in the Tuscan dialect and it is probable that, once she had learned to read, these formed the chief substance of Catherine's reading. Twice in the *Dialogue*, Catherine makes specific reference to the Desert Fathers, and in each case she refers to recalling what she has read. In the section of Divine Providence, Catherine writes:

Questo sai, se bene ti ricorda, d'aver letto nella vita dei santi padri

If you remember well (God says to her) you know from having read it in the lives of the holy fathers...¹³

(and she describes how a hermit who was ill, trusted in God's providence and an angel was sent to help him.) Again, in writing about obedience, she tells the story of someone who planted a dry stick in obedience and watered it. One day it became green and bore fruit: the fruit of obedience. Once again the comment, coming from God the Father, is: 'You will recall having read it in the *Lives of the Fathers*'.¹⁴ Yet another reference reveals Catherine's familiarity with

¹⁰ Cf. Dial. 128:253, 141:292, 165:358. D'Urso writes convincingly of Catherine's familiarity with Cavalca's writings, especially *Specchio di Croce* and *Vite dei Padri*, and traces parallel passages as well as themes: (1971:112f). The passages are often so similar that Catherine must have read Cavalca herself. He wrote, after all, in her own Tuscan dialect.

¹¹ Noffke 1989: I, C, 3. Noffke may have D'Urso's remarks in mind.

¹² Dial. 141: 292 n. 28

¹³ *Dialogo CXLI*:392. 'Come si legge ...', lit. 'as is read'. The English 'as you read' is the impersonal use of 'you' and does not indicate that Catherine had actually read the manuscripts herself.

¹⁴ Dial. 165:358

Cavalca's *Life of St Anthony, Abbot*. In railing against a wicked priest, she remarks:

...(E)gli ... è fatto montone con le corna della superbia, e chiunque se gli accosta percuote.

(H)e has made himself a ram with pride for horns, goring everyone who comes near him.¹⁵

This image occurs in Cavalca's *Life*, ch 3. There are in fact, as D'Urso shows, several passages in Catherine's writings which are almost parallel to passages in Cavalca, though not all these are relevant to the Fathers.

What is germane to the line of thought developed here, however, is not only Catherine's own acquaintance with the desert ascetics, but also the literary construct used by Raymond and other early biographers of Catherine. The first literary cycle (of the desert ascetics) was the paradigm of the second (medieval women mystics). That this genre was in fact understood as such by an educated medieval readership is more than likely. It would have been part of their cultural conditioning. Noffke reminds us of the '...limitation (which) lies in our own conditioning, which, up to now, has colored our use of these resources.'¹⁶ Genre has not been taken sufficiently into account in the interpretation of Catherinian texts.

General familiarity, in the medieval era, with the lives and sayings of the desert ascetics is something we tend to underestimate. Tugwell makes the point that any number of edifying stories used by medieval preachers derived from the lives and sayings of the Desert Fathers.¹⁷ This is understandable, since the sources available to theologians and preachers in the pre-printing era would necessarily have been limited and people were more dependent on the oral tradition than we are.

¹⁵ *Dialogo* 334

¹⁶ Noffke 1980a:5

¹⁷ Tugwell 1984:13

There are sufficient indications, therefore, that Catherine knew the *Vitae Patrum* well. Not only did she draw on their stories and sayings to illustrate a point, as she was probably accustomed to hearing preachers doing, but she was sufficiently impressed by their style of spirituality to choose the same path herself, until she was shown a different way.

Stories heard in childhood often leave a lasting impression: many people remember for life the fairy-tales they heard when they were young. Catherine could not read until she was about twenty, so when she was younger she would have had the stories read or related to her, or she heard about the desert ascetics in sermons, and also possibly from Tommaso dalla Fonte, who grew up in her home and then studied to become a Dominican. Raymond relates a 'hermit' episode of Catherine's childhood, saying that she set off one day, determined to emulate 'the holy Fathers of Egypt'¹⁸ and become a hermit. This may be an illustration of Petroff's two parallel literary cycles described above, in which there is evidence of the use of *topoi*.¹⁹ The story told Raymond by Catherine reminded him of the desert Fathers and he made the obvious link. It would have suited his purpose of portraying the young Catherine as holier than others and inspired with an extraordinary desire for seeking God in solitude, even in childhood. Catherine herself never mentions this episode and our only source for this story is Raymond's *Life*.²⁰ There does appear to be some factual basis for the story, though, in the details: the bread she took with her, the

¹⁸ Tugwell 1984:13

¹⁹ Kearns (trans) 198:31

²⁰ The incident was hardly more than a child's game. Catherine, Raymond tells us, set off to become a hermit, taking with her a loaf of bread. She passed the house of her married sister, who lived near one of the city gates. When Catherine passed through the gate, it was the first time in her life she had been outside the city walls. Seeing that the houses were not as close together as within the city, she thought she must be on the outskirts of the desert, and she found a small cave into which she went to pray. (Raymond adds that she was lifted above the ground while she prayed.) Then she became afraid and thought that the family would think she was lost, so she started home again. (Once more Raymond embellishes the story by saying that she was miraculously transported back home.) The family assumed that she had been visiting her sister.

Note: Raymond's additions were in line with medieval hagiography and would possibly not have been taken at face value by his readers, but accepted as part of a literary construct in hagiographical writings. (See ch 1.2 Literature Survey: Trends in Catherinian Hagiography, (i)).

impression that the desert was just outside the city gates where there were fewer houses, the knowledge that the family would be anxious, and the seemingly endless road home - all these are seen through the eyes of a child and provide convincing internal evidence. In contrast, the more fanciful hagiographical *topoi* suggest possible embroidery by Raymond in the accepted style of his day: he explicitly links the incident with the Desert Fathers, he has Catherine raised from the ground while she prays, and she is miraculously transported through the air to be safely deposited at the city gates.

The employment of *topoi* may be apparent here in another sense: the narration, with the clarity of hindsight, of a childhood incident as a kind of prophetic paradigm of Catherine's adult spirituality and mission. This would apply equally to the 'vision' incident, also told us by Raymond and never mentioned by Catherine herself, which is said to have taken place a little before the 'hermit' episode, when Catherine was six. In a vision, the young Catherine is said to have seen Christ in pontifical vestments and tiara; with him were Peter, Paul and John.²¹ This could be seen as a retrospective portrayal of Catherine's later strongly ecclesial spirituality, her involvement with the popes of her time, whom she referred to as 'Christ on earth'; and also her fondness for Paul and John, of which there is abundant evidence in her writings.²² In the same way, the childhood 'hermit' story prefigures Catherine's initial adult spirituality.

We can proceed then, on the double premise that Catherine's hagiographers used the fourth century ascetics as their paradigm and that Catherine's spirituality, like that of many of her contemporaries, exhibits features which point to their influence. Her familiarity with their lives and sayings could have developed further in adulthood as she associated with well-read people, particularly those in her group of disciples, some of whom were theologians. William of Flete was an Augustinian and a hermit: Catherine met him when she was about twenty-one.²³ William would conceivably have had a profound

²¹ Kearns 1980:29. Recall ch. 2 on Catherine's life: Childhood.

²² I found the same idea in Noffke 1995: endnote n. 24.

²³ See Hackett 1992:84 for a discussion of the date of Catherine's meeting with William of Flete. Hackett puts it much earlier than other biographers and I have followed his dating. He bases his argument on the evidence given by Bartolomeo Dominici for Catherine's canonization process. Hackett regards Dominici as a reliable witness.

knowledge of anchorite spirituality, for he was making it his own, and his influence on Catherine is documented. When William of Flete and Catherine met, however, it was just around the time when she had the conversion experience which led her to a new and creative interpretation of the 'cell'.

2.2 Influence of Desert Spirituality of the Cell on Catherine

We have established clear parallels between the fourth century ascetics and the medieval women mystics in general and on Catherine in particular. We can now focus on Catherine's spirituality of the 'cell' to see the influence of the cell-dwellers on this foundational aspect of Catherine's spirituality.

This, however, was at a later stage in Catherine's spiritual development. Some years before she met William the hermit, Catherine became virtually a hermit herself, just after she had joined the *Mantellate*. Her room was her cell and she stayed in it, emerging only to go to daily Mass at the nearby Church of San Domenico.

One of the fundamental practices and sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers - that God is to be found in one's cell - was the foundation on which Catherine built. For the first few years, she understood this literally, and through her very fidelity she was led to a different level of awareness and understanding. Catherine's 'cell' was then to become the inner cell of the heart in which one comes to knowledge of self and of God interdependently. Even this development was not far from the experience of the Egyptian ascetics, for instance:

Abba Anthony said: Whatever you find in your heart to do in following God, that do, and remain within yourself in Him²⁴.

And a word from one of the Desert Mothers:

The abbess Matrona said: ... It is better to have many about thee, and to live the solitary life in thy will, than to be alone, and the desire of thy mind to be with the crowd.²⁵

The usual way for the desert solitaries to live was in a small self-built cell; in the inner desert the cells were spaced out so that no-one could see a neighbour. There was a 'huge silence and a great quiet there'.²⁶ Benedicta Ward, the renowned scholar of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, says:

The cell was of central importance in their asceticism. 'Sit in your cell and it will teach you everything,' they said. The point was that unless a (person) could find God *here*, in this one place, his cell, he could not find him by going somewhere else. But they had no illusions about what it meant to stay in the cell; it meant to stay there in mind as well as in body.²⁷

There was however, no minimalistic concept of localizing God in a cell:

At one time the abbot Daniel and abbot Ammois were going on a journey together: and the abbot Ammois said 'When think you, Father, shall we be sitting in our cell?' The abbot Daniel said to him, 'And who hath taken God from us? For now is God out of doors, and now is God in the cell.'²⁸

Catherine's 'cell of self-knowledge' is in fact a complex concept which, in the spirit and style of the fourteenth century, owes a great deal to the early eremitical tradition of the Mothers and Fathers of the desert.

The whole point of staying in one's cell and depriving oneself of food was to arouse and foster a hunger, a longing, an intense desire for God. Desire, often imaged by Catherine as a flame, is a recurrent theme both in the writings of the holy women and men of the desert, and in Catherine's writings. She speaks of

²⁵ Sr. Benedicta 1981:xviii. For Catherine, however, the Desert Fathers were *fathers*.

²⁶ Russell 1981:149

²⁷ Sister Benedicta 1981: xvi-xvii

²⁸ Waddell 1994:152

desiderio infinito (infinite desire)²⁹ insisting: Your desire is infinite and you have nothing infinite except your soul's love and desire.³⁰ A story that would have captured Catherine's imagination is the following:

There came to the abbot Joseph the Abbot Lot, and said to him, 'Father, according to my strength I keep a modest rule of prayer and fasting and meditation and quiet, and according to my strength I purge my imagination; what more must I do?' The old man, rising, held up his hands against the sky, and his fingers became like ten torches of fire, and he said 'If you wilt, thou shalt be made wholly a flame.'³¹

She, too, became 'wholly a flame'. Her favourite image of God is fire: 'blazing fire of measureless love',³² and Catherine claims that her nature, too, is *fuoco*,³³ fire. Desire for God is also a flame, a fire.³⁴

Catherine's image of the fish out the water is also an echo of the sayings from the desert. Speaking of religious who go roaming and gossiping about the city, she says that, just as fish taken out of the water die, so do these religious who live vainly and dishonourably outside their monastic cells.³⁵

Tutti i loro diletti sono ... d'andare discorrendo per le città. E adiviene di loro come del pesce, il quale stando fuore de l'acqua muore.

This image is lifted from Cavalca's Tuscan translation of the *Lives of the Fathers*.³⁶

²⁹ Dial. 3:28, 11:42, 92:170, 104:197

³⁰ *Dialogo XCII:214*

³¹ Waddell 1994:157-8

³² There are numerous examples of this, e.g.:
O summo Idio, amore inestimabile, fuoco eterno che allumini le menti degli uomini ... Oraz. 168.
O amore inestimabile, o amore dolce, fuoco eterno! Tu se'quello fuoco che sempre ardi, o alta eterna Trinità! Oraz. 210.

³³ *Ibid*: 104

³⁴ Dial. 4:32, 104:197, 145:306. See also ch. 6 on Imagination, Image and Symbol.

³⁵ *Dialogo: CXXV:31*.

³⁶ *Vita di S. Antonio Ab.* c17, quoted in Cavallini 1980:316.

Catherine's understanding of the 'cell' was not as literal as that, at least not after her conversion experience in 1368; in fact, she felt clearly called to leave her actual cell (her small room) in order to serve others. This challenged her to find another way of remaining in the 'cell of self-knowledge'.

Beyond this, there is something about Catherine's very style which is strikingly similar to that of the desert anchorites: an intensity, an extravagance which goes to extremes and knows no compromise. What Helen Waddell says of the women and men of the desert can also be said of Catherine:

Yet one intellectual concept they did give to Europe: eternity. Here again they do not formulate it, they embody it. These men, by the very exaggeration of their lives, stamped infinity on the imagination of the West...The Desert Fathers knew no compromise. The extravagance of their lives is the extravagance of poetry.³⁷

Catherine, too, is characterised by her intensity and lack of compromise. She, too, stamps infinity on our imagination. The stark simplicity of being in one's cell brings with it the burning focus which we recognise in both the fourth century cell-dwellers and in Catherine.

2.3 Parallels between Catherine and the Desert Ascetics

It seems to me that there are five major elements of Catherine's spirituality which give evidence of influence from the hermits of the desert. These are slightly different from the four parallels between medieval mystics and desert ascetics listed by Petroff: she enumerates asceticism, demonic temptation, visionary experience and spiritual leadership³⁸ as characteristic of both groups. The most significant parameters of Catherine's spirituality which seem to bear the stamp of the desert hermits are:

³⁷ Waddell 1994:30-31

³⁸ Petroff 1994:116

- 2.3.1 dwelling in a 'cell'
- 2.3.2 extreme fasting
- 2.3.3 giving a 'word'
- 2.3.4 spiritual authority and freedom
- 2.3.6 body/soul dualism.

2.3.1 Dwelling in a Cell

It was of the essence of desert spirituality to live in a cell in order to be faced with oneself and with God. Merton³⁹ writes:

What the Fathers sought most of all was their own true self, in Christ. And in order to do this, they had to reject completely the false, formal self, fabricated under social compulsion in 'the world'.

For the fourth century desert dwellers this generally meant literally staying in a hut or room. Catherine seems to have had the same idea at first, and loved to pray in her room: so much so, that when she foiled the family's attempts to arrange a marriage, they punished her by depriving her of her private room and making her do the work of a servant in the house. She proved resourceful, however, in discovering that she could escape into her inner 'cell' for prayer and a different kind of solitude, wherever she was. But the ideal of the cell seems to have remained with her: two years later, when her room had been restored and she had joined the *Mantellate*, she again shut herself up in her room and began to live in almost total solitude and silence. For three years, she spent her time in prayer and fasting, emerging only to go to Mass at the Church of San Domenico

³⁹ 1975:5-6

on the hill behind their home. At the end of Carnival in 1368, however, Catherine had a mystical experience that permanently changed her attitude towards the place of the cell in her spirituality. It was a paradoxical experience for her: on the one hand she describes it as being mystically espoused to Christ, while at the same time she felt impelled to go out of her room to minister to people in need. She understood that she must learn 'to walk on two feet':⁴⁰ love of God and love of others, and to do this she would have to leave her cell. She found the idea unappealing and resisted it, fearing that she would, to some extent, lose God. But she was assured of God's presence and guidance if she were to leave her solitude. Thus she gradually came to realize all over again that she did not need a cell made of wood and stone in order to be with God; we each have an interior place, in the depths of our being, where God dwells. More and more, Catherine developed her spirituality out of this reality, which she came to call the 'cell of self knowledge'.

2.3.2 Extreme fasting

Ward remarks that the desert fathers chose to 'live at the limits of human nature'⁴¹ and this was exemplified not only by their celibate lives of great poverty and simplicity in the silence of the desert, but also by their extreme fasting. Over and over again, one reads of their unbelievable fasting: that they ate only once every second day, or once a week, or fasted for extended periods, or ate practically nothing, ever; when they did eat, their diet consisted of uncooked vegetables and fruit and sometimes bread.⁴² Catherine's imitation of these eating habits provoked severe criticism⁴³ which has continued into the present

⁴⁰ Kearns 1980:116

⁴¹ Sister Benedicta 1981:x.

⁴² Ward 1983: Abba Amoun found that a very small quantity of wheat every two months was sufficient for him (31); Abba Gelasius had only a few chicory leaves in the evening (50); Abba Macarius of Alexandria was accustomed to eating only once a week (132).

⁴³ Noffke 1988:78-79. In this letter, Catherine writes her reply to someone who has criticized her extreme fasting. He has asked whether she thought she could not be deluded; she says she does indeed believe that she could be deluded; however, God has given her a very special grace since she could not simply fast out of love.

debate about whether she could be regarded as anorexic. Our modern understanding of anorexia, if understood as an obsession with thinness or an attention-getting device, is a concept that would have been foreign to Catherine. Like the desert solitaries, her motivation was:

the stripping of illusion; the continuous life-long struggle, in seriousness and tenacity to 'see God', to become the 'friend of God'.⁴⁴

Fasts, vigils, silence, poverty and the struggle against temptation were all in terms of:

the first work of the monk, (which) is prayer to God, so that standing before God who is darkness, the false self may be stripped away and the true image and likeness of God within be revealed.⁴⁵

The desire for martyrdom can be seen as the ultimate form of longing to see God; living with this sense of martyrdom was another aspect of desert life which appears in Catherine, and it is linked with a severely ascetical lifestyle. Holmes, in writing the history of Christian spirituality, opens the chapter on monasticism as follows:

An alternative to martyrdom in the Church became the precarious life in the desert: *anchoritism* ... People literally went into the desert to avoid martyrdom, but the severe life there was considered a worthy substitute for the final witness.⁴⁶

In Kearns 1980: 158-172, an entire chapter is devoted to Catherine's extreme way of life, particularly her rigorous fasting. In this chapter, Raymond describes the 'fierce snarlings' of people who made Catherine their 'butt' because of her fasting; some accused her of being a fraud, i.e. eating and drinking in secret.

Modern studies of this question include Rudolph Bell's *Holy Anorexia* and Caroline Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. A study of Catherine's eating habits forms Appendix I of this thesis.

⁴⁴ Ward 1981:30

⁴⁵ Ward 1981:33

⁴⁶ Holmes 1981:29

Regarding Catherine, Noffke remarks that the desire for martyrdom 'was always with her';⁴⁷ there is abundant evidence of this in Catherine's own writings. In a (now famous) letter to Raymond of Capua,⁴⁸ in which she describes how she accompanied Niccolò di Toldo to his execution, Catherine also makes several allusions to her own desire to shed her blood for Christ. She speaks, for instance, of the fragrance of Niccolò's blood (of which she was aware even before the execution) and adds:

...and it wasn't separate from the fragrance of my own, which I am waiting to shed for my gentle spouse, Jesus.

She speaks to Niccolò of his death as a wedding-feast, and breaks out into a most moving description of her vision of Niccolò being received into the open side of the God-Man, bathed in his own blood, which found its worth in the blood of Christ.

Catherine prays:

... a me concede grazia che io distilli el sangue e coli le mirolla dell'ossa mie in questo giardino della santa chiesa.⁴⁹

And grant me the grace to pour out my blood and scatter the marrow of my bones in this garden, holy Church.⁵⁰

2.3.3 Giving a 'word'

It does seem rather incongruous to apply 'a word', in the singular, to Catherine! But like the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, what she said or wrote was always a

⁴⁷ Noffke 1988:309

⁴⁸ Noffke 1988:107. (Letter 31).

⁴⁹ Oraz. VIII, 90

⁵⁰ Noffke 1983:15, 132

verbum salutis,⁵¹ though the Holy Fathers and Mothers were always concise and brief in what they said, while Catherine weaves in image after image as she develops her favourite themes of creation in God's image and redemption in the blood of Christ. Catherine differs from the anchorites in her manner of 'giving a word' in two ways, however: not only in the largesse with which she dispensed her words, but also in that she saw herself as called *to walk with* people to Christ, carrying the olive branch of reconciliation, and bringing them the word: she calls it (in this one place, though she does speak elsewhere of 'good and gracious news') 'the news of great joy'. Catherine describes this in one of her most significant visions:

The fire of holy desire was growing within me as I gazed. And I saw the people, Christians and unbelievers, entering the side of Christ crucified. In desire and impelled by love I walked through their midst and entered with them into Christ gentle Jesus. And with me were my father Saint Dominic, the beloved John and all my children. Then he placed the cross on my shoulder and put the olive branch in my hand as if he wanted me (and so he told me) to carry it to the Christians and unbelievers alike. And he said to me: 'Tell them I am bringing you news of great joy!'⁵²

The desert anchorites, in contrast, received people who came to them asking for a word. These were people who came to the desert seeking salvation and the custom was to ask the elders for a 'word' that would help them find it. Ward discusses the place of a holy person (she says 'the holy man') in desert society.⁵³ The ones recognized as holy in the desert were called 'Abba' or 'Amma', as Catherine came to be called 'Mama' by her disciples. This was not hierarchical or official authority, but the authority of the spiritual father or mother

⁵¹ Karen Scott develops this in her article (1992) on Catherine as 'apostola', and more fully in her doctoral dissertation.

⁵² Noffke 1988:207-8

⁵³ Ward 1981:xii-xiii. Ward discusses how the words given by the spiritual father were life-giving and came from their experience. The spiritual father was not a spiritual director in the modern sense of the word, but a father to the sons he had begotten in Christ. Catherine, even in her twenties, was called Mama by her followers, most of whom were men older than she was. She regarded herself as their spiritual mother, interceded for them and even, like some of the desert fathers, undertook to carry the guilt of their sins.

for their children in Christ.⁵⁴ They regarded themselves as intercessors for their spiritual children: how often Catherine prays 'for those You have put on my shoulders' or 'for those You have given me to love with a special love'. She even, at times, takes their sins on herself - another practice from the desert Abba. For instance, she writes to Neri di Landoccio Paglieresi, a young Sienese nobleman and poet who has asked if he could be one of her disciples:

You have asked me to receive you as my son. Unworthy, poor and wretched though I am, I have already received you and do receive you warmly. I pledge myself and will pledge myself always in the sight of God to be answerable for all your sins ...⁵⁵

She takes on others' sins very often in a subtle way in her letters by switching to the first person plural when she begins speaking of the addressee's sins.

Merton makes another point which is noteworthy in this comparison of the desert eremites and Catherine. He says that their wisdom was the fruit of their experience; that what they said came from what they lived.⁵⁶ Catherine's words, too, gained their power from her obvious holiness, from the way she lived. The high degree of integration between word and life is what constitutes the effectiveness and the timelessness of their words of salvation.

2.3.4 Authority and freedom

The authority of the 'word' given was in direct proportion to the perceived holiness of the speaker by others. This was as true of the anchorites as it was of Catherine. Tugwell⁵⁷ writes that while the 'more dramatically eccentric'

⁵⁴ Catherine speaks of giving birth to her spiritual children by her constant prayers and desire for their salvation. (Noffke 1988:261-2).

⁵⁵ Noffke 1988:53

⁵⁶ Merton 1975:11

⁵⁷ Tugwell 1984:14-15

ascetics understandably aroused people's curiosity, it may seem surprising that many of them had considerable authority and power. The explanation he offers is that they renounced ordinary human structures and thus came to represent a totally different kind of power, one which challenged the political and economic power-structures of society. This explanation holds good for Catherine too, in that by her conduct, she bypassed the societal structures which dictated appropriate behaviour for women: by refusing to marry, by being out and about on the streets, by drawing attention to herself when she fell into a trance in Church, by her intervention in political and social matters, by preaching, by having a group of disciples, many of whom were men, and generally by being different. And she too acquired an extraordinary authority and power which was recognized, possibly even by her critics - 'and they were not a few!⁵⁸ - for they found her whole bearing and lifestyle intolerable. That this unlettered woman did in fact have such an impact on the Church and society of her time is sufficient testimony to the authority she carried. Her authority, like that of the desert ascetics, was also rooted in a certain freedom. It was a freedom to respond to the prompting of the Spirit. Neither the holy ascetics of the fourth century nor Catherine was bound by a monastic rule or obediencial structures. Theirs was a different, more individual way which required great sensitivity in responding to God. What was required on this path was a high degree of discernment, which Catherine often refers to as *discrezione*.⁵⁹ Thomas Merton points out that the hermits did not have to conform to any Rule: they were therefore much freer than the coenobites in their monasteries:

There was nothing to which they had to 'conform' except the secret, hidden, inscrutable will of God which might differ notably from one cell to another! ... God is the authority and ... apart from his manifest will there are few or no principles. Therefore, whatever you see your soul to desire according to God, do that thing, and you shall keep you heart safe.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Noffke 1988:8

⁵⁹ Catherine's understanding and practice of *discrezione* (discernment) will be developed more fully in the central part of this thesis, since it is linked to the cell of self knowledge.

⁶⁰ Merton 1975:6-7

Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin⁶¹ have some perceptive comments on the question of women's authority in the Church, which have a direct bearing on Catherine's authority. It is significant that all these observations are also true, to some extent, of the desert ascetics. This is not surprising, for the leaders in the desert, like women in the Church, carried a non-institutionalized authority and they too were a marginalized group.

Six of the points made by Ruether and McLaughlin are comparable traits in a consideration of women's leadership and that of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. The first of these traits is 'a stance of 'radical obedience' which 'takes its stand on a vision of the true meaning of the Gospel ...' When people operate out of this stance their leadership is effective. The second trait speaks of a leadership of personal charisma, rather than of office. The third refers to martyrdom or suffering for Christ, relevant to both the desert ascetics and to Catherine: they often regarded their lifestyle as an alternative to martyrdom; she had a continuous desire for it. Suffering for Christ, in the early Church, bestowed an authority which transcended gender. Catherine's sufferings gave integrity to her leadership. The fourth shared characteristic is that charismatic leadership is often apparent in founding or renewal movements; later it becomes institutionalized and male-dominated once again. Both Catherine and the fourth century anchorites fit into this category: she worked for the reformation and renewal of the Church; they founded the eremitical tradition, both in a spirit of radical discipleship of Jesus. Fifthly, Ruether and McLaughlin highlight the fact that when lay leadership comes to the fore in the Church, women's authority emerges. Catherine was a Dominican laywoman; she was not cloistered, nor did she make religious profession. The eremitical movement of the fourth century was essentially a lay movement and therefore outside the hierarchical structures of the Church. Finally, there is the authority of holiness, common to both Catherine and the elders of the desert. Ruether and McLaughlin focus particularly on ecstasy:

...Through holiness and ecstasy a woman transcends 'nature' and participates in the eschatological sphere. She anticipates the order of salvation of heaven. In this eschatological order, sex hierarchy is abolished for that asexual personhood

⁶¹ 1979:16-28 (Introduction).

in which there is 'neither male nor female.' Holiness or rising to the transcendent, therefore, can be a way for women to claim equality with men.⁶²

The effective authority of the desert ascetics and of holy women such as Catherine was rooted in their holiness.

2.3.5 Body-soul dualism

It seems self-evident that the asceticism of the Desert Fathers and Mothers was founded on a dualistic concept of body and soul. They had inherited this as a general trait of Christian theology and spirituality from Augustine and even before him. Many of their practices and sayings betray this. 'I kill my body, for it kills me,' said Dorotheus the Theban.⁶³ And Theonas, echoing Socrates in the *Phaedo*, as Waddell reminds us, stated: 'Our mind is hampered and called back from the contemplation of God, because we are led into captivity by the passions of the flesh.'⁶⁴ Although there were many motives for the asceticism of the holy ones of the desert, disciplining or punishing the body was definitely one. 'Some of the Fathers' writes Bynum, 'explicitly saw the ascetical life as a substitute for martyrdom or as a hurting of the body to force it to virtuous deeds.'⁶⁵

Body-soul dualism was inherited by Christianity from the Greek philosophers. Nicholas Watson points out that in Catherine's case, extreme as it is, there is, however,

an inversion of the dichotomy between flesh and spirit: the life of the flesh is spiritualized by near-total abstinence, while that of the spirit is lived in rich and

⁶² Ruether and McLaughlin 1979:23

⁶³ Waddell 1994:14

⁶⁴ Waddell 1994:14

⁶⁵ Bynum 1987:216

sensual intimacy with carnal, incarnational and eucharistic language; indeed, in Catherine's life the dichotomy breaks down altogether.⁶⁶

Watson proceeds to illustrate the inversion by two examples: one 'beautiful': that Catherine writes of God as a nursing mother⁶⁷ and one 'shocking': that she overcame her revulsion at the sight and smell of ulcerated flesh by 'thrust(ing) her mouth into the putrefying breast of a dying woman.'⁶⁸ As a child of her time, Catherine had the commonly-held medieval view that it was a great victory over the flesh to overcome one's repugnance at the sight and smell of pus by drinking or swallowing it.⁶⁹ On this occasion, however, Catherine seems only to have placed her mouth and nose against the ulcer to overcome herself; there is no mention of drinking or swallowing. Raymond records one other incident in Catherine's life in which she drank the water with which an ulcer had been washed, forcing herself to swallow the putrid stuff.⁷⁰ Extreme measures to control and counter natural physical reactions!

Speaking in a letter of how the *soul's* natural bent is to love God, but our selfish sensuality offends God, she says: 'This is why our soul is constantly wanting to punish the sensual part of us, the soul's mortal enemy.'⁷¹ One of Catherine's

⁶⁶ Watson 1989:58

⁶⁷ Kearns 1980:183. Catherine describes a mother teasing her baby by offering it her breast but at the same time holding the child a little away from her, so as to increase its desire. When the child cries, she hugs it and offers it her breast to its heart's content. Using this metaphor, Catherine tries to express how God increased her longing until she 'set her mouth to the wound in his (Christ's) most sacred side', and pressing on into his breast, plunged itself into the Godhead

⁶⁸ Watson 1989:58. He is quoting from Bynum, who prefers Lamb's translation of Raymond's *Life* to that of Kearns. Kearns' rendering, however, deserves note. He says that Catherine 'pressed her mouth and nose upon the festering sore, and in that posture she remained a long time, until she felt that the power of the spirit had subdued the nausea of the flesh ...' (Kearns 1980: 149). It seems to me that this is a more faithful translation. Tinagli's Italian version of Raymond's Latin is as follows: '...inclinata la faccia sul petto dell'inferma, accostò la bocca e il naso sull'orribile piaga, e rimase in quella posizione finché non le parve che lo spirito avesse vinto l'indescrivibile nausea, e domata la carne, che si opponeva allo spirito. The verb 'accostò' could simply be 'placed against, put next to'. 'Thrust', which is Lamb's translation, is very strong.

⁶⁹ Bynum gives further examples of medieval saints drinking or swallowing pus in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. See, for instance, pp 180, 209.

⁷⁰ Kearns 1980:155

⁷¹ Noffke 1988:159

much-used expressions is '*propria sensualità*' (selfish sensuality). Regarding reprobate priests, for instance, she speaks of 'how the world and the devils and their own selfish sensuality accuse them'.⁷² She writes, in the *Dialogue*, of the soul having 'hatred for her selfish sensual passion, recognizing the perverse law that is bound up in her members and is always fighting against the spirit.'⁷³ Here Catherine is paraphrasing Gal.5: 16-26. Whatever her sources, Catherine does have a strong streak of body-soul dualism. 'There are then,' she says, 'two aspects to yourself: selfish sensuality and reason. Sensuality is a servant and it has been appointed to serve the soul, so that your body may be your instrument for proving and exercising virtue.'⁷⁴

On the other hand, it must be said that the deeply-held dualism of the late medieval era 'was tempered (in Catherine) in a sacramental understanding of self and cosmos, microcosm⁷⁵ and macrocosm. In Catherine's case, as Suzanne Noffke says, a sense of sacramentality is revealed in 'her treatment of the concept of 'mystery', which carries a sacramental sense far broader than the ritual seven sacraments.'⁷⁶ Noffke explains further:

Mistero, 'mystery' is for her a reality which integrates the spiritual and the physical, the human and the divine. *Mistero* is the phenomenon of the divine embracing the human, and the human in turn embracing the divine ... It is for her a highly sacramental concept, referable to the mundane perplexities of life as truly as to the formal sacraments of the Church. And incarnation-redemption is at the heart of *mistero* as quintessentially the divine embracing the human.⁷⁷

Catherine's sacramental view of reality as the divine embracing the human, of all of God's relating with humanity, the sacramentality of all life in Christ⁷⁸

⁷² Dial. 131:262

⁷³ Dial. 7:36

⁷⁴ Dial. 51:105

⁷⁵ Ruether and McLaughlin 1979:122

⁷⁶ Noffke 1989:3

⁷⁷ Noffke 1995:4

⁷⁸ Noffke 1988:333 n. 14

counterbalances the body-soul dualism which is traceable in her writings and which she shared with most other medieval mystics.

As a woman mystic of the late medieval era, then, Catherine of Siena evinces, in her spirituality, significant parallels with that of the Mothers and Fathers of the Desert in the fourth century. The similarity is heightened by the hagiographical style of the period, which used the literary cycle of the fourth century desert ascetics as a paradigm.

There are, however, many other influences and sources for Catherine's '*cell of self-knowledge*', starting with some of the earliest Christian writers.

3. **Other Influences on Catherine for the '*Cell of Self-knowledge*'**

Other possible sources include Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Ambrose and Augustine, Gregory the Great, Anselm, Bernard, Hugh and Richard of St Victor, Cistercian writings on the interior dwelling-place, Hugo of Folieto, Guigo II and Cavalca. This does not imply that Catherine had actually read these works herself, or even that she was aware of their influence on her. In the sermons she heard daily, and from the educated men and women with whom she associated, especially those who were her close disciples and joined her *famiglia*, Catherine absorbed a great deal. She shows originality in her synthesis and application of her source material and she is particularly original in her image-making, even though the elements of most of it came from elsewhere. Sometimes her references are recognizably the words of one of the classical theologians, but she does not usually acknowledge this, probably because she is unaware of her sources. Noffke names some of the 'strains of influence'⁷⁹ in Catherine's life:

⁷⁹

Noffke 1988:8

...(S)trong Augustinian and scholastic patterns through the Dominican tradition; bits of Gregory the Great ...; echoes of near-contemporaries whose works were the favorites of so many preachers of the day: Jacopo da Vorazze, Domenico Cavalca.⁸⁰

Noffke goes on to explain that Catherine, permeated as her thought is by Scripture, especially John and Paul, rarely gives exact biblical references. This is not surprising, considering that she was dependent on her hearing of Scripture. In the *Introduction* to the *Dialogue*, Noffke describes the debate about Catherine's major sources: scholars hold differing views on this. Alvaro Grion, for instance, did major research on Catherinian sources, but his conclusion - that Catherine's most significant source was Ubertino da Casale's *Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu* - has not been generally accepted.⁸¹ Noffke herself leans towards the position of Getto and others,

who are content to recognize multiple influences in Catherine's writings: Augustine, Cassian, Gregory the Great, Bernard, Francis, Thomas, Ubertino, Passavanti, Cavalca, Colombini.⁸²

Of these, not all are relevant to the 'cell of self-knowledge', though their influence on Catherine's thought in other areas may be considerable.

3.1 Thomistic Foundations: Intellect and Truth

The Thomistic notions of reason and truth, omnipresent in Catherine's thought, provide the underpinning for the theology of the cell of self-knowledge. D'Urso⁸³

⁸⁰ Noffke 1988:8

⁸¹ D'Urso is particularly opposed to this thesis; his article *Il pensiero di S. Caterina e le sue fonti*: Sapienza 7; 1954, is a strongly worded argument against Grion's position. I find D'Urso convincing.

⁸² Noffke 1988:10

⁸³ D'Urso 1971:171-173

spells out the extent of Dominican influence on Catherine from her childhood on. Her first confessor was Tommaso dalla Fonte, the cousin who was raised in her home and later joined the Dominican friars in the convent on the hill. Most of her confessors and directors, except William of Flete, were Dominicans. When she joined the *Mantellate* at the age of eighteen, not only did she hear a sermon from a Dominican every morning, but she attended a monthly meeting of the Mantellate at which one of the Dominicans instructed the members. It was common practice for the Director of Studies at the Dominican convent to arrange scriptural, dogmatic or moral talks. There was also a series of sermons at the Church of San Domenico during Advent and Lent, and on special occasions, well-known preachers were invited.

Catherine's Dominican formation was comprehensive and profound. It is from this source that she absorbed the writings of the great theologians of earlier centuries. However, Catherine cannot be regarded as a Thomist in the full sense of the word. D'Urso⁸⁴ is of the opinion, borne out by internal evidence in Catherine's writings, that Thomism had not yet taken root in Siena in the mid-fourteenth century. But her passion for truth is both Dominican and Thomistic.

This is the aspect of her theology that sets her apart from other medieval women writers: the predominance of truth. Her favourite name for God and also for Christ is *prima Verità* (First Truth) or *prima dolce Verità* (gentle First Truth) and the Church, as also the priests, are 'ministers of truth'. Truth is the *leitmotiv* of Catherine's spiritual maturation, leading her to embrace truth uncompromisingly as God reveals it more clearly to her at each stage of her spiritual growth.

She opens the *Dialogue* with one of her seminal themes: the interweaving of truth and love. Starting with the Thomistic (and Augustinian) concept that knowledge precedes and leads to love,⁸⁵ Catherine expresses the aim of her

⁸⁴ D'Urso 1971:176-191

⁸⁵ Summa Theologia IIa IIae 27,2: Thomas, quoting Augustine (*De Trinitate* X,1,2) states that we cannot love what we do not know. Love demands some apprehension of the good that is loved. However, Thomas distinguishes between the perfection of knowledge, which requires that we know distinctly all that is in a thing, such as its parts, powers and properties; while love regards a thing as it is in itself. For the perfection of love, it suffices that a thing is

life: '...[A]mando cerca di seguitare e vestirsi della verità'.⁸⁶ (... loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.)⁸⁷ The desire to know and follow truth is Catherine's constant objective and prayer.⁸⁸ Christ, who is truth, is the way to eternal life, the bridge we must cross to attain life.⁸⁹ Catherine develops the theme of redemption by saying that it is the blood (of Christ) that gives us knowledge of the truth.⁹⁰ And as she says in her opening paragraph of the *Dialogue*, it is by dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge that we come to know truth: the truth of God's goodness, of who God is and who I am in relation to God. Although few scholars would call Catherine predominantly or consistently Thomistic,⁹¹ the Dominican and Thomistic theme of truth is typical of her.

Truth resides in the intellect;⁹² as the will is made to tend towards the good, so the intellect tends towards truth. The ultimate perfection of the human intellect is divine truth,⁹³ and other truths perfect the intellect in relation to the divine truth.' Catherine's most frequent metaphorical expression of this is the oft-repeated invitation from God: 'Open the eye of your mind and gaze into Me': her own description of her mystical experience.

The Thomistic influence on Catherine is, however, very relevant to the cell of self-knowledge. God, for Catherine, is above all Truth and Love. It is the truth

loved as it is known in itself. Hence it is possible that something can be loved more than it is known.

⁸⁶ *Dialogo* 1:1

⁸⁷ Dial. 1:25

⁸⁸ Noffke 1983:105. Catherine ends this prayer as follows:
Today, eternal God,
let our cloud be dissipated
so that we may perfectly know and follow your Truth
in truth
with a free and simple heart.

⁸⁹ Dial. 55:109

⁹⁰ Dial. 4:30

⁹¹ Hackett 1992:116, n. 7.

⁹² *Summa Theologia* Ia, 16.

⁹³ *Summa Theologia* Iia IIae:180,4.

of God and of ourselves which we come to know in the cell of self-knowledge. As we 'open the eye of the mind and gaze into God' we see the deepest truth of ourselves and of all things in relation to God. We come to know God as the One who IS, and ourselves, with all of creation, as contingent beings whose ground and source is God. We come to know God as the One who has created us out of love in the Divine image, and has fallen passionately in love with us. And since knowledge precedes love, (a scholastic dictum which Catherine repeats often) we in turn fall deeply in love with the God who loves us so much.

Our truth, then, is to find the fullness of our being in God. Sin, which turns us from the truth, is non-being. To restore in us the divine image, God takes on our image by taking on our flesh in Jesus. Through the blood of Christ, the blazing fire of truth and love, we are restored to the divine image and to life in God through Christ. It is in the cell of self-knowledge that *questo sangue fa conoscere la verità*⁹⁴, (this blood gives us knowledge of the truth).

3.2 Patristic and Classical Sources for the 'Cell of Self-Knowledge'

The most significant sources and influences for the theme of this study on the 'cell of self-knowledge', other than the Desert Fathers and Mothers, are Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory the Great, Ambrose, Augustine, Anselm, Bernard, Hugh and Richard of St Victor, anonymous Cistercian writings, Hugo of Folieto, Guigo II, Cavalca and William of Flete. Since Catherine is using the monastic sense of 'cell', it is to be expected that there will be a strong monastic representation among the sources.

⁹⁴

Dialogo IV:7

3.2.1 Clement of Alexandria

The earliest traceable source on an inner cell comes from Clement of Alexandria (150 - 215), commenting on Matt. 6:6 in his *Stromateis*:

If you pray in your inner room, as the Lord taught, in a spirit of adoration, then your domestic economy would no longer be confined to your domicile, but would extend to your soul. What should it feed on?

How? In what quantity? What should we store in its treasury? When should these treasures be produced? For whom?⁹⁵

3.2.2 Origen

Origen (185 - 254), writing on prayer, takes up the theme of the inner room:

He who prays must follow the precept of Christ and enter into his own inner chamber, shutting himself in upon the riches laid up in store, 'the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'.⁹⁶

Later in the same treatise, he takes this further:

Thus he prays to the Father, who does not flee from or abandon such a secret place, but rather dwells in it, his Only-Begotten being also present with him. For, says he, I and the Father will come unto him and make our abode with him. It is evident that if we indeed pray thus, we shall make intercession not only with the righteous God but also with the Father, as one who is not absent from his sons but is present in our secret place and watches over it, and increases what is in 'the inner chamber', if we 'shut the door' of it.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ferguson 1991:46

⁹⁶ Oulton and Chadwick 1954:208

⁹⁷ Oulton and Chadwick 1954:279.

3.2.3 Ambrose of Milan

Ambrose of Milan, in the fourth century, also commenting on Matt. 6.6, writes:

Your room is the secret place of your heart and soul.

Enter into this room, that is, enter into the depths of your soul, remove yourself entirely from the exterior vestibule, and close your door.⁹⁸

3.2.4 Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

Called by McGinn the 'founding father' of Western Christian mysticism,⁹⁹ Augustine moulded the theology and inspired the spirituality of the Middle Ages up to the thirteenth century and beyond. Catherine, living a century after Thomas Aquinas in a Siena not yet shaped by him, shows far more Augustinian than scholastic influence. Even a cursory comparison of Catherine's thought with Augustine's writings indicates that he is undoubtedly one of the major influences on her, and particularly on her theology of the cell of self-knowledge. The main reason for this could be that William of Flete, the Augustinian hermit was her spiritual guide 'during the crucial period of her doctrinal formation'.¹⁰⁰ Before William, Tommaso dalla Fonte, the young Dominican, was Catherine's confessor. However, he does not seem to have had the spiritual stature, learning or experience of the English Augustinian friar. Catherine had close contact with William for five or six years before the renowned Dominican, Raymond of Capua, became her director; and William remained a friend of

⁹⁸ Cain and Abel 1:35 (12-13)
Cubiculum tuum, mentis arcanum, animique secretum est. In hoc cubiculum tuum intra, hoc est, intra in alta praecordia, totus ingredere de corporis tui exteriori vestibulo, et claude ostium tuum. De Caino et Abele I,ix (PL XIV,334).

⁹⁹ McGinn 1991:228-261

¹⁰⁰ Hackett 1992:108

Catherine's to the end of her life,¹⁰¹ as a member of her *famiglia*, her inner circle of disciples. While William, learned theologian that he was, must have exercised a profound influence on Catherine's spiritual formation, the other theologians with whom she associated, including Raymond, would also have had an Augustinian background, since Augustine's thinking dominated the theology of the time.

It is largely to Augustine that Catherine owes the Trinitarian and Christological foci of her mysticism, and the fact that the '*visio Dei*' and '*imago Trinitatis*' (are brought) into a more intimate relation¹⁰² as her theology unfolds. She takes up and repeats often the Augustinian concept that we image God in the three powers of memory, understanding and will. Augustine's thought in *De Trinitate* is woven into Catherine's theology of the 'cell of self-knowledge'. In Book X for instance, he develops 'the realization of self-knowledge; memory, understanding and will,'¹⁰³ and speaks of memory itself as 'an inner chamber, vast and unbounded.'¹⁰⁴

Augustine's plotinian stress on personal desire, restless hunger for God, is the theme of the *Confessions*: Augustine opens with the 'restless heart' and Catherine does the same in the *Dialogue*. Even Catherine's intertwining of love and knowledge has an Augustinian foundation: 'the burning thirst that the soul experiences is fundamentally a desire for the illumination of the interior eye.'¹⁰⁵ Further, Petry points out that, '[i]n the balance of the contemplative and the active, there is in Augustine, as later in Gregory and Bernard, an incitement to Christian service and social responsibility that inspired the whole of the Middle Ages.'¹⁰⁶ All of these arise, for Catherine, in the cell of self-knowledge, and are

¹⁰¹ Their friendship endured despite the fact that William disappointed Catherine sorely in the end, when he refused to come to Rome at the request of Urban V.

¹⁰² cf. McGinn 1991:237

¹⁰³ Burnaby 1955:72-90

¹⁰⁴ *Confessions*: X, 8 (15)

¹⁰⁵ McGinn 1991:239. Compare the Catherinian text quoted above under Thomas Aquinas: her description of an invitation into mystical experience is 'open the eye of your mind and gaze into Me'.

¹⁰⁶ Petry 1957:30-31

thus relevant to the theme of this study. However, Augustine also writes more specifically on moving into oneself to find and know God. He speaks of the 'soul's return to God ... (as) predicated on its entry first into itself.'¹⁰⁷

In his study of Augustinian influence on Catherine, Hackett formulates the basic principle of Catherine's spirituality:

'Self-knowledge and knowledge of God constitute the basis and point of departure of Catherine's whole mysticism.'¹⁰⁸ She herself says much the same in the *Spiritual Document* dictated to William of Flete.¹⁰⁹ Hackett underlines the striking similarity between this and Augustine's Sermon 69 on humility, which has self-knowledge as its basis. 'You propose to construct a very high building; well, if you do, make humility its foundation.'¹¹⁰

Augustine discovered that God was 'more inward than [his] inmost self, and higher than [his] highest being.'¹¹¹ There are other Augustinian texts which have a direct bearing on the inner cell. For instance, in his sermon on Psalm 35,¹¹² Augustine says:

There is no greater, no better employment in tribulation, than to retire from the noise which is without, and to go into the inner closet of the heart; there to call upon God where none seeth thee groaning, and Him succouring, that chamber-door to close against every invading trouble; to humble thyself in confession of sin, to magnify and praise God, both chastising and consoling: this must by every means be held firm.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Petry 1957:29. Petry is quoting Bishop William Bernard Ullathorne.

¹⁰⁸ Hackett 1992:109

¹⁰⁹ Cited at the end of this section on sources and influences.

¹¹⁰ Hackett 1992:110

¹¹¹ Confessions III, vi, 11.

¹¹² S. Augustine 1884:392.

¹¹³ The key words in the Latin text read: '*...et ire in interiora mentis secretaria..*' (PL XLVI, 334).

and in the *Confessions*:

Too narrow is the house of my soul for you to enter into it; let it be enlarged by you.¹¹⁴

Then there is the well-known passage in *True Religion*:

Do not go outside but enter into yourself, for truth dwells in the interior self.¹¹⁵

Augustine's own early ideal had been *noverim Te, noverim me*: (may I know You, may I know myself).¹¹⁶ And 'That is my only desire: to know the soul and God.'¹¹⁷ This is an Augustinian development of the famous maxim of Greek wisdom, attributed to Thales and inscribed in Apollo's temple at Delphi: Know thyself. Augustine would have been familiar with Cicero's: 'When Apollo says, Know thyself, he means, know thy soul.'¹¹⁸

Augustine considers the meaning of the injunction, know thyself, in *De Trinitate*, Bk X:

I suppose it (i.e. self-knowledge) is that the mind should reflect upon itself, and live in accordance with its nature, that is to say, strive to be ordered according to its nature, under him whom it should be set under, and over all that it should stand over ... It sees the beauties of the inward realm belonging to that transcendent reality which is God.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Confessions 1960:46

¹¹⁵ True Religion: 39, 72

¹¹⁶ PL 32: Soliloquies: 2, 1, 1 and 1, 2, 7.

¹¹⁷ PL 32: Soliloquies: 1, 15, 27.

¹¹⁸ Cicero: Tusc. Quaest. I, 22, quoted in Burnaby (ed) 1955: 80. There is a full discussion of the philosophical underpinning of self-knowledge (72-92) including the Augustinian triad of memory, understanding and will, which is the threefold way in which Augustine sees the human person as imaging God. This will be taken up more fully in the section on memory, understanding and will in the 'Cell of self-knowledge'.

¹¹⁹ *De Trinitate*, X, 5, quoted in Burnaby (ed) 1955:80.

He adds that the mind is not to seek to behold an absent self, 'but to be sure that the self which is present is clearly discerned'.¹²⁰ He distinguishes between seeing oneself in this way from seeing one's face, which he says can be done only in a mirror. It is interesting that Catherine turns this around: she likes to use the image of a mirror precisely as a means to self-knowledge, reminding us to see ourselves in the 'gentle mirror' of God, held in the hand of love.¹²¹

It is clear that, as regards the spirituality of the cell of self-knowledge, Augustine had a significant impact on Catherine.

3.2.5 Gregory the Great

Gregory the Great (540 - 604) lists self-knowledge as one of the requisites of the contemplative state, for which he says there must be 'circumspection,¹²² self-knowledge, humility and purity of heart, fear and godly compunction'. Gregory does not, however, use the image of the inner dwelling-place. Gregory is one of the Church fathers Catherine mentions by name. She refers to him as '*Gregorio dolce*¹²³ (gentle Gregory), seeing him as a role-model for popes. Catherine's basic image of the *Christ the Bridge* is also probably drawn from Gregory the Great, though Catherine develops this powerful image in her own way.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Burnaby 1955:84

¹²¹ Dial. 13:48 and 167:366

¹²² Petry 1957:40

¹²³ *Dialogo* CXV:277

¹²⁴ Dial. 26:64

3.2.6 Anselm of Canterbury

Writing in the 11th century, Anselm, in his *Proslogion*, entitles the first chapter *The Awakening of the Mind to the Contemplation of God*. Anselm writes:

Make a little time for God, and rest for a while in him. Enter into the chamber of your mind, shut out everything but God and whatever helps you to seek him, and, when you have shut the door, seek him. Speak now, O my whole heart, speak now to God: 'I seek thy face; thy face, Lord, do I desire.'¹²⁵

In chapter V of the same document, Anselm develops the truth that God is the only self-existent being who has made all other things from nothing. This is the meaning of Catherine's foundational cell experience, when God teaches her who God is and who she is: 'I am the One who is; you are she who is not.'

3.2.7 Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 - 1153)

Bernard, whose spirituality, like Catherine's, was highly affective, could have been a major influence on Catherine. Overtones of Bernard are discernible in her spousal imagery and experience of Christ's love as spiritual marriage, the kiss, the centrality of the humanity of Christ, the image of mystical sleep of the spouse at the pinnacle of ecstatic love, Christ's wounds imaged as hiding-places (Bernard calls them 'clefts in the rock'), and even in her use of the epithet *dolce* (gentle, sweet). There is also a touch of Bernard in Catherine's depicting the spiritual journey as movement from the feet to the open side (the heart) to the mouth of the Crucified One; for Bernard, however, we move from the Lord's feet to his hand to his mouth.¹²⁶

With regard to self-knowledge specifically, Bernard has this to say:

¹²⁵ A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham. (*Library of Christian Classics*, vol, X):70.

¹²⁶ St Bernard's Sermons, Vol. 1, 1920:20-31

...God gives us a saving knowledge of himself. Man first recognizes the helplessness of his condition. He then cries to the Lord ... And thus the knowledge of oneself leads on to the knowledge of God. He is perceived by means of his own image ...

...(O)bserve that both self-knowledge and the knowledge of God are alike essential for salvation; so that it is impossible to save one's soul in the absence of one or the other.¹²⁷

3.2.8 Hugh of St Victor

In speaking of the soul's preparation for contemplative experience, Hugh of St Victor (1096 - 1141) describes a long, difficult apprenticeship in which one struggles against vice and strives to acquire virtue, at the same time withdrawing from sensible realities and from images that distract one's inner vision. Then:

ultimately, if slowly, the soul will learn to re-enter itself, to experience self-knowledge, and finally to transcend itself on the way to God, who lies beyond it.¹²⁸

3.2.9 Richard of St Victor

From Hugh, Richard of St Victor takes up the theme of self-knowledge. In his work, *Benjamin Minor*, he outlines the way to contemplation, recounting how the person seeks liberation from the passions and gradually learns to use reason with discretion.

In a quaint English translation (an updating of Pepwell's 1521 edition of early English mystical treatises), Richard of St Victor speaks of self-knowledge and

¹²⁷ St Bernard's Sermons, Vol. 1, 1920:434

¹²⁸ Evans 1987:82

knowledge of God in a manner which Catherine was to develop. Using Joseph and Benjamin, Rachel's sons, as the personification of discretion and contemplation respectively, Richard writes:

Joseph (i.e. discretion) ... not only learned to eschew the deceits of his enemies, but also oft a man is led by him to the perfect knowing of himself; and after that a man knoweth himself, thereafter he profiteth in the knowing of God, of whom he is the image and the likeness. And therefore it is that, after Joseph, is Benjamin born. For as by Joseph discretion, so by Benjamin we understand contemplation. And both are they born of one mother and gotten of one father. For through the grace of God lightening our reason, we come to the perfect knowing of ourself and of God ...¹²⁹

Richard goes on to explain that if we 'use us busily and long in ghostly travails' we will come to know both ourselves and God, and that it is futile to lift up one's eyes to see God if we are unable to see ourselves. We must first know the unseeable things (*invisibilia*) of our own spirit, before we can presume to know the unseeable things of the Spirit of God. He emphasizes this:

...(H)e that knoweth not yet himself, and weeneth that he hath gotten some deal knowing of the unseeable things of God, I doubt it not but that he is deceived; and therefore, I reed that a man seek first busily for to know himself, the which is made to the image and the likeness of God as in soul.¹³⁰

These are of the major classical references to self-knowledge and to the inner cell which Catherine might have absorbed from others who were well-read and theologically trained.

¹²⁹ Gardner 1966:29-30. Compare Discernment in the '*Casa del Cognoscimento di sé*' section.

¹³⁰ Gardner 1966:30

4. Monastic Writings on the Inner Cell

As Noffke¹³¹ points out, Catherine may also have been influenced by monastic writings on the 'inner cell'. There is the *Tractatus de interiori domo seu de conscientia aedificanda*,¹³² by an anonymous Cistercian. The last four chapters are of particular interest. Chapter XXXVIII discusses the likeness of the soul to God: '*animae cum Deo analogia ei similitudo*', dwelling especially on the Augustinian concept that the three powers of the soul, intellect, memory and will, image the three Persons of the Trinity. Chapter XXXIV focuses on the dignity of the soul, in which Christ is spiritually brought forth: '*potes eum gignere in corde tuo*'.¹³³ He is begotten by the intellect, conceived by the will, born through the affections, nourished by effective action. This translation fails to capture the conciseness of the Latin: '*Intellectu gignitur, consensu concipitur, affectu nascitur, effectu nutritur*'. Chapter XL speaks of the promptness of the soul in receiving Christ and of the intimate secret place (*'intimo recessu'*) of divine love. The final chapter, XLI, shows how the soul is aroused to the contemplation of the sublime and the divine. There is much here that has its echoes in Catherine's writing, as in the following sentence:

Through the contemplation of truth, we are taught justice and are consumed into glory. By the grace of contemplation, the heart is not only cleansed of every worldly love but is made holy, and the soul is on fire with divine love.¹³⁴

Catherine often speaks of Christ as 'sweet First Truth', she urges us to 'open the eye of our mind' and gaze at Truth; she also speaks of the priorities of love: only God is to be loved '*senza modo*'; our love for everyone and everything else

¹³¹ Noffke 1988:270, n. 5.

¹³² PL CLXXXIV:507

¹³³ PL CLXXIV n. 81. The theology of the birth of the Word in the soul was most fully developed later by the Dominican Rhineland mystic, Meister Eckhart (1260 - 1327).

¹³⁴ '*Per veritatis contemplationem eruditur homo ad justitiam, consummatur ad gloriam. Gratia contemplationis cor ab omni mundano amore non solum emundat, sed sanctificat, at animum ad coelestium amorem inflamat.*' PL CLXXXIV:551.

has limits of some kind; and Catherine speaks of herself as being on fire with love, and of God as being a 'fire ever blazing ... a measureless fire of charity'.¹³⁵

Another monastic treatment of the same theme is by Hugo of Folieto¹³⁶, *De claustro animae*, in four books. The first two deal largely with temptations and abuses in monastic life, but the first chapter of Book Three is headed: (*That contemplation is called the cloister of the soul.*)¹³⁷ Hugo goes on to describe how contemplation within this cloister is far removed from the turmoil of worldly thoughts and how the contemplative delights in the Lord. One sentence is echoed by Catherine many times in her writings:

*Patris potentiam, Filii sapientiam, Spiritus Sancti benignitatem considerat.*¹³⁸

It considers the power of the Father, the wisdom of the Son and the kindness of the Holy Spirit.¹³⁹

Catherine, however, while echoing these words almost exactly, uses 'clementia' (*clemencia* or *clemenzia* in Italian) rather than 'benignitas' with reference to the Holy Spirit. The remaining chapters of the book develop the image of the different parts of a monastery; refectory, dormitory, oratory, guest-house, and apply these to the 'cloister' of the soul. In the fourth book, Hugo writes of the heavenly Jerusalem in much the same vein. He describes, inter alia, the silence of the heavenly cloisters, i.e. of the contemplative heart; the conversation with

¹³⁵ Noffke 1983:99

¹³⁶ PL CLXXVI:1018

¹³⁷ *Quod claustrum animae contemplatio dicitur.*

¹³⁸ PL CLXXVI:1087

¹³⁹ Oraz: 264, 272. The Italian text (p 272) reads:
Potencia del Padre eterno, aitami; sapiencia del Figliuolo, illumina l'occhio dell'intelletto mio; *clemencia dolce* dello Spirito santo, infiamma e unisce el cuore mio in te.
Noffke (1983:48) translates:
Power of the eternal Father,
help me!
Wisdom of the Son,
enlighten the eye of my understanding!
Tender mercy of the Holy Spirit,
enflame my heart
and unite it to yourself!

God that takes place there, and what this divine conversation will be like after the resurrection.

The third monastic source for the image of the 'cell of self-knowledge' is Guigo II's *Liber de quadripartito exercitio cellae*.¹⁴⁰ Guigo II was a Carthusian who died c. 1188. His writing, says Simon Tugwell¹⁴¹ 'enjoyed considerable popularity in the Middle Ages'¹⁴² and, together with that of the writers mentioned above, would probably have been well-known to William of Flete, Raymond of Capua and other well-educated people with whom Catherine associated. This book seems to be a sequel to Guigo's first book, *The Ladder of Monks*,¹⁴³ which taught that *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio* are interweaving threads in the practice of prayer. In the *Exercitio cellae*, Guigo develops the last-mentioned 'moment' in prayer: contemplation. He writes of the purity of contemplation for those who are able to be in the solitude of the interior cell of the heart. Repeating his earlier injunction that prayer usually begins by reading Scripture, he then traces how holy people, from Moses to Isaiah, expressed the secrets of what they had experienced in the inner cell. He describes the *taedio* (weariness, boredom, distaste) which can overtake those who dwell in the interior cell, but goes on to develop what was so significant for Catherine: the dwelling of the persons of the Trinity in the intimate depths of the soul.¹⁴⁴ It is in his first book, however, that Guigo speaks of another theme dearly-loved by Catherine: desire and longing.¹⁴⁵ For Catherine, it is within the cell of self-knowledge that we become restless with desire for God.

There are two other sources for the 'cell of self-knowledge' which deserve mention. One is a poem, attributed to Cavalca, about how to build an interior

¹⁴⁰ PL CLIII, 799-884

¹⁴¹ Tugwell 1982b:351-359

¹⁴² Tugwell 1982b:351

¹⁴³ Tugwell 1982b:351

¹⁴⁴ PL CLIII:799F (CH. XXIX and XXX).

¹⁴⁵ Tugwell 1982:357-358

dwelling.¹⁴⁶ The other, the last one to be dealt with here, is the so-called *Spiritual Document*, dictated by Catherine herself to William of Flete when she visited him at Lecceto on 7 January 1377.¹⁴⁷ The document begins and ends with the theme of self-knowledge. It opens:

Speaking of herself as if of another person, our holy mother said that at the beginning of her enlightenment she countered self-love by setting as the foundation of her whole life the rock of self-knowledge ...

At the end of his transcription of Catherine's words, William adds a postscript:

That same mother of ours whom we have mentioned above, blessed Catherine, once asked the Saviour to grant her solitude, and he replied: 'There are many living in cells who are really outside their cells. I want your cell to be the knowledge of your own sins.' This cell she never left, and every servant of God should imitate her example; thus no matter where he is he will always be secure in his cell.¹⁴⁸

Such is the richness of the tradition which was absorbed and reshaped by Catherine as she formulated her own spirituality of the cell of self-knowledge. The fourth century desert ascetics influenced both Catherine herself and her hagiographers in their depiction of her. Her well-developed Dominican spirituality forged her passion for truth and she drew on the wealth of classical and monastic Christian tradition, albeit unknowingly, and transformed it into what became her unique blend of spirituality.

¹⁴⁶ Mentioned by Noffke (1988:270 n. 5). The poem was an appendix in Cavalca's *Descr. de' dieci comandamenti*.

¹⁴⁷ Hackett 1992:181-182

¹⁴⁸ There is a section of the *Dialogue* which corresponds closely to part of the *Spiritual Document*. The gist of it is '(L)'anima che senza mezzo si unisce in me partecipa della purità mia.' (The soul who unites herself directly with me shares in my own purity.) *Dialogo*: 242.

5. Conclusion

Catherine's foundational image of the cell of self-knowledge has its roots in Christian tradition. The cell-dwellers of fourth century Egypt, in their single-minded search for God, exercised a particularly strong influence on her, as on all the mystics of the fourteenth century. The desert ascetics were regarded as role-models of holiness in fourteenth-century Italy: their *Lives* were translated into the vernacular and the style of late medieval hagiography shows a certain congruence with that of the desert cell-dwellers. The image of the inner cell or room is also evident in classical, patristic and monastic sources which were available to Catherine indirectly through sermons and her learned friends and disciples.

Catherine's spirituality is characterized by a passion for truth, which is part of her Dominican heritage. Her theology of the cell of self-knowledge is founded on truth; the truth of who God is and of who she is, seen in relation to each other. This is the deepest truth of her being, as it is of every human being, and it is discovered in the cell of self-knowledge.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE THREE MAJOR SYMBOLS OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN CATHERINE'S WRITINGS: *CELLA, CASA, CITTÀ*

Introduction

We now come to the core of the thesis. The previous chapters have sketched in the background, exploring the nature of mystical self-knowledge, outlining Catherine's life and times, giving a survey of catherinian literature and discussing the tradition of the 'cell' and its influence on Catherine.

This chapter breaks new ground, in that it works directly with Catherine's texts on self-knowledge in order to see what emerges when they are read in the order in which she wrote them. Because of contemporary research, it is now possible to arrange the texts in chronological order. They have been further grouped according to Catherine's three major symbols for self-knowledge: *cella*, *casa* and *città*. Each of the three main sections has its own conclusion, and overall conclusions and deductions are made in the fourth part of the chapter.

CHAPTER 5.1

1. ***La Cella Del Cognoscimento di Sé* (The Cell of Self-knowledge)**

1.1 **The Unfolding of the Symbol of the Cell**

This section will be an attempt to trace the theme of *la cella del cognoscimento di sé* (the cell of self-knowledge) in Catherine's writings. The unfolding of the theme will be followed by an analysis and interpretation.

1.2 **Chronological development: 1374 - 1380**

1.2.1 **The Image emerges**

Catherine does not come up with the image 'the cell of self-knowledge' immediately; it takes two years or more before she arrives at the expression which comes to be seen as paradigmatic of her spirituality.

She begins (in 1374 or earlier) with the expression 'the cell of the soul'; this is extended to 'the cell of the soul and body'. This *cell* is linked with self-knowledge from the earliest letters by means of images such as the well and the

abyss. In these early years of formulating her spirituality, the self-knowledge imagery is developed in conjunction with some basic tenets of Catherinian spirituality, such as intercession and 'eating souls', and with her theology of creation and redemption.

In 1376 Catherine first uses the expression *la cella del cognoscimento di sé* (the cell of self-knowledge). She begins to feel her way towards a layered image of a cell within a cell when she speaks of the 'the cell of the open side of Christ'. It is only in 1377 that Catherine achieves clarity on 'the cell within a cell': within the cell of knowledge of myself, I find the cell of God's goodness to me. This becomes the definitive form of the image because it captures, for her, the fullness of the theological concept that knowledge of myself is incomplete without knowledge of God's goodness to me. She calls it *la cella del cognoscimento di te e della bontà di Dio in te*. (The cell of knowledge of yourself and of God's goodness to you).

In Catherine's earliest juxtapositioning of the inner cell and the notion of self-knowledge, she plunges directly into the underlying theological anthropology on which this concept is based. It is an anthropology which recognizes our complete dependence on God for our very being. This awareness springs from her experience of her own total ontological poverty and a simultaneous realization of God as the 'One who is', who exists absolutely.

1374 (or earlier)

Letter T41¹ to Frate Tommaso dalla Fonte at San Quirico (before May 1374)

The Well

Frate Tommaso dalla Fonte was Catherine's first confessor and she always had a special affection for him. In this letter she writes to him as her confessor; it is clearly before May 1374, when Raymond of Capua was appointed by the Dominicans to be Catherine's confessor. This is one of Catherine's earliest letters and the first in which the 'cell of the soul' is mentioned. Catherine writes to him of dwelling within the '*cella dell'anima*': the cell of the soul. (There is no mention at this early stage of 'the cell of self-knowledge': that expression appears only in 1376.)

Catherine develops the image of the inner cell as a '*pozzo*', a well, and describes how, before we reach the water underneath, we first discover the earth, that is, '*la nostra miseria*' our poverty.² It is poverty in the most radical sense: we come to know that of ourselves we do not even have existence, for our very being is from God. This is a reference to what Raymond calls the 'fundamental maxim of the spiritual life taught her by our Lord at the outset'.³ In

¹ A T before the number signifies Tommaséo's numbering. DT is for Dupré Theseider's numbering of the letters, used by Noffke in the 1988 1st volume of the English translation.

² Later, in the *Dialogue*, Catherine will use the image of the soil of humility in her well-known image of the tree of love. (Dial. 10:41). It has branches of discernment and is planted in the soil of humility. This humility is closely related to the concept of poverty advocated in the image of the well in the present letter.

³ Life: 1, 10, 92

a prayer experience, Christ asked her: Do you know, daughter, who you are and who I am? You are she who is not, and I am the One who is.⁴ This experience became the central *motif* of Catherine's spirituality and it is on this most basic truth that her doctrine of the 'cell of self-knowledge' is built.

To reach the water underneath, one must dig down through the earth. The realization of our total dependence on God for our very existence is the point at which we break through the layer of earth to the living water beneath. For Catherine, the living water is:

...l'acqua viva ..., cioè il vero cognoscimento della sua dolce e vera volontà...

The very core of the knowledge of his true and gentle will which desires nothing else but that we be made holy.⁵

If we dwell in this well, we discover, says Catherine, not only ourselves in our poverty and dependence (the earth through which we have to dig), but also God's goodness (the hidden spring of water).

The image is an encapsulated one: recognition of the twofold truth of our nothingness and God's all-ness is a humbling of ourselves which takes us into the open heart of Christ, 'that flaming, consumed heart, opened up like a window without shutters, never to be closed.'⁶ 'We are now in the cell within a cell: in the cell of self-knowledge and the knowledge of God's goodness, which in turn is located within the greater cell, or cavern, of Christ's open side.

⁴ Life 1, 10, 92

⁵ Noffke 1988:44

⁶ Noffke 1988:44. In endnote 10, p 275, Noffke refers to Dupré Theseider's notes which trace the theme, in mystical literature, of entering into the open side of Christ. It appears in two of Augustine's sermons (CCCXI, ch. III and *Serm de temp. barbarico*, ch. VII -VIII) and in the writings of Bianco da Siena. The Vulgate rendition of Is. 60:8 and Sg. 2:14 is also relevant to the theme of the open side of Christ.

Catherine moves from the interplay between self-knowledge and knowledge of God's goodness, to the interplay between knowledge and love - an Augustinian and Thomistic concept very dear to Catherine.⁷ 'For as we understand, so we love, and when we love, we find ourselves united with and transformed in love....

*...passati e passando per la porta di Cristo crocifisso.*⁸

...having passed through and yet ever passing through the gate that is Christ crucified.

Being 'united with and transformed in love' is Catherine's description of prayer. It parallels the *orazione umile e continua* (continual humble prayer)⁹ of the opening lines of the *Dialogue*, where Catherine says that 'by such prayer the soul is united with God ... and through ... the union of love he makes of her another himself.'¹⁰ This is the transformation she means.

The remaining two images round off the highly-developed symbol of the cell in this letter. The first is '... having passed through and yet ever passing through the gate that is Christ crucified ...'¹¹ Catherine is referring here to the

⁷ Noffke 1988:276. Once again Noffke quotes Duprè Theseider who refers to Augustine (Sol. I: PL XL, 865) and Aquinas (ST I-II q 27, a, 2) on the relationship between knowledge and love. Augustine's formulation is particularly beautiful: '...that in perceiving I may see you, that in understanding I may know you, that in knowing I may love you ...' Duprè Theseider also quotes from *Dial.* 85:

'For love follows upon understanding. The more they know, the more they love, and the more they love, the more they know. Thus each nourishes the other.'

The opening paragraph of the *Dialogue* plunges into this theme. Catherine speaks of the soul (i.e. herself) who has become 'accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God's goodness towards her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.' (*Dial.*, Prologue: 25)

⁸ Letter T41:514. Note the play on words. This is Catherine's way of expressing the eschatological 'already' and 'not yet'.

⁹ *Dial.* (Prologue):25

¹⁰ *Dial.* (Prologue):25

¹¹ Noffke 1988:41

paradoxical human experience of God's mercy and our sinfulness, of redemption accomplished once and for all by Christ and yet personal redemption still working itself out within each of our lives. In the face of ontological as well as moral poverty, Catherine believes herself to be the 'dearest daughter' of a loving God, justified and redeemed by Christ crucified. Rahner's explanation of this phenomenon¹² sheds light on Catherine's expression of the simultaneous 'already' and 'not yet':

The doctrine of permanent, habitual justice through infused sanctifying grace must not be understood as if this justice were a purely static possession or static quality ... Rather, this justice is always tempted and threatened by the flesh, the world and the devil. It is always dependent again on the free decision of man. In spite of its character of a state it is suspended, as it were, on the point of the free grace of God and on the point of man's freedom. The grace of justification must always be accepted and exercised anew again, since basically it is always given anew again by God.

The paschal mystery is the saving event of our justification and redemption, yet it continues to work itself out in the course of our individual lives. For Catherine, the inherent dynamic of this experience consists in having already passed through, and yet ever being in the process of passing through, the gate that is the crucified Christ.

Passing through a gate suggests entry into a dwelling: it is through Christ, then, that we enter the cell of the soul where we come to know ourselves and God. And finally, Catherine takes us one step further: the inner cell is the place where Christ dwells with us. We have come full circle, for Catherine ends with Jn. 14:23, which is Jesus' promise that he will come and make his dwelling-place with us.

¹² Theological Investigations 1969: VI, 224 & 228.

Letter T30 to the Abbess and Suora Niccolosa of the Monastery of St Martha in Siena (April 1374 or earlier)

The Abyss

The image of the well changes, in Catherine's next reference to self-knowledge, from a well to an abyss. This is in a letter addressed to the abbess and subprioress of the monastery of St Martha in Siena. In the 'holy abyss' which is the knowledge of ourselves and of God, we arrive at a 'holy hatred' of ourselves in the sense that we see and reject our sinfulness: agents of that which has no being.¹³

This 'holy hatred' in turn gives us a profound sense that God alone is the One that is good and this awareness, says Catherine, makes us 'join ourselves with supreme eternal First Truth'¹⁴ with a cry from the heart which proclaims God's goodness. The image of the abyss expresses well Catherine's sense of the enormous chasm separating us in our sinfulness (and therefore nothingness) from God who is fullness of being and goodness. This chasm is spanned by Christ the Bridge¹⁵ whose crucified body stretches from heaven to earth; this is the way along which we walk to God.

¹³ Noffke, acknowledging DT n. 11, explains that 'this interpretation of sin, of evil, of falsehood, as 'non-being' is typically Augustinian and stems from that saint's refutation of Manicheism.

¹⁴ Noffke 1988:38

¹⁵ The bridge comprises ch. 26 - 87 of the *Dialogue* and is the central and most important part of the work. The theology and imagery of Christ the Bridge also appear in Catherine's letter. T272 which was the springboard for the *Dialogue*. T272 was written to Raymond in October 1377 and Catherine began dictating the *Dialogue* soon after. The work went on until October 1378.

Intercession and Self-knowledge

In the same letter to the two nuns, Catherine tells them:

I ... want to do for you a servant's work of delivering and fetching. So I want to carry you constantly into the presence of the most gentle Saviour, and once I have brought you there, we shall ask his unutterable charity for grace to come back down, doing the other job servants do. In this way we will come to the grace of knowing both ourselves and God.¹⁶

The image of the servant is significant for Catherine: there is no connotation of inferiority or of servanthood being demeaning. 'Servant' or 'waiter' is one of Catherine's favourite images for the Holy Spirit. There is a passage in the *Dialogue*¹⁷, parallel to the one above, in which the Holy Spirit is described as a waiter who serves God's gifts and graces. In this passage the Father speaks to Catherine as follows:

Questo dolce servitore porta e arreca: arreca e offera a me i dolci e amorosi desiderî loro, e porta a loro il frutto della divina carità, delle loro fadighe, nell'anima loro, gustando e nutricandosi della dolcezza della mia carità. Sì che vedi che lo lo' so' mensa, il Figliuolo mio l'è cibo, e lo Spirito santo gli serve, che procede da me Padre e dal Figliuolo.

This gentle waiter carries to me their tender loving desires, and carries back to them the reward for their labors, the sweetness of my charity for their enjoyment and nourishment. So you see, I am their table, my Son is their food, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds from me the Father and from the Son, waits on them.

Our work of intercession also involves this two-way movement: carrying people upward to God as we intercede for them, and then returning to serve others.

¹⁶ Noffke 1988:38

¹⁷ Dial. 78:146

There is the implication that the intercessor is herself involved in the whole dynamic: she brings people before God only because she herself is in God's presence; and then she, as well as those for whom she intercedes, moves outwards from God to others in loving service.

What then is the link Catherine sees between intercession and self-knowledge? She is suggesting that, as we come into God's presence as intercessors, we come to know the triune God. We come to know the Father as our bed, i.e. the one in whom we rest and who renews and refreshes us as sleep does each night, so that we have energy for life and love and service the next day. We come to know the Son as food: an obvious reference to Eucharist, our '*viaticum*' or food for the journey of life. And we come to know the Holy Spirit as 'servant' - expressing the clemency of God in practical, tender service such as fetching and carrying: doing a servant's tasks for us.

In being before God as intercessors, we also come to know ourselves. We come to realize how much we need God, that we can no more live without God than go without sleep or food, and that we need to be taken care of; we need someone who fetches and carries for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We realize more and more how utterly dependent we are on God and that God's nourishing, sustaining love and tender care never fail us, no matter how sinful we are. So we come to know God's unfailing goodness and our own nothingness, as Catherine puts it. There is therefore a very close link between intercessory prayer, knowledge of God and self-knowledge.

A glance at Catherine's prayers, whether in the *Dialogue*, the letters or in the recorded prayers themselves, shows that she was an ardent and relentless intercessor until the end of her life. In fact, her final great act of intercession for the church was the offering of her life. As she came to know God better, she discovered that 'God let himself be forced by her tears and chained by her holy desire'.¹⁸ Constant intercession was, for Catherine, one of the best ways of

¹⁸

Dial. 14:50. God says to Catherine at this point: 'Dearest daughter ... your weeping has power over me and the pain in your desire binds me like a chain.' And: 'Then that soul

'eating souls': This is introduced into her letters in 1375 in connection with the doctrine of the cell.

Letter T70 to Frate Bartolomeo Dominici (April - May 1374)

The Cell of our Soul and Body

Bartolomeo Dominici was a Dominican friar who met Catherine through Tommaso dalla Fonte and was one of the first to join 'la famiglia', Catherine's group of disciples. He later became one of her confessors and a very dear friend.

Catherine has two references to self-knowledge in this letter. The first speaks of the upward and downward movement in us. The comparison is to sparks of a fire. Just as sparks receive their being from the fire, so we have our source in God, sparking up and then coming back down.

The first movement of our holy desire ought to be into the knowledge of God and his honour. Then let's come down to know our own poverty and indifference, but only after we have gone upward.¹⁹

Catherine will explain later that knowledge of ourselves without knowledge of God leads to despair, while knowledge of God without self-knowledge makes us presumptuous.²⁰

(i.e. Catherine herself) stood before the divine majesty deeply joyful and strengthened in her new knowledge ... For she has seen how God, in his love and his desire to be merciful to humankind ... had given his servants a way to force his goodness and calm his wrath.' (55). Catherine is describing the power of intercession.

¹⁹ Noffke 1988:82

²⁰ This is graphically described in Catherine's image of the tree of love which grows within a circle: the circle represents knowledge of self combined with knowledge of God, which

The other reference to self-knowledge is an exhortation to Frate Bartolomeo to

ricordovi di quella santa abitazione della cella dell' anima e del corpo.

remember that holy dwelling-place, the cell of our soul and body.²¹

This specifically refers to the physical cell, the body's cell, in contrast to the inner cell of the soul: a distinction Catherine is to make increasingly through the years to come. As Noffke reminds us,²² this distinction comes from Catherine's experience. About twelve years earlier, she had been deprived of her privacy and made to do the servant's chores in the Benincasa home when she resisted her family's attempts to have her married. Forced to share a room with her brother, and longing for a place for quiet and prayer, she devised a 'cell' within herself as a way of escaping into prayer. Through the years, the concept of the 'cell' developed and changed. From being a place of escape, it became the centre of the upward and downward movement Catherine describes: we receive our being from the fire, God, and then spark upwards and outwards to others.

merge into each other. One can go round and round, moving from knowledge of oneself to knowledge of God, without every leaving the circle. (Dial ch 10).

²¹ Noffke 1988:82

²² Noffke 1988:297 n. 10

1.2.2 1375

Letter T144 to Monna Paola of Fiesole (July 2 - 15 1375)

and

Letter T342 to Robert of Napoli (July 15 - 31 1375)

Eating Souls

These two letters, written within the same month in 1375, are all but identical, and so probably written one after the other. The image of 'eating souls' predominates in both letters. The cell has not yet become 'the cell of self-knowledge' but Catherine refers once more to the 'cell of the soul and body': the latter referring to the physical cell. Her implication seems to be that being in one means being in the other; there the 'cell within a cell' is different from that discussed under T41 above. This time it is specifically the room or physical cell into which we can withdraw.

When we are inside this cell, there is no indulging in unhealthy introspection or focusing on ourselves. The cell is not an escape from responsibility or an opting out of concern for others. Instead, what we do in the cell is 'eat souls':

Studiate la cella dell'anima e del corpo: ine studiate, per l'amore e per santo desiderio di mangiare e parturire l'anime nel cospetto di Dio.

Seek out your cell - the cell of your soul as well as your body - and there apply yourself in love and holy desire to eating souls and giving them birth in the sight of God.²³

²³

Since the English translations in this and many other letters has not yet been published the translations used in this thesis is the one supplied by Suzanne Noffke as she prepares for publication volumes 2, 3 and 4 of her translation of the critical Italian edition.

Catherine's strange (and to modern minds, distasteful) image of 'eating souls' is her expression for 'being zealous to win them for salvation'.²⁴ In these two letters, 'mangiare e parturire' go together, suggesting that to eat souls and then give birth to them are part of the same process. St Paul uses the image of giving birth in a similar way in Gal. 4:19:

My children, I am going through the pain of giving birth to you all over again, until Christ is formed in you ...

Paul, too, is speaking of his mission within the church in the plan of redemption. 'Eating souls', however, is Catherine's unique expression - a direct result, it seems, of her extremely ascetical practices regarding food. She certainly knew what hunger and starvation felt like and this image would have suggested itself to her very readily as she tried to express 'zeal for souls', which would have been the more common expression. Catherine speaks of eating 'the food of souls' (*cibo de l'anime*) ... at the table of the most holy cross'.²⁵ Noffke says:

²⁴ The fact that Catherine uses the expression 'eating souls' is almost certainly bound up with her choice not to eat food. She gives the impression that these two hungers exist in inverse proportion to each other. She seems to have regarded 'eating souls' as a kind of sublimation and shifted the focus of her appetite from physical to spiritual food. She uses the expression 'eating souls' often; in fact, in Letter T25 (DT147) she writes to Sano di Maco di Mazzacorno: '... our souls must always be eating and savouring the souls of our sisters and brothers. In no other food ought we ever to find pleasure. (Noffke 1988:95). She even speaks, in 'Souls are a food so sweet and mild that they make us fat, till we can enjoy no other food. I tell you, here your weak teeth will be so strengthened that you will be able to eat big mouthfuls as well as small' (Noffke 1988:55). Catherine's inedia has been the subject of much controversy. Her decision not to eat became irreversible and finally brought about her collapse and death. That she may have had some serious doubts about this severe penitential practice, often used by her to 'bargain' with God, is shown in the last part of her life, when she finally lost her assurance about God's will and died surrendering this.

²⁵ Dial. 76:140

To 'eat souls' is to absorb and become one with them and with their well-being as the Word became one with humankind. It is to lay one's blood on the line for them as Christ did²⁶.

For Catherine, the 'mystic body' of Christ, the church, continues the redemptive mission of Christ and as members of that 'mystic body' we are called to share in the redemptive work of Christ.²⁷

Catherine's way of talking about our share in the mission of redemption is 'eating souls'. This image will recur again and again in the Letters, the *Dialogue* and the Prayers.

It is significant that, in the *Dialogue*, Catherine's mature theological work, she writes in great detail about 'eating souls at the table of the most holy cross' in the section which describes the stages of perfection in the spiritual life. She is speaking of the soul who has reached the third stair, or the mouth of the Crucified, having climbed the previous two stairs, i.e. having moved from the feet to the open side of Christ. The final stage, when she arrives at perfection, is to be at Christ's mouth in great intimacy. At this stage, says Catherine, the soul fulfils the mouth's functions: speaking and eating. In the words of the Father to Catherine:

First she speaks to me with the tongue of holy and constant prayer that is in the mouth of her holy desire ... She eats the food of souls for my honour at the table of the most holy cross ...

Then the soul grows so fat ... that the garment of selfish sensuality (that is, the body, which covers the soul) splits apart so far as its sensual appetite is concerned.²⁸

²⁶ Noffke 1995: The Place of the Physical in the Mysticism of Catherine of Siena: 12. (Forthcoming in *Annali d'Italianistica* 1995, Italian Women Mystics).

²⁷ Dial. 76:141. Noffke is the only scholar so far to hold that Catherine's *corpo mistico* includes all the baptised. Others insist it is the clergy or hierarchy, while the rest of us are '*corpo universale*'.

²⁸ Dial. 76:141

Catherine then speaks of the peace that is found in this stage - a peace that nothing can disturb. Peace, she says (referring to the traditional liturgical kiss of peace) is given by the mouth. So for Catherine the final stage of spiritual maturity in love and intimacy with Christ expresses itself in intercession and in 'eating souls', in the midst of profound peace.²⁹

1.2.3 1376

LETTER T166 TO MONNA COLUMBA IN LUCCA (EARLY 1376)

The Temple of the Soul

There are nine letters written in 1376 which make reference to the cell. The first of these is T166, written to Monna Columba whom Catherine must have met in Lucca. Columba has been recently widowed; Catherine chides her for wanting to be something of a merry widow! She is to stay away from weddings and parties and frivolities,³⁰ and be a mirror of virtue for the younger women. Jesus

²⁹ Dial. 141. It is noteworthy that Catherine does not regard intercession as the kind of prayer which is typical of the earlier stages of spiritual growth, but of the final stages of perfection. This is rather different to a more commonly-held view that intercession is a prayer for beginners and that when one reaches the heights of contemplative prayer this may fall away. Not for Catherine!

³⁰ Catherine goes quite far here: she says that God is not found at feasts. As Noffke points out, she may have realized the incongruity of this statement, because she never says it again. (Noffke: unpublished notes on Letter T166). However, Catherine is fairly stern with the widowed Columba and clearly thinks her far too frivolous for the good of her soul.

was lost at the temple when they went to the feast and Mary found him, not among their relatives and friends, but in the temple with the teachers. Columba, too, rather than seeking to be at feasts, should go to the temple of her soul: this is where we get to know ourselves. 'Once we learn that we are not, we will come to know God's goodness within us, that he is the One who is.'³¹ After her stern reprimands, she teaches Columba the basic explanatory paradigm of the cell of self-knowledge.

Letter T36 to Frate Simone di Giovanni, Frate Francesco di Pasquale, Frate Giacomo di Sano di Maco and others, all of Siena; and Novices of the Order of Monteoliveto at the Convent of San Michele in Bologna³² (January - April 1376)

Fish out of Water

Echoing the sayings of the desert ascetics, Catherine reminds the novices that a religious who stays outside the cell dies, as a fish does out of water.

The Side of Christ

Her other image in this letter, however, opens up a new theme of the cell: *'la cella del costato di Cristo, dove troverete il cognoscimento di voi e della sua*

³¹ Letter T166, par. 5

³² It is possible that the same letter was sent both to Bologna and to Monteoliveto Maggiore. (Noffke: unpublished notes on Letter T36).

bontà' (the cell of the side of Christ, where you find knowledge of yourself and of his goodness). This image is one form of the cell within a cell; Catherine implies that the inner cell is located within the open side of Christ.³³

Go to this sweet home; enter in and stay there, and there will be no devil or anyone else who can take grace from you or keep you from reaching your destination of seeing and tasting God.³⁴

***Letter T73 to Suor Costanza of the Monastery of S. Abundio
(February - April 1376)***

The Cell of Self-Knowledge: God is our Bed

This letter is significant because in it, for the first time, Catherine uses the expression *la cella del conoscimento*³⁵ *di te* (the cell of self-knowledge). The fact that Suor Costanza was a nun who slept in a convent cell could have prompted the image. The image of the cell and the concept of self-knowledge have now come together and will remain Catherine's favourite expression for this reality, although she also uses 'casa' (house) instead of *cella* and

³³ This image is further developed in Letter T62 (Noffke 1988:196f) where Catherine writes: 'I long to see you hidden and enclosed in the side of Christ crucified.' She goes on to describe the growth through the stages of spiritual life as climbing the staircase of Christ's body. The second stair is 'the open side of God's Son', where we find the fiery abyss of divine charity.

The same image occurs in the *Dialogue*:64: 'You can climb to his side, where you see revealed his inmost heart.' Catherine constantly reiterates that it is in the cell of self-knowledge - or, as here, in the open side of Christ - that we come to see God's unspeakable love and we then respond in love.

Other *Dialogue* references to the side of Christ include pp 115, 138 and 139.

³⁴ Letter T36, par. 7.

³⁵ *Conoscimento/ cognoscimento/cognoscimiento* are all spelling variations used by various scribes in Catherine's letters.

sometimes even refers to the *città* (city) of the soul, although *città* is never *di cognoscimento*. Catherine always says: *la città dell' anima*.

In this letter Catherine refers seven times to the *cella*, taking up the theme that God is our bed. Catherine describes how one enters one's cell and sees the bed; in fact, one's eyes and affections go to the bed, where we will find repose. She then enjoins her addressee, Costanza, to enter the *cella del conoscimento di te* (cell of self-knowledge) the inner cell in the same way, opening the eye of knowledge to pass through the cell to the bed, which is the gentle goodness of God. Catherine stresses *che non ài cella senza letto né letto senza cella* (there is no cell without a bed or bed without a cell). In this bed, she says, the soul grows fat in the gentle goodness of God because we find here food, table and waiter: it is the trinitarian theme in which the Father is bed and table for us, the Son is the food and the Holy Spirit is the waiter: *el cibo, la mensa e 'l servidor*.

Letter T52 to Jeronimo of Siena (February - March 1376)

The Tree of the Cross

Since this letter would have been written during Lent of 1376, it is not surprising to find in it Catherine's first mention of finding the cross within the inner cell. She encourages Jeronimo to ensure that the tree of the cross is planted and standing upright within the cell of the soul, because from this tree we gather the fruits of true obedience, patience and profound humility. The fruit of this tree causes our self-love to die and we develop a hunger to be *mangiatori e gustatori dell'anime* (eaters and savourers of souls), which is better rendered 'to eat and savour souls'.

Catherine, as is typical of medieval piety, lays great stress on the passion and crucifixion of Christ; it is only rarely that she refers to the resurrection. It is not surprising then, to find that her earlier theme of being eaters of souls is now linked to the cross. It is interesting, too, to note the inversion of the cell image: in the previous letter, we moved into the side of Christ; in this one, the cross is within the cell of the soul. Though it may sound paradoxical, this makes good theological sense: we are in him and he is in us, as is evident in numerous Johannine and Pauline texts.³⁶

³⁶ Cf some Johannine texts expressing mutual indwelling:

Anyone who loves me will keep my word
and my Father will love him,
and we shall come to him
and make a home in him. (Jn 14:21)

Remain in me, as I in you. (Jn 15:4)

With me in them and you in me,
may they be so perfected in unity
that it was you who sent me and that you have loved them as you loved me. (Jn 17:23)

and some Pauline texts about our being *in Christ*, and Christ being in us:

Condemnation will never come to those who are in Christ Jesus ... (Rom. 8:1)
Do you not realize that you are the temple of God with the Spirit of God living in you? (1 Cor. 3:16)

Do you not realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you and whom you received from God? (1 Cor. 6:19)

So for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation. (2 Cor. 5:17)

I have been crucified with Christ and yet I am alive, yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me. (Gal. 2:20)

May he, through his Spirit, enable you to grow firm in power with regard to your inner self, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love ... you will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth, so that, knowing the love of Christ which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God. (Eph. 3:16-19).

Letter T187 to Giovanni Sabbatini and Taddeo de' Malavolti (May - June 1376 or early 1377)

Continuing the theme of the cross in this letter, Catherine urges Giovanni and Taddeo to run to embrace the tree of the cross in order to seek *la visione invisibile* (the unseen vision) which cannot be taken from us against our will. This is what we come to see when we 'open the eye of the mind and gaze' in the cell of self-knowledge: we see the ineffable love of God in the blood of Christ.

Letter T241 (DT73) to Monna Giovanna di Corrado Maconi (May - July 1376)

Make your Home in the Cell of Self-knowledge

Monna Giovanna was the mother of Stefano Maconi who had become a disciple of Catherine's and accompanied her to Florence and also to Avignon, from where she probably wrote this letter. Monna Giovanna was very attached to her son and was always complaining that he was away from home too much. This letter addresses the issue of the mother's relationship with her son.

It is a letter of major importance as regards the cell of self-knowledge, since Catherine develops this image significantly in the entire letter. Catherine plunges into the theme of the cell in the second sentence: I long to see you making your home in the cell of self-knowledge. The expression 'the cell of self-knowledge' is familiar now and the letter could be read as a description or explanation of what it means to make one's home in this cell.

Memory, Understanding and Will

The first point Catherine makes is that, if we know ourselves, we attain perfect love. The reason for this is the familiar theme of our dependence on God for existence itself and our resultant discovery of God's goodness and love, for:

...we see our own nothingness, that our very existence is ours by grace and not because we have a right to it, and every grace beyond our existence as well - it is all given to us with boundless love. Then we discover so much of God's goodness poured out on us that words cannot describe it. And once we see ourselves so loved by God, we cannot help loving him ...³⁷

Catherine then states 'in this cell you will find God'. She develops this in the threefold Augustinian categories of memory, understanding and will. It is in these three ways that we are created in God's image. Our memory holds all God's blessings, mirroring in some small way God who holds within the divine being all that shares in being. Our understanding 'makes us sharers in the wisdom of God's Son by knowing and understanding his will, a will that wants nothing but that we be made holy'.³⁸ And our will, which is 'nothing but love, and its every affection and movement comes from nothing but love'³⁹ is created in the image of the 'gentle mercy of the Holy Spirit, the aspect of God that gives and is nothing but love'.⁴⁰ It is in this threefold sense, then, that we find God within ourselves - the whole of God, Catherine says, probably meaning some aspect of each of the three members of the Trinity. The three human faculties of memory, understanding and will give us some share in the divine being, since

³⁷ Noffke 1988:226

³⁸ Noffke 1988:227

³⁹ Noffke 1988:227

⁴⁰ Noffke 1988:227

in these three ways we are made in God's image. Knowing this is, for Catherine, fundamental to our self-knowledge.

The Garden

If we come to know ourselves in this way, as made in God's image, we get rid of all selfish love, of everything that is not God's will, then through self-knowledge 'our soul is transformed into a garden filled with fragrant blossoms of holy desire'.⁴¹ And in the centre of the garden is 'the tree of the most holy cross ... He bathes and waters this glorious garden, irrigating it with his blood ...'.⁴² This garden is described in terms of the garden of Eden; the tree of life in the centre is the cross, and the fruit is the fruit of Christ's virtues. Catherine enumerates them, calling Christ the bedrock of each: patience, since no murmur of complaint was heard from the Lamb in his suffering; humility, since God stooped down to humanity in the incarnation and the Word stooped to the shameful death on the cross; and charity, since it was the power of love that kept him nailed to the cross.

Hide in the Wounds of Christ Crucified

In the final paragraph of this letter, Catherine retrieves the theme of Christ crucified, which she had begun to develop in earlier letters. The cell is located within what she now calls the 'wounds' of Christ: a wider concept than in Letter T36, where she spoke of the cell as within his side. She urges Monna Giovanna to 'hide in the wounds of Christ crucified' and immediately adds that if we live in the cell, we will discover none other than Christ crucified. The link between

⁴¹ Noffke 1988:228

⁴² Noffke 1988:228

living in the cell of self-knowledge and coming to know the crucified Christ is becoming stronger in Catherine's thinking.

1.2.4 1377

The frequency of Catherine's use of the 'cell of self-knowledge' image increases significantly in 1377. Her letters dated 1374 or earlier have four occurrences of 'the cell of the soul'; in 1375 there is only one such image, while in 1376 it occurs seventeen times. In 1377, however, there are fifty-six occurrences in her letters and the *Dialogue*.⁴³

The first few letters take up themes already mentioned.

Letter T82 to Three Women Friends in Florence (January - April 1377)

recapitulates the foundation on which the theology of the cell rests: that we need to remain always in the cell of self-knowledge, coming to know that of ourselves we are not and that we have our being from God.

Letter T113 to Benedetta Salimbeni (April - July 1377)

describes the one who lives in the cell of self-knowledge as 'enclosed' in the sense that she takes no pleasure in worldly delights and seeks not riches but voluntary poverty. She exerts herself not to win favour with others, but only to please God. 'Enclosed' has overtones of the cloister.

⁴³ Catherine began dictating the *Dialogue* in October 1377 and completed it in October 1378. Since the *Dialogue* was edited by Catherine in 1378, all the occurrences of *cella* are counted as 1378. See Appendix II of this thesis.

***Letter T76 to Giovanni di Bindo, A Monk of Monte Oliveto Maggiore
(April - August 1377)***

Catherine exhorts him to flee to the cell of self-knowledge embracing the wood of the most holy cross and bathing in the blood of the humble and immaculate Lamb, while shunning every contact which could do him harm.

***Letter T84 to Filippo di Vannuccio e Niccolò di Pietro of Florence
(June 1377c)***

Catherine writes to these two monks that they have made a heaven of their cell, therefore they must not leave it, but at the table of the cross with the obedient Lamb they must eat the honour of God and the salvation of souls. Speaking of those monks who do not observe the vow of poverty, she says that such people are full of self-love, they long for the delights of the world and they come reluctantly to prayer and to the cell.

Letter T56 to Frate Simone Da Cortona, (Sept - Nov 1377)

In this letter Catherine again takes up the theme of lax monks. She paints a sad picture of those who have succumbed to temptation and are confused; they abandon the cell and delight in worldly company.

Letter T267 to Raymond of Capua (Sept - Oct 1377)**In the Cell we find Strength to bear Trials**

Catherine introduces a new theme in this letter to Raymond. She writes of the persecutions he has suffered from religious and lay people and of the displeasure and indignation of the Vicar of Christ which he has had to face, either on his own account or hers. She urges Raymond to bear all this with patience and to go into his cell with holy meditation, considering that God has made him worthy to endure all this for love of the truth and allowed him to be persecuted for God's holy name. With true humility, Raymond is to consider himself worthy of suffering but unworthy of its fruit.

Catherine encourages Raymond to stand before the Holy Father with a brave heart, without pain or servile fear. But first he must be in his cell before Mary and the most holy cross, with true self-knowledge, a lively faith and willingness to suffer. Then he can go forth confidently to do whatever he can for God's honour and the salvation of souls, even to the point of death.

It is clear that it is in the cell of self-knowledge that Raymond will find the strength to face the trials and challenges awaiting him.

Letter T94 to Matteo Tolomei (November - December 1377)

Variations on a Theme: A Cell within a Cell

Catherine has already twice mentioned one cell within another in some sense. The first was the physical (actual) cell; '*la cella dell'anima*' if we dwell in it we discover the cell of the soul.⁴⁴ The other was the open heart or side of Christ, which is a cavern or large cell within which we find the cell of the soul.⁴⁵ In this letter to Matteo Tolomei, there is a third variation of the cell within a cell. This time she describes the cell of self-knowledge as the first or 'outer' cell; within this we find another, that is, *la cella del cognoscimento della bontà di Dio in sé* (the cell of the knowledge of God's goodness to you).

The other four references to the cell in this letter are on the same lines as previous letters written in 1377: encouragement to remain in the cell of self-knowledge and warnings that neglect of choir, and worldly company, make one unable to dwell in the cell. This is one of Catherine's favourite themes in her letters to nuns or friars. If, however, the monk lives a regular monastic life and learns to live in the cell of self-knowledge, he will keep vigil with humble prayer. This fulfills God's desire in his regard and he will be seeking God in truth, without any intermediary.

⁴⁴ cf Letters T144 and T342.

⁴⁵ cf Letter T41, one of the earliest letter in which Catherine writes of the cell of the soul.

Letter T104 to Raymond of Capua (November - December 1367)

This is the second of three letters written by Catherine in November of December 1377, all of which have numerous references to the cell of self-knowledge.

Catherine reiterates to Raymond, in exactly the same words, the 'cell within a cell' of the previous letter: within the cell of self-knowledge we find the cell of God's goodness towards us.

In the cell of self-knowledge, he is to eat with pain the food of souls at the table of the cross. Catherine reminds Raymond that he can also rest in the cell to the glory and praise of God, for God is his bed there. And she urges him to seek his physical cell in order to know the truth; for this reason Raymond must shun all contact and company that is not necessary for the salvation of souls, so that he can pull them away from the hands of the demons by means of holy confession. It is significant that Catherine maintains the need for a physical cell as a means to abiding in the 'cell of self-knowledge'.

Letter T37 to Niccolò di Ghida: a Monk of Monteoliveto Maggiore (November - December 1377)

We take the Cell with us wherever we go

This letter is full of the cell of self-knowledge; in it, Catherine refers to the cell twenty-three times and uses image after image so that they tumble over each other. She sets the tone of the letter in the opening sentence, writing to him:

*con desiderio di vedervi abitatore della cella del cognoscimento di voi, e della bontà di Dio in voi, la quale cella è un'abitazione che l'uomo porta seco dovunque va.*⁴⁶

with desire to see you living in the cell of self-knowledge, and of the goodness of God within you. This cell is a dwelling we carry with us wherever we go.

Earlier Catherine spoke of the 'cell within a cell'. Now she seems to have grown into the concept of the two knowings (of myself and of God) as so integrated as to be one cell. She also puts into words what has been implied all along up to now, but she has not said it: that we take the cell of self-knowledge with us wherever we go. This was Catherine's discovery once she had lost the privacy of her room and was forced to find an alternative 'place' to be with and seek God.

There is also the question of the physical cell which Catherine consistently links with the cell of self-knowledge. She reminds Niccolò that real, true virtues are acquired in the cell, especially humility, charity and patience. The lover of the cell delights in psalmody and makes of the cell a heaven by continual, humble prayer. It is better, maintains Catherine, to remain in the cell in pain and with all sorts of diabolical temptations, than to be outside the cell in peace and quiet. Our *desiderio infinito* (desire for God) - the only part of us that is infinite⁴⁷ is acquired in the cell of self-knowledge. It is dangerous to be outside the cell; Catherine stresses this several times in the letters and repeats the idiom about the monk outside his cell being like a fish out of water - he will die. Catherine explains why it is dangerous (for religious) to leave their cells. She says that before they leave the physical cell, they have already abandoned the spiritual cell of self-knowledge. If this were not so, they would know their weakness and it would be a signal for them to remain in the cell, not leave it.

⁴⁶ Letter T37, 3

⁴⁷ Dial. 170, 28, 32, 126 are just a few of Catherine's references to the infinity of our desire.

In the Company of the Holy Doctors

Catherine's description of what one does in the cell has broadened: she speaks of embracing the cross in the company of the holy doctors (of the church) and speaking with them of the breadth of God's goodness. The cell-dweller is in love with virtue and takes the food of God's honour and the salvation of souls at the table of the holy cross, enduring pain with true perseverance until death.

Nourished by the Blood

A new note is introduced at this point. Catherine has spoken much of 'eating the food of souls' or 'eating God's honour'. She now introduces the blood of Christ in a new way. Almost every letter begins with

Io Caterina ... scrivo a voi nel prezioso sangue di Gesù Cristo...

I, Catherine ... am writing to you in the precious blood of Jesus Christ ...

or some variation of that. Catherine's theology is so filled with the blood of Christ that she has been called 'the doctor of the blood'. She has certainly, before this letter, linked the cell of self-knowledge with the cross, but not specifically with the blood of Christ. Here she writes: *E in cella si notrica di sangue, ed unisce col sommo ed eterno Bene per l'affetto d'amore*, (and in the cell we are nourished by the blood and united with the highest and eternal Good through the affection of love). The effects of Christ's redemption come to us through the power of his blood, the main one being precisely what she says in the second half of the sentence: union with God through love. This comes about as we dwell in the cell of self-knowledge and of the knowledge of God's goodness.

The Battlefield

Earlier in this letter, Catherine referred to doing battle with demons; now she develops this into the image of the knight on the battlefield who defends himself against the enemy with the sword of hatred and of love (hatred of one's self-love and love of God) and with the shield of holy faith.⁴⁸

The Shop

Using an image which appears in the *Dialogue* in another context,⁴⁹ Catherine speaks of buying the richness of virtues. She says that this merchandise is available in no other shop (*bottiga*), but only in the one of knowledge of oneself and of God's goodness. There is no other way to acquire virtue than to dwell in this cell.

The Cell of Self-knowledge in the *Dialogue*

Catherine began dictating the *Dialogue* in October 1377. Considering that she speaks of the cell of self-knowledge in the opening sentence of the Prologue, there are surprisingly few references to the cell in the book: only eighteen in all.

⁴⁸ Another of Catherine's Pauline images: see Eph. 6:16 ... always carrying the shield of faith, you can use it to quench the burning arrows of the Evil One.

⁴⁹ There is a similar image of a shop or hostelry on the bridge where the church serves the bread of life and the blood to the journeying pilgrims. Dial. 66.

And after her opening sentences, the next reference to the cell appears in chapter 63.

The opening sentence of the Prologue is a trenchant summary of Catherine's doctrine of the cell:

Levandosi una anima ansietata di grandissimo desiderio verso l'onore di Dio e salute dell'anime, esercitatasi per alcuno spazio di tempo nella virtù, abituata e abitata nella cella del cognoscimento di sé, per meglio cognoscere la bontà di Dio in sé, perché al cognoscimento seguita l'amore, amando cerca di seguire e vestirsi della verità.

A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God's honour and the salvation of souls. She has for some time exercised herself in virtue and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God's goodness towards her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.⁵⁰

This little autobiographical⁵¹ sketch is enormously valuable. The consistency between Catherine's theology and her experiential spirituality is remarkable. The urgency of the opening words is typical of Catherine.⁵² she was consumed with longing for God and the salvation of souls, a longing which never left her.

⁵⁰ *Dialogo: Proemio 1...*

⁵¹ Catherine usually refers to herself in the third person.

⁵² This urgency is most beautifully expressed by the bronze statue of Catherine by F. Messina in Rome, at the beginning of Via della Conciliazione, which leads to *the piazza di S. Pietro*. Restless urgency is in every line, combined with beauty and grace.

1.2.5 1378

By 1378 the image of the 'cell of self-knowledge and of knowledge of God's goodness' is well established in Catherine's thinking and writing. She continues, in this year, to draw together the theological realities most dear to her, with the cell of self-knowledge as their focal point. It is particularly the blood of Christ and contemplation ('opening the eye of the mind') that are envisioned in reference to the cell of self-knowledge in 1378. Many of her 'cell' references appear in letters to religious.

There are fifty-nine references to the 'cella' in 1378 in Catherine's writings, seventeen in the *Dialogue* and forty-two in letters. For convenience' sake, I shall discuss 'cella' occurrences in the *Dialogue* thematically as they fit in with themes in the letters of 1378.

Letter T67: Convent in Passignano di Valle Ombrosa;
and

Letter T215: Certain Monasteries in Bologna (January - March 1378)

These two letters can be taken together. They were written around the same time, during the first three months of 1378. Both are addressed to communities or groups of religious, rather than to individuals, and they bear the rather bland character of a general or community letter.

It is clear to Catherine that the spiritual life is of a piece: it is no use trying to develop a love for the cell without also being faithful to the other aspects of spirituality appropriate to one's state in life, for all these things are mutually supportive. So she encourages them to love prayer in choir, to be obedient, to make of their cells a heaven by means of psalmody and faithful prayer. There is

the predictable injunction not to be away from one's cell or to seek worldly company but to rejoice in the conversation of the cell (prayer and reflection). The lax religious avoids the cell like a mortal enemy, is absent from choir and does not eat in the common refectory.

One new note, in Letter T215, is Catherine's suggestion that the monks and nuns should seek to decorate the cell of the heart rather than to live in a beautifully decorated cell.

Dialogue 125: 14-24

Catherine takes up similar ideas in chapter 125 of the *Dialogue*. The 'cella' references here are to the actual cells of religious, rather than to the cell of self-knowledge. Repeating the 'fish out of water' saying, Catherine writes with disgust of religious who seek only to adorn their bodies and their cells and who roam about the city seeking gossip. Catherine does not mince her words: she calls these lax religious 'incarnate devils'. In this context, she cannot even begin to speak of the 'cell of self-knowledge', since these people do not stay in their physical cell. And, as she warned in an earlier letter,⁵³ those who leave their physical cells (because of restlessness and worldliness) have already left the 'cell of self-knowledge'. This destructive path can lead only to death.⁵⁴

⁵³ Letter T37, n. 25

⁵⁴ Catherine is probably not referring to physical death; for her, the spiritual death she envisages is far worse.

Letter T201 to Giovanni, a Carthusian Monk in Rome (February - October 1378)

Dialogue 63:13

Self-knowledge and the Blood of Christ

Both these passages link the cell of self-knowledge and the blood of Christ. In Letter T37 above, Catherine said that one is nourished by the blood in the cell of self-knowledge. Now she takes this theme further. She tells Giovanni that, if he is seeking the light he wants and ought to have, he must enter the cell of self-knowledge with holy hatred (i.e. hatred of his selfish sensuality). Then his soul will be inebriated with the blood of the gentle and loving Word. In this knowledge of himself and of God, every perfection is acquired with faith and without pain or fatigue, through hope in the blood shed with such great fire of love. He must remain in his cell, embracing the wood of the most holy cross.

This letter has all the passion typical of Catherine when she is writing to someone who is making a serious effort spiritually. She is also skilled at addressing her letter in a very particular way to a person; this is probably why her general letters to communities seem less intense.

Chapter 63 of the *Dialogue* is somewhat similar to the passage in the letter to the monk, Giovanni. Catherine says:

Chi ci giogne conviene che sia perseverante e stia nella cella del cognoscimento di sè, nel quale cognoscimento di sé conoscerà la misericordia mia nel sangue de l'unigenito mio Figliuolo, tirando a sè con l'affetto suo la divina mia carità.⁵⁵

⁵⁵

Dialogo LXIII: 136

To attain charity you must dwell constantly in the cell of self-knowledge. For in knowing yourself you will come to know my mercy in the blood of my only-begotten Son, thus drawing my divine charity to yourself with your love.

In an earlier chapter of the *Dialogue*, Catherine bursts into a panegyric on God's mercy. This beautiful outburst of praise and love is surely Catherine's own experience of coming to know God's mercy in the blood of his only-begotten Son:

Nella misericordia tua fummo creati; nella misericordia tua fummo ricreati nel sangue del tuo Figliuolo... O misericordia! Il cuore ci s'affoga a pensare di te, chè ovunque io mi vollo a pensare non truovo altro che misericordia. O Padre eterno, perdona all'ignoranza mia, che ò presunto di favellare innanzi a te, ma l'amore della tua misericordia me ne scusi dinanzi alla benignità tua.⁵⁶

By your mercy we were created. And by your mercy we were created anew in your Son's blood ...

O mercy! My heart is engulfed with the thought of you!

For wherever I turn my thoughts I find nothing but mercy!

O eternal Father, forgive my foolish presumption in babbling on so before you - but your merciful love is my excuse in the presence of your kindness.

This is just a glimpse of Catherine in her own cell of self-knowledge as her words fall over themselves in her attempt to express something of the fullness in her heart. The passage from chapter 63 quoted above may have been dictated not very long after chapter 30; at the very least, the later one would have recalled her personal experience of knowing God's mercy through the blood of Jesus.

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Dialogo XXX:68-69

Letter 169b to Matteo Tolomei in Rome (March - June 1378)

Cry out in your Cell

The entire letter is about struggle and weapons and facing our enemies. Catherine points out that 'it is in periods of struggle that we have occasion to know better both ourselves and God's goodness within us.'⁵⁷ At the end of the letter there is a reference to the cell: '*Gridate in cella, e la Verità eterna udirà il grido vostro*' (Cry out in your cell, and eternal Truth will hear your cry.) This crying out, groaning, making a clamour describes the cry of the heart of someone in desperate need.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Unpublished translation of Letter T169b: Noffke.

⁵⁸ It is not impossible that this letter was written during Lent 1378. Catherine often refers in her letters to the scripture readings of the day or season. A typical Lenten reading may have been similar to those we read today during Lent, such as Joel 2:12-18, which begins:

Come back to me with all your heart,
fasting, weeping, mourning.

Tear your hearts and not your clothes

The weeping and mourning and the 'tearing of the heart' would be equivalent, to Catherine's injunction: *Gridate in cella!* and could have been the inspiration for her words.

Letter T43 to the Prior of the Brethren in Monte Oliveto (25 April - 12 May 1378)

Leisure for the Cell

This letter contains one interesting remark about the cell. Catherine suggests that the Prior should give the two novices in his care leisure to be in their cells and to study. Time for reflection and study is a Dominican characteristic which Catherine would have known through her own Dominican formation; one which she had diligently acquired herself and valued highly as the basis of spiritual discipline and development. She clearly thinks that one must learn the habits of the cell early.

Letter T245: To a Member of the Third Order of St Francis in Genoa (Mid-August - September 1378)

This letter simply contains an exhortation to take refuge in the cell of self-knowledge, where her addressee will find the breadth of the goodness and love of God, who has delivered him from hell.

Letter T262 to Tora Gambacorta (26 October 1378)

Lady Tora was the daughter of Pietro Gambacorta, ruler of Pisa. She had married young and when her husband died he left her a widow at fifteen. The

family was insisting that she remarry; Catherine, in this letter, urges her to enter religious life instead.⁵⁹

Catherine passionately urges Tora to become the spouse of Christ. The first reference to the cell is to the open side of Christ. Tora is to find her pleasure in remaining continually at the table of the most holy cross and to lock herself in its chamber, that is the open side of Christ crucified. There she will be bathed clean in his blood and find '*il segreto del cuore*', the secret of his heart.⁶⁰

Tora is urged to 'dwell in the cell' and not to waste time but rather to spend it well in reading and prayer and manual labour. She must avoid laziness and be prepared to do battle against the devil but also against the assaults of those who want to push her into remarriage. The cell here probably refers both to her physical room and to the inner cell of the heart.

Further *Dialogue* Occurrences of *Cella*

The remaining references in the *Dialogue* to the cell fit in at this point, both chronologically and thematically. Some are similar to Catherine's injunction to Tora Gambacorti. Several times there is mention of not wasting time and avoiding laziness by remaining in the cell in watching and humble prayer,

⁵⁹ Some time after receiving Catherine's letter, Tora ran away to a Franciscan monastery in Pisa, but was forcibly removed by her father and locked up for five months in a room where she saw no-one but a domestic servant. Finally Bishop Alfonso da Volterra, confessor to St Bridget and friend of Catherine, convinced the father to allow his daughter to enter religious life. He agreed, provided that it be in a different convent. Four years later, Tora entered the Dominican monastery of Santa Croce, built by her father. She took the name Clara and lived to be 37. She has been beatified and is known in the Dominican calendar of saints and blessed as Blessed Clara Gambacorti. (cf Noffke: unpublished notes on Letter T262).

⁶⁰ Finding the secret of the heart of Christ is one of Catherine's favourite expressions for growth in love.

keeping the eye of the mind gazing into God:

*Apri l'occhio dello 'ntelletto e mira in me.*⁶¹

Remaining in one's cell is part of obedience for religious. The disobedient religious is unable to remain even in the physical cell - a sure sign that the inner cell of the soul has already been abandoned. On occasion, however, this same obedience can draw one out of the physical cell to attend to the needs of others. What God gives us in the cell of self-knowledge is a treasure; we must be careful to conserve and spend it with care.

Letter T2 to Andrea dei Vitroni (Autumn 1378)

The Tree of Death

Andrea dei Vitroni was a priest who had written to Catherine. In this, her reply, she uses several images and expressions which correspond to similar ones in the *Dialogue*⁶² One which is relevant to the cell of self-knowledge is the 'tree of death'.⁶³ In order to know our dignity, writes Catherine, we need light by which

⁶¹ *Dialogo Proemio: 2*

⁶² She wrote this letter at about the time when she was completing or had just completed her dictation of the *Dialogue*, so the correspondence is to be expected.

⁶³ The image of the tree of death in the *Dialogue* is more highly developed than in this letter. Here she simply says it is rooted in pride and its fruit brings forth death. In the Dial 31:73 the tree is rooted in pride, nourished by sensual selfishness, has a core of impatience and its branches are the lack of any discernment. This is clearly drawn in contrast to the tree of love with its branches of discernment (see in the section on the 'house of self-knowledge' Letter T213 to Suora Daniella of Orvieto, written at about the same time as T2). In ch.48:99 of the *Dialogue*, Catherine says that the greedy and the envious 'have become trees of death'. In ch. 93:171 she again contrasts those who have become trees of love with those who are trees of death by setting their roots in the mountain of pride and who produce fruit of death. Finally, near the end of the *Dialogue*,

to see it. What deprives us of this light is sensual self-love which is 'a tree of death rooted in pride. So from pride is born selfish love and from selfish love is born pride ...'⁶⁴ Catherine explains this as follows: when we love ourselves with selfish self-love, we rely on ourselves too much; this pride in turn engenders sin. And so we spiral downward from pride to selfish love to pride ... Of people who have allowed the tree of death to remove their light, Catherine writes: 'Their life is totally corrupt because the deepest root of their soul's motivation is corrupt.'

The danger of the tree of death, says Catherine, is that people deprive themselves of the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God, because the pride and selfish love of the tree of death take away the light by which they know both themselves and God. So they have neither humility nor charity and become like animals. Having given up the dignity of the light of reason, they do not deserve to be called human.

The remedy for the deprivation of light and its consequences is to dwell in the cell of self-knowledge 'by recognizing that of ourselves we have no being, by recognizing God's goodness to us, by recognizing that our being and every grace which has been added to our being is from God.'⁶⁵ And we must also see our faults so that we hate and reject our selfish sensuality.

when she is berating bad religious, Catherine describes them as 'wretched trees: who produce the fruit of death. They are rooted in pride which they have drawn from self-centeredness and everything that comes from them is rotten: blossoms, leaves, fruit, and the three branches of obedience, poverty and continence. Their leaves, images of their words, are rotten. The stench given off by their rotten fruit is the stench of disobedience. (ch. 161:349)

⁶⁴ English translation from Noffke's unpublished translations and notes. Noffke points out that this is the only time Catherine describes pride and selfish love giving birth to each other. In all other cases it is pride that is born from selfish love.

⁶⁵ Translation by Noffke, unpublished.

The Watchdog of Conscience

At the entrance to the cell we set the watchdog of conscience⁶⁶ who guards the cell and barks immediately when enemies - evil thoughts within our heart - are approaching. The dog also knows when friends are coming: the holy and good thoughts we have when we want to do good things.

Letter T78 to Niccolò, a Hermit of the Romagna (4 November 1378)

Open the Eye of the Mind

Catherine summarizes for this man, a hermit of Romagna, her doctrine of the cell of self-knowledge. She explains that it is necessary for us to open the eye of the mind, thereby dispersing the clouds of self-love. This is one of God's constant invitations to her, one of her favourite images, which she constantly passes on to others. She urges us over and over again to open the eye of our mind and gaze into God. In this way we will come to see, God tells her, '*la dignità e bellezza della mia creatura*' the beauty and dignity of my reasoning creature⁶⁷ (that is, ourselves). The soul also looks at herself '*nello specchio dolce di Dio*'⁶⁸ in the gentle mirror of God with the eye of understanding and there she sees all the more clearly her own defects because of the purity she sees in him.

⁶⁶ In the *Dialogue* Catherine has the same image of the watchdog of conscience. Here the watchdog guards the city of the soul, barking when enemies approach and awakening the guard of reason, and reason together with free choice discerns by the light of understanding who is a friend and who an enemy. (p 263).

⁶⁷ *Dialogo Proemio: 2*

⁶⁸ *Dialogo XIII:30*

Catherine says elsewhere that she opened the eye of her understanding, gazed into divine charity, and there she saw and tasted 'how bound we are to love and seek the glory and praise of God's name through the salvation of souls.'⁶⁹ When we gaze with the eye of the mind, we see in truth, as Catherine does when God invites her to 'open your mind's eye and you will see the blinded and the foolish, the imperfect and the perfect ones who follow me in truth.'⁷⁰

There are also numerous examples in the letters of opening the mind's eye. Catherine writes to Frate Bartolomeo Dominici, for instance, that she longs to see him so on fire with Christ Jesus that he is completely lost to himself. 'But', she continues, 'I don't see how you can unless your mind's eye rises above yourself in true desire to gaze into the eye of the divine charity with which God looked on his creatures before he created us.'⁷¹ In the same letter, Catherine says that she wants Bartolomeo to be 'constantly gazing into the gentle eye of his charity, for then you will love perfectly what he (God) loves, and hate what he hates.'⁷² In a letter to Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi, Catherine explains that the crucified Christ was held fast to the cross not by nails but by love. She continues:

It is here then that I want you to gaze. Let the eye of your understanding rest here always. Here you will discover and fall in love with true virtue ... You will find perseverance ... Remembrance of the blood will make the world and all its works a cause of boredom and repugnance for you. You will learn to eat and savour souls, the food of God's servants ...⁷³

⁶⁹ Dial. 19:57

⁷⁰ Dial. 22:59

⁷¹ Noffke 1988:47

⁷² Noffke 1988:48

⁷³ Noffke 1988:52

Opening *l'occhio dell'intelletto*, the eye of the intellect is Catherine's way of talking about contemplation, gazing into God and allowing God to open her mind and heart to truth. Ultimately, this is what we do in the cell of self-knowledge. It is in this way that we come to know God's love and to see creation, including ourselves and events in some way as God sees them. Self-knowledge comes not by looking endlessly at ourselves but by gazing at God. The reason is that we do not exist of ourselves and when we try to see ourselves without reference to God, the picture we form will inevitably be distorted. We need to see ourselves in context: in God's context. This includes discovering God's purpose in creating and redeeming us; it includes finding my place and my meaning not only in reference to God, but together with and as part of the human family, the society of which I am part, and the church. This was the lesson Catherine had to learn. She started with an over-individualistic approach to life and spirituality. But since she did 'open the eye of her mind' and gaze into God, she came to see where she was wrong and to understand that living in the cell of self-knowledge does not preclude involvement in church and society. She was, in fact, called to a high degree of involvement and played a leading role in the political and ecclesial affairs of her day. The source of Catherine's energy and the guiding principle of her life was God, into whom she gazed as she opened 'the eye of her mind' in the cell-of self-knowledge.

Letter T322 to Giovanni delle Celle (December 1378)

Leave the Physical Cell and take to the Cell of Self-Knowledge

Giovanni delle Celle was the renowned hermit of Vallombrosa, near Florence. He and she had conflicting views on the desirability of a crusade and it was with regard to this issue that Giovanni became part of Catherine's fellowship. Urban VI invited the hermits to Rome to support the validity of his election. We know

that William of Flete refused to go; it is not known whether Giovanni delle Celle went or not. Catherine writes this letter to him soon after the pope's request that he leave his cell and come to Rome. She urges him to leave his physical cell and its consolations and to take to the cell of self-knowledge, where he will be ready to lay down his life, if need be, for truth. He will do this if he is a lover of God and of the reform of the church.

Leaving one's cell in obedience is clearly very different from leaving it because of restlessness and a longing for worldly company or entertainment: a point Catherine makes over and over again.⁷⁴

Letter T315 to Pietro of Milan (Late December 1378 to very early 1379)

The image of the cell is very lightly touched upon in this letter. Catherine is still considering remaining in or leaving one's cell in the light of obedience or disobedience. It is possible for self-love to judge the intentions of the prelate who orders me to leave my cell as outside the will of God.

Letter T86 to the Abbess of the Monastery of Santa Maria Degli Scalzi (December 1378 - February 1379)

The image of the cell to this contemplative nun is used very literally. There is a play on words in this letter of the kind Catherine delights in. Using 'bando' (exile) as the root, she speaks of the contemplative nun placing herself in the exile of the grille and the parlour, of banishing the familiarity of the faithful who

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In Dial. 151 Catherine speaks of leaving the cell for charity, in letter T154 for obedience and charity.

may seek her out, and of repatriating herself in the homeland of her cell.⁷⁵ Catherine then takes up the spousal theme, suggesting that the abbess build a mansion in the cell with her eternal Spouse, embracing whatever sufferings and discomforts he might offer her and spurning worldly delights, rank and honour. She must deny her selfish and wretched will and place herself, in the cell, before the obedience of the crucified Christ. The sisters are to withdraw from worldly company and be encouraged to be in the cell.

Letter T154 to Francesco Tebaldi (1378/12 - 1379/12)

This letter makes significant use of the image of the 'house' of self-knowledge. However, Catherine does refer to the 'cell' too, particularly when she speaks of taking it with us wherever we go and locking ourselves up in it.

In her letter to Tebaldi, a Carthusian on the island of Gorgona, Catherine reminds him that obedience and service of others may keep us away from the physical cell,⁷⁶ in which case the soul's longing for the consolation and peace of the cell is a temptation. The inner cell, on the other hand, is with us wherever we go. She urges Francesco to remain locked in his cell of self-knowledge and never to leave it. Catherine implies that the discipline of regular religious observance is a necessary support for the discipline required for living continuously in the cell of self-knowledge. On the other hand, the devil's wiles can make it seem darker and more of a struggle to be inside the cell than outside it, and people sometimes come out of the cell in terror, as though it is the cell itself which causes their troublesome thoughts.

⁷⁵ *Bando, sbandisce e ribandiscesi.*

⁷⁶ Being in exile may have been on Catherine's mind at this time because at the end of 1378, Urban VI asked her to come to Rome, leaving behind her beloved Tuscany.

1.2.6 1379

Letter T328 to Antonio da Nizza (3 January 1379)

The Call of Obedience

Once again Catherine writes of the tension between obedience and one's longing to be at home in one's cell. She is dismayed at the refusal of William of Flete and Antonio da Nizza to respond to the papal summons; what pains her especially is not their mere refusal, but the way in which it was done, especially by William. He has claimed, as she quotes in this letter, that one who is bound by divine obedience does not have to obey creatures. Catherine has no time for such pretensions. Expressing her bitter disappointment at William and Antonio, she speaks admiringly of two old and sickly monks, great servants of God who, after living in retirement all their lives, set out at once and have come in obedience to the papal summons. Although they long to be back in their cells, they do not seek to be relieved of the yoke and are willing to deny their own will and their personal consolation.

Catherine's own struggle is expressed here: she too has been summoned to Rome, and her own longing is obviously at odds with the pope's command. She has no doubt, however, as to what is the right thing to do: for her, obedience to God never exonerates us from obedience to the Holy Father. She clearly believes that the papal command is an expression of God's will for her.

Letter T329 to Stefano Maconi (15 January - February 1379)

The Knife in the Cell

Stefano is struggling to follow his vocation, but is strongly attached to his home and is tied to mother's apron-strings. Catherine strongly urges Stefano Maconi to cut the knots, not to fiddle about with trying to loosen them; it is much better to make a clean break in leaving home and cutting himself off from the world in order to follow his call. Where will he find this knife (*coltello*) of hatred and love with which to slash away with his free will? He will find it in the cell of self-knowledge, the place where he conceives hatred for vice and for his own weakness, and love for his creator and neighbour, with true and solid virtue.

Letter T353 Catella and Cecia Planula and Catarina Dentice
and

Letter T26 to Eugenia, Catherine's Niece (25 May 1379)

Prayer in the Cell

This entire letter is about prayer.⁷⁷ Catherine recommends to these three Neapolitan women to remain always in the cell of self-knowledge, where they will find the food of angels. This angelic food is God's desire for us. Catherine describes how to live so that this food alone may become important: they must stay in the physical cell, keeping vigil with humble and continual prayer, free

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A theme uppermost in her mind at this time, when she and others, such as the hermits of Lecceto, were summoned to Rome by Urban VI to support him once the schism had broken.

themselves from undue attachments to creatures and be obedient, prudent and charitable. The food of angels is best savoured, she stresses, by prayer based on self-knowledge. True prayer, insists Catherine, is founded on self-knowledge, for in self-knowledge we see that of ourselves we are not, and we cannot help ourselves, so we turn in faith to the One who is, who knows our needs and can and will help us. This turning to God in utter poverty, dependence and need, with faith in God's unutterable love, is the beginning and basis of all prayer.

Letter T360 to Petronella, Daughter of Masello Pepe (August 1379)

Spiritual Discipline

Catherine outlines for Petronella the disciplines of the spiritual life. These include humble, faithful and continual prayer, night vigils, fleeing from worldly company, recovering in the cell and cutting out all vain and idle worldly memories. Catherine also advises the young woman to fast and to take care in the way she dresses; she should put on the garment of Christ crucified.

Letter T102 to Raymond of Capua (December 1379 - February 1380)

Pastoral and Ministerial Implications of the Cell

Catherine develops the link between Raymond's pastoral task and the place of the cell in his life. She urges him to be a spouse of Truth, a true pastor and

governor of the flock entrusted to him, and a lover of the cell of the soul as well as the actual cell, as much as is possible in his state of life.

1.2.7 1380

Letter T373 to Raymond of Capua (15 February 1380)

The Cell of your Heart

In this long letter, dictated two-and-a-half months before her death, Catherine describes a near-death experience and writes what amounts to her last bequest to Raymond in the form of an impassioned plea for the church. The letter is also a wonderful summary of Catherine's theology which she applies to Raymond and pushes him to be courageous, zealous and obedient. She begs him to lose his whole self in working tirelessly for the church. With regard to the cell of self-knowledge, she writes:

You will not often be able to keep to your actual cell, but I want you always to have the cell of your heart and to take it everywhere with you, for you know that as long as we keep ourselves locked in there, our enemies cannot harm us. Then everything you undertake will be directed and ordered according to God.⁷⁸

The references to enemies doing harm refers to Raymond's actual situation. He was on his second mission to the King of France on behalf of Urban VI. It was an attempt, on the part of the pope, to win the French king over from his pro-

⁷⁸ Foster and Ronayne 1980:269

Clementine stance, Clement VII having been elected in opposition to Urban. On his first mission, Raymond's companion had been ambushed and Raymond's own life had been threatened. This time he was finding it impossible to gain access to France and settled for remaining in Genoa, preaching an Urbanist crusade. In spite of her love for him, Catherine was bitterly disappointed in his faintheartedness. If only he could really live in the cell of self-knowledge and knowledge of God's goodness, he would lose 'the fear of his own shadow' as Catherine puts it in this letter and would be able to discern God's will.

1.3 Summary

This section has traced the chronological unfolding of Catherine's symbol of the cell. What emerges is the following:

- Catherine begins with other images of going down into the depths of the self, such as the well and the abyss. From the beginning she has the concept that, if we go deep enough into ourselves, we find God as the source and ground of our being.
- In her early references to the cell, Catherine means the physical cell, the place into which we can withdraw for prayer. She is influenced, as we have seen in the previous chapter, by the desert ascetics and the tradition in the church of having a physical cell in which one can seek God.⁷⁹

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Catherine's earliest letters are dated 1374 or earlier; some may have been as early as 1371. Most of her writing, however, falls between 1374 and early 1380. She died in April 1380.

- The development in Catherine's thinking about the cell parallels her own story. She is urged out of her physical cell in obedience and charity⁸⁰ and this brings about the discovery that there is in fact an inner cell which we take with us wherever we go. Her letters reveal her feeling her way towards naming and exploring this reality.
- It is only in 1376, after two years of letter writing,⁸¹ that Catherine first uses the expression 'the cell of self-knowledge'. Thereafter she uses it constantly and it becomes characteristic of her spirituality. It is her expression for her mystical experience of God and herself in God.
- The cell of self-knowledge is the pivotal symbol. at the centre of her mystical experience. It is in the cell of self-knowledge that other aspects of her mystical experience take place, as it were. These include being at the 'tree of the cross' or 'eating souls'. These two aspects go together since in the cross we find our redemption and we are called to live for the redemption of the world. It is in the cell of self-knowledge that we open the eye of the intellect and gaze into God. It is within the cell of self-knowledge that we see ourselves as created in the image of the triune God.
- Catherine speaks of the cell of self-knowledge as being located within the open side of the crucified Christ, or within his wounds. This expresses that her mystical experience is profoundly Christological and has the typically medieval stress on the suffering, crucified Christ.
- At the end of 1377 Catherine describes the 'cell within a cell'. The cell of knowing oneself is what she calls the first or outer cell; as we pass through this we find an inner cell which is the cell of the knowledge of

⁸⁰ See ch. 2, Life and Times, in the section on *Conversion*.

⁸¹ Any letter-writing before 1374, if there was any, would have been sporadic. It was in 1374 that Catherine's letter writing began in earnest.

God's goodness towards us. At this stage Catherine sees these two knowings as two cells, one within the other.

- The 'cell within a cell' is, however, not an image that Catherine maintains. The two knowings, of myself and of God, become so integrated for her that they form one cell, which Catherine calls simply the 'cell of self-knowledge. She does periodically remind us, however, that the cell of self-knowledge includes both aspects: knowledge of myself within God and of God within me.
- The major integrating symbol of Catherine's theology, the blood of Christ,⁸² is closely linked with the cell of self-knowledge, which integrates her spirituality. It is in the cell of self-knowledge that the blood gives us knowledge of the truth - the truth of God's immense love, mercy and goodness and the truth of our total dependence on God, our beauty and dignity but also our sinfulness.
- Although Catherine outgrows being limited to a physical cell and finds that mystical experience of God takes place in the inner cell of the heart, she knows the need for a physical cell or place of prayer to which we can return. Having a place and atmosphere of prayer is an important support for the prayer of the heart. However, we must be able to leave our physical cell for obedience or charity. The cell of self-knowledge, our knowledge of ourselves in God and of God in us, we have with us always.

⁸²

See chapter six for the symbols of the blood and the cell of self-knowledge.

1.4 Conclusion

For Catherine, the cell of self-knowledge is the foundational symbol of her spirituality in general and of her mystical experience in particular. In the early years of writing, she uses other images of depth, but the cell image seems to express best what she wants to convey. At first she calls it the 'cell of the soul and body' but it develops into the 'cell of self-knowledge'. This cell has two aspects': knowledge of self in God and of God in her. Catherine tries to express both by speaking of a 'cell within a cell'. However, she grows into a concept of the cell in which the two aspects become so integrated that they become one cell. Having a physical 'cell' or place of prayer remains important but not essential. The core reality is the mystical knowledge of self in God and of God in oneself.

CHAPTER 5.2

2. *La Casa del Cognoscimento di Sé* (The House of Self-knowledge)

2.1 Introduction

Catherine's 'cell' symbol expands, after 1375, into a larger one. She begins to use the symbol of a *casa* (house). Without letting go of *cella*, she uses *casa* alongside it,¹ bringing in some essential dimensions of her experience of self-knowledge which cannot easily be expressed by the *cella* symbol.

Unlike *cella*, the *casa* symbol has a strong scriptural base. In connection with *casa*, Catherine loves to quote the 'many mansions' text of Jn. 14:2, and Mt. 21:13: My father's house is a house of prayer... The house of self-knowledge is, then, in the first place one which allows for great variety and diversity in spiritual experience: there are many mansions.² The house of self-knowledge is the Father's house, the place of prayer. It is the house of prayer *par excellence*, viz. the house in which we await the gift of the Spirit. What Catherine has in mind is the house in which the disciples waited in prayer from the ascension to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

¹ See Appendix II, the chart showing Catherine's comparative use of her symbols for self-knowledge.

² Catherine's interpretation of the 'many mansions' text and, in fact, the impression she gives of her mystical experience seem to give credence to the view of constructivists such as Katz and others who argue for the plurality of mystical experience, a plurality shaped by a person's conceptual categories. In contrast to this, Stace and other essentialists hold all mystical experience to be phenomenologically the same though subject to varying interpretations. (Relevant articles listed in bibliography.)

The *casa* section of Chapter Five has two parts. The first is scriptural. It discusses the scriptural component of Catherine's *casa* imagery in particular and then broadens out into an exploration of her hermeneutic of scripture in general. The second part traces the *casa* theme chronologically as it occurs in Catherine's writings. Conclusions drawn from these two sections round off the chapter.

2.2 Scriptural Component of Casa

Letter T30 to the Abbess and Subprioress of the Monastery of Santa Marta in Siena (April 1374 or Earlier)

The first time the word 'casa' appears in Catherine's writing is in reference to Martha of the Gospel.³ Martha was the hostess to Christ, says Catherine, and she is now living in the house of the Father.⁴ Although this occurrence of 'casa' has only a tenuous link with the catherinian image of the house of self-knowledge, it leads on to the fact that there is a scriptural component to Catherine's 'casa' imagery, her favourite text in this connection being Jn 14:2, where Jesus says: '*Nella casa del Padre mio son' molte mansioni*' (In my Father's house there are many mansions). Of the eleven scripture references to 'casa' in Catherine's letters, eight are quotations of this text.⁵ In the *Dialogue*⁶ this text appears twice.⁷

³ Lk 10:38-42

⁴ Letter T30: 54. The reason for the reference to Martha is obvious, since the letter is addressed to the Abbess and subprioress of the Monastery of St Martha in Siena.

⁵ Apart from the reference in T30, Jn 14:2 occurs in the following letters: in 1377: T82, T294; and in 1378: T63, T65, T39, T340, T154.

⁶ Since Catherine often uses the same images in the *Dialogue* as in the *Letters*, it is convenient to discuss them together even though the chronology is not clearly reflected by doing so. The *Dialogue* was dictated between October 1377 and October 1378; some of the imagery appears in letters pre- or postdating the

2.2.1 Catherine's favourite *Casa* Text in Scripture: John 14:2

Catherine's usual interpretation of the 'many mansions' text has to do with the variety of religious experiences⁸ and spiritual gifts. In Letter T283, for instance, Catherine speaks immediately of the 'many different fruits there were from the virtues they (the blessed) exercised in this life.'⁹ In Letter T39 Catherine describes the '*molte mansioni*' by saying that the tongue cannot tell the

...*tanti diversi modi e visitazioni e doni e grazie che Dio fa, non tanto in molte creature, ma in una anima medesima.*

...many different ways and visitations and gifts and graces God gives, not only in many creatures, but in a single soul.

The variety that Catherine envisages, then, is not only the diversity of religious experiences and gifts God gives different people, but the entire spectrum of these within a single soul.

The first time Catherine uses the 'many mansions' text in the *Dialogue*, she is illustrating the diversity of gifts among different people. The Father tells her about 'my gifts and graces, virtue and other spiritual gifts'¹⁰ and explains that he has distributed them in such a way that no one has all of them, therefore we all have reason to practise mutual charity. God wanted to make us dependent on one another so that each of us can be God's minister, dispensing the gifts and

Dialogue. I have followed the chronological sequence of the *Letters*, and fitted in corresponding *Dialogue* images.

⁷ Dial. 7: 38 and 100:189

⁸ Noffke says this in footnote n. 5 of the Letter T283 and refers to Augustine, *In Ioan. evang. tract. LXBII* (PL XXXV, 1812), where the many dwelling places signify the different titles of merit in eternal life. (DT n. 6) (Noffke 1988:320).

⁹ Noffke 1988:145

¹⁰ Dial. 7:38

graces we have received. It is noteworthy that Catherine specifically includes hierarchical rank: she mentions that we have been set in different positions and different ranks to exercise the virtue of charity. And she relates all this mutual ministry in charity to the text: 'for there are many rooms in my house'.

The other *Dialogue* occurrence of this text¹¹ demonstrates another nuance of meaning Catherine brings to it. It relates to refraining from judgement of others on the grounds that there are many possible situations and ways of living which are different from ours, all leading to God. The breadth of this viewpoint is surprising in someone with a relatively restricted religious background. Catherine does not spell out what she means exactly by the 'many different ways' by which people walk, but she does say that those who live in God's light are happier to see that there *are* ways than they would be if everyone were to walk the same way, because in this diversity they see the greatness of God's goodness more fully revealed.

This interpretation of John 14:2 in which Catherine rejoices in the many different ways leading to God, is reminiscent of a remarkable prayer experience she had on the night of 1 April 1376. She relates it in a letter to Raymond of Capua and others who had gone ahead of her to Avignon:

The fire of holy desire was growing within me as I gazed. And I saw the people, Christians and unbelievers, entering the side of Christ crucified. In desire and impelled by love I walked through their midst and entered with them into Christ gentle Jesus.¹²

The same interpretation of the Johannine text appears in Letter T340, in which Catherine writes to Agnesa da Toscanella that we must not judge people but rejoice in such a diversity of ways among the servants of God because 'in our Father's house there are many mansions.'

¹¹ Dial. 100:189-190

¹² Noffke 1988:207-208

It is a lack of discernment, says Catherine in another letter,¹³ to judge by our own standards 'and not according to God's mysteries and all the holy ways he works in his creatures. Let human pride be ashamed, and let it be willing to see that in the Father's house there are many dwellings. We are not, says Catherine, to try to make rules for the Holy Spirit, nor set limits for the One who cannot be limited.

In a letter which has the 'house of self-knowledge' as its central theme,¹⁴ Catherine relates John 14:2 with self-knowledge. She says that it is within this inner dwelling-place that God is revealed and in this revelation we come to see all the different rooms there are in the home of the eternal king. We then hold 'in joyful reverence every different way you might see in God's creatures, judging everything in terms of God's will rather than passing judgement on human intentions.'¹⁵

For Catherine, then, the 'many mansions' refer to variety in three different senses: the variety of gifts and graces within a single person; the variety of gifts in the community by which we minister to one another and, more broadly, the great variety of ways to God, often very different from our own.

2.2.2 Another *Casa* Text in Scripture: Mt. 21:13 and Parallels

The other scripture text Catherine likes to use in connection with *casa* is by way of contrast:

Non volendo che della casa del Padre mio si facesse spilonca di ladri .

Not wanting my Father's house to be made into a robbers' den.¹⁶

¹³ Letter T294

¹⁴ Letter T154 to Francesco Tebaldi

¹⁵ Letter T154

¹⁶ Mt. 21:12-13, 17; Mk 11:15-19; Lk. 19:45-48; Jn. 2:14-16.

This text occurs only once in a letter¹⁷ but it is found three times in the *Dialogue*, all of them in the section¹⁸ in which Catherine exposes the scandalous lives of lax and corrupt clergy and religious. In a letter to Raymond and other disciples of hers,¹⁹ Catherine relates her interpretation to the cleansing of the temple by Jesus as she speaks of simony, for she says there are those who buy and sell the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is significant that, in each of these occurrences, Catherine gives the full text: 'Of my Father's house, which is a house of prayer, you have made a robbers' den'.²⁰ By the inclusion of this clause, there is a particular stress on the fact that God's house - by which in this instance, she means the Church - is meant to be a place of prayer. However, in the light of Catherine's frequent use of *casa* to refer to the self, 'God's house' can be seen as referring also to the house of self-knowledge.

2.2.3 A Third *Casa* Scripture Text

In a similar vein, Catherine alludes to another scripture text:

When an unclean spirit goes out of someone it wanders through waterless country looking for a place to rest, and not finding one it says: 'I will go back to the home I came from.' But on arrival, finding it swept and tidied, it then goes off and brings seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and set up house there, and so that person ends up worse than before.²¹

Writing of those who 'for fear of punishment begin to rise up from sin toward grace',²² Catherine describes how these beginners in the following of Christ

¹⁷ Letter T219, 1376

¹⁸ Dial. ch 121-133

¹⁹ Letter T219

²⁰ Dial. 127:248. The other two occurrences are on pp250 and 251.

²¹ Lk. 11:24-26; see also Mt 12:43-56

²² Dial. 95:177

'begin to empty their soul's house of filth'. However, 'to walk merely in slavish fear is not enough' says Catherine. 'It is not enough for eternal life to sweep the house clean of deadly sin. One must fill it with virtue that is grounded in love, and not merely in fear.'²³ For Catherine, this text illustrates the early stages of conversion with its accompanying dangers.

These three texts, then, are often used by Catherine in relation to the inner house of self-knowledge. They express some of Catherine's basic concepts of this 'house'. The first is that the 'many mansions' within the house allow for great variety and diversity, both within one individual and among different people. The second reminds us that it is above all a place of prayer. The third takes up the Scripture warning that, once the house has been cleaned and emptied, we must take care to fill it with virtue, especially love.

2.2.4 Catherine's Hermeneutic of Scripture

The above discussion of Catherine's interpretation of biblical texts which are related to the house of self-knowledge, leads to a wider question: what was Catherine's hermeneutic of Scripture? Within the scope of this thesis, only a brief overview of this question is possible.

It is clear, even from this short discussion of the scriptural texts related to the 'house of self-knowledge' that Catherine's hermeneutic of Scripture was very different from our own. She never studied Scripture as we do today. A description of the layperson's familiarity with the written text of the Bible prior to Catherine, in the thirteenth century, is as follows:

The written word was not yet a common medium of gospel communication. More people were learning to read, but books were still quite expensive. The cost of producing a whole Bible made private ownership almost impossible. It took a year to copy the Bible, and a year's income for a parish priest to buy a

²³

Dial. 49:100

copy. Several hundred lambs or sheep had to be killed so that their skins could be made into pages for the book. The handlettered tome, when finally complete, would be too massive to be carried around anyway. Nevertheless, some people did own copies of the Gospels or the New Testament, in Latin.²⁴

By the mid-fourteenth century, things had improved slightly. There were more Latin bibles for personal use, still handwritten on parchment since printing had not yet been invented. Also available were books containing the psalms or one of the Gospels. Portions of the Bible were translated into the vernacular.²⁵

It is well to recall that, in medieval times media other than the written word were used to enshrine and express the faith. There were the great gothic cathedrals of Europe; there was liturgical music, and psalms, biblical poetry sequences and hymns communicated the faith in song. The liturgy of the word was presented in dramatic form: this gave rise to the medieval mystery and miracle plays, which eventually had to be moved out of the church or cathedral. These dramatic portrayals of scripture and the truths of the faith became part of the yearly cycle of festivals which formed the liturgical year.²⁶

From childhood on, Catherine attended regular (probably daily) Mass in their nearby parish church and listened to the readings of the day and the homily. She heard rather than read Scripture. It is not unlikely that in her Catholic home there was informal discussion of the bible readings and the homily, particularly on Sundays. As she moved into womanhood, she had friends and disciples who were mostly well-educated: theologians, poets, writers, scholars. Her conversations with them must have been a major formative influence. Catherine was imbued with Scripture; she absorbed it and it is woven into the text of her writing quite naturally. Sometimes she leaves the text intact; sometimes it is rephrased or presented in new and different combinations. Catherine never cites chapter and verse and would certainly never have had recourse to commentaries as we do. She lived Scripture, made it her own and interpreted it in a fresh, original way as situations of life arose and she responded. The

²⁴ Sawicki 1988:223

²⁵ Latourette 1976:351

²⁶ Sawicki 1988:222

category of 'correctness of interpretation' simply does not apply to Catherine in our sophisticated sense of the term. She reworks it in her mind until it becomes part of the tapestry of her thought.

Raymond records an exchange he had with Catherine over her unusual interpretation of the words of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane: Father, remove this chalice from me.²⁷ Catherine understood that Jesus was referring to the chalice of his yearning for the salvation of humankind, a chalice he had been drinking all his life and now, as the hour drew near, he was drinking it with greater eagerness than ever. His request to his Father, in Catherine's view, was that he might now at last be let drink it to the dregs and so slake his thirst for our salvation.²⁸ He added the words: And yet not my will but yours be done, to show he was willing to wait for the postponement of his heart's desire for as long as it should be his Father's will.

Raymond says he has never heard this interpretation before and he ventures to point out to Catherine that the scholars say that Jesus said these words because he was fully human, showing how his sensitive nature shrank from the approach of death.

Catherine replies:

The actions of our Saviour are so rich in meaning that every soul that ponders them attentively in its own way finds in them its own share of spiritual food to nourish it and bring it to salvation ... And so it is a more widely helpful thing that there should be various ways of understanding it, so that souls of each class (i.e. the weak and the strong) may find in it what suits them, than that there should be only one interpretation of it, helpful to one class only.²⁹

²⁷ Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 2:42

²⁸ Catherine's interpretation is slightly closer to the Johannine text, Jn 12:27:
 Now my soul is troubled.
 What shall I say?
 Father, save me from this hour?
 But it is for this very reason that I have come to this hour.
 Father, glorify your name!
 We remember that Catherine was familiar with the Vulgate.

²⁹ Kearns 1980:198-199

Catherine pondered and was nourished by the Scriptures and was not only unafraid of her own interpretation but was quick to defend it, even to a theologian like Raymond.

The liturgy was the ordinary daily or weekly form in which medieval people became familiar with the Bible. Each day there were readings and psalms from Scripture at Mass and, for clerics, religious and pious groups like the *Mantellate*, the daily Divine Office.³⁰ Often, especially on Sundays, there was a homily on the Scripture texts for the day after the readings at Mass or during Vespers.

Catherine, like so many of her contemporaries, especially women, was dependent on the oral tradition of Scripture. She learned to read only in her early twenties and even then would not have had access to the written text of Scripture, except when she had joined the *Mantellate* and learned to read so that she could read the Latin text of the Liturgy of the Hours daily. Since this was recited or sung in common, it was quite possible to learn it by heart over the years. Once Catherine had learned to read, we are not sure how precisely she was actually able to read it, or whether she prayed along with the others and more or less followed in her breviary. Even when she prayed the Office privately, she could easily have been more dependent on her aural memory than on the written text.

There is at least one example of Catherine having mis-heard a Scripture text. She refers to St Paul as a 'vessel of affection' instead of a 'vessel of election'.³¹ She must have heard the Latin '*vas electionis*' as '*vas delectionis*'.³²

Catherine freely adapts the texts of Scripture to suit her purposes. Without making an exhaustive study of this, I shall select, almost at random, some illustrative examples. In chapter 128 of the *Dialogue*, the Father is telling Catherine that those who sensually love and serve the world despise God, and

³⁰ We now call it the *Liturgy of the Hours*.

³¹ Dial. 131:265 and Letter 5, in Noffke 1988:48. Catherine says the same in both instances.

³² Dial. 131:265 n. 100.

those who despise the world love God. Catherine's expression of the Father's conclusion is:

This is why my Truth said that no one can serve two opposing masters. Whoever would serve the one would be despised by the other.³³

In the Gospel text, it is the servant who loves one master and despises the other, not one of the masters despising the servant! Noffke has some insight into Catherine's adaptation of this text. She says that 'Catherine reads into the text the reciprocity that is characteristic of her whole understanding of the relationship between the soul and God.'³⁴

Examples of Catherine's adaptation of the text of Scripture could be multiplied. In a passage extolling patience, she writes: 'This virtue stands like a lamp set on a lampstand.'³⁵ She is appropriating Jesus' words about being light for the world in Matt.5:15 and applying the image to patience which she sees as pre-eminent among the virtues.

Catherine was strongly in favour of a crusade (which never in fact materialized). In reference to this, she writes to William of Flete that all God's servants are longing to hear the words: 'Children, leave your houses and your homelands and follow me; some to offer your bodies in sacrifice!' Here she uses for her own purposes a combination of God's call to Abram³⁶ in Gen. 12:1 and Jesus' call to his disciples to follow him, in passages such as Mk 1:18, and to these Catherine adds her own injunction.

In her letters and prayers, Catherine very often refers to the liturgical readings of the day. On Passion Sunday, her prayer is a profound meditation on the

³³ Mt. 6:24 and Lk. 16:13. Catherine uses this parable in exactly the same way a second time. Dial. 136:280.

³⁴ Dial. 128:252, n. 79

³⁵ Dial. 96:179

³⁶ Catherine adapts God's words to Abram for her own purpose, i.e. as an exhortation to join in the crusade. (DT. 9, cited in Noffke 1988:312).

passion of Christ,³⁷ while during Easter week it is the resurrection that fills Catherine's mind and heart.³⁸ And a letter, probably written on the first Thursday of Lent, on which the gospel story of the Canaanite woman was read (Mt 15:22-28), has the following in the opening paragraph:

I long to see you in the same power of holy faith and perseverance as the Canaanite woman had. She had such a strong faith that she won her daughter's deliverance from the devil. Even more: God wanted to show how pleased he was with her faith, and to give her faith credit for the victory, so he said: Be it done to your daughter as you wish!³⁹

Here, Catherine remains close to the original in recounting the incident as she tells Sano di Maco that this is the kind of intense faith she wants him to have.

Not having had recourse to the written word, Catherine is occasionally mistaken. She attributes to St Paul, for instance, a text which is not, in fact, Pauline. She says: Saint Paul taught you this when he said that charity cannot fully profit others unless it begins with oneself.⁴⁰ While a slip like this, or an 'original' rendering of a text gives evidence of her reliance on what she has heard without being able to check it, the wonder is that she has retained, absorbed and understood so well that her use of Scripture comes as naturally to her as breathing.

Catherine has a few favourite texts which constantly recur in her writing. One is 1 Thes 4:3: which Catherine renders in almost the same words time and time again: '... (God's) true and gentle will ... desires nothing else but that we be made holy';⁴¹ 'the truth is that God wants nothing other than that we be made holy';⁴² '...we see that God wants only that we be made holy'.⁴³ Another

³⁷ Cavallini 1978:134f. Cavallini entitles this prayer: *Virtù della Passione*. For the English translation see Noffke 1983: Prayer 19.

³⁸ Cavallini 1978, Orazione XIII: 156f. (Cristo Resurrezione Nostra). English translation in Noffke 1983:185ff.

³⁹ Noffke 1988:92

⁴⁰ Dial. 11:44

⁴¹ Noffke 1988:65

⁴² Noffke 1988:65

favourite text is a Christological one: Jn 14:6: I am the way, the truth and the life. This one occurs very often in connection with Christ the Bridge. For instance, the Father says to Catherine that we must all keep to the bridge, adding: 'There is no other way that you can come to me.'⁴⁴ Sometimes Catherine quotes this exactly. In this example it is still the Father speaking, explaining:

At the end of the bridge is the gate ... which is the only way you can enter. This is why he said: 'I am the Way and Truth and Life; whoever walks with me walks not in darkness but in light.' And in another place my Truth said that no one could come to me except through him.⁴⁵

Here Catherine weaves Jn 8:12 into Jn 14:6. The fact that she refers to 'another place' in Scripture, when in fact it is simply the next part of Jn 14:6, is another indication of her remembering the words but not knowing chapter and verse. She continues with this verse as a refrain through all her writing: Christ is the only way to the Father; we cannot come to God except through him.

These two texts, taken from Paul and John respectively, also serve as a reminder that these were the biblical authors most frequently quoted by Catherine. However, as one reads Catherine's text, whether it be the *Letters*, the *Dialogue* or the *Prayers*, it is striking to notice how scriptural texts and allusions are woven into the very fabric of the sentences. The footnotes on page after page give the exact references, which Catherine herself never did: she could not. Nor does it matter. For it becomes clear that she was nourished by the Scriptures. She heard them, pondered them in her contemplation and found in them a voice for her own convictions.

In the *Prayers*, Catherine makes particular use of verses or phrases from the psalms, drawing them from the psalms of the Liturgy of the Hours and making

⁴³ Noffke 1988:155. Even a glance through Vol. I of the *Letters* gives an indication of how often Catherine uses this text: it is found in Letter 3 p 44; Letter 15 p 65; Letter 18 p 77; Letter 43 p 139; Letter 49 p 149; Letter 51 p 155.

⁴⁴ Dial. 23:60

⁴⁵ Dial. 27:66

them her own. There is one verse she loves to repeat in Latin, from the beginning of psalm 51: *Peccavi, Domino; miserere mei*. This verse runs like a refrain through all her prayer. It is typical of the mystics that they have a strong sense of sinfulness. Catherine is no exception. Another verse Catherine loved was the opening verse of the Divine Office.⁴⁶ Raymond, in his *Life*, remarks that 'she was particularly struck by the psalm-verse with which each Hour of the Office begins: 'Incline unto my aid, O God; O Lord, make haste to help me.' She translated it into the vernacular, and would repeat it again and again.'⁴⁷ There are numerous instances in the *Prayers* where Catherine uses some form of these words:

*Exaudisce la tua serva: io misera ti prego che oda la mia boce che chiama te, pietosissimo Padre.*⁴⁸

Listen to your servant;
wretched as I am I beg you
to hear my voice crying out to you,
most compassionate Father.

and

*Dio, intende al nostro aiutorio, Signore, affrettati d'aitarci.*⁴⁹

God, come to our assistance!
Lord, make haste to help us!

Catherine was herself nourished by the Scriptures and she in turn nourished others, spontaneously applying Scripture in many specific contexts, both for herself and for others. In *Prayer 26*, for instance, the last of her recorded

⁴⁶ Taken from Ps. 28:2 or 27:7

⁴⁷ Kearns 1980:105

⁴⁸ Oraz II:20

⁴⁹ Oraz. XXII:260. There is a footnote which refers us to Raymond's *Life* I, xi, p 105, confirming Noffke's remark that this introductory invocation from the Liturgy of the Hours was particularly dear to Catherine. Raymond writes: 'It (this verse) remained a favourite with her for the rest of her life ... She translated it into the vernacular and would repeat it again and again.'

prayers, she alludes to a near-death experience, and possibly to her coming death and eternal life in terms of the potter in Jeremiah and Isaiah:

...tu, maestro buono, amore mio dolce, se' quello maestro che disfai e rifai, tu spezzi e risaldi questo vasello secondo che piace a la tua bontà.⁵⁰

You, good master
my sweet love -
you are the master who breaks and refashions;
you smash this vessel
and put it back together again
as it pleases your goodness.

It is her body which is 'this vessel'.

The words of Scripture became Catherine's vocabulary, her word, because she had nourished herself at the 'table of the cross'. By means of the word, she had become 'engrafted' onto the Word whose blood makes the tree bear fruit, and then:

Quando noi siamo innestati in te, allora e rami che tu hai dati all'arbore nostro menano i frutti loro.⁵¹

Once we have been engrafted onto you,
the branches you gave our tree
being to produce their fruit.

These, then, are some reflections on the role of Scripture in Catherine's writings and her hermeneutic of Scripture. The texts she uses in reference to the theme of the house of self-knowledge were considered first. These were then contextualized by placing them within the wider scope of her hermeneutic of Scripture - so essential a part of her thought, expression and life.

⁵⁰ Oraz. XXVI:282. The reference is to Jer. 12:3-6 and Is. 45:9.

⁵¹ Oraz. X:108

2.3 The Image of *La Casa del Cognoscimento di Sé*: (the House of Self-knowledge) as it occurs in Catherine's Writings

The *casa* image in Catherine's writings is wider than the Scriptural images which she uses. The other *casa* occurrences are as follows:

2.3.1 1375

Letter T144 to Monna Paola (2 - 15 July 1375)

The Sword Hidden in the House

It is in this letter that we find the first reference to '*la casa dell'anima nostra, per vero conoscimento di noi medesime*' (the house of our soul, for true knowledge of ourselves). Catherine is encouraging the nuns to defend themselves against the attacks of the devil. Using a masculine image, she suggests they be like knights defending a city, 'armed with the sword of divine charity'.⁵² In order not to lose this weapon, it must be kept hidden in the house of the soul in true self-knowledge. She proceeds to explain the connection between self-knowledge and love for God. The argument goes as follows:

As we come to know that we are not and to recognize our sinfulness, we become humble before God and others. By contrast, God's goodness is so overwhelming that we become judgmental of ourselves and even wish that others would take vengeance on us. This gives rise to a 'fragrant patience'⁵³ which considers no burden too heavy or too bitter to bear for love of God.

⁵² Noffke 1988:119

⁵³ Noffke 1988:119

It is interesting that in this letter Catherine uses all three images: cell, house and city. The three complement each other. Catherine urges Monna Paola to seek out her cell, the physical cell as well as the cell of the soul. There she will 'eat souls' and give them birth in the sight of God. There is no need to fear the attacks of the devils who may want to attack the city of the soul, for her defence is the sword kept hidden in the house of the soul in true knowledge of ourselves.

The three images are thus interconnected and flow into each other.

2.3.2 1376

Letter T59 to Pietro, Priest at Semignana (January - April 1376)

The Pigsty

This is the only occurrence of the '*casa dell'anima*' (house of the soul) in 1376. Catherine is writing about the gross lack of purity so rife in her day. In her usual forthright fashion, she says that by their impurity, people make themselves into a pigsty, and, instead of the fire of the word of God, they carry the fire of anger, hatred, rancour and malevolence into the house of their soul.

The same image occurs in the *Dialogue*.⁵⁴ Catherine is discussing the vice of avarice among the clergy and religious. Referring several times to the words of

⁵⁴

This is the section (chapters 121 - 133) which exposes the corruption of so many of the clergy and religious of Catherine's time. Cavallini warns in this regard: 'This exposé, even in the crudity of some of its parts, is no mere scandal-mongering. Its only intent is to rouse sorrow and stronger love to wrest from God, by prayer and penance, the grace of reform for the Church and its members. It is essential to read

Jesus: 'Of my Father's house, which is a house of prayer, you have made a robbers' den',⁵⁵ Catherine writes:

They have become merchandisers in greed, selling and buying, and in their indecency they have made [my house] a receiving place for filthy beasts - made it, in fact, a pigsty where they wallow in the mire of indecency. Thus do they keep their she-devils in the Church as a husband keeps his bride in his house.⁵⁶

The 'house' in this case refers to both the Church and the individual soul, both of which are corrupted by such behaviour. The same image occurs when Catherine, in the *Dialogue* (95), describes the beginnings of conversion: what happens when people, for fear of punishment, begin to rise up from sin towards grace.

They begin to empty their soul's house of filth ... and open their mind's eye to look at their dwelling place. Before it was emptied they could not see it for all the filth of so many different sins.

Letter T17 to Antonio da Nizza (10 -31 December 1376)

Holding the Lamp outside the Door

In this letter Catherine uses an image unique to this letter. Early in the letter she speaks of self-knowledge and near the end she refers to:

colui che sta in su l'uscio col lume in mano, che distende la mano di fuore e fa lume di fuore...

these pages in the spirit in which they were written, or pass over them altogether. (*Dial* 231).

⁵⁵ Mt. 21:13; Mk. 11:17; Lk. 19:46

⁵⁶ *Dial*. 127:251

a person standing in a doorway, lamp in hand, but holding his or her hand outside so that the lamp lights the outside ...

This image of the lamp shedding light outside the house brings an important new dimension to the casa image. Together with the image of opening the windows in *Letter T315*, written two years later, this image of the lamp held outside the door gives a quite different impression from that of the cell. Throwing open the windows to let in the warmth and light of the sun, and taking the lamp to go outside the house, suggest an openness and a going out to others which is not clearly present in the 'cell of self-knowledge'.

2.3.3 1377

Letter T53 to Agnesa Malavolti (August - November 1377)

The House of Self-Knowledge

In this letter Catherine uses, for the first time, the expression 'the house of self-knowledge'. Although she does not add 'and of knowledge of God', the next clause does in fact say this:

...nella casa del cognoscimento di voi, dove voi troverete l'amore ineffabile che Dio v' ha ...

...in the house of self-knowledge, where you discover the ineffable love God has for you ...

Catherine is writing about seeking love with great desire and solicitude. She urges Agnesa not to sleep but to set about her search. Where is she to find this love? In the house of self-knowledge, says Catherine, where we find the

ineffable love God has for us. In love God has created us in the divine image, and in love has recreated us through grace in the blood of his only-begotten Son. Finding God's love and knowing that we have it within ourselves, we cannot help loving.

In this context of discovering within ourselves God's unutterable love, Catherine's treatment of *casa*⁵⁷ is so similar to *cella* that the two symbols are often in fact interchangeable.

Letter T51 to Felice da Massa (August - December 1377)

Open the Eye of your Mind

Written about the same time as the previous letter, this one takes up a similar theme, with additional stress on the blood of Christ. Catherine is speaking of the 'eye of the mind' which sees clearly once self-love has been removed. As we gaze with this eye, we see the crucified Christ and we are moved as we recognize in him, and most especially in his blood, the abyss of his inestimable love. But where can we find this object of our gazing? In the house of self-knowledge, says Catherine. In this knowledge we know our own misery because with the eye of the mind we see our defects and that, of ourselves, we truly are not. When we recognize this, we also know the goodness of God in us. To have knowledge of ourselves without reference to God, or of God's goodness without knowing who we are, is not founded on truth and leads to confusion.

⁵⁷

See, for instance, Letter T241 (DT73) to Monna Giovanna di Corrado Maconi (May-July 1376), Letter T2 to Andrea dei Vitroni (14 August 1376). Letter T37 to Niccolò di Ghida (Nov-Dec 1377), the opening sentence of the Prologue in the *Dialogue*, Letter T245 to member of the Third Order of St Francis in Genoa (dated between 15 August and some time in September 1378). All these speak of discovering God's unutterable love as we move into the cell of self-knowledge.

Catherine goes to great lengths to stress the balance required here in the twofold knowledge of ourselves in reference to God, and God's goodness towards us. It is always a two-way dynamic. Holding on to only half (either self-knowledge or knowledge of God) is incomplete and causes distortion. Catherine underlines this in chapter 66 of the *Dialogue*:

*O quanto è dolce a quella anima, e a me è piacevole, la santa orazione fatta nella casa del cognoscimento di sè e nel cognoscimento di me! Io non voglio che abbi, nè debba avere, solo la considerazione de' peccati in comune in particolare senza la considerazione e memoria del sangue e della larghezza della misericordia, acciò che non venga a confusione. Che se il cognoscimento di sè e considerazione del peccato non fosse condito con la memoria del sangue esperanse della misericordia, starebbe in essa confusione.*⁵⁸

O how delightful to the soul and pleasing to me is holy prayer made in the house of self-knowledge and knowledge of me⁵⁹. I do not want her to, nor should she, think about her sins either in general or specifically without calling to mind the blood and the greatness of my mercy, otherwise she will only be confounded. For if self-knowledge and the thought of sin are not seasoned with remembrance of the blood and hope for mercy, the result is bound to be confusion.

Seasoning

Catherine's image of two flavours seasoning each other must come from the Italian '*cucina*' and this is one of her images for keeping together self-knowledge and knowledge of God. God tells her:

*Debba dunque l'anima condire col cognoscimento della mia bontà il cognoscimento di sè, e il cognoscimento di sè col cognoscimento di me.*⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Dial. 66:123

⁵⁹ *Dialogo LXVI*:142-144

⁶⁰ *Dialogo LXVI*:146

The soul, then, should season her self-knowledge with knowledge of my goodness, and her knowledge of me with self-knowledge.

and

*Adunque vedi che e'orazione perfetta non s'acquista con molte parole ma con affetto di desiderio, levandosi in me con cognoscimento di sè, condito insieme l'uno con l'altro.*⁶¹

You see, then, perfect prayer is achieved not with many words but with loving desire, when the soul rises up to me with knowledge of herself, each movement seasoned by the other.

Letter T87 to 'Giovanna Pazza' (Crazy Johanna) October - December 1377)

The House of the Knowledge of Ourselves and of God

In this letter, for the first time, Catherine uses the full expression *questa casa del cognoscimento di noi e di Dio*, (this house of the knowledge of ourselves and of God). This shows a natural progression from the previous letter, in which she had the concept but not the complete expression yet. Now they have come together.

The dating of this letter to Giovanna 'Pazza' coincides with Letter T94 to Matteo Tolomei⁶² in which we first find 'the cell within a cell' - the outer cell representing self-knowledge, the inner one knowledge of God's goodness to us. Other *cella* letters written at this time (November to December 1377)⁶³ develop the theme

⁶¹ *Dialogo LXVI*:148

⁶² T94 to Tolomei is dated November - December 1377

⁶³ Letter T104 to Raymond of Capua and T37 to Niccolò di Ghida.

of the double knowledge of oneself and of God. It is not surprising, therefore, that she now uses the same expression with regard to *casa*.

In the *Dialogue*, too, Catherine speaks, in the words of the Father, of 'the house of self-knowledge and knowledge of me'.⁶⁴

Washed in the Blood

In this house of the knowledge of ourselves and of God, says Catherine, we find the blood (of Christ), in which the face of our soul is washed. Being washed in the blood of Christ was first mentioned by Catherine earlier in 1377.⁶⁵ In that case she spoke of bathing in Christ's blood. To Felice da Massa and Niccolò di Ghida respectively, both letters dated at about the same time as this one, Catherine writes of seeing God's love most especially in the blood of Christ, and being 'nourished by the blood'. A few months later, in mid-1378, Catherine will state that in the cell of self-knowledge we are inebriated by the blood of the gentle and loving Word. And in the *Dialogue*, also in 1378, she says we come to know God's mercy in the blood of his Son.

It does not appear that Catherine makes any distinction between the *cella* and *casa* occurrences with reference to the blood of Christ. Whether it is a matter of bathing in Christ's blood, having the 'face of the soul' washed in it, seeing in it the love of God or drinking it, Catherine seems to use either *cella* or *casa* interchangeably. However, she uses *cella* four times in connection with the blood, and *casa* only twice.

⁶⁴ Dial. 66:123

⁶⁵ In letter T76 to Giovanni di Bindo, dated April to August 1377

Letter T104 to Raymond of Capua (November - December 1377)

The Feet of the Affections⁶⁶

Catherine explains to Raymond that to arrive at love, he must open the eye of his mind in order to understand and see how much we are loved by God. In order to reach this understanding, it is necessary to go on the feet of the affections to the house of true self-knowledge, because in self-knowledge we conceive hatred for our selfish self-love and love for God in response to God's inestimable love, which we find within ourselves.

Walking to a house is a purposeful and deliberate action and we are carried there *on the feet of the affections*. Catherine seems to suggest that we can and must consciously direct our affections Godwards; they will then be transformed into love when we discover God's love. Once inside the house of self-knowledge, it is the same as being in the cell of self-knowledge: we come to the same hatred of our selfish self-love and discovery of God's love in either case.

Letter T119 to Alessa dei Saracini (Advent 1377)

Shut yourself up in the House⁶⁷

At the end of this letter, Alessa is encouraged by Catherine to shut herself up in the house of self-knowledge. It is possible that the image of being shut in was suggested by the fact that Catherine wrote this letter from what she referred to

⁶⁶ Catherine never uses the plural 'affections', with feet, always the singular *affetto*. In English, however, the plural sounds better.

⁶⁷ According to a later letter, T154 to Francesco Tebaldi (Dec 1378 - May 1379) it is *prayer* that locks us into the house of self-knowledge and keeps us there.

as the '*Isola*' (island), which was the promontory on which the fortress of the Salimbeni in the Val d'Orcia was built. Its isolation is increased by the fact that its summit is frequently above the clouds that cover the valley below,⁶⁸ and there are strong winds in the region.⁶⁹ Catherine makes several allusions in this letter to gossip and rumours about her: 'the winds lashing on every side' could well have a literal as well as a figurative meaning. In the face of this, her remark 'let's all be happy in Christ Jesus, shut up in the house of self-knowledge' probably expresses that the house of self-knowledge is a place of refuge and safety for her, where she finds some happiness in the midst of persecution. While the image of locking oneself up in the house of self-knowledge does not seem to occur in any other letters written around this time, it does reappear in a letter dated a year or so later. In a letter to Suora Bartolomea della Seta in Pisa,⁷⁰ Catherine writes about developing a hatred of our selfish self-love. She says we come to this hatred once we have locked ourselves into the house of self-knowledge. Here we discover the ineffable love God has for us; this love drives out selfish self-love.

The image of shutting oneself up in the house of self-knowledge also occurs several times in the *Dialogue*. Most of these, however, occur in connection with awaiting the gift of the Spirit.⁷¹ There are also some other nuances regarding this image which appear in the *Dialogue*. For instance, the Father tells Catherine that sometimes he withdraws his presence 'so that you will shut yourself up in the house of self-knowledge'.⁷² God promises to return later with ever greater light and knowledge of the truth. There is the implication here that spiritual dryness can have the salutary effect of making us go into the house of

⁶⁸ Notes from Noffke, as yet unpublished, on Letter T119.

⁶⁹ Noffke records that Dupré Theseider has a remark in his unpublished notes, that the promontory is almost constantly lashed by winds from nearby Mont'Amiata and adds that Catherine may be alluding to the physical environment as a metaphor of her own isolation and the gossip and rumours pounding at her from every side ... Unpublished notes on the Letters by Noffke.

⁷⁰ T188, written between August 1378 and September 1379. (Unpublished notes: S Noffke).

⁷¹ This will be the next image under discussion

⁷² Dial. 65:121-2

self-knowledge in earnest, presumably in order to discover what is wrong. A little of this does us no harm, Catherine seems to be saying.

The concept is also reversed. When the soul has learned to be strong and patient by persevering in the house of self-knowledge, God takes away spiritual pleasure, knowing she will have the power to endure suffering. In this case Catherine seems to imply that one grows and is strengthened even more when God removes consolation from us, but God will not do this until we are strong enough:

Così l'anima che à aspettato per cognoscimento di sè, per lo modo che detto t'ò, lo so' tornato a lei col fuoco della mia carità.⁷³

So it is with the soul who has waited for me in self-knowledge: I come back to her with the fire of my charity.

Letter T94 to Matteo Tolomei (November - December 1377)

Wait for the Gift of the Spirit

In this letter there are six occurrences of the word *casa*; the image of the *house* of self-knowledge is uppermost in Catherine's mind. Several times Catherine refers to Peter and the other apostles who lost their servile fear and love of consolations and received the Holy Spirit: they were in the house behind closed doors and remained watching and in continual prayer for ten days and then the Holy Spirit came. We ought to do the same, says Catherine: remain in the house with the doors closed in vigil and continual prayer for ten days, and we will receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit, who will illumine us in the truth. This lovely and glorious house, for us, is the house of knowledge of ourselves and of God.

⁷³

Dialogo LXXIV:162

Catherine lays great stress on being behind closed doors, and on the watching and prayer in expectation of the Holy Spirit. The 'ten days' in our case is clearly figurative and therefore symbolic, possibly of a fullness of time or until the Spirit is given. Later, in T94, the ten days are explained as the ten commandments.

'Closing the doors' or locking oneself in is an image Catherine uses for the *casa* occurrences only, never for *cella*. The purpose of keeping the doors closed or locked is continual prayer. The fact that closed doors keeps people out and the prayer in, simply indicates the need for keeping out distractions and not going out to seek them.

In the *Dialogue* there are four references to waiting in the house of self-knowledge for the gift of the Spirit. In the first one, Catherine is explaining⁷⁴ that in order to attain charity one must dwell constantly in the cell of self-knowledge. As we come to know ourselves, we know better God's mercy in the blood of Christ. Thus we draw God's love to us with our love. We must also exercise ourselves in tearing out every perverse desire, spiritual or material, while we are hidden away within the house of self-knowledge.⁷⁵ This is what Peter and the other disciples did, the Father reminds Catherine, for Peter wept after he had sinned in denying my Son.

In the same chapter, God describes for Catherine how the soul behaves when it comes to perfection. When it feels that God has withdrawn, it does not run back but remains locked in the house of self-knowledge. 'There, with lively faith, she waits for the coming of the Holy Spirit, for me, the flame of love watching in constant, humble prayer.'⁷⁶

Referring to the fact that imperfections are lost and the perfection of love is learned in the house of self-knowledge, Catherine says that this happens in holy

⁷⁴ Dial. 63:118

⁷⁵ In this paragraph Catherine uses *cella* and *casa* interchangeably. However, when she speaks of being locked in, she consistently uses *casa*. Being locked into the house is always connected with awaiting the spirit.

⁷⁶ Dial. 63:120

prayer, made inside the house of self-knowledge. This is what happened to the disciples and Peter who remained inside the house in watching and prayer.⁷⁷

The other comparison with Peter and the disciples speaks of awaiting God's providence in the house of self-knowledge⁷⁸ with the lamp of faith as the disciples did. They persevered in watching and constant humble prayer until the coming of the Holy Spirit. They they could go out fearlessly to proclaim the teaching of the word. This, says Catherine, is the sign that they had attained perfect love. It will be the same for us if we wait in the house of self-knowledge in constant, humble prayer. We receive a share in God's power and God's love, which is the Holy Spirit. Without abandoning the house of self-knowledge, we are able to come out of ourselves in perfect, free love.

Christ the Bridge⁷⁹

A major image for Catherine is that of Christ the Bridge. Although it is not one of the primary images connected to the house of self-knowledge, she does indeed make a connection. To begin to walk in the way of truth is, for Catherine, 'to put both feet on the first stair of the bridge'.⁸⁰ The two feet, she explains, are affection and desire and with them we begin to walk the way of truth, across the bridge which is the crucified body of Christ for 'he has made a stairway of his body.'⁸¹ Later, Catherine describes the soul who reaches the next stage along the bridge by staying in the house of self-knowledge:

⁷⁷ cf Dial. 65:123

⁷⁸ Dial. 73:136

⁷⁹ Christ the Bridge is the major image of the *Dialogue*, comprising chapters 26 - 87. There is a very close correlation between the concept of self-knowledge and the image of the bridge. This section, however, focuses on the image of the *house* of self-knowledge, which Catherine does not link very specifically or very often with the bridge imagery.

⁸⁰ Dial. 49:100

⁸¹ Dial. 49:100

But the soul who has entered in truth into the house of self-knowledge, practising perfect prayer and rousing herself from the imperfect love that goes with imperfect prayer ... receives me (i.e. God) in loving affection. She seeks to draw to herself the milk of my tenderness from the breast of the teaching of Christ crucified.⁸²

This soul has moved from the first to the second stair of the bridge, or from the feet to the open side of Christ. She has done so by learning more perfect love and prayer in the house of self-knowledge.

2.3.4 1378

*Letter T67 to the Convento di Passignano di Valle Ombrosa
(January - March 1378)*

Furnishing the House

Catherine makes a reference in this letter to the true religious furnishing the *casa dell'anima sua* (house of his soul). Since it is a question of furnishing, *casa* is obviously preferable to *cell*. However, she reverts here to the earlier expression: 'house of the soul' rather than 'house of knowledge of oneself and of God'.

⁸²

Dial. 72:134

Letter T299 to Ristoro Canigiani (Late June - early July 1378)

Adorning the House

Ristoro Canigiani was a captain of the *Parte Guelfa* in Florence and his was one of the houses looted and burnt in the anti-Guelph riot which took place on 22 June 1378.⁸³ On the following day, ordinances were passed excluding magnates from public office and Canigiani was declared a magnate.⁸⁴ In her letter to Ristoro, probably written soon after the burning of his house, Catherine urges detachment, reminding him not to give his attention and money solely to decorating his home, because it can be destroyed. Instead, this experience should serve as a reminder to him to adorn the house of his soul with true solid virtue. This adornment no one can take away without his will.

The tone of the entire letter is brisk and direct. Catherine writes affectionately, calling Ristoro her 'dearest brother' but she wastes no time in sympathy at his loss; rather she reminds him not to set his heart and will on worldly things; 'everything in the world passes away like the wind, and we can't keep anything the way we want it.'⁸⁵

⁸³ It was in this uprising that the mob sought out Catherine to kill her. However, when she faced her would-be murderers, they withdrew, to her bitter disappointment. (Gardner 1907:239-241).

⁸⁴ Gardner 1907:239, 242

⁸⁵ Noffke: unpublished notes on Letter T299.

Letter T266 to Ristoro Canigiani (15 August - September 1378)

Every Virtue acquired in the House of Self-Knowledge

This is one of a series of letters written by Catherine to Ristoro Canigiani about this time. A previous one⁸⁶ dated early August 1378 indicates that Ristoro was undergoing a conversion and Catherine makes proposals in her letter for reforming his life. These include an injunction to recollect himself sometimes in order to get to know himself and the generosity of God's goodness, which has worked and continues to work so gently in him.

In this letter, T266, Catherine writes to him of the 'house of self-knowledge', telling him that every virtue and grace is acquired in this house. It is in the house of self-knowledge that the soul finds the riches of contrition for faults and the abundance of God's mercy.

This is a constant in Catherine's spirituality: that we acquire the virtues in the house of self-knowledge. It is through perseverance in staying 'at home', Catherine repeats in the *Dialogue*, that the virtues are conceived and we share in God's power.⁸⁷

The three virtues which Catherine most often connects with the house of self-knowledge are humility, patience and charity. It is these that we learn in the house of self-knowledge. However, near the end of the *Dialogue* she also writes of obedience and the house of self-knowledge.

Therefore those who are perfectly obedient rise above themselves and take control of their selfish sensuality. By rising above their emotions with a lively

⁸⁶ Letter T258

⁸⁷ Dial. 74:136

faith, they have set contempt in their soul's house as a servant to chase away the enemy of self love.⁸⁸

The 'contempt' here must be the same as the hatred for our selfish sensuality so often referred to by Catherine. It is noteworthy that she uses the 'servant' image again: the servant for Catherine is very often the Holy Spirit. It makes good sense theologically that the gift of the Holy Spirit does in fact chase away self-love, helping us to rise above ourselves and our selfish sensuality.⁸⁹

Letter T83 to Conte di Conte of Florence (August 1378 - February 1380)

Humility

Catherine encourages this young man⁹⁰ to be constant and persevering until death, so that neither the devil, nor creatures nor the fragility of the flesh can make him turn aside. We arrive at perfection after much exercise in virtue, longing desire and profound humility. This humility is acquired in the house of self-knowledge, together with continual, humble and faithful prayer and many struggles with creatures, with ourselves and our own perverse will.

⁸⁸ Dial. 342. The 'enemy of self-love': this is an oppositive genitive and the sense is 'the enemy, self-love'.

⁸⁹ This is the Pauline doctrine in Gal 5:16-26.

⁹⁰ This disciple may have been a member of one of the religious confraternities devoted to good works; later in life he was in charge of a prison in Florence. This letter indicates that he was unsettled; according to an early manuscript, he had recently fallen into sin. (Foster and Ronayne 1980:218).

Letter T263 to Montagna da Narni (September - December 1378)

Light and Fire

Beginning with the Augustinian and Thomistic axiom, so dear to Catherine, that knowledge precedes and leads to love,⁹¹ she says that knowledge is a *lume* (light) that leads us to the *fuoco* (fire) of love; we cannot have one without the other. Where is this light of knowledge and fire of love to be found? In the house of self-knowledge. We find within ourselves this gentle and loving fire, because God, in love, has created us in the divine image and likeness and recreated us in grace through the blood of Christ crucified. With this light of knowledge let us go then, continues Catherine, into the house of self-knowledge and there we will be nourished by divine love, seeing ourselves so inestimably loved by God.

Letter T213 to Suora Daniella of Orvieto (October 1378)

Discernment

A new theme appears in this long, rambling but rather important letter. It is what Catherine calls *discrezione*, usually translated as discernment. From the internal evidence of the letter, it is clear that the young Suora Daniella has done so much penance and fasting that she has become ill. Catherine gives much attention in the letter to the place of penitential practices in our lives: these, she says, will be governed by discernment. 'This is what discernment dictates,' she writes, 'that penance is to be used as an instrument, not as the primary thing we set our hearts on.'⁹² Suor Daniella is to take heed of the counsel of others, eat

⁹¹ See Chapter 4, Section 2.1.2 Thomistic Foundations: Intellect and Truth.

⁹² Translation by Noffke: unpublished notes on Letter T213.

the food she needs and get better. Discerning persons, Catherine explains, are wise in their perception of their own and other people's needs.

Catherine states that it is necessary to have discernment, coming as it does from knowledge of ourselves and of God. In the house of this double knowledge are the roots of discernment. The principal function of discernment, says Catherine, is that, having seen what we owe and to whom, we render this promptly.⁹³ This description shows that Catherine's understanding of discernment is twofold. It is the ability to make a right judgement and the ability to carry out what has been discerned. This meaning of discernment goes as far back as Cassian⁹⁴ and appears also in the twelfth century writings of Richard of St Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux.⁹⁵ The first rule of discernment, Catherine reiterates, is the rule of giving God the honour, of giving our neighbours kindness and of giving ourselves hatred for vice and for our selfish sensuality. Once discernment has given us direction in charity for our neighbours, it directs us in that which keeps charity alive in us and nurtures it, that is, continual, humble prayer. It is the house of self-knowledge which is our place of prayer - one which we take with us wherever we go. In this place, this house, God dwells with us in grace⁹⁶ and we ought to make it a place of prayer and of holy desire. Our prayer should be continual and fervent, and we should be inebriated by the blood of Christ which will burn and consume our own will: this is prayer, rather than simply getting through a great number of Our Fathers.

⁹³ This is not far from the words of Jesus: cf Matt. 22:21: Pay Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and God what belongs to God.

⁹⁴ The writer is indebted to Diana Villegas for information and references in this section. The subject of Villegas' doctoral thesis (1986, see bibliography) was a comparison of Catherine's teaching on discernment with that of Ignatius of Loyola. The Cassian reference occurs in *Collationes sanctorum patrum*, 1, 2, 7.

⁹⁵ Richard of St Victor: Benjamin Minor: 67-72 and Bernard of Clairvaux: *Sermones super Cantica Canticozum*: 49, 5.

⁹⁶ cf Jn. 14:23

It is in chapter 9 - 11 of the *Dialogue*⁹⁷, however, that Catherine gives a succinct and refined account of the doctrine of discernment which forms the subject of Letter T213.

The Tree of Love with its Branches of Discernment

Catherine's well-known image for discernment is the 'tree of love', which she describes both in Letter T213 and chapter 10 of the *Dialogue*. She asks us to 'imagine a circle traced on the ground, and in its centre a tree sprouting with a shoot grafted into its side.'⁹⁸ This is the tree of love, since the soul is a tree made for love and living only by love. The circle in which the tree grows is true knowledge of self, knowledge that is joined to God, who like the circle, has neither beginning nor end. One can go round and round within this circle, finding neither end nor beginning, yet never leaving the circle. If knowledge of yourself were isolated from God, there would be no full circle, but only a beginning in self-knowledge which would end in confusion. The knowledge of yourself and of God within you, is grounded in the soil⁹⁹ of true humility. The branches of the tree represent discernment, the many-fragranced blossoms are the virtues, and the fruit, which is seasoned with discernment, is grace for the soul herself and blessing for her neighbours.

By building discernment into this complex/image of the tree of love, Catherine shows the essential place of discernment in spiritual life and growth. Villegas states that, by communicating in an intricate pattern of interwoven images, Catherine shows that the practice of *discrezione* 'is an essential part of the journey to holiness.'¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ There is a further elaboration of the principles of discernment in chapters 71, 97 and 106 though in these chapters the term '*discrezione*' is not used.

⁹⁸ Dial. 10:41

⁹⁹ *Humus* in Latin

¹⁰⁰ Villegas 1986:9

It is worth noting that Catherine's teaching on discernment is in the *discretio* tradition as understood by writers such as Cassian, Richard of St Victor and Bernard. This is in contrast to the *discretio spirituum* (discernment of spirits) tradition which is that of Ignatius of Loyola. It is extremely unlikely, says Villegas, that Catherine influenced Ignatius' thinking regarding discernment.

Letter T315 to Pietro da Milano (Late December 1378 - Very early 1379)

Open the Window of the Soul

Catherine writes to Pietro of Milan to open freely the window of the will so that the sun can enter the house of the soul. Then he will render just honour to God, and glory and praise to the Word of the Father.

Letter T154 to Francesco Tebaldi (December 1378 - May 1379)

This letter is a high point in Catherine's doctrine on the house of self-knowledge, which is the theme of the letter. In developing this theme, she retrieves most of her basic principles regarding the house of self-knowledge and concentrates particularly on prayer. As may be expected, there are fifteen occurrences of *casa* in this letter. There is also one occurrence of *cella* and it is used in exactly the same sense as *casa*.

The theme of the 'house of self-knowledge' appears immediately in the opening greeting: Catherine writes to Francesco Tebaldi that:

*con desiderio di vedervi abitare nella casa del cognoscimento di voi, nel quale cognoscimento acquisterete ogni virtù; e senza questo vivreste in ogni male e senza veruna ragione.*¹⁰¹

I long to see you living in the house of self-knowledge, where you will learn every virtue. Without such knowledge you would be living in every sort of evil, irrationally.

The Resting House along the way

Catherine describes how to find the house of self-knowledge and live there. We pilgrim travellers find it along the road of the teaching of Christ crucified. The light along the road is faith. By this light we notice the house on the side of the road. It is a house of holy self-knowledge, a resting place. We enter into it by entering into ourselves.

Once inside, the first thing we discover is our chief enemy: our selfish sensuality, whose vassals are the world and the devil.¹⁰² These all have many servants, waiting to ensnare us and make us stumble. However, if we have the discernment to do something about it, reason will take the light of faith, go into the house and take control of selfish sensuality by killing it with the knife of hatred for sensuality and love of virtue.

Once selfish sensuality is dead, its companions are defeated too. With the enemies removed, we now begin to grow, within the house of self-knowledge, in the light of truth and in an 'immeasurable, indescribable, incomprehensible fire that burns and consumes whatever might be opposed to reason in this house.'

¹⁰¹ Sentence 3

¹⁰² Catherine is referring to the classic trilogy of the world, the flesh and the devil. Her specification of sensuality in this sense is of particular interest; she clearly does not see sensuality ('the flesh') as evil in itself. (SN) It is also noteworthy that Catherine sees 'selfish sensuality', not this 'world', as the chief enemy. If our selfish sensuality has been conquered by reason, the other two are no longer any threat to us.

Prayer¹⁰³

It is in the house of self-knowledge that we learn to pray, to live in continual, faithful prayer. The Father tells Catherine:

By the very fact that her eye is watching in the knowledge of me and of herself, the soul is praying continuously. This is the prayer of a good and holy will, and this is continuous prayer. But she watches also in acts of prayer - prayer, I mean, that is made at the regular times ordained by holy Church.¹⁰⁴

Prayer made in the house of self-knowledge draws together, for Catherine, nearly all the main elements of her spirituality. It is done in faith through the power of Christ's blood, and she becomes clothed in the fire of God's love. It even enables her to be fed by the body and blood of Christ through the intensity of her desire: Catherine distinguishes here between receiving communion 'sacramentally' and receiving it 'virtually'. Communicating through holy desire is the fruit of prayer made in the house of self-knowledge.¹⁰⁵ In this prayer, the soul, the Father tells Catherine:

... remains watching, gazing with her mind's eye into the teaching of my Truth. She is humbled, for in constant prayer (that is, in holy and true desire) she has come to know herself, and in herself she has come to know my affectionate charity.

In speaking of the sturdiness of the house in Letter 154 to Francesco Tebaldi, Catherine slips once into identifying the house of self-knowledge with the self by using a first-person pronoun: 'And what is it that makes us strong and

¹⁰³ In this letter, Catherine develops her doctrine on prayer in much more detail, which warrants it being dealt with a third time in this section on the 'house of self-knowledge'. Another letter devoted almost entirely to prayer is Letter T353 to the three Neapolitan women. (See section on 'cella', 1379.)

¹⁰⁴ Dial. 63:120

¹⁰⁵ cf Dial. 66:123

enduring?' In the next sentence, however, she 'reinstates the distinction'.¹⁰⁶ Her answer to her own question is: 'Continual humble prayer made in the house of self-knowledge and of knowledge of God's goodness to us.'

The house of self-knowledge has humility as its foundation and, once in the house, we are clothed in fire, the fire of divine love when we see how indescribably much we are loved by God. Then come tears, according to where our love is directed. Prayer, then, is founded in humility and is a response to our awareness of God's love. It engages our whole being: we burn with love and our tears flow according to the direction and intensity of our love.

Catherine then describes three ways of prayer: continual, vocal and mental prayer. Continual prayer is true, holy desire. It is desire for God and for God's honour in all we do for ourselves or our neighbours. *Questo desiderio è sempre orare* (such desire is constantly praying). From this continual desire we receive a calm tranquillity within. Catherine explains that this holy desire is what St Paul means when he invites us to 'pray without ceasing.'¹⁰⁷

Another sort of prayer is vocal prayer, the purpose of which, says Catherine, is to lead to mental prayer. She assures Francesco that this will indeed happen, if vocal prayer is grounded in continual holy desire and if he perseveres in practising it. She adds in this letter:

E con prudenzia vada: che quando si sente essere visitato nella mente sua, ponga termine alle parole.

And walk wisely: when you sense that your spirit is being visited (by God), put words aside.

Catherine notes that the exception is when he prays the Divine Office.

¹⁰⁶ Noffke's notes point this out.

¹⁰⁷ 1 Thes. 5:17

Finally there is mental prayer, which she describes in the same letter:

...levando la mente e il desiderio suo sopra di sè a una considerazione dell'affetto della carità Dio e di sè medesimo; dove cognosce la dottrina della verità gustando il latte della divina dolcezza, il quale latte esce dalle mammelle della carità per lo mezzo di Cristo cruciato e passionato. Ciò è che non si diletta di stare altrove che in croce con lui.

...lifting the mind and desire above oneself to consideration of the movement of charity for God and for oneself. There you will come to know the teaching of truth when we taste the milk of divine sweetness flowing from the breasts of charity, with Christ suffering and crucified as its mediator. I mean, you will find no pleasure in being anywhere but on the cross with him.

Self-knowledge and knowledge of God: Catherine's definition

The fruit and effect of prayer is the unitive state, says Catherine, where you become so united with God that you see yourself no longer in reference to yourself but to God, and your neighbours in reference to God, and God in terms of the infinite divine goodness. This serves as a good definition or description of what Catherine means by knowledge of oneself and of God. The unitive state which Catherine describes here is precisely that: a state of being in which one remains as one lives in a house, constantly. Therefore she says that it is prayer that locks us into the house of self-knowledge and keeps us there.¹⁰⁸ But the experience of being in this house is not static: we come more and more to recognize within ourselves the extravagant fire of God's love. As we continue to live in this house, it becomes filled and beautified with the virtues.

At this point, Catherine once reverts to *cella* as she points out to Francesco that he can take this cell about with him wherever he goes on the island of Gorgona, where his monastery is. This one occurrence of *cella* in a letter so filled with

¹⁰⁸

In an earlier letter, T119 to Alessa dei Saracini, (Nov - Dec 1377) Catherine first mentioned locking oneself up in the house of self-knowledge. Here she explains what she means.

casa imagery is conditioned by its parallel to the physical cell. Francesco does not have a *casa*. She also encourages the monk to stay in his physical cell as much as obedience allows. She is clearly suggesting that remaining within one's physical cell fosters the ability to live in the house of self-knowledge.

2.3.5 1379

Letter T334 to Bonaventura, Cardinal of Padua (March 1379)

Darkness or Light

In this letter, written to the cardinal while he was in Florence, Catherine draws a contrast between those who live in serious sin and those who dwell in the house of self-knowledge. Those in sin are like mad, crazy people who seek death and darkness and have left behind the light of the knowledge of God's goodness, given to them through love and grace, not because they deserve it. Those in the house of self-knowledge are humble. Catherine restates the original meaning of self-knowledge: we come to recognize that of ourselves we are not and we are therefore not able to grow proud, since we have our very existence from God.

Letter T351 to Urban VI (31 May 1379)

How Receive the Gift of the Spirit?

This letter is obviously written at Pentecost. It bears some similarity to Letter T94 to Matteo Tolomei, dated November-December two years earlier and further develops the theme of waiting for the gift of the Spirit. Having spoken of the apostles who kept vigil with unceasing prayer in the upper room, Catherine says that we too can receive the Holy Spirit by remaining in the house of self-knowledge. This keeps the soul humble, not over-elated by joy or impatient in sorrow, but balanced, mature and patient.¹⁰⁹ In the house of self-knowledge, there is the same vigilant prayer as there was in the upper room and our understanding must be watching to know the truth of God's gentle will. We then receive the gift of continual prayer, that is, holy desire, leading to the practice of virtue. Near the conclusion of the letter, Catherine again urges the pope to withdraw into the house of self-knowledge and so receive the fullness of the Spirit.

Letter T358 to Andrea Vanni, the Painter, while he was 'Captain of the People' in Siena (September 1379)

The Good Ruler first rules well over Himself

Tailoring her remarks to her addressee, as Catherine does so well, she paints for Andrea a picture of the good, just ruler. He is one who will rule over himself

¹⁰⁹

It is possible that this is a glimpse into the more mature Catherine. Intense and fiery as she was by nature, she seems at least to have come to value a more balanced, even approach to the vicissitudes of social and especially ecclesial life.

first. He does this by the light of reason, maintaining right order in all aspects of his life.

Catherine proceeds to describe a just man who controls his sensual appetite for worldly status, honours and wealth, who does not allow himself to fall into unchastity, and who is humble, faithful and benevolent. He renders due honour to God and charity to his neighbour. Such a person's place, says Catherine, is the house of knowledge of himself and of God's goodness to him.

Letter T26 to Suora Eugenia, Catherine's Niece (November - December 1379)

The Food of Angels

This letter is very similar to Letter 353 to the three Neapolitan women.¹¹⁰ It is noteworthy that Catherine uses both *cella* and *casa* as images of self-knowledge, even in the same sentence. She invites Eugenia to flee to her physical cell, away from worldly company which can come between us and our Creator. However, she commands Eugenia to remain always in the house of self-knowledge where she will find the food of angels: God's fiery desire for us.

Letter T369 to Stefano Maconi (20 December 1379 - Jan 1380)

Catherine exclaims how pleasing and useful virtue is. And it is acquired through prayer made in the house of self-knowledge, where we find the fire of God's love and our own wretchedness, ignorance and ingratitude. We also reach the vein of humility through the awareness of God's measureless love for us, which we find in the house of self-knowledge.

¹¹⁰ cf the Section on *cella*, 1379 letter T353.

Letter T102 to Raymond of Capua (December 1379 - February 1380)

Spouse of the Truth

In one of her last letters, probably her second-last to Raymond, Catherine speaks of the house of self-knowledge for the last time. She is urging him to be a spouse of the truth and asks where this might take place. It happens, she says, in the house of self-knowledge, when we come to know that we have our being from God by grace, not by right.

This is the fundamental truth on which the whole of her doctrine of self-knowledge is built. She began with it and now returns to reaffirm it: God is the One who is; she is the one who is not, because she, like each of us, does not hold life, or being, except by receiving it from God. God's goodness, however, is ineffable and incomprehensible. God creates us in love and recreates us in mercy through the blood of Christ. Loving us with a love that is *pazzo* (crazy), God wants only our love. We are called to love God without limit or measure, while loving others within limits. By living in the house of self-knowledge, we come to know who and what we are as creatures, as rational beings called to walk the way of truth, as members of the human family who cannot walk this way except on the two feet of love for God and love for others. We come to know ourselves as individuals, with our unique blend of strengths and weaknesses, responses and reactions, likes and dislikes, beauty and distortion. Our beauty reflects the loveliness, creativity and love of God, in whose image we are made; it is sometimes marred by the ugliness of selfish self-love, which we gradually come to recognize in ourselves and reject. Rather than wasting the time 'lent'¹¹¹ us by God in superficiality and lack of awareness, we are invited

¹¹¹

Dial. 46:95

to live life on a deeper level of awareness of the self, of God and of the others who are part of the web of relationships within which we each live. This is locking ourselves up in the house of self-knowledge as we await the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then we are ready to go out in freedom and love to proclaim God's word in truth in a great hunger for souls, which is the crowning glory of spiritual life and love.

2.4 Summary

The scripture texts Catherine uses in connection with the house of self-knowledge express dimensions of the inner self which do not come to the forefront in the *cella* symbol. The first is Catherine's sense of the diversity and variety in spiritual experience. The second is her concern that people called to be people of prayer, (she is thinking especially of priests and religious), should not desecrate themselves by worldly concerns and neglect of spirituality. A further text is used as a warning to beginners on the spiritual journey: after conversion, we must 'fill the house' with virtue. If we leave it empty, the demons we have expelled will return.

The discussion of the scripture texts used in relation to *casa* leads to a consideration of the larger question of Catherine's hermeneutic of scripture. Since scripture texts are closely woven into Catherine's entire vocabulary, it is worthwhile looking at the sources of her scriptural knowledge and at her approach to interpretation.

Tracing the chronological development of the *casa* image as it occurs in Catherine's writings, one finds that Catherine arrives at the expression *la casa del cognoscimento di sé* (the house of self-knowledge) only in 1377, a year later than she speaks of *la cella del cognoscimento di sè*. From 1377 on Catherine uses the two symbols of the cell and the house of self-knowledge in very similar ways, sometimes almost interchangeably. However, the *casa* symbol develops

some important dimensions not present in *cella*. Catherine often urges people to shut themselves up in the house of self-knowledge. The purpose of this is not introspection or simply withdrawal from society. The specific purpose of locking the doors and shutting oneself in, is to await the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit's gift includes that we grow in the virtues, especially humility, patience and charity.

A final important aspect of the *casa del cognoscimento di sé* symbol is that it forges the link between prayer and ministry. While the focus regarding *cella* is on the mystical knowledge of myself in God, *casa* has windows which are to be flung open so that the sun can come pouring in. It also has a door. Outside the door hangs a lamp which we take with us when we leave the house, spreading the light we have received in the house of self-knowledge. This is a graphic illustration of the motto of the Dominican Order to which Catherine, as a *Mantellata*, belonged: *Contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere*. (To contemplate and to give to others the fruits of contemplation.)

2.5 Conclusion

A year after Catherine begins using the expression *la cella del cognoscimento di sé*, she expands the symbol from the cell to *la casa del cognoscimento di sé*, without dropping *la cella*. The symbol of the house of self-knowledge brings important new dimensions to the expression of self-knowledge. The first of these is that Catherine encourages us to shut ourselves up in the house of self-knowledge in order to receive the gift of the Spirit. The other is that, in the house of self-knowledge, we can throw open the windows, i.e. open ourselves to the sunshine of God's presence and love and allow it to warm and light up the house. We also leave the house for charity or ministry and take with us the light we ourselves have received in the house of self-knowledge. The *casa* symbol, then, with its windows and doors, is clearly wider and freer than the *cella*. There is more space and more freedom of movement. While this remains the place

where we are *a casa* (at home) with ourselves and with God, the symbol represents a maturing and broadening out of Catherine's sense of knowing herself in God.

CHAPTER 5.3

3. La Città dell'Anima

3.1 Introduction

Catherine's image of *la città dell'anima* (the city of the soul) is the third symbol she uses for the self and for self-knowledge. Her use of *la città dell'anima* is much less extensive than *la cella* and *la casa del cognoscimento di sé*: most of the occurrences of *la città dell'anima* appear in 1378. In this year she uses the symbol forty-five times in her correspondence and the *Dialogue*, and in one of the *Prayers* from that year. In 1377 the *città* symbol occurs six times; in all other years there are only one or two occurrences.¹

The high number of *città dell'anima* occurrences in 1378 points to a development in Catherine's sense of self and of self-knowledge. The city of the soul is a mature concept in her writing and takes several years to unfold fully, though the few occurrences in the early years of her writing indicate a growing awareness in Catherine of an opening out of the self. As we go down into the well, the cell, to find ourselves in God, we also begin to move outwards in ever-widening circles as love and ministry call us forth.

¹ Appendix II showing comparative number of occurrences of the three symbols for self-knowledge: *cella*, *casa* and *città*.

There is a natural progression in Catherine's imagery from the *cell* of self-knowledge to the *house* of self-knowledge to the *city* of the soul.² *Cella - casa - città*. The progressive enlargement of the symbol reflects an enlargement in Catherine's horizons of self-knowledge. It represents her development from a private, isolationist spirituality to the ecclesial and social awareness so characteristic of her mature spirituality. It symbolizes the clearly-defined, integrated self that knows inner harmony as well as harmony in relationships. The *città* dimension also expresses something of Catherine's views on authority and poverty.

There is, in the *città* imagery, a sense of the wholeness of the self, particularly in the imagery of the wonderful harmonious music which comes from the integrated self. Catherine feels well-protected against the enemies of the soul, expressing this in her imagery of the walls and the gates: an important element in self-knowledge. She is very clear about the choices to be made regarding who and what will be allowed to enter and who will be prohibited. The self is alert and on guard against any attack on truth, love, justice and other values. As she writes to Bartolomeo Smeducci:³

Once clothed and armored with virtue and the sword of hatred and of love,⁴ you will shed slavish fear and take possession of the city of your soul.

It is essential to be in possession of the city of one's soul, using the powers of the mind, especially memory and understanding, to defend the values and virtues which give form and shape to the self. If the will allows the enemies of the soul to enter the city, great misery ensues.⁵

² Although Catherine never uses the expression '*la città del cognoscimento di sè* (the city of self-knowledge) there are some parallels and connected images which tie the 'city' image closely to those of 'cell' and 'house'. One of the parallels is the prominence in all three of the three faculties of the soul: memory, understanding and will. These are of special importance in the 'city' of the soul as a form of the realization of self-knowledge.

³ Letter DT52 (Gardner I), Noffke 1988:160

⁴ This is the double-edged sword of hatred of selfish self-centeredness and true love of God, of self and of others.

⁵ Dial. 144:301

3.2 The Three main Gates: Memory, Understanding, Will

Catherine's 'city of the soul' is, predictably, a medieval walled city with many gates, although there are three main ones: memory, understanding and will. Of these, the will holds firm and guards on behalf of the others. The guard at this gate, free choice, can say yes and no as he pleases to anyone who wants to enter the city and no enemy has the power to open this gate.⁶ On occasion, Catherine refers to the ruler of the city as 'lady freedom';⁷ she is the one who consents to or refuses entry.

Enemies beat at the other two main gates: understanding is battered by spiritual darkness and memory may seem to be bereft of any thought of God.⁸ At times all the other senses of the body may be besieged. There is little that can be done to prevent these attacks; the will, however, is proof against unwanted invasion in a way that the intellect and memory are not.

3.3 Defending the City

The city is in constant danger of attack by the enemy and must be defended by the knights who are alert and well-armed.⁹ At the city gate is the dog of conscience, which barks when enemies approach.¹⁰ Another guardian of the city of the soul is hope, which defends the city against the confusion of

⁶ Dial. 144:299 and 301

⁷ Noffke 1988:123

⁸ Dial. 144:301

⁹ Noffke 1988:123

¹⁰ Dial. 131:263

despairing at the dead weight of sin, for hope places on the scales with sin the price of the blood of Christ.¹¹

Much of the imagery has to do with the defence of the city - an indication of the importance of defending the self when necessary and of knowing our boundaries. The person with a strong sense of being loved, as Catherine was, and of the values to be defended at all costs will erect strong walls and gates which are well defended. Catherine urges her addressees not to be afraid of 'the devils who might come to pillage and take over'¹² the city of the soul. We must be ready to fight, like knights drawn up on the battlefield, our weapon the sword of divine charity. The enemies of the city of the soul are the flesh, the world and the devil.¹³

3.3.1 If the Lord does not guard the City...

Catherine frequently paraphrases the second verse of Psalm 127:

If the Lord does not guard the city
in vain does its guard keep watch.

In several letters¹⁴ Catherine says that those who guard the city are wearing themselves out for nothing unless God is guarding the city. Catherine is well aware of human frailty; if we trust in our own strength the city will fall to the onslaughts of the enemy.

There are some overtones of Augustine's 'city of God' in the symbol, but, unlike Augustine, Catherine has not two cities but one, which is being fought over by

¹¹ Letter T343 to Raymond of Capua.

¹² Letter T342 to Robert of Napoli and Letters T144 (DT 34), dated June and July of 1375 respectively, have practically the same sentence about not fearing the enemies of the city.

¹³ Letters T114 to Agnolino di Giovanni Salimbeni and T71 to Monna Bartolomea d'Andrea Mei da Siena.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Letters T168 (DT53); T171 (DT60) and T207 (DT68).

the good and bad forces in and around us. Usually Catherine depicts the city as occupied by the good and the godly, while it is in danger of attack by the evil forces. Occasionally she turns it around, as in a letter to Frate Bartolomeo Dominici¹⁵ in which she says:

Don't give any leverage to the wicked devil, who wants to prevent so much good and doesn't want to be thrown out of his city.

Catherine is well aware of the ongoing struggle in us as the flesh struggles against the spirit.

3.4 The Good Ruler rules well over Self first

In a letter to Bernabò Visconti, tyrant of Milan, Catherine takes up the theme of ruling the city of the soul. She makes the point that the 'most satisfying, most gratifying, most mighty lordship there is, [is] lordship over our own soul'.¹⁶ There are people, she says, who have gained the victory over cities or fortresses, but if they have failed to conquer themselves and their enemies, they have nothing at all. In the city of the soul where God dwells there is peace, tranquillity and consolation. The city is strong, so that no-one can seize it without permission from the ruler. Catherine then urges Visconti to liberate the city of his soul from the slavery of deadly sin. She is referring to the fact that he is in violent opposition to the pope; she wants him to be a 'faithful son of the church'.¹⁷

This letter is an example of Catherine's contribution to social and political justice. She is very aware that authority carries with it the need for a high degree of personal responsibility, which begins with the ability to govern oneself. The ruler is responsible to God. If he rules with integrity and strength, God dwells in the

¹⁵ Letter T204, written between Feb. 26 and April 12, 1376.

¹⁶ Noffke 1988:68. (Letter T28, DT 17, dated Jan. - April 1376)

¹⁷ Noffke 1988:71

city of the soul. Catherine often draws this parallel between ruling oneself and holding temporal power.

3.5 Surrender the City of the Soul

There is One to whom the city of the soul must in fact be handed over, surrendered: Catherine urges that the city be surrendered to God, burning with the fire Christ has set alight. If we do not surrender of our own accord, we will be consumed by the fire of his love. Surrender the city of your soul, writes Catherine to Cardinal Corsini of Florence, who is in Avignon to support the Florentine cause in the conflict with the pope. He represents a city and Catherine uses the image of the city of the soul, which:

...if it does not surrender to anything else, it will have to surrender to fire - for Christ has set fire everywhere, and there is nowhere you can turn, physically or spiritually, without encountering the fire of love.¹⁶

This is a surrender that brings the greatest peace when the city of the soul will be consumed in love.

3.6 A jubilant sound: The harmony of integration

When the will is in control, the whole self is integrated in harmony, symbolized by the music that can be heard from within the city:

Tutti i sentimenti loro fanno uno suono soavissimo, il quale esce dentro della città de l'anima ... L'affetto de l'anima fa allora uno giubilo e uno suono, temperate e

¹⁶ Noffke 1988:195. The reference to Christ setting fire everywhere is in Lk 11:49. Various meanings have been attached to this 'fire' that Jesus says he has come to bring to the earth, among others, the gift of the Spirit. Catherine's interpretation is typical of her: it is the fire of love.

*acordate le corde con prudenzia e lume, acordandole tutte a uno suono, cioè a gloria e loda del nome mio.*¹⁹

All their senses make one sweet sound, which comes forth from the centre of the city of the soul ... The soul's movements, then, make a jubilant sound, its chords tempered and harmonized with prudence and light, all of them melting into one sound, the glorification and praise of my name.²⁰

Catherine interweaves two images in a complex interplay of meaning. One is that of the city and its gates, within which there are smaller gates or wickets which open and shut more easily than the massive city gates. The other is the image of musical instruments, which have smaller and larger openings (gates and wickets) to make music. Catherine uses the word '*organo*' in its various medieval meanings.²¹ One was instrumentality: the senses are organs of the soul. All musical instruments, including the human voice, are also organs; and then there is the instrument we know as the organ. Catherine distinguishes between the 'great chords of the soul's powers' and the 'small chords of the body's senses and organs', expressing the harmony of the whole person. The music of a person in harmony is so pleasant that even the wicked, who emit a dead sound, cannot help being aware of it and many are so attracted that they 'leave death behind and come to life'.²² The person who is alive is like an organ peeling forth in wonderful music.

Catherine makes this image even more complex by introducing a third element: fishing. The attraction exercised over people who are drawn by the music is also referred to as 'fishing' in the sense that they are caught. The great 'maestro' was the gentle loving Word, who made a sweet sound on the cross and 'caught' humanity. All the saints have 'gone fishing' in this way and we are all called to learn to play the instrument which is the self, given us by God's providence.

¹⁹ Dialogo 419 - 420

²⁰ Dial. 147:310

²¹ See Dial. 144:299 - 300

²² Dial. 147:310

This image also reflects Catherine's medieval view of society in which each person has an appointed, God-given place. Harmony is achieved when each keeps this appointed place. Thus, while Catherine has a strong conviction of the dignity of the human being created in God's image, she does not have the modern concept of social equality.

As we learn to play our individual instruments, we will have inner harmony and be part of the great symphony of the Church by which we 'fish' for others who are caught for Christ. As Catherine herself discovered, inner harmony and integrity, signs of a mature spirituality, lead to redemptive love. There is a reaching out to others, a concern for their well-being on every level and a desire to contribute towards truth, justice and love within society.

The music symbol expresses both the harmony within one individual 'in the city of the soul' and the harmony of all of us playing our various instruments as in an orchestra.

3.7 The City of the Soul and Voluntary Poverty

Whenever Catherine is referring to the vowed poverty of religious, she calls it 'voluntary poverty'. The chapter in the *Dialogue* in which this section occurs²³ is about the 'spiritually poor who have taken as their bride Queen Poverty',²⁴ that is, religious.

The city of those who live voluntary poverty is never at war, but is always peaceful. The city walls, built on the living rock of Christ Jesus, are strong. There is no darkness or cold within her for the fire of divine charity blazes. The city's adornment is compassion and mercy, because the cruel tyrant, wealth, has been banished. Among the citizens there is a spirit of neighbourly affection. The city is governed well, with concern and prudence. As long as the city is

²³ Dial. 151

²⁴ Dial. 151:321. The influence of Francis of Assisi is evident in this image.

faithful to her bride, Queen Poverty, she will have abundant spiritual riches bestowed on her for ever.

Catherine paints a picture of peace and harmony within the soul, together with a spirit of compassion and mercy towards others. The truly poor religious is not hard or cold, but filled with love. In the same chapter, Catherine speaks of the *kenosis*²⁵ of Christ, with an indirect reference to Phil. 2:6-7. She writes:

For you he (Christ) took poverty as his bride, though he was wealth itself by his union with the divine nature...²⁶

She describes Christ as 'humiliated', 'in great poverty' and 'clothed in the lowliness' of our humanity. He chose to suffer and to die to give us life. It is this pouring out of oneself for others that Catherine holds up as the ideal; to become poor and needy with those who are lowly and marginalized.

It needs to be remembered that this was written in the midst of widespread corruption and dissolution among the religious of Catherine's day. Possibly partly as a result of the terrible successive outbreaks of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, religious and clerics often scandalized people by their flagrant offences against obedience, chastity and poverty. Here Catherine puts before them an ideal of the poverty of religious which may well stand as a challenge to religious today as they reconsider the vow of poverty in the light of the 'option for the poor'.

3.8 The Eternal City, the New Jerusalem

Writing to Giovanna d'Angiò, Queen of Naples,²⁷ Catherine speaks of 'the eternal city of Jerusalem' which we will reach after this fleeting life is ended.

²⁵ Self-emptying

²⁶ Dial. 151:320

²⁷ Letter T145 (DT40)

That city is the 'vision of peace' and in it, divine mercy will make us all 'kings and queens, lords and ladies.' In that eternal city, Catherine writes to Pietro del Monte Santa Maria, a senator of Siena, 'we will not find our flesh rebelling against our spirit.'²⁸ To the same senator, Catherine writes that Christ returned to the 'city of his eternal Father with his spouse as his spoils, I mean with our souls, whom God espoused when he took our human nature.'²⁹ The image of the city of the soul is expanded here into 'ultimate enlargement', to use Lonergan's term.³⁰ It becomes the eternal city, the new Jerusalem.

3.9 Conclusion

Catherine's symbol of the city of the soul is largely a positive depiction of the mature, integrated self. Boundaries (walls and gates) are strong and well-defended. There is a healthy distrust of one's own frailty and a reliance on God's help in keeping the enemies of the soul at bay. The person who rules well over his or her own city of the soul will be a good leader and will not abuse power. Ruling one's city well involves, paradoxically, surrender of the city to God in Christ. An integrated self is harmonious and well-tuned, like an orchestra, giving out beautiful music. For those vowed to voluntary poverty, there is the challenge of self-emptying for the sake of others who are poor, suffering and marginalized, following the example of Christ. The city of the soul will open out, after death, into the eternal Jerusalem, the vision of peace.

²⁸ Letter T170 (DT67)

²⁹ Letter T148 (DT36)

³⁰ cf Chapter on Mysticism and Self-knowledge.

CHAPTER 5.4

4. ***Cella, Casa, Città*: The Interconnectedness and Development of these in Catherine's thought**

4.1 Introduction

Chapter Five has thus far traced the development in Catherine's writings of her three major symbols for the deepening knowledge of herself in God, viz. *cella*, *casa* and *città*. This final section of chapter five considers the relationship of these three symbols to one another.

The first two are directly linked with self-knowledge, for Catherine speaks freely of both *la cella del cognoscimento di sé* and *la casa del cognoscimento di sé*. She never says this of the city image, however, contenting herself with the expression *la città dell'anima* (the city of the soul). This turn of phrase is significant, since it indicates a growing outward movement of the self which accompanies and results from the inner downward movement. This double dynamic - a movement downward into the self and God, and at the same time outward towards others - has already been evident in *cella* and *casa*. It is characteristic of Catherine's spirituality that her mystical experience of her self in God gives rise naturally and spontaneously to an outgoing concern for others in redemptive love.

The image that comes to mind is of a stone thrown into a lake: its downward movement in the water is accompanied by the widening circles of ripples. The vertical and horizontal movements take place almost simultaneously, though it is the downward movement of the stone which causes the horizontal ripples. Catherine's

own image is that of holding the cup in the fountain even while we drink. In this image the water falls downward into the cup and causes it to splash outward so that the two movements then take place simultaneously. This twofold dynamic, so typical of Catherine, appears in her writing as early as 1375 with regard to the cell of self-knowledge. It becomes even stronger in the symbol of the house of self-knowledge and finally opens out into the city of the soul.

4.1.1 Cella

In *la cella del cognoscimento di sé* Catherine uses the image of 'eating souls ... at the table of the cross' to express her burning zeal for the salvation of every person. Even while she urges her addressees to 'open the eye of the mind' and gaze into God, she is also, with equal urgency, reminding them to eat souls, even taking great mouthfuls in their hunger for redemption in the blood of Christ to come to fruition in everyone.

Catherine also encourages those, like the hermits, who are attached to their physical cells, to be willing to leave their cells for the sake of obedience or ministry. Unlike the physical cell, the cell of self-knowledge is within and we take it wherever we go.

4.1.2 Casa

In reference to *la casa del cognoscimento di sé*, Catherine uses the image of the house in which the disciples awaited the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. The Pentecostal image itself reflects the double movement of receiving the Spirit and being urged outwards to proclaim the truth. The house also has windows which we can fling wide open to allow the sun of God's love to come streaming in, and a door

through we which move outwards to others to share this love with them, taking with us the lamp of truth that hangs outside our door.

4.1.3 Città

In the *città* image, the movement 'downwards' into the depths of the self leads to a balanced, integrated sense of self which is both God-directed and other-directed. Catherine describes this integration in terms of *strength*, *surrender* and *harmony*.

The strength of the self as known in God is like that of a strongly-walled and well-defended medieval city. Enemies of the soul are kept out because God is guarding the city and the mind and will are attuned to God and to each other.

The city has surrendered to God. This is the source of its strength and its peace. Catherine is convinced that, if we do not surrender of our own accord, we will surrender to the fire that Christ brings, the fire of love. The image is of a strong city being overtaken by fire.

The peace of surrender and the integration of the self are expressed in the image of harmonious music which resounds from within the city of the soul.

This is closely linked with the image of fishing. As people are attracted by the sound of the music, they can be 'caught' for Christ as they approach the city, attracted by the loveliness of the music.

4.2 Conclusion

Catherine has grown, as expressed in her use of the three major symbols *cella*, *casa* and *città*, from a private, isolationist spirituality to a social and ecclesial awareness. She holds both together in an increasing sense of wholeness and balance as the inner dynamism of her mystical experience and the outward thrust of her redemptive love grow together. It is the mystical knowledge of herself in God that inexorably urges her outward to others, and all she experiences with others is brought into her prayer. Knowing the mad, 'crazy' love of God for her, she is impelled to go out and make known this great truth, shown as it is in the blood of Christ.

CHAPTER SIX

COMMUNICATING THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE: CATHERINE'S USE OF IMAGERY AND SYMBOL

1. Introduction

All the mystics, in attempting to express their experience of the 'depth dimensions of reality',¹ speak in symbols, since it is the nature of a symbol to reveal what is beyond immediate human experience. As Eliade says: '... religious symbols which touch on the patterns of life reveal a deeper Life, more mysterious than that grasped by everyday experience.'² Catherine's symbols express her experience of the Real, of God, and they structure that experience into a meaningful, integrated system. One of the major areas of integrated symbols in Catherine's writings is that of self-knowledge. Having traced the occurrence in her writings of the three major symbols for self-knowledge, *cella*, *casa* and *città*, it is essential to explore these symbols in order to uncover her meaning more fully.

As a preparation for this exploration, Catherine's use of imagination and symbol will be considered.

¹ Krüger 1995:58

² Beane and Doty 1976:347

2 Mysticism and Imagination

In reference to the relationship between mysticism and imagination, it has been said that mysticism can be seen as 'personal and imaginative involvement with unknown modes of being'.³ Such involvement takes place when the memory of some experience, be it the sight of a host of dancing daffodils or a sense of the divine presence, flashes upon what Wordsworth calls the 'inward eye'. The inward eye is the eye of the imagination.⁴ The 'inward eye' is not bound and limited as is the physical eye, which perceives and remembers spatially and in a time-frame. The eye of the imagination 'is free to recreate the scene around the emotion as alive within the memory'.⁵ It can change, highlight, embellish, enlarge, discard and in many ways transform so that it creates a new vision which expresses the aspect, or even divergent aspects, of the reality represented by the image. This transformative vision of the inward eye 'opens up its own inward horizons'⁶ taking us more and more deeply inward to express the mystical in symbol.

³ Mackey (ed) 1986:188

⁴ This is similar to, but not identical with, the 'eye of the mind' with which Catherine is invited to gaze into God. 'Open the eye of your mind and gaze into me,' the Father says to her. Noffke has traced this expression to several authors who would have been indirectly or, in the case of Cavalca, directly known to Catherine. Augustine speaks of the eye of the mind or heart; Bernard says: 'Pure truth can be seen only with a pure eye'; Cavalca writes: 'Understanding is an eye for the soul...' (Noffke 1988:288) Catherine's concept of the 'eye of the mind' has as its analogue more than the imagination. For her it is the openness to God which is at the core of mystical experience. It is understanding transformed by faith, as she says: 'It was your mind's eye, with the pupil of holy faith, that had vision in the end. So the spiritual must be the principal vision, because it cannot be deceived.' (Dial. 211) This spiritual vision is then translated, interpreted by the combined working of the intellect and the imagination; the end-result is symbol.

⁵ Mackey (ed) 1986:188

⁶ Mackey (ed) 1986:188

The mystic is energized by an experience of the Source of all being and goodness, all light and love, all truth and beauty. From this 'source-experience'⁷ mystical imagination flows. The source, who is God, is the fountainhead of all creation and creativity, therefore a mystic is creative in finding symbols that express his or her experience, or they are used in new combinations. It is remarkable that Catherine, in spite of her repetitive, unpolished style and her traditional theology is so creative, fresh and even daring in her imagery and symbolism, which in fact is the vehicle of her theology and spirituality. This includes her use of Scripture and her interpretation of the fathers and mothers of the Church.

A source-experience is always a heart experience.⁸ For Catherine, it is an experience of being totally, unbelievably loved by a God who is crazy, drunk, besotted with blazing love for her and for all humankind. It is the experience of this love which calls forth a response of complete love and which is transformative of the mystic and of her mystical imagination. Catherine told Raymond that she wrote her book because it gave her some relief.⁹ And so she gave us the creative expression of her mystical imagination: the symbols which are the topic of this chapter.

Using the framework provided by Van Roo and some additional material from Eliade, Mackey, Lonergan and others, imagination and symbol are discussed and applications are made to Catherine's use of symbol. This section looks at imagination and image and then at the essence of symbol, viz. analogy. Paradox, which plays such a striking role in Catherine's symbolism, is considered next, followed by an outline of the two kinds of symbolizing, conceptual and intuitive. It is noted that the particular symbol is always integrated into a whole from which it derives its meaning, at which point Van

⁷ Mackey (ed) 1986:191

⁸ Mackey (ed) 1986:198

⁹ Letter T373, as translated in Foster and Ronayne 1980:270.

Roo's definition of symbol is given. Finally, the role of the community is discussed.

2.1 Imagination and Image

Van Roo differentiates imagination from other operations and their terms.¹⁰ In this comparison, 'image' is used only as the term of imagination and is contrasted with percepts, concepts and feelings. While concepts, which hold and form definite relationships, can be common to many people with a high degree of common meaning, images are unique to the individual and are not fully communicable.

Images are not tied to time and place. What I am experiencing in the here and now is not in my imagination but in my present perceptions, thoughts and feelings: I experience it as reality, therefore I do not imagine it. Nor can I imagine what I remember from the past. That is memory, fixed into situations, times, relationships. Imagination uses the configurations of present perception and of memory and creates something new, something which has no existential import. Perception and memory are the storehouses on which imagination draws. It is then capable of endless creativity in variation and transformation, but it relies on these two resource centres for the raw material of its functioning. Catherine had heard about the hermits of the desert living in cells and she experienced her own need for privacy and solitude. Out of these two grew the symbol of the cell of self-knowledge, which unfolded into one of the basic tenets of her spirituality as she explored the interdependence of knowledge of self and knowledge of God.

¹⁰

Van Roo 1981:48ff

Images constitute a mode of knowledge in which there is much interplay between the imagination and the intellect. In the development of knowledge there is in fact a basic mutual relationship between intellect and imagination. Images lead to intellectual insight, and the process of thinking in turn conjures up images. Out of this has emerged the principle that 'there is no human knowledge unaccompanied by a phantasm or image'.¹¹ And there is no image in our conscious life which is not accompanied and transcended by the intellect. Analogy, which is the secret of creative imagination, is dependent on the intellect which recognizes the interplay of similarities and differences.

Imagination also draws on the senses and the feelings. Having had the actual experience of something gives power to the image. Catherine, like all of us, knew the experience of being warmed and possibly burnt by the heat of a fire, of the light it gives and the energy it radiates. All this is part of her fire imagery. Her images of drunkenness show that she must have often seen drunk people around her; she is able to describe the various stages of intoxication, but more from the observer's point of view than the drunkard's. For instance, she never refers to a hangover of any kind and her images of drunkenness are romanticized.

The resources of imagination, then, are all the perceptible aspects of experience, retained in some form in the memory:

...static and dynamic, of figure and ground, explicit and implicit, fully conscious and subliminal, grasped in all our modes of sensing, objective and subjective.¹²

¹¹ Van Roo 1981:50

¹² Van Roo 1981:51

2.2 Symbol

Images are pictures: the term of the imagination. Symbols are images by which reality is organized into 'coherent networks of meaningful relationships.'¹³ 'In its widest and simplest sense, symbolism means that some components of our experiences are associated with and evoke other components of our experience.'¹⁴ By means of symbolism we establish the relationship between things. We synthesize, make connections, establish meaning, for without symbols all of reality and experience would consist of unconnected bits and pieces. Symbols, as Eliade points out, are 'polyvalent and multivocal, that is, they are words or things that open out into a plurality of possible meanings, and still have a superplus of meaning left over.'¹⁵

We are *homo symbolicus*, since it is through symbols that we make connections and establish meaning. Meaning emerges through symbols because they 'are capable of revealing a modality of the real or a condition of the world which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience.'¹⁶ Symbols are therefore often religious since they point to what is real.¹⁷ 'Symbolizing and symbols are part of (the) mystery of the properly human way of being in this universe,'¹⁸ states Van Roo, whose description of symbols is particularly helpful in providing a framework for an introduction to Catherine's use of imagery and symbol. Some of Lonergan's categories regarding symbols add further light.

¹³ Krüger 1995

¹⁴ Krüger 1995

¹⁵ Beane and Doty 1976:342

¹⁶ Beane and Doty 1976:347

¹⁷ Eliade states that 'at the archaic levels of culture, the *real* - that is to say, the powerful, the significant, the living - is equivalent to the *sacred*.' (Beane and Doty 1976:348) For the mystics, such as Catherine, this is equally true. For her, God was *the great Reality*. Rahner says this too: 1975:126.

¹⁸ Van Roo 1982:11

2.3 Analogy

Van Roo points out that human understanding consists in a grasp of relationships.¹⁹ In the manifold interplay of relationships of human life, one vast area is that of 'a certain likeness in spite of difference or diversity'²⁰ which we call analogy. Symbolizing is based on analogy. Since insight into relationships, on which analogy is based, is always partial, symbols are necessarily limited or abstractive, in the sense that they catch and express only some aspect of what is symbolized.

Analogy, says Tracy,

is a language of ordered relationships articulating similarity-in-difference. The order among the relationships is constituted by the distinct but similar relationships of each analogue to some primary focal meaning, some prime analogue ... In Christian systematics, the primary focal meaning will be the event of Jesus Christ ... That focal meaning as *event* will prove the primary analogue for the interpretation of the whole of reality.²¹

Catherine's primary analogue is the blood of Christ. It flows from his crucified body which forms the bridge spanning the gulf between God and humankind; his blood is the source of life, the source of salvation and truth for us. As we climb the bridge of his body, bathed in his blood, we grow in self-knowledge and knowledge of God, particularly when we reach his open side and come to know

¹⁹ Van Roo 1981:172

²⁰ Van Roo 1981:172

²¹ Tracy 1981:408

'the secrets of his heart'. Catherine's symbols are Christological and Trinitarian, in that they lead through Christ to the Trinity.

2.4 Paradox: The *Coincidentia Oppositorum*²²

Lonergan points to the paradox or ambiguity inherent in many symbols. This becomes clear when one focuses on difference rather than similarity. Some symbols achieve their effect mainly by contradistinction:

The symbol has the power of recognizing and expressing what logical discourse abhors: the existence of internal tensions, incompatibilities, conflicts, struggles, destructions.²³

It is the *coincidentia oppositorum*, holding together in paradox apparently contradictory concepts and thereby giving birth to a fresh meaning. Eliade calls this 'the capacity (of symbolism) for expressing paradoxical situations or certain patterns of ultimate reality that can be expressed in no other way.'²⁴ Catherine has a highly-developed sense of paradox or ambiguity which forms the texture of all her writing, with its complex patterns of interweaving, contrast and repetition. Some of the major paradoxes in her writing are: love and hatred; truth and falsehood; sensuality and reason; light and darkness; holy desire and selfish self-love; obedience and disobedience; God's mercy and our resistance; the fragrance of virtue and the stench of sin; the tree of love and the tree of death. Virtue, she says, is acquired by its opposite.²⁵ In her imagery she holds in juxtaposition opposing terms which strike sparks off each other,

²² The bringing together of opposites.

²³ Lonergan 1971:66

²⁴ Beane and Doty 1976:349

²⁵ Dial. 98:185

thereby revealing a glimpse of the mystery - more than might be possible in logical discourse.

Catherine speaks of the Trinity, 'drunk' and 'crazed' with love for us and the three Persons of the Trinity as bed/table, food and waiter. The 'fiery blood' of Christ 'washes the face' of the bride, which is both the Church and the individual soul and we are urged to hide in the 'cavern of his open side'. In the 'cell of self-knowledge' we find self-knowledge through knowledge of God and vice versa; the Holy Spirit weeps 'tears of fire' before the Father within the mystic. 'Eating souls' is her favourite image to express desire for the salvation of others, and we eat souls at the 'table of the cross' with 'anguished longing'. As Catherine intercedes for others, God is 'forced' by her tears and 'chained' by her holy desire.

In her *Prayers*, Catherine sometimes builds up a series of opposing images:

*O dolce e soave innesto: tu somma dolceza ti se'degnato d'unirti con la nostra amaritudine; tu splendore, con le tenebre; tu sapiencia, con la stoltizia; tu vita, con la morte, e tu infinito con noi finiti.*²⁶

You, sweetness itself,
stooped to join yourself
with our bitterness.
You, splendor,
joined yourself with darkness;
you, wisdom,
with foolishness;
you, life,
with death;
you, the infinite,
with us who are finite.

²⁶

Oraz. X:106-108

Catherine shows, through her imagery, a strong sense of the ambiguity in all human existence and experience. She starts with the most basic of all: at the ontological level, we are those who 'are not' in the sense that we are contingent beings, while God is the One who Is. There is also an existential ambiguity. Catherine sees in humanity a combination of greatness and guilt, goodness and evil, being called to great love and happiness and yet inclined to fall into the evil of selfish sensuality. She sees this ambiguity in herself, in human nature, in human endeavour and in the Church and state.

The other function Lonergan points out is that, unlike logic and dialectic, symbol meets the need for 'internal communication'²⁷ between intentional consciousness, the organism and the psyche. It is through symbols that mind and body, mind and heart, heart and body communicate.²⁸ Catherine's symbols all have a theological content, the 'intentional consciousness', and at the same time they speak to the heart and being, drawing together as only an image can, the various levels of consciousness and response within us. Lonergan defines a symbol as 'an image of a real or imaginary object that evokes a feeling or is evoked by a feeling.'²⁹ The 'internal communication' of which Lonergan speaks is related to Van Roo's description of intuitive symbolizing.

2.5 Two kinds of Symbolizing

Van Roo distinguishes between *conceptual* and *intuitive* symbolizing although it is to be remembered that every symbol has something of both the conceptual and the intuitive. Conceptual symbolizing is highly cognitive and linear; it is the kind used in mathematics, science and some kinds of philosophical reflection.

²⁷ Lonergan 1971:66

²⁸ Lonergan 1972:66-67

²⁹ Lonergan 1971:64

Intuitive symbolizing, which is the kind employed by Catherine, uses memory and imagination to form 'an image, a form, similar to the configuration .or constellation of what is held in perception.'³⁰

Three of Van Roo's characteristics of intuitive symbolizing are useful in considering catherinian symbols. First, intuitive symbolizing is abstractive but in a different way from conceptual symbolizing, in that it abstracts 'significant sensuous form'.³¹ From the whole of reality as perceived, remembered or imagined, it abstracts that sensuous form which vividly sets forth the aspect to be portrayed. It is often more vivid and striking than everyday reality because irrelevant features are absent.

Intuitive symbolizing embodies a concrete whole in which everything is related to everything and which is untranslatable. An attempt to spell out in words the meaning of a symphony, a work of art or any of Catherine's integrating images will never succeed fully. The symbol speaks in its own fullness.

Intuitive symbols at their best suggest a

multiple sensuous analogy, with a suppleness and inexhaustible richness of the full meaning of human experience.³²

The interrelatedness of Catherine's symbols of the blood, the bridge, the open side and drunkenness, for instance, defies logical description which falls short of the emotional, volitional and sensory aspects of the symbol itself.

³⁰ Van Roo 1981:189

³¹ Van Roo 1981:190

³² Van Roo 1981:191

2.6 Universal function

In all symbolizing, 'a particular is integrated into a whole, in which alone it has its full meaning'.³³ Eliade speaks of the 'capacity of religious symbolism to reveal a multitude of structurally united meanings ... (so that) the symbol is capable of revealing a perspective in which diverse realities can be fitted together or even integrated into a *system*'.³⁴ Catherine's symbol of the blood, for instance, holds together her entire theology of salvation and redemption. The blood of Christ is the source of life and the symbol carries with it the rich overtones of an archetypal blood symbol: blood being spilt or shed, representing death, while it is also life, health and energy. The blood is the source of mercy for us; the Church holds the keys to the blood and Catherine writes to her addressees that she longs to see them bathed and drowned in the blood of Christ. The symbol of the blood integrates her theology into a system, a structure of interconnected thoughts and images.

Van Roo defines a symbol as 'a sensuous image which terminates a human intentional operation, represents the imaged reality and may affect the human world with a manifold efficacy.' In this sense, then, 'theology as an activity is symbolizing'.³⁵ Since theology is a human, conscious, intentional operation it terminates in symbol. The matrix within which theologizing occurs is the religious experience of the theologian within his or her community.

³³ Van Roo 1988:193ff

³⁴ Beane and Doty 1976:348-9

³⁵ Van Roo 1982:223

2.7 The Role of the Community

Our individual experience is severely limited; we all come out of a historical community with its traditions and systems of meaning expressed in symbols, and we all live as part of our contemporary community through which we are in touch with the full living reality of the mystery of life and faith. Symbols are created within community, although a particular symbol is often given shape by one person.

Theologians, like all symbolizers, draw creatively on the shared resources of the many symbolisms of their community.³⁶

Taking these shared resources, they create something new, fresh and distinctively their own, which in turn is a contribution to the insight and experience of the community. Catherine's symbols come out of the richness of the Christian tradition: she draws freely³⁷ on Scripture, the hermits of the desert, Augustine, Gregory, Bernard, Thomas and other great theologians, or on the Italian spiritual writers of her own day, all of whom are part of the tradition of faith which she inherits.

She understands and assimilates the symbols of her faith community more profoundly as her own experience of God deepens. For it is not simply a question of inheriting the symbols of our faith tradition and reorganizing them into new relationships and patterns. It is out of the theologian's living faith, her personal experience of God, that the interaction with traditional symbols comes to new life as she seeks expression of her religious experience.

The profundity and adequacy of their theologies will be a function of the richness of their personal experience, their capacity to conceptualize and elaborate an

³⁶ Van Roo 1982:231

³⁷ ... though usually not explicitly, as explained Chapter 5.2 on her hermeneutic of Scripture.

intelligible structure, and the diligence and perseverance with which they apply themselves to their unique task in the life of the Church.³⁸

It is the richness of her personal experience of God which makes Catherine's imagery so evocative.

Five aspects of symbols have been outlined above as an introduction to a consideration of Catherine's major symbols: analogy, the 'stuff' of which symbols are made; the two kinds of symbolizing with special reference to intuitive symbolizing; the integration of a symbol into a whole from which it takes its meaning; the fact that symbols arise out of the community and in turn interpret meaning for the community and finally an overview of the imagination and its functions.

3. Major Symbols relating to Self-knowledge

Catherine creates a vast web of interrelated symbols. Among these the chief connecting or integrating symbol is the blood of Christ. The symbols flow from the depths of her religious experience³⁹ and hold together the main threads of her theology. The fabric of Catherine's thought is so closely-textured that her symbols are themselves inter-related. The focus in this thesis is on the symbols for self-knowledge: the cell, the house, the city. However, these are so closely interwoven with some of the other major symbols that together they form a system. The symbols most closely connected to self-knowledge include the blood, the bridge, the open side of Christ, drunkenness, fire and tears.

³⁸ Van Roo 1982:230

³⁹ Noffke describes 'integrative symbols' as 'those which grow out of our own guts'. (Handout for talk on *The Contemplative Attitude: Blood*). 'One's guts', explains Noffke, 'symbolize the whole of what one has become. What is important about an integrating symbol is that it encompasses the whole of one's thought and spirituality'.

3.1 The 'Cell of Self-knowledge'

The symbolism of the cell is what Eliade refers to as 'exemplary', that is to say, endlessly repeatable in many different contexts.⁴⁰ As we open ourselves to this symbol, we begin to discover its universal implications. These include the womb, the belly of a monster, the hut of the neophyte,⁴¹ the cell of the hermit or the prisoner, and the darkness of the cell symbolizes the foetal state of the earth in 'cosmic Night'.⁴² The symbol suggests beginnings, promise, unfolding and going forth. It is also the place of 'giving birth' to souls⁴³ - the souls we have 'eaten' in our urgent intercession for them. The womb symbol for the cell would be more typical of Catherine's earlier understanding of it, especially during the first three years when she remained almost completely shut up in it. Then she was called forth, and another meaning of the cell begins to emerge, without negating the first, but complementing it. For Catherine, the cell becomes the centre, from which we go out: it is the well which is the source of water and hence of life. It is the temple which is the sacred place where we find God. It is home, a place of rest and refreshment, where God is our bed, our food and even our waiter.

Catherine pushes the cell symbol to the limits of inwardness by using the further image of the 'cell within a cell'.⁴⁴ In the innermost depths of our being, the core of the self, the sanctuary of the temple, we discover God's immense goodness.

⁴⁰ Beane and Doty 1976:351

⁴¹ Compare the hut of the Abakwetha in the initiation rites of the Ama-Xhosa.

⁴² Beane and Doty 1976:351

⁴³ See chapter 4, *La cella del cognoscimento di sé*, 1375: Eating souls.

⁴⁴ See Chapter 5.1 on *La cella del cognoscimento di sé*, Letter T94.

Paradoxically, the cell of self-knowledge is also the abyss, the dark void of all that separates us from God, the shadow side of the self. For we discover the self in all its complexity and convolutedness, goodness and sinfulness; the temple of light and the heart of darkness. The symbol reveals the pattern of light and darkness which is part of human experience as well as the cosmic pattern. There is a unity between our existence and the structure of the cosmos to which we are opened up by the symbol: its universal function. At the core of the universe we discover God's goodness. We discover creation as made in God's image. We see human sinfulness drowned in and redeemed by the blood of Christ.

3.2 The House of Self-knowledge⁴⁵

This symbol of the cell expands into the symbol of the house, with all its overtones of a space in which we are at home, of coming and going freely and possibly even inviting others in. The symbol is a more spacious one than 'cell'; there are more rooms in a house and it has doors and windows, making it lighter and airier. In the house of self-knowledge we are to throw open the windows to let the sun come streaming in.⁴⁶ Catherine's house has a lamp at the door,⁴⁷ which she takes with her when she goes out into the city at night, bringing light as she goes. The house is a symbol of the self, of the freer, expanding self-image of one who is becoming more at ease with herself and is coming to know herself as deeply loved by God. She is thus empowered to venture forth to proclaim the good news which she has experienced.

⁴⁵ The background for this section is in Chapter 5.2, *La casa del cognoscimento di sé*, in the section on the scriptural component of *casa*.

⁴⁶ Letter T315 to Pietro da Milano; see 1378 section of *La casa del cognoscimento di sé*.

⁴⁷ Letter T17

The scriptural symbols connected with Catherine's house of self-knowledge bring to light aspects which are significant to her. The first is the 'many mansions' text of John 14:2. This allows scope for a great variety of ways of being oneself, and thus of coming to know oneself. Catherine was not imitative. Her lifestyle was uniquely her own. She did not conform, was apparently not concerned about meeting the expectations of others, but built her 'house' according to her own original design. In this symbol of the 'many mansions' she rejoices in individuality and creativity. What is important is to be oneself. There is room for everyone in the Father's house, for the number and variety of mansions is endless.

The house of the self is, Catherine emphasizes, the Father's house, a sacred place, and we must not allow it to become a den of thieves. She reminds us further that we are in control of those who enter the house of the self: if it has been swept and tidied, we must fill it with virtue if it is not to be invaded once again by those intent on destruction. It is possible for the house to be turned into a pigsty.

Whenever Catherine speaks of 'shutting oneself up' in the house of self-knowledge, the image hinges on the Pentecost story. There are times when we need to do this to await, prayerfully, the gift of the Spirit. This is a very different concept from that of shutting oneself in one's cell in order to withdraw. What is suggested by this symbol is that, having received the gift of the Spirit, we go out to proclaim the good news. The dynamic here is outward-orientated rather than introspective.

4. The City of the Soul

The city of the soul is the third image of the self which Catherine uses. Appearing sporadically in the early years of her writing (approximately 1374 onwards), the occurrence of the city image peaks in 1378, the year which represents a high point in Catherine's writing. In that year, she completed and edited the *Dialogue*. It is also the year in which the *cella* and *casa* symbols appear most often. It seems fair to say that 1378 is the year in which Catherine's writing comes to maturity.

It is this maturity of thought and expression that is represented by the *città* symbol. The city symbolizes, for Catherine, the internal harmony of the self. Well-defined and in control of who enters (symbolized by the walls, gates and army), the self is integrated and in harmony. The wonderful music emanating from the city symbolizes this in a remarkable way.

Compared to a cell or even a house, a city is spacious and populated. The image suggests many people and much coming and going, lively interaction, healthy relationships and peace under good rulers. Meade remarks:

Allusions to cities in Catherine's writings make it clear that she was deeply affected by the elements of city structure, its life and function, as well as the political realities of everyday government. That she knew her own city of Siena well is also obvious.⁴⁸

The city is thus a predictable symbol for Catherine as she seeks to express the growing sense of self and self-knowledge which she experiences. In the city symbol there is a sense of balance between the self and the community and of a mingling of Catherine's personal and public life which expresses the

⁴⁸ Meade 1991:4

integration she had reached. She is at home in her city as she is in her own house.

Medieval people lived as much in the streets as in their homes; open archways, balconies and exterior staircases provided ready access between private and public places so that family life was scarcely separated from life in the extended family of the neighbourhood.⁴⁹

The progression in Catherine's symbolism from *cella* to *casa* to *città*, and her use of all three symbols contemporaneously in her writing, express the enlargement of the boundaries of the self and the gradual integration Catherine experienced. This was the integration of paradoxical elements in herself and her life. Such elements include mysticism and political involvement, personal and public life and being an individual within a community: the community of her *famiglia*, her city and the community of the Church.

5. The Blood of Christ as an Integrating Symbol

The whole mystery of redemption is symbolized for Catherine by the blood. It stands for the mystery of the cross and resurrection; 're-creation beyond the first gift of creation',⁵⁰ It is at the centre of Catherine's theology, for 'in this mystery all mysteries, all sacraments, coalesce'.⁵¹ It is the 'blazing fire' of the blood of Christ which is the source of our life and in which we come to know the truth: the truth of God as the One who Is who is also madly in love with us. Thus we know how we are loved. We come to know Christ as our Redeemer;

⁴⁹ Meade 1991:5

⁵⁰ Noffke 1983:107

⁵¹ Noffke 1983:107

the spotless Lamb has bathed all humanity⁵² in his blood to cleanse us of our sin.

In Letter T102, Catherine herself integrates all of her thought in the symbol of the blood of Christ. A few excerpts will suffice to show how central this symbol is for her. From the outset, she links the symbol of the blood with self-knowledge and with truth:

*E nel cognoscimento di noi troviamo ancora la recreazione che Dio ci fece, recreandoci a Grazia nel sangue dell'unigenito suo Figliuolo; il quale sangue ci manifesta la verità di Dio Padre.*⁵³

And in self-knowledge we discover also how God created us anew when he recreated us to grace in the blood of his only-begotten Son. That blood reveals to us the truth of God the Father.

Catherine says that we are like a *vasello* (jug) to receive the Lamb's blood as it ran down from the cross. It is in the blood that we receive everything:

Chi conoscerà e sarà sposo di questa Verità, troverà nel sangue la Grazia, la ricchezza e la vita della grazia; e troverà ricoperta la nudità sua, e vestito del vestimento nuziale del fuoco della carità, intriso e impastato sangue e fuoco, il quale per amore fu sparo e unito con la Deità.

If we come to know and be espoused to this truth we will find grace in the blood, the wealth and life of grace. We will find our nakedness covered, find ourselves clothed in the wedding garment of charity's fire, fire mixed and kneaded together with the blood that was shed for love and made one with the Godhead.

⁵² Letter T141, DT 38, Noffke 1988:127.

⁵³ These and the following excerpts are all from T102 to Raymond of Capua, until indicated otherwise in the next footnote.

Fire and blood are mixed together to express love, divine love. Catherine goes on to draw together, around the central integrating symbol of the blood, images of food, of light and darkness, of truth.

Nel sangue si pascerà e nutrirà di misericordia; nel sangue dissolve la tenebra e gusta la luce; perocché nel sangue perde la nuvola dell'amore proprio sensitivo ...

In the blood we will be fed and nourished on mercy. In the blood our darkness will be dissipated and we will experience the light, for the blood frees us from the cloud of self-centeredness ...

And then, as Catherine so often urges people to do, she urges Raymond, to whom this letter is written, to drown, bathe in the blood of Christ; to get drunk on it, have his fill, clothe himself in it. The blood is the all-encompassing symbol of health, life and redemption. The Italian is much more compact and flowing than the English translation:

Annegatevi dunque nel sangue di Cristo crocifisso, e bagnatevi nel sangue, e inebriatevi del sangue, e saziatevi del sangue, e vestitevi del sangue.

Drown yourself, then, in the blood of Christ crucified. Bathe in the blood; get drunk on the blood; have your fill of the blood, clothe yourself in the blood.

In the blood, all ills are healed, all sin forgiven. Catherine says that, if you have been unfaithful, *ribattezzatevi nel sangue* (be baptized again in the blood); if the devil has clouded over your mind's eye, *lavatevi l'occhio col sangue* (wash out your eye with the blood). If you have fallen into ingratitude by not acknowledging gifts, *siate grato nel sangue* (become grateful in the blood). If you have been a bad shepherd and have no staff of justice tempered with prudence and mercy, *traetela del sangue* (get one from the blood).

Nel caldo del sangue dissolvete la tepidezza, e nel lume del sangue caggia la tenebra; acciocché siate sposo della Verità, e pastore vero e governatore delle pecorelle che vi sono messe tra le mani ...

In the heat of the blood melt your lukewarmness, in the light of the blood let the darkness give way, so that you may be espoused to truth, a true shepherd and caretaker of the little sheep that have been entrusted to you.

Our personal experience of healing and redemption in the blood leads inexorably, in all truth, to our pastoral ministry. Catherine is consistent, in her mature years, in insisting that our experience of God flows into ministry. All the above is connected with the cell of self-knowledge and even the physical cell as Catherine encourages Raymond in the next sentence to be an *amatore della cella dell'anima e del corpo* (lover of the physical as well as the spiritual cell).

We discover the 'truth of the blood' which we come to know in the cell, the house, the city of self-knowledge. There is an intimate connection between self-knowledge and the blood of Christ.

Christ's blood shed on the cross is the clearest revelation of the mystery of God, 'hidden during the life of the incarnate Word like fire under ashes, and bursting into flame in his passion.'⁵⁴ The hands of the Holy Spirit tap the cask of Jesus' body to allow his blood to flow. As we come to know the truth in the blood, we know God's inexpressible love and that Christ's blood was shed for us, to 'engulf us in your charity's fire'.⁵⁵ In one sense, then, the blood of Christ is the chief source of our self-knowledge.

The blood is also the centre of Catherine's ecclesiology, for she sees the Church existing *in function of* Christ's blood.⁵⁶

The Church is the medium through which the blood shed on the cross for the human race becomes not only the *sign* of God's recreating love for sinners, but also the *vehicle* of that love to this and that sinner individually.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Noffke 1983: 114, n. 8, quoting Cavallini.

⁵⁵ Noffke 1983:143

⁵⁶ Foster and Ronayne 1980:23

The Church, says Catherine, holds '*la chiave del sangue*' (the key of the blood)⁵⁸ and those in orders are ministers of the blood. The pope, 'sweet Christ on earth', particularly 'holds the keys of the blood'.

Catherine opens almost every letter with *Io, Caterina ... scrivo a voi nel prezioso sangue suo*. (I, Catherine ... write to you in his precious blood.) The blood of Christ, for Catherine:

is not a gruesome obsession, as some have considered it, but rather the glorious Love-gone-mad that dyes the whole cloth of God's truth in us red with life - God's life and our life. It is the blood, the blazing fire of Truth and Love, that is the fountain of life that washes the cataract of 'the great lie' from our eyes and reveals the truth to us.⁵⁹

The blood of Christ, then, is the integrating Christological symbol for Catherine. Within this symbol, Catherine places the image of Christ the bridge, which she uses only in Letter T272 and the *Dialogue*.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Foster and Ronayne 1980:23

⁵⁸ *Dialogo* XXVII:60

⁵⁹ Noffke, Catherine of Siena, *Vision through a Distant Eye* (to be published): ch. 1

⁶⁰ Letter T272 is a letter to Raymond of Capua in which Catherine develops the image of Christ the bridge. This letter apparently gives rise to Catherine's development of this theme in the *Dialogue*. However, the image of the bridge never becomes, for Catherine, an integrating symbol, since it never appears in her letters or prayers again.

6. The image of Christ the Bridge⁶¹

The image of Christ as the bridge finds its meaning within the symbol of the blood. Catherine uses it to concretize aspects of the blood symbolism. It is her image of the Christian journey within the blood of Christ; the way she spells out what it means to be bathed, drowned in and given life by the blood. The journey across the bridge, at least in the first two stages, is in the blood of Christ: we move from the nailed feet to the open side from which blood streams. The mouth, which represents the third stage, that of union, suggests the point of arrival to which our journey in the blood of Christ has brought us.

The bridge is the image of Christ's crucified body stretching from heaven to earth across a great chasm. There was once a road where the chasm is, but that was destroyed by sin. Now there is a raging torrent which it is impossible to cross without drowning. The bridge has walls of stone, which are the virtues of Christ; the mortar is mixed with his blood.⁶² Christ's blood is also the key which has opened heaven. It is a covered bridge,⁶³ with a roof of mercy. On the bridge is the hostelry of the Church, where the bread of life and the blood are served to the journeying pilgrims. The bridge has three great stairs; we move from one to the other by desire - Catherine refers to this as *sete* (thirst) - and the movement itself is a growth in self-knowledge⁶⁴ which is also growth in love.

⁶¹ 'The Bridge' is the central and most important part of the *Dialogue*, comprising chapters 26 -87 out of a total of 166 chapters. The image of the bridge in its relation to self-knowledge, then, is significant.

⁶² The medievals believed cement to be stronger if it was mixed with blood. (Noffke: Catherine of Siena: *Vision of a Distant Eye*, ch 3, 7 (awaiting publication).⁶³

⁶³ The bridge Catherine is imagining is somewhat like the Ponte Vecchio over the Arno in Florence, which Catherine had seen on her visits to Florence. Unlike the Ponte Vecchio, which is not fully covered, Catherine's bridge is completely roofed.

⁶⁴ Rahner points out that knowing the unity between oneself and God makes it possible to achieve unity between love of God and love of neighbour. Life in its fullest sense always involves the 'I' relating to a 'thou'. (1975:126-127).

On the first stair we are at the feet of Christ; we walk in discipleship on the feet of our affection to his open side, his heart. At this stage our heart, too, is involved in friendship which is a deepening knowledge of self and of the secrets of Christ's heart. Finally we come to the third stair and we are mouth to mouth in the intimacy of the kiss. The bridge is Catherine's integrating Christological symbol, for the bridge is Christ, as are the stairs and the nourishment served *en route*, and Christ is the gate at the end.

6.1 **Congregata (Gathered): The Bridge and Self-knowledge**

With the richness of ambiguity and layered meanings that an image can carry, the image of being gathered is significant as Catherine uses it in reference to the bridge. On one level there must be a gathering together of those who share the same thirst. We cannot cross the bridge alone, since Christ promised to be in our midst where two or three or more are gathered in his name.

*Convienvi dunque avere sete e congregarvi insieme ... Uno è schiuso che lo sia in mezzo di lui, perchè non à seco compagno sí che lo possa stare in mezzo ..*⁶⁵

If you would make progress, then, you must be thirsty and you must gather together ... One alone is excluded from my companionship, since I cannot be 'in the midst' of someone who has no companion...

This is a gathering together, Catherine says, of the two loves, of God and of neighbour.

On another level, there is a gathering together of what Catherine calls the powers of the soul. The three powers are memory, understanding and will, each corresponding to one of the stairs of Christ's body. Catherine states:

⁶⁵

Dialogo LIV:120

*Come queste tre virtù e potenzie dell'anima sono congregate, lo so' nel mezzo di loro per grazia.*⁶⁶

When these three powers of the soul are gathered together, I am in their midst by grace.

The gathering together is cumulative, expressed by the very image of climbing three stairs and by the fact that *la ragione* (reason) takes possession of the three stairs once they have been climbed. Self-appropriation, to use Lonergan's term, has taken place progressively through the three steps until, when the third is reached, 'reason has taken possession'⁶⁷ of the self; intentional consciousness has heightened to a significant level of self-appropriation. The self is now gathered together, appropriated, and in this very moment of self-appropriation there is the beginning of being appropriated by God in the fourth and fifth stages of union, beyond the three steps of the bridge.

Catherine, then, has an analogical vision of the growing self-knowledge which takes place as one climbs the three stairs of the bridge. At each level the quality of self-knowledge is different. At the first stair the *memory* holds all God's gifts and blessings; at the second there is *understanding* of this experience which includes evaluation; on the third stair the *will* is activated to choose a path of action.

*Allora si muove con ansietato desiderio, avendo sete di seguire la via della Verità, per la quale via truova la fonte dell'acqua viva.*⁶⁸

Then you are roused with eager longing, thirsty to follow the way of Truth that leads to the fountain of living water.

⁶⁶ *Dialogo* LIV:121

⁶⁷ Dial. 54:108

⁶⁸ *Dialogo* LIV:122

Catherine speaks of the gathering of the powers of the soul in terms of being drawn, quoting Jn 12:32: And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself. Catherine spells out the two modes in which we are drawn:

*L'uno si è che, tratto il cuore dell'uomo per affetto d'amore ... è tratto con tutte le potenzie dell'anima, cioè la memoria, lo 'ntelletto e la volontà. Accordate queste tre potenzie e congregate nel nome mio, tutte le altre operazioni che l'uomo fa, attuali e mentali, sono tratte piacevoli, e unite in me per affetto d'amore, però che s'è levato in alto seguitando l'amore crociato.*⁶⁹

First, the human heart is drawn by love ... and with all its powers: memory, understanding and will. If these three powers are harmoniously united in my name, everything else you do, in fact or in intention, will be drawn to union with me in peace through the movement of love, because all will be lifted up in the pursuit of crucified love.

Everything is drawn to union with God once the powers of the soul, or, as Lonergan would say, the levels of consciousness, have been gathered together. The next stage is the fourth level of unrestricted love when one enters the sea of peace and rests, brimming over with love, in the unending love of the Bridegroom.

7. The open side of Christ

The image of Christ's open side, where we come to know the 'secret of his heart' is also closely connected with the blood symbol, the image of the bridge and the theme of drunkenness. All three in turn constitute the core of our knowledge of God in Christ, and thus of our self-knowledge.

⁶⁹

Dialogo XXVI:59

In a letter to the nuns of San Gaggio,⁷⁰ Catherine describes the open side of the crucified Christ as:

... a shop filled with fragrant spices. The souls becomes so sated and drunk that she loses all self-consciousness, able to see nothing but the blood of Christ, shed with burning love.

7.1 The open Window

As we gaze into the open side of Christ, we see his 'flaming, consumed heart, opened up like a window without shutters, never to be closed'.⁷¹ Catherine has in mind the shuttered Italian windows, as she urges us to gaze through this one which is always wide open.

7.2 The Hostelry

The open side of Christ is also *una bottigia aperta* (an open hostelry)⁷² in which Catherine urges us to shut ourselves up. It is '*piena d'odore, in tanto che 'l peccato diventa odorifero*' so full of fragrance that sin itself is made fragrant⁷³ - an image expressing the power of Christ's redemption, by which the stench of

⁷⁰ Letter DT62, Noffke 1988:198-9

⁷¹ Letter DT3, Noffke 1988:44 and also Letter DT20, Noffke 1988:81.

⁷² DT points out, as noted in Noffke 1988:308, that, while the hostelry here refers to the open side of Christ, elsewhere (as in Dial. chapters 27, 66, 77) it refers to the Church, which is situated on the bridge. In this *bottiga* the pilgrims are sacramentally refreshed.

⁷³ Letter DT31, Noffke 1988:108

sin is transformed into fragrance by the blood of Christ, shed with inexpressible love. In the hostelry, the bride rests in the bed of fire and blood.⁷⁴ This is the bed of love, intoxicating burning love which transports the bride into the ecstasy of supreme love. Hidden and enclosed in the side of Christ crucified⁷⁵ we come to self-knowledge when we see the blazing love of Christ's heart.

7.3 Why Christ's Side was Opened

Catherine lays great stress on her interpretation⁷⁶ of Jn 19:34: the opening of Christ's side by the soldier with a lance, and blood and water came out. After stating in the *Dialogue* that the fruits of the blood are infinite, she continues:

*Questo vi manifestai nell'apertura del lato mio, dove truovi il segreto del cuore, mostrando che lo v'amo piú che mostrare non posso colla pena finita...*⁷⁷

I showed you this in the opening up of my side. There you find my heart's secret and it shows you, more than any finite suffering could, how I love you.

The inmost heart, '*il segreto del cuore*', is revealed by the piercing of Christ's heart and the outpouring of blood and water, gushing out as a symbol of infinite love, 'blood for our redemption, water for our sanctification'.⁷⁸ In this blood we are washed, bathed, cleansed;⁷⁹ we are invited to bathe, rest in it, drink it, for it

⁷⁴ The hostelry and the bed are brought together explicitly in one place: Letter T273.

⁷⁵ Letter DT62, Noffke 1988:196

⁷⁶ DT shows that Catherine owes the image of the open side to St Bernard, and would have read of it in Cavalca: '... and through the opening in his side, the tenderness of his heart is revealed to me.' (*In Cant. sermo, LXI, 4*), quoted in Cavalca *Descriz. de' dieci comand.*, p 24.

⁷⁷ *Dialogo* LXXV:167

⁷⁸ Noffke 1988:299

is love we are drinking, such love as we could never have imagined. Drinking this love, this blood, is an image of receiving the fruits of the redemption brought about through our one redeemer, Christ. Through baptism,⁸⁰ *l'anima s'impasta col sangue* (the soul is fused with the blood.)

8. Eating Souls at the Table of the Cross

An image closely linked with the open side of Christ, and woven into the symbol of the blood, is that of the 'table of the cross', at which we 'eat souls'.⁸¹ We find the table of the cross in the 'cavern' of Christ's open side. In the words of the Father to Catherine:

*Il vostro luogo, dove voi stiate, sia Cristo crocifisso unigenito mio Figliuolo, abitando e nascondendovi nella caverna del costato suo ... In quello cuore aperto troverete la carità mia e del prossimo ... Vedendo e gustando questo amore seguitarete la dottrina sua, notricandovi in su la mensa della croce, cioè portando per carità con vera pazienza il prossimo vostro ..*⁸²

And let your place of refuge be my only-begotten Son, Christ crucified. Make your home and hiding-place in the cavern of his open side ... In that open heart you will find charity for me and for your neighbours ... Once you see and taste this love you will follow his teaching and find your nourishment at the table of the

⁷⁹ Purification rites in the Old Testament foreshadowed this, for the blood of slain animals purified the altar and the people. (See footnote 9 in Noffke 1988:299).

⁸⁰ Catherine also refers to baptism of blood (traditionally regarded as martyrdom); baptism of water, which she calls the 'common baptism given to Christians', or baptism of desire: these are all 'but various paths of entry into the one redemption to be found in Christ alone'. (Noffke 1980:138)

⁸¹ See chapter on 'La Cella del Cognoscimento di Sé, 1375: 'Eating Souls'.

⁸² *Dialogo CXXIV:313*

cross. In other words, charity will make you put up with your neighbours in true patience ...

Catherine also says that the table at which we drink the wine of the blood is the pierced side of God's Son.⁸³

When Catherine first starts using the image of the table of the cross in 1375 and early 1376,⁸⁴ it is the 'Lamb' who is food, table and servant, or food, table and waiter. By the time she is writing the *Dialogue*, in October 1377-78, she has reversed the order of food and table, and the table-food-waiter image has become Catherine's beloved trinitarian image, while 'eating souls at the table of the cross' has taken on new layers of meaning.

The 'eating' image here signifies not only a great hunger for the salvation of others but a willingness to do whatever is in one's power towards that end. Christ is the great eater of souls: he 'ate' the whole of humanity: 'Christ ran through pain and shame to the table of the most holy cross. There in his suffering he ate as his food the human race.'⁸⁵ When we eat souls at the table of the cross, we are hungry for their salvation, interceding with *spasimato desiderio* (anguished longing)⁸⁶ and being willing to suffer with Christ for them, as in Col. 1: 34: 'It makes me happy to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to make up all the hardships that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church.' Eating souls at the table of the cross is the duty of all who minister in the Church.

Catherine always combines the phrase 'for God's honour' with the eating of souls. That this, above all, should give honour and glory to God fits in with a

⁸³ Noffke 1988:49. Sometimes the table of the cross is within the open side, but at other times the open side is the source of the drink or bath.

⁸⁴ Letters T146 (Feb 1375), T148 (July 1375) and T208 (April 1376).

⁸⁵ Dial. 145:304

⁸⁶ Dial. 89:163

text from Scripture which is one of Catherine's themes:⁸⁷ 1 Thes. 4:3: God wills you all to be holy. It is above all to the honour and glory of God that all should be saved and come to knowledge of the truth.

One becomes an eater of souls as one moves into the unitive stage. Catherine makes this clear several times. The Father explains:

*Gionto alle terze lagrime, egli pone la mensa della santissima croce nel cuore e nell'anima sua. Poi che l'ha posta, trovandovi il cibo del dolce e amoroso Verbo - il quale dimostra l'onore di me Padre e la salute vostra, per la quale fu aperto il corpo de l'unigenito mio Figliuolo dandosi a voi in cibo - allora comincia a mangiare l'onore di me e la salute dell'anime ...*⁸⁸

When she has attained the third stage of tears, she prepares the table of the most holy cross in her heart and spirit. When it is set, she finds there the food of the gentle, loving Word - the sign of my honor and your salvation, for which my only-begotten Son's body was opened up to give you himself as food. The soul then begins to feed on my honor and the salvation of souls ...

In the third stage of life-giving tears, there is conformity with God's will, a sense of joy and a spirit of compassion. As the soul is drawn into union with God, 'she finds her pleasure in feeding at the table of the most holy cross.'⁸⁹

Catherine repeats the notion that 'eating souls at the table of the cross' happens only in an advanced stage of love. She does so when she is discussing patience - for her, the touchstone of the virtues. She says that if patience is absent, all the other virtues are still imperfect and the person has not yet arrived at the table of the cross.⁹⁰ Self-knowledge and knowledge of God's goodness

⁸⁷ See Chapter 5:2 on the scriptural component of 'Casa': Catherine's hermeneutic of Scripture.

⁸⁸ *Dialogo* XCV:223

⁸⁹ Dial. 89:163

⁹⁰ Dial. 95:178

have not yet grown to a point where true patience has been developed; nor is the person yet an 'eater of souls.'

Being at the table of the cross involves suffering. Catherine speaks of this numerous times. She says that those who are at this table have to face persecutions from the world and the devil and great troubles and temptations, though none of these can hurt them.⁹¹ She speaks of the saints and martyrs who refused no labour and evaded no toil as they stood at the table of the cross.⁹²

When she prays for those in ministry, especially the pope, she begs God to make him an 'eater of souls'.⁹³ This would have the double effect of being zealous for the salvation of others and himself moving into closer union with God.

The open heart of Christ is, for Catherine, a complex symbol of redemptive love. The experience of the revelation of the inmost heart of Christ leads to greater self-knowledge, since it increases our grasp of God's love and the meaning of redemption and leads us to glimpse the place we have in God's heart. This increased self-appropriation in turn allows a greater response of love on our part until we stand at the 'table of the cross' in our hunger for the well-being and salvation of all.

⁹¹ Dial. 100:189

⁹² Dial. 119:222 and 120:229

⁹³ Noffke 1983:38

9. Like two Drunks: Being in love unrestrictedly

In her intimacy with God and her creative expression of her experience of God, Catherine has no hesitation in using images which are unusual and daring. The image of drunkenness⁹⁴ is closely linked with the blood symbol, since Catherine often speaks of becoming drunk by drinking the blood. The outpouring of Christ's blood is proof of a God who is mad and drunk with love.

The image which best portrays the *coincidentia oppositorum*⁹⁵ and most powerfully expresses God's unrestricted love is the 'drunken God', and Catherine's image for herself in response is also that of being drunk.⁹⁶ It is above all a lack of restraint that Catherine is depicting, as though God is controlled by love as the alcoholic is by alcohol, even to the point of making a fool of himself. Catherine's language is disconcerting, coming as it does out of her experience of God's incredible, unconditional love and the unlimited love pouring out of her own being in response.

Into this image all the other major symbols are woven.

⁹⁴ It is not as unusual as one might think to use drunkenness as an image for mystical experience. There is a verse in Si. 1:16 on wisdom and the fear of God which uses the same image:

The fullness of wisdom is to fear the Lord;
she intoxicates them with her fruits.

Bernard of Clairvaux, in *De diligendo Dio*, 27, describes what he calls the fourth degree of love. It is a state in which one is 'drunk with love and forgets oneself... (You are) emptied out of yourself; ... you lose yourself'. Catherine may have been quoting Bernard without realizing it.

⁹⁵ In the sense that the lack of restraint and control of the drunkard is diametrically opposed to the image of the Divine Being, who orders and controls the universe.

⁹⁶ Catherine is consistent in maintaining drunkenness as an image; she never for a moment considers actual drunkenness to have any bearing whatever on the mystical experience of God, unlike William James (1935, p 387) who makes the strange statement that alcohol stimulates the 'mystical faculties' making a person, for the moment, 'one with truth' and adds: 'the drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness'. Catherine would have regarded this as sheer nonsense. Her use of drunkenness is always an image, a symbol of a God who behaves irrationally, like a drunk, and her own response is a similar one. It in no way refers to the actual imbibing of alcohol.

By using this image, Catherine suggests that a truly rational, sensible God could not possibly love us, considering our apathy, lack of response and sinfulness. Only a God *come ebbro d'amore e pazzo della tua creatura*⁹⁷ (as if drunk with love and infatuated [lit: crazy] with your creature) could be so foolish as to love us in the besotted way in which we are indeed loved. Catherine herself feels drunk with love, caught up as she is in love for God.

Burning with intense love, Catherine describes herself in God's presence as *come ebbra e quasi fuore di sé* (beside herself, as if drunk);⁹⁸ she is *quasi come ebbra, non si poteva tenere* (intoxicated and unable to restrain herself),⁹⁹ *come ebbra ansietata e affocata d'amore* (drunk with restlessness and on fire with love).¹⁰⁰ She was also drunk with love of poverty.¹⁰¹ Catherine also describes a 'tender trick' played on her by God¹⁰² to make her 'drunk' with God's providence.

The blood [of Christ], says Catherine, is a wine on which our soul gets drunk. She is describing her mystical experience of the crucified Christ, with a profound sense of the significance of redemption in his blood. Catherine even uses rather distasteful imagery, urging Bartolomeo Dominici, to whom she writes in a very early letter,¹⁰³ to be like a heavy drinker who has drunk so much that his

⁹⁷ Oraz:106

⁹⁸ *Dialogo XIX:47*

⁹⁹ *Dialogo XXX:67*

¹⁰⁰ *Dialogo XXXIV:364*

¹⁰¹ Dial. 325. Catherine's most profound understanding of poverty is ontological: our dependent and participative being is utter poverty compared to God, who is Being.

¹⁰² The 'trick' was that God gave Catherine communion one day during Mass when she greatly desired it and the priest had disappointed her. Catherine's playful description of this and a similar incident show a great deal of intimacy with God.

¹⁰³ This letter is dated March 1373. The imagery is fairly crude. Later Catherine writes about being 'drunk' in a more refined way. However, her early imagery is very significant.

stomach can no longer hold the wine, and out it comes. Pushing the analogy further, she says that the wine of the blood so warms us that we come out of our very selves, that is, we lose our selfish self-will. And if we drink enough, out it comes over our brothers and sisters. Drinking deeply of God's love, shown in the outpouring of Christ's blood, inevitably issues forth as effective preaching; the person who has drunk of the blood in this way is as unable to stop his flow of words as the heavy drinker can prevent himself vomiting.¹⁰⁴

In several letters, Catherine urges people to get really drunk on the blood of Christ.¹⁰⁵ This is not meant literally: she is urging them to contemplation of Christ crucified whose blood reveals God's love.

*Inebriatevi di sangue per Cristo crucifisso! ... Non ne prendete poco, ma tanto che voi inebriato, sì che perdiate voi medesima.*¹⁰⁶

Get drunk on the blood of Christ crucified! ... And don't take just a little, but enough to make you so drunk that you will lose yourself.

This is far more than the state of unconsciousness that may happen in what most people understand by ecstasy. It implies becoming what one has drunk, i.e. doing as Christ did. It is a whole way of life. Catherine explains what she means: as we grow towards perfect love, we become unable to think of anything except Christ crucified and the perfect love of God, symbolized by the

¹⁰⁴ Noffke 1988:280. quoting DT, Noffke points out a passage in Augustine: *Enarr. in Ps. CXLIV, 7 (PL XXXVII, 1874-75)*: 'When you are learning you are eating, when you are preaching you are overflowing; when you are listening you are eating, when you are preaching you are overflowing. If you want to overflow with grace, drink grace.'

¹⁰⁵ See for instance, other letters in Noffke 1988: 'Let the fire of boundless desire grow, [till you are] drunk with the blood of God's Son.' (p 142) 'Get drunk on the blood of the Lamb': (p 143). '...immerse yourselves, drown yourselves, get drunk in the blood of Christ crucified, for in the blood is the heart made strong.' (p 153) 'I tell you ... to become drunk with blood ... and to nourish yourselves on nothing but blood.' (p 179)

¹⁰⁶ Letter T29. This letter was written in 1376 or early 1377, three years after T31 in which Catherine used the 'vomiting image'. This letter shows some refinement of Catherine's thought and expression.

blood. As we drink even more deeply, we lose ourselves in God. This is the meaning of Catherine's life, the point of intersection of her mystical experience of God (drinking the blood) and her ministry (out it comes over the heads of our brothers and sisters). To Raymond of Capua¹⁰⁷ Catherine describes her experience of this:

O botte spillata, la quale di bere e inebbrii ogni innamorato desiderio, e di letitia e illumini ogni intendimento, e riempi ogni memoria che ine s' affadiga, in tanto che altro non puritenere, 'n altro intendere, 'n altro amare se non questo dolce e buono Gesù, sangue e fuoco, ineffabile amore!

Oh overflowing flowing cask, you give drink and fill to drunkenness every loving desire. ...You so fill all our remembrance that we are overcome and can neither hold nor understand nor love anything other than this good gentle Jesus, blood and fire, ineffable love.

And again, in a letter to the nuns of San Gaggio Catherine describes how a person who is really properly drunk, falls asleep. This is compared to the mystic who is sated with love, and she falls asleep in the peace of her Bridegroom, God¹⁰⁸:

This is the ultimate stage of complete loss of self, total intoxication on the blood, immersed in a fullness of peace which Catherine can only describe as being 'sated with love.' This is what it is like from the inside to have lost oneself and to be immersed in God. The whole point of coming to know oneself is to lose oneself in God, to have drunk to the full of God's love and to overflow with that love over our brothers and sisters. There is a double losing of oneself: in God and in ministry.

¹⁰⁷ Noffke 1988:109

¹⁰⁸ Noffke 1988:199

Catherine says this over and over again:

When the soul looks and sees in herself such a marvellously strong fire of the Holy Spirit, she becomes so drunk with love for her Creator that she completely loses herself. Though she is alive she is dead, and does not feel within herself creaturely love or pleasure, for her memory has been filled with affection for her Creator. Her understanding ... sees and understands only her own non-being and God's goodness to her ... Then her love for God becomes perfect ... and there is no holding back the speedy course of desire; she runs on without anything binding or weighing her down.¹⁰⁹

Catherine is consistent in imaging profound union with God as advanced drunkenness. She says that those who reach the final stage of union with God are *inebriate di sangue, arse di fuoco d'amore* (inebriated with the blood [of Christ] and aflame with the fire of love).¹¹⁰ Her final words in the *Dialogue* are *pare che di nuovo inebri l'anima mia*. (I sense my soul once again becoming drunk).¹¹¹ For her, life at its depth is being so filled with God that we lose ourselves, and our fullness overflows onto others.

But not only is Catherine drunk, God is too. God is *Dio, come ebbro d'amore verso la salute nostra* (like one drunk with love for our good),¹¹² or *Tu, abisso di carità, pare che impazzi delle tue creature* (You, abyss of charity, mad with love for your creature). And Christ, she says, ran like one drunk with love for our salvation, to the shame of the most holy cross. Only one who is so drunk that he does not know what he is doing, would behave in this way for people as uncaring as we are.

¹⁰⁹ Letter T189, quoted in Noffke 1983:198, n. 5.

¹¹⁰ *Dialogo* LXXIX:180

¹¹¹ *Dialogo* CLXVII:502

¹¹² *Dialogo* XVII:45

Catherine herself is dizzy and drunk with the wonder of it. She describes God as *pazzo d'amore*, (crazy with love, madly in love)¹¹³ and cries out that God's love is *inestimabile* (immeasurable), *ineffabile* (ineffable) and *consummato* (consummate).¹¹⁴ Catherine addresses the eternal Trinity as 'madly in love with your creature'¹¹⁵ and repeats the expression, *pazzo d'amore* (mad with love) four times more in the same prayer. She asks God whether it was not enough to gift us with creation and redemption, without giving us the whole of the divine being, the whole of God, as our food. It was the madness of love, she says, that drove God to such lengths. The Trinity, says Catherine several times, is *pazzo d'amore* (mad with love). In her *Prayers*, most of them taken down during the final seventeen months of her life, Catherine is drunk with epithets describing the love of God: *ineffabile*, (ineffable, unutterable), *inestimabile* (boundless), which she uses many times, *dilettevole* (delightful), *di grazia* (gratuitous), and *dolcissimo* (most gentle). She calls God by a variety of 'love' names: *vero amore* (true love), *fuoco d'amore* (fire of love), *inestimabile fuoco e dilezione di carità* (immense fire and affection of charity), *carità increata* (uncreated charity), *amore incomprendibile* (love incomprehensible), *amore eterno* (love eternal), *amore medesimo* (love itself), *fuoco e abisso di carità* (fire and deep well of charity), *o amatore nostro* (our lover), *Amore deità* (Godhead love), and *Amore Amore!* (simply Love! Love!) This torrent of love words shows us Catherine struggling to express something of the God she is coming to know, and of her self-knowledge as she knows herself in God. There is a superabundance, an intensity, a being plunged into the depth and height and breadth of God's eternal love which overflows from the fullness of Catherine's experience of God; the closest analogy she can find is to say that God is drunk, mad, crazy with love.

¹¹³ *Dialogo XXV:56*

¹¹⁴ *Dialogo CLIII:442*. Note that *inestimabile* carries more literally the sense of 'incapable of being measured, or fully valued for its worth.'

¹¹⁵ Noffke 1988:78

The image of drunkenness as Catherine applies it to herself, then, suggests being so possessed by God that one 'loses oneself'. As applied to God, the image of drunkenness is also linked to love. A drunk person and a person very much in love might behave in a similarly 'crazy' manner. As Catherine 'opens her mind's eye and gazes' into God, it seems to her that God is so much in love with us that love has taken over. Only a lover or a drunk would behave so foolishly, and continue in this way with so little response. It is the fond, affectionate image of a 'dearest daughter' who knows she can get anything from her doting father, and at the same time, aches at her own and others' indifference to him. It is also a daring image which goes as far as possible to express God's incredible, inexpressible, unlimited Love. It is a profound symbol of Catherine's mystical self-knowledge: she knows herself as unrestrainedly loved by God and she in turn is inebriated with God's love.

10. Fire imagery

The symbol of the blood draws together all Catherine's other images, including the fire imagery. For the fire is one with the blood and the water:

*... però che il sangue è intriso e impastato col fuoco della divina carità, perchè per amore fu sparto.*¹¹⁶

... for blood has been fused with the fire of divine charity, because it was shed for love.

Those who enter the open side of Christ come to know:

¹¹⁶

Dialogo LXXV:164

... *il battesimo dell'acqua, il quale à virtú nel sangue, dove l'anima trovò la grazia nel santo battesimo, disposto il vasello dell'anima a ricevere la grazia unita ed impastata nel sangue.*¹¹⁷

... the baptism of water that has within it the power of the blood provided the soul's vessel is ready to receive the grace of being joined and kneaded into the blood.

The blood is the symbol of the redemptive love of God, which is imaged as a fire of love and in that sense the two are fused. Our entry into redemption is through Christ, by means of baptism which can take various forms, expressed in traditional Catholic theology as baptism of water, of blood (martyrdom) and of desire. There is also the *continuo battesimo del sangue* (ongoing baptism of blood) of repentance, confession and reconciliation.¹¹⁸ This baptism of blood poured out in God's burning love, and the baptism of water that is *unita col sangue e col fuoco* (one with the blood and the fire) causes the soul to be fused with the blood of Christ. Catherine stresses that the blood and the fire are one in Christ:

... *nel sangue troverete il fuoco (perocché per amore fu sparto) e nel costato troverete l'amore corale.*¹¹⁹

... in his blood you will find the fire (because it has been shed for love) and in his open side you will find hearty love).

Catherine prays that the fire and the blood will be united in us in burning love so that we will have a hunger for souls:

¹¹⁷ *Dialogo LXXV:164*

¹¹⁸ Noffke points out baptism of blood (martyrdom), of desire and of water are various ways of entering the one redemption of Christ. This is extended into the ongoing baptism of repentance and reconciliation. Dial. 138 n.98.

¹¹⁹ Letter T158,4

*Arde i cuori nostri e immergeli in questo sangue acciò che meglio potiamo concipere fame a l'onore tuo e salute de l'anime.*¹²⁰

Set our hearts ablaze and plunge them into this blood, so that we may more surely conceive a hunger for your honor and the salvation of souls.

Catherine forges a link between self-knowledge and the blood and the fire, which represent love:

*Chi ci giogne conviene che sia perseverante e stia nella cella del cognoscimento di sè, nel quale cognoscimento di sè conoscerà la misericordia mia nel sangue de l'unigenito mio Figliuolo.*¹²¹

To attain charity you must dwell constantly in the cell of self-knowledge. For in knowing yourself you will come to know my mercy in the blood of my only-begotten Son ...

God's love, which is a fire, is revealed in the blood of Christ. It was this fire of love that split open Christ's body on the cross; it is through the spilling of Christ's blood in the Passion that we come to understand God's love:

*...perché allora il fuoco ascoso sotto la cenere nostra cominciò [a] manifestarsi largamente e pienamente, aprendo il suo corpo santissimo sul legno della croce.*¹²²

... For then the fire hidden under our ashes began to show itself completely and generously by splitting open his most holy body on the wood of the cross.

¹²⁰ Oraz. XIX: 55

¹²¹ *Dialogo* LXII: 136. Compare 'The Symbol of the Blood' in this chapter: blood and fire are closely linked to symbolize love.

¹²² Oraz. XII:40

Fire, for Catherine, is most often a God-image, although she uses it also as a Spirit-image and a Christ-image. As a God-image, of which there are numerous occurrences, fire appears in expressions such as:

*... tu che se' fuoco participi con lei el fuoco, e nel fuoco tuo unisci la volontà tua con la sua e la sua con la tua.*¹²³

You who are fire, share the fire with her, and in the fire you fuse your will with hers and hers with yours.

*Deità eterna, o alta eterna Deità, o sommo ed eterno Padre, o fuoco che sempre ardi! Tu, Padre eterno, alta eterna Trinità, tu se' fuoco inextimabile di carità.*¹²⁴

Eternal Godhead, O high eternal Godhead, O supreme eternal Father! O fire ever blazing! You, eternal Father, high eternal Trinity, you are the measureless fire of charity.

While Catherine speaks of (or to) God as a fire, the fire-images relating to the Spirit are specifically related to the action of fire. They are dynamic images of, for instance, cleansing or powerful intercession or of holding Christ fastened to the cross:

*...arde col fuoco del tuo Spirito e consuma e dibarbica dal fondamento ogni amore e affetto della carne dai cuori de le piante novelle ...*¹²⁵

Burn with the fire of your Spirit and consume, root out from the bottom up every fleshly love and affection from the hearts of the new plants ...

¹²³ Oraz. XXI:240

¹²⁴ Oraz XXII, p 250

¹²⁵ Oraz. V, p 50-52

Catherine's image for the Holy Spirit praying in us 'with unutterable groanings' (Rom. 8:26) is 'tears of fire':

*Dico che costoro àno lagrima di fuoco, in cui piagne lo Spirito santo dinanzi a me per loro e per lo prossimo loro ...*¹²⁶

I tell you, these souls have tears of fire. In this fire the Holy Spirit weeps in my presence for them and for their neighbours.

It was the fire of the Holy Spirit that held Christ to the cross:

*... la clemencia dello Spirito santo, fuoco e abisso di carità che tenne esso tuo Figliuolo confitto e chiavellato in croce ...*¹²⁷

... mercy of the Holy Spirit, fire and deep well of charity that held this Son of yours fixed and nailed to the cross ...

More rarely, Catherine uses a Christ-image of fire: she refers, for example, to Christ as *il carro del fuoco de l'unigenito mio Figliuolo*¹²⁸ (the fiery chariot of my only-begotten Son). This fiery chariot brings the fire of charity to humanity with overflowing mercy.

Fire is connected with self-knowledge in Prayer 12.¹²⁹ Throughout the prayer she sustains the image of God as fire and she repeats in several ways God is inviting her to gaze into the depths of the Godhead so that, in coming to know God, she will also know herself. God is the 'fire ever blazing' and the 'measureless fire of charity'. Gazing, then, into 'eternal Goodness' she sees

¹²⁶ *Dialogo XCI:221*

¹²⁷ *Oraz. XXIV:272-3*

¹²⁸ *Dialogo LVIII:127*. The 'chariot of fire' image also occurs in reference to Christ in letter T35. However, in Letter T184 it refers to Mary, as is the case in Prayer 18 (English edition). Cavallini points out that images of Christ and of Mary coalesce, a coalescence in itself symbolic of the close union of mother and Son. (Noffke 1983:165).

¹²⁹ Noffke 1983:99ff. This corresponds to Cavallini, *Le Orazioni*, XXII, p250ff.

God's gratuitous love for her; she contemplates her own creation in the divine image and likeness. Finally she comes to the crux of self-knowledge:

*Nella natura tua, Deità eterna, conoscerò la natura mia. E quale è la natura mia, amore inestimabile? È il fuoco, però che tu non se' altro che fuoco d'amore, e di questa natura hai data a l'uomo però che per fuoco d'amore l'hai creato.*¹³⁰

In your nature,
eternal Godhead,
I shall come to know my nature.
And what is my nature, boundless love?
It is fire,
because you are nothing but a fire of love.
And you have given humankind
a share in this nature
for by the fire of love
you created us.

In her very nature Catherine, and all of us, are like God in that we are 'fuoco' (fire), that is, made by Love and for love.

11. The Symbol of Tears

The tears-symbol is the most self-contained and the one least obviously connected with the blood. There is an indirect connection through fire-imagery, for Catherine coins the image 'tears of fire' and, as has been shown above, the blood symbol is closely interwoven with the image of fire. Then tears and blood are both body fluids which are shed in suffering or possibly in extreme emotion.

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Oraz. 258

Another link between the blood symbol and the tears-image is that kinds of tears for Catherine, depict stages of spiritual growth, roughly corresponding to the three stages on the journey across the bridge. The bridge itself is blood-soaked, since it is the crucified body of Christ.

The section on Tears in the *Dialogue* comprises ten chapters: 88 - 97 inclusive. There has been some speculation that this section may have been written first and circulated before the rest of the book. One argument in support of this view is that the section on 'Tears' is relatively self-contained.

The tears symbol depicts five spiritual stages. These correspond to the stages of spiritual growth in the movement along the three stairs of the bridge. Progress along the bridge, or through the kinds of tears, indicates growth in self-knowledge, including, as always, growth in knowledge of God.

Using a process of discernment which examines motives, Catherine says that we can know a great deal about ourselves by looking at what makes us weep, what upsets us. If the heart's love is disordered, our tears are selfish and in fact deadly. The first stage of salutary tears, however, are those which come from a recognition of sinfulness and a fear of God's punishment. Not very advanced, but commendable because these tears show we are on the way of truth. The next three stages are all the result of a growth in self-knowledge which flows from a deepening knowledge of God. Some key texts illustrate the growth:

*E però si leva con amore a cognoscere sé medesima e la mia bontà in sé, e comincia a pigliare speranza nella misericordia mia, nella quale il cuore sente allegrezza, mescolato il dolore della colpa con la speranza della divina mia misericordia.*¹³¹

So she rises up in love to know herself and my goodness to her, and she begins to hope in my mercy. In this her heart feels glad, because her sorrow for sin is mixed with hope in my divine mercy.

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Dialogo LXXXIX:202

Knowledge of God and self-knowledge are beginning to grow together and there is the joy of the newly-converted who has experienced the peace of God's mercy. The tears that are shed at this stage are often sensual tears of self-pity when consolation, either from God or from someone who is loved with a spiritual love, is withheld; or the tears are self-pitying in time of temptation.

As the person becomes steadier in virtue and prayer, which Catherine calls 'exercising herself in the light of self-knowledge', there is discernible growth, evinced by the new motive for her weeping. This is the third stage of life-giving tears.¹³²

*Ma crescendo ed esercitandosi nel lume del cognoscimento di sé, concipe uno dispiacimento in sé medesima, unde trae un cognoscimento della mia bontà con un fuoco d'amore, e comincia ad unirsi e conformare la volontà sua con la mia. E così comincia a sentire gaudio e compassione: gaudio in sé per l'affetto dell'amore, e compassione al prossimo ... Subito l'occhio ... geme nella carità mia e del prossimo suo con cordiale amore ...*¹³³

But as she grows and exercises herself in the light of self-knowledge, she conceives a kind of contempt for herself. From this she draws a bit of knowledge of my goodness, aflame with love, and she begins to join and conform her will with mine. She begins to feel joy and compassion: joy for herself because of this impulse of love, and compassion for her neighbours ... Then her eyes ... weep in charity for me and her neighbors with heartfelt love ...

The self-contempt of which Catherine speaks is not a false derogation of the self, but a turning away from one's sinfulness. It is a recognition of the false self, the ego, in order to discover the deeper true self. This goes together with conforming one's will to God's will and brings with it joy and compassion. There

¹³² cf The third stage of life-giving tears discussed above, in the section on 'The Table of the Cross'. One sets this table in one's heart and spirit and begins to eat souls when one has reached the third stage of life-giving tears.

¹³³ *Dialogo* LXXXVIII:201

is much more focus on the praise and glory of God, rather than on self. Suffering is accepted with patience and even gladly, because there is joy in suffering for God's sake. All these are indications of genuine growth in love.

The final stage of tears is that of union with God, corresponding to the fourth stage on the bridge. It is through ever-deepening self-knowledge that the soul is brought to this point, when she has seen and tasted, that is, experienced, God's goodness and greatness in her. It is an experiential self-knowledge in which she knows herself to be loved by God unspeakably much. This love then flows out to all around her. Catherine describes this unitive stage in moving terms, with the unmistakable voice of experience:

Tratto l'affetto dietro all'intelletto, gusta la Deità mia eterna nella quale conosce e vede essa natura divina unita con la vostra umanità. Riposasi allora in me, mare pacifico ... Nel sentimento di me, Deità eterna, l'occhio comincia a versare lagrime di dolcezza che drittamente sono un latte che nutrica l'anima in vera pazienza. Queste lagrime sono uno unguento odorifero che gittano odore di grande soavità¹³⁴

Her will, drawn along on the heels of understanding, tastes my eternal Godhead and knows and sees therein the divine nature joined with your humanity. She takes her rest then in me, the peaceful sea ... When she feels the presence of my eternal Godhead she begins to shed sweet tears that are a milk that nourishes the soul in true patience. These tears are a fragrant ointment that sends forth a most delicate perfume.

She feels the presence of the Godhead; she tastes the Godhead. This is the source of her knowledge of God and of herself and the tears flow like fragrant ointment.

It is significant that Catherine's symbols of spiritual progress are all open-ended, leaving room for 'ultimate enlargement'. The bridge has three stages; beyond

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Dialogo LXXXIX:204

that is a fourth which opens out into an extension of itself, opening out beyond imagining, beyond symbols. The stages depicted by the various kinds of tears, too, have a further stage beyond the unitive stage. This is the stage beyond physical tears, when the Holy Spirit weeps tears of fire in God's presence for the mystic and for all for whom she intercedes. And since ever-growing experiential knowledge of God brings an ever-deepening self-knowledge, Catherine is saying that both of these, intertwined as they are, are capable of 'ultimate enlargement', endless eternal growth.

12. Conclusion

The above discussion of Catherine's symbols and images shows how closely interrelated they all are. In a sense they are all one, forming a tightly-knit system filled with paradox and multifaceted meaning such as is possible only in the language of symbol and image. We started with the three symbols for self-knowledge: *cella*, *casa* and *città*, as these open out into each other. In each of these, it is in fact through the blood of Christ that we come to know the truth, the truth of God and of self. The integrating symbol of the blood encompasses the image of the bridge, which is, in fact, the crucified body of Christ. At each of the significant stages in the journey across the bridge, we encounter the blood and at the same time we grow in self-knowledge. The open side of Christ, from which blood streams and which reveals his heart, is the place where we 'eat souls' at the table of the cross. It is also in the cell of self-knowledge that we find a table and learn to 'eat souls'. We drink the blood of Christ and become drunk with love as we come to see God's overwhelming love for us; so our self-knowledge and knowledge of God deepen until 'out it comes over the heads of our brothers and sisters'. We lose ourselves, both in God and for others. This love is a blazing fire in God, in the activity of the Spirit, in Christ and in us, made as we are in God's image. And finally, the Spirit weeps 'tears of fire' in us

before the Father when the blood has brought us to knowledge of the truth in a depth of love that is besotted and crazy.

The interweaving of these images and symbols brings to light the way of life of the mystic as Catherine lived it and sees it. Walking in growing self-knowledge and knowledge of God, our true self emerges and we see ourselves as so loved by God that it makes us drunk. Drinking our fill on the blood of Christ, we become so filled that it comes out over the heads of others. Though we may feel a little squeamish about this image, it expresses the inextricable bond between mystical experience and ministry. This is the secret and the pattern of Catherine's life. Since it is part of the mystery of God's relationship with us, it can be expressed most fully only in symbol.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Introduction

The first section of this chapter draws conclusions based on the chronological study of self-knowledge in the writings of Catherine of Siena in the foregoing pages. Possibilities for further research are pointed out in the second section.

The most significant conclusions that emerge are as follows:

1.1 Fusion of Horizons

Our contemporary horizon is neither fixed nor static but is constantly in a process of formation, even through encounters with the past. This study of Catherine has been one such formative encounter. As we follow the development of her experience and teaching regarding the 'cell of self-knowledge', we discover the truth of it for ourselves and our horizon of self-knowledge is expanded. Mystical self-knowledge, which is self-knowledge at its most profound, is something that we, too, can experience, for Catherine's knowledge of herself in God and of God in herself is a deep human experience which has timeless and universal validity.

1.2 Understanding Catherine within her own historical Horizon

It has been important to see Catherine in terms of her own being, not in terms of our contemporary criteria and prejudices, but within her own historical horizon. This includes her social and cultural horizon, which have been outlined, but more especially, because of her life story, her politico-historical horizon and, as regards her writing, the horizon of her linguistic symbols.

1.2.1. Politico-ecclesial horizon

We have placed Catherine within her historical context and described something of the times in which she lived. Her involvement in the political and ecclesial affairs of her day, for instance, was undertaken from within her horizon of truth. She was utterly convinced for instance, that the papacy should return to Rome and she used what influence she had to bring this about. She was equally convinced that the election of Urban VI was completely valid. Educated and influential people of her own day took the opposite view and historians since then have had significant questions about the election process. The eventual outcome of the return of the pope to Rome and the election of Urban VI was disastrous, for it resulted in schism within the Church. Though Catherine's role in influencing these events was very small within the larger picture, one cannot help wondering about the possible outcome if she had taken a different stand. However, the attempt to see her within her own social, political, ecclesial and cultural horizons helps us to understand why she acted as she did and, that, being the person she was, she could not have done otherwise. To do this, we need to put aside the perspective afforded us by six hundred years of hindsight. The best way of doing this is to read Catherine's own texts. It is on these that this thesis is based.

1.2.2 Horizon of linguistic symbols

An awareness of our criteria and prejudices enables us to see beyond them. Thus when we find some of Catherine's imagery unappealing or distasteful, we are better able to look beyond it to understand her meaning. Catherine's symbol of the *cell* of self-knowledge, for instance, may conjure up in people's minds today the image of a prison cell. The word 'cell' is less and less used, even in monasteries and convents. For Catherine it has a positive meaning as a privileged place of prayer, a place of precious privacy, a holy place.

Other catherinian symbols need to be approached with an awareness of the tension between our horizon of meaning and hers. She was not at all squeamish in using, for instance, the blood of Christ as her major symbol. It colours every page of her writing and is for her the dominant symbol of God's love and of our redemption in Christ. Neither would she understand our discomfort with 'eating souls'. She loves to use this to express our concern for the salvation of everyone. The most offensive image of all, for most people today, is that of vomiting. Catherine uses it in connection with being drunk on God's love or the blood of Christ. When we have drunk enough, out it comes - not on the floor or into a basin, but over the heads of our brothers and sisters! The inevitability of bringing up when we are so full expresses, for Catherine, the very close connection between mystical experience and ministry. When we are filled with God, 'out it comes' in loving concern and service for others.

As we recognize our own horizon and come to understand something of Catherine's, there comes about a fusion of horizons which opens us up to an understanding of Catherine. We recognize the tensions between Catherine's horizon and our own and this recognition brings about at least a partial fusion of the two horizons of meaning. As Gadamer says, rather than naively trying to assimilate these tensions or covering them up, we consciously face them in order to arrive at a fusion of horizons.

In doing so, we are able, to some extent at least, to put aside our own prejudices and recognize the truth in what she is saying. Thus we claim her truth as our own and our horizon is enlarged.

1.3 Reciprocity of Questioning

We have approached Catherine in this thesis with the question: What did the concept of self-knowledge mean to you? What were you expressing about self-knowledge by using the symbols of the cell, the house and the city and the entire network of related symbols and images? An examination of the texts to discover Catherine's answer has formed the substance of the thesis and is summarized in this concluding chapter. However, at this point what is being noted is that Catherine in her turn questions us. She asks, for instance, what self-knowledge means to us. Are we too taken up with more superficial levels of self-knowledge such as what we find in books on popular psychology, or in the Enneagram and the Myers Briggs Personality Profile? (Our contemporary understanding of the Enneagram possibly often lacks the depth that the Sufi mystics had in its regard). Do we have too high an expectation regarding the value of psychological therapy and counselling? While these are undoubtedly of help and have their place in our coming to self-knowledge, do we tend to assume that that is all there is to self-knowledge? Have we ever considered the possibility of a deeper level of mystical self-knowledge which is built into our very nature? In striving for self-knowledge, do we look only at ourselves without seeing ourselves in the light of the God who created us? Catherine shows us the way to the attainment of this most profound level of understanding who we are and challenges us to discover it for ourselves.

1.4 Mystical Self-knowledge: immediate, not reflective

Catherine arrived at an experience and understanding of self-knowledge in God when she was called out of her physical cell and forced to find another way towards union with God. What she discovered she came to call 'the cell of self-knowledge', referring to the knowledge of ultimate selfhood which is an immediate awareness of presence to oneself and to the transcendent source of the self. This is the deepest mystery of our being. Self-knowledge at this level is a direct awareness of the self as *such*, rooted and grounded in God. It is knowing oneself to be transcendent by nature. Unlike ordinary levels of self-knowledge, it is not the result of reflection on the operations of the self but is an immediate and direct metaphysical, and ultimately mystical, experience. It is an experience of the self in union with God, of being loved and loving without restriction. This knowledge of herself in God is at the very heart of Catherine's mystical experience.

1.4.1 The self that Catherine came to know

Knowledge of the transcendent self, for Catherine, is the knowledge of being made in the image and likeness of God. This is the source of our dignity and beauty. Created in the image and likeness of the eternal Trinity, we reflect God's beauty. The fact that we are made in the image of God is the foundation of all human dignity, of any charter of human rights and of the respect to which every human being has a right.

At the same time, like all the mystics, Catherine knows her own sinfulness, the self-centeredness which mars God's image in us. She often prays for mercy and forgiveness and blames herself for the evils in the Church. Though this may seem exaggerated to us, it is clearly a perception which is part of knowing oneself in God. The direct apprehension of the self in such close union with God reveals to the

mystic her sinfulness with a clarity which we do not attain in the ordinary levels of self-knowledge. Our knowledge of our transcendence, of our beauty and dignity and also of our sinfulness is blunted and clouded in our everyday perception of ourselves.

1.5 Mystical Self-knowledge: Catherine's unique contribution

The self-knowledge which Catherine experienced and described in her complex web of symbols and images has also been experienced and named by other mystics. Some of these, such as Catherine's contemporaries Julian of Norwich and Ruusbroec, have been quoted in this thesis. What then is Catherine's unique contribution regarding mystical self-knowledge?

It is precisely what has been explored in chapter five of the thesis: the *development* of Catherine's experience of mystical self-knowledge, traced chronologically. Through her writings, now at last in the process of being correctly dated, we are able to watch the unfolding of this theme and to monitor the changes in Catherine's experience of knowing herself in God. The main features of this development are as follows:

1.5.1 The *cella* symbol

The chronological unfolding of Catherine's *cella* symbol as traced in this thesis reveals the following:

Catherine begins with other images of depth, such as the well and the abyss, to indicate the inner space in which we find God. She discovers that, at the same time, we also come to know ourselves in God. Her letters show her feeling her

way towards naming and exploring this reality. She begins to call it the *cell* (the cell of the soul, or of the soul and body.) It is only in 1376, after two years of writing about the cell, that she first uses the expression *the cell of self-knowledge*. Thereafter it becomes her favourite expression for her mystical experience of God and of herself in God.

There is a discernible development in Catherine's understanding of the *cell of self-knowledge*. In 1376, she speaks of it as being located within the open side of the crucified Christ, or within his wounds. This engenders the image of two *cells*, one inside the other. In 1377 she tries out the image of a *cell within a cell*. The outer cell is the cell of self-knowledge. Hidden deep within this is another cell, *la cella del cognoscimento della bontà di Dio in sé*, (the cell of the knowledge of God's goodness to you.) However, Catherine grows into the concept of the two cells merging into one. The two knowings, of herself and of God, become so integrated that she does not maintain the *cell within a cell* image; instead, she simply uses the expression *the cell of self-knowledge* with an occasional reminder that she is referring to twofold knowledge, of God in herself and of herself in God. The two have become integrated in her mystical experience and this is reflected in her imagery.

It is noteworthy that, although Catherine transcends the necessity of having a physical cell by discovering the *cell of self-knowledge*, she knows how much a place and atmosphere of prayer supports the prayer of the heart. People must always be willing, however, to leave the physical cell for obedience of charity, remembering never to leave the *cell of self-knowledge*.

The cell of self-knowledge is the foundational symbol of Catherine's spirituality in general and her mystical experience in particular. It expresses what is, for Catherine, the core reality: the mystical knowledge of self in God and of God in oneself.

1.5.2 The *casa* symbol

After about a year of using the 'cell' symbol, Catherine broadens it out into the 'house' of self-knowledge. The house of self-knowledge is connected to awaiting the gift of the Spirit. The house is more open and spacious than the cell; in it, we throw open the windows to let the sunlight in, and we go out through the door, taking with us the lamp of truth. There is a greater sense of ease in relationships and freedom of movement in the house than there is in the cell.

1.5.3 The *città* symbol

The 'city of the soul' symbolizes the harmony of the integrated self. Well-defended against the enemy, the city is strong and at peace. Wonderful music can be heard from within the city; this attracts people who are then 'caught' for God. Mysticism and zeal for the salvation of others inform each other and have come together.

As we trace the three symbols for self-knowledge chronologically in Catherine's writings, we watch her growing from a private, isolationist spirituality to an ecclesial and social awareness which is typical of her mature, integrated spirituality.

As is evident from a glance at the chart in Appendix II, Catherine never actually abandons any of these three symbols of self-knowledge. All three are held together in complementarity, so that when she is in the 'city of the soul', she presupposes the cell and the house.

1.6 Integration of Mystical Experience and Ministry

All three symbols express a balance between mysticism and ministry, but as they unfold, they reveal Catherine finding the balance between the two more and more steadily. The 'cell of self-knowledge' we take with us wherever we go, but in the early stages there is still a certain separation between the inner experience of God and the movement outwards towards others. Gradually, this division falls away. In the house of self-knowledge, the interaction between the two (experience of God and concern for the salvation of others) is more evident. There is openness to God, waiting for God's gift, and readiness to go forth. In the city of the soul, the two seem almost to have merged. In Catherine, this was in fact the case in the final years of her life. She lived continuously in God and at the same time was constantly pouring herself out in tireless love and concern for the Church and for those in need.

Catherine shows, in both her lived experience and her teaching on self-knowledge, that the movement 'downwards' into the depths of the self where God is, is accompanied by a movement 'outwards' to others. Ultimately these two movements become one current of energy, flowing outwards and back in, so that there is no beginning or end. This is the circle in which grows Catherine's 'tree of love'.¹ The circle is called self-knowledge.

1.7 Catherine's creative imagination

The use of image and symbol is the human way to express mystery. From time immemorial, humankind has been creative in finding images and symbols for transcendent realities. In all her writing, it is the mystery of her experience of the transcendent which Catherine is expressing. She is particularly creative in the way

¹ Dial.10:41. See the section on: 'Discernment' in *La Casa del cognoscimento di sé*.

she finds new symbols, or combines them with older ones, to give fresh and vivid expression to her mystical experience.

Catherine communicates her experience and her teaching by means of an intricate web of symbols and images, all of which are interconnected so that they form one system. At the centre of the web is the 'cell of self-knowledge'. This is her core experience, the 'place' where she encounters God, herself in God, and the reality of redemption in the blood of Christ. The whole web is coloured the rosy, fiery hue of the blood. On this blood she becomes drunk on the 'madness' of God's love, filled so full that 'out it comes' over the heads of her brothers and sisters. This brings us back to the same central reality of the interconnectedness between our experience of God and our genuine love for others, expressed in concerned service and involvement. Inevitably for Catherine, the former leads to the latter. The relation between the two is at the heart of Catherine's life and teaching. This is the hope and the challenge she offers us today, for her message has a timeless validity. It concerns knowing ourselves at the deepest and most meaningful level, in God, and the 'overflow' of this experience in active, loving concern and involvement.

1.8 An Ecclesial Woman

Like us, Catherine lived during a time when the Church was in turmoil and there were many abuses. While she felt impelled to denounce abuses and corruption, Catherine did not separate herself from the sinfulness in the Church but realized that her sins were part of the sinfulness of the Church.² She prayed continually and urgently for the Church and she became involved in every way she could for the renewal and reform of the Church. She loved the Church enough to stay in it in the midst of suffering and schism, for her love for the Church was an extension of her love for Christ. In our day, many are disenchanted with the Church. Many women,

²

Some of these points are made by O'Driscoll 1994:12.

for instance, find the Church's attitude to women unjust and intolerable. Possibly, like Catherine, we are called to work from within for reform: to speak out against abuses, to become involved where possible, to pray for and with the Church and to realize that our sinfulness is part of the sinfulness of the Church.

1.9 Prophetic Mission: denouncing abuses and giving hope

Denouncing abuses is only one aspect of a prophet's mission; the other aspect is to bring people hope. Catherine, in the prophetic dimension of her mission in the Church, does both of these in an outstanding way. Her fearless denunciation of corrupt practices and abuses forms a significant part of her letters and the *Dialogue*. Nor is she afraid to write directly to the people concerned.

On the other hand, her urgent and exultant message is filled with hope. She herself *is* the message - a burning flame of love and desire. She burns and overflows with her experience of God, knows herself to be created in God's image, sees herself as profoundly loved and invites us to venture down into our own inner cell to experience the same knowledge of ourselves in God. Catherine's experience of God is of One who is crazy and drunk with love for us. It is of the God on whom we rest as on our bed. How different this is from the image which many people have, of the stern, judgmental God. And sin? Sin, she says, is itself made fragrant in the open side of Christ. God's mercy ultimately transforms sin. This is the source of her hope.

1.10 Being yourself

Catherine's style was not imitative: she made her own choices and stood by them in the face of strong opposition and harsh criticism. She also, of course, had loyal friends and disciples who loved and revered her. In her refusal to conform, she grew

more and more into the fullness of the person she eventually became. Headstrong and stubborn she certainly was, but the other side of that was a resolute determination which enabled her to see things through in her own way and to live with the consequences.

Undoubtedly her growing mystical self-knowledge, founded on her experience of God's 'crazy' love for her, enabled her to discover her own unique beauty and dignity. She came to see herself as made in the image of God. We, too, are called to this. This, too, is a challenge she offers us: to discover the creative possibility of being a person in the true sense of the word, free not to conform but to be original.

As a fourteenth century woman, she would normally have had little control over many of the major aspects of her life, such as whom she would marry and how she would spend her life. She not only chose to deviate from the expectations of her family and society, but she chose her own unique path in life. Nor was she timid about doing many things generally regarded as male prerogatives. She went about with a group of disciples, many of whom were male. She traveled fairly widely within Italy and into France. She became involved in ecclesiastical politics. She told the pope, the hierarchy, royalty and rulers what to do and what not to do. She preached and directed people on the spiritual path. Though it would be anachronistic to call her a feminist, she simply took on traditional male roles, especially in the Church, without asking anyone. Driven by her passion for truth and recognized as a mystic, she was a woman to be reckoned with. Her authority came from within and was powerful, in contrast to the poorly-wielded hierarchical authority of most churchmen of her day.

Could she be reminding women today that hierarchical authority is often less effective than the charismatic authority that works from within rather than from above? Could she be challenging women to do what must be done in service of the truth?

1.11 Spiritual Leadership

It was precisely Catherine's growing knowledge of herself in God and of God in her, which gave her the spiritual charisma and authority which others recognized. Spiritual leadership flows from spiritual experience. With our contemporary penchant for doing courses and acquiring qualifications, do we need reminding that to take God seriously, to take spirituality and mysticism seriously, is primary in spiritual leadership?

2. Possibilities for future research

Possible directions for future research which emerge from this thesis are as follows:

2.1 Mystical experience and creative imagination

Catherine's writing raises the question of the connection between mystical experience and creative imagination. She found some relief in her creative expression and apologized to Raymond for writing so much, explaining that her hands and tongue were going along with her heart.³ Her experience of herself in God demanded an outlet; she was drunk with it and the torrent of images and symbols comes pouring out over us! Whether a mystic's creative expression in some way enhances her openness to God in further mystical experience is not clear, but it is not impossible. The creative expression of an experience gives it a more definite shape, one which may more deeply imprint the experience on the self and

³ Dial. Intro:22

free the self to further openness. The interrelationship between creative, symbolic expression and mysticism would be a fascinating area of research. It has been touched upon in this thesis, particularly in chapter six, but it could well be a topic for an entire thesis.

2.2 Scripture in Catherine's writings

This topic, too, has been discussed a little in one section of the thesis, but it could well be expanded into a full-scale study. Catherine's writings are so steeped in Scripture that one can hardly disentangle her text from the biblical one she has in mind. Of great interest is the fact that she learnt most of her Scripture by hearing, not reading it. In a country such as South Africa, where such a large proportion of the population is illiterate or semi-literate, many people are in the same position of being dependent on their hearing of Scripture. One wonders whether Catherine's experience speaks to such a situation.

2.3 Hagiographical styles and their influence on models of holiness, as illustrated by Catherine of Siena and other medieval mystics

For those with a more historical and literary bent, it would be interesting to develop this theme. Again, an indication of this has been part of this thesis, particularly in chapter four, where the fourth century desert ascetics are seen to have been the paradigm for late medieval hagiographers. An exploration of contemporary hagiography and models of holiness would flow from this study.

2.4 The compatibility of holiness and weakness as revealed in Catherine of Siena

In this thesis Catherine has been shown to have had several weaknesses. One of these was her early 'Jesus and I' spirituality. She outgrew this one, but others remained with her, at least to some extent. The one which she found irreversible was her inedia, and this was undoubtedly one of the major factors which brought about her death. She also had a certain imperiousness of manner, a self-assurance which expressed itself in her oft-repeated *lo voglio* (I wish, I want). And her enormously high regard for the virtue of patience, coupled with the intensity and urgency of her personality, make it easy to deduce that her patience was in short supply. Yet she was a mystic, recognized as such by her contemporaries and by the Church, for she is Saint Catherine. She is one of the only two women to have been declared a Doctor of the Church. The relationship between holiness and weakness, in her case alone, would make an interesting study especially in the light of chapter five of *Lumen Gentium*, the constitution on the Church from the Second Vatican Council. Chapter Five is on the 'Call to holiness' which is stated to be universal. The pre-conciliar popular concept of a two-tiered concept of holiness, which involved 'perfection' for some, especially clergy and religious, and something rather more ordinary for others, has been definitely abrogated. A study of Catherine from this angle could throw further light on the role of weakness in holiness.

2.5 Catherine of Siena's doctrine of our human beauty and dignity as made in the image of God

This theme is an integral part of Catherine's experience of knowing herself in God. It has come up several times in the course of this thesis, but could fruitfully itself be expanded into a thesis. This theme has clear implications for human rights and may have much that is valuable to say to a country such as South Africa as we emerge from years of apartheid.

This is also a theme that could be explored from the perspective of creation spirituality. Catherine's conviction of the goodness of creation and its imaging of the divine beauty would undoubtedly contribute something to creation spirituality.

2.6 Catherine of Siena as an ecclesial woman

Although Catherine was not a feminist, she was a woman who played a significant role in the Church of her day and she exercised outstanding spiritual leadership within the Church. A study on this theme could well be of interest to women in the Church today.

3. Conclusion

Finally, this investigation of the text of Catherine of Siena's 'cell of self-knowledge' has revealed a development in her experience and her thought in this area. The self-knowledge she is describing is a mystical self-knowledge. This thesis has explored the wealth of symbols and images Catherine uses to express her experience of mystical self-knowledge, especially the three major symbols, *cella*, *casa* and *città*. The texts reveal that Catherine's 'inward' growth in mystical self-knowledge is accompanied by a corresponding 'outward' growth in loving concern and ministry. These two directions of growth gradually become so integrated that they are really one. Catherine is seen as a mystic and at the same time as intensely involved in active ministry. It is in the remarkable balance and integration in which she comes to live these two dimensions that Catherine is unique among the mystics. 'Losing herself' in God, and 'losing herself' in ministry are, for Catherine, two aspects

of mystical experience. The loss of herself which she experiences as a mystic inevitably leads to the loss of herself as she pours herself out for her sisters and brothers. This is the integrated spirituality towards which Catherine grows in the 'cell of self-knowledge'.

APPENDIX I

1. Was Catherine Anorexic?

This is a thorny question but one which cannot be avoided in an account of Catherine's life - and death. It is a question very often asked about her, and therefore has its place in an account of her life and influence. The term itself is anachronistic and yet there are undeniable similarities between the "symptoms" of modern *anorexia nervosa* and those caused by abstention from food as practised by many medieval women saints in Europe. There are also some notable differences. In order to assess Catherine's inedia in terms of her own times rather than ours, it is necessary to sketch in the background.

It has been established¹ that the practice of extreme fasting was very common among holy people, especially women, of the twelfth to the fifteenth² centuries and their lives give evidence of many of the above characteristics. In the Low Countries there were women like Mary of Oignes, Hadewijch, Margaret of Ypres, Ida of Louvain, all of whom lived in the thirteenth century, and Lidwina of Schiedam in the fifteenth, who fasted in an extreme manner. In Germany and France there were women such as Jane Mary of Maillé, Lukardis of Oberweimar, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Alpais of Cudot, Elizabeth of Hungary, Margaret of Hungary, Dorothy of Montau and Colette of Corbie, all medieval holy women who became unable to eat normally. They fasted obsessively, had little need for sleep and sometimes engaged in frenetic activity. In Italy, some of the better-known medieval

¹ Bynum refers, for instance to the study by Weinstein and Bell, which considered 864 saints from 1000 - 1700, in which they demonstrate conclusively that all types of penitential asceticism, including fasting, are significantly more common among women than among men in medieval piety.

² These and the following names are from the study of the place of food and fasting in medieval women by Bynum 1987, especially chapter 4.

women saints whose eating habits were similar to these were Margaret of Cortona, Angela of Foligno, Alda of Siena, Agnes of Montepulciano, Rita of Cascia, Columba of Rieti, Catherine of Genoa and Catherine of Siena. This list is by no means complete, but it serves to demonstrate that Catherine of Siena was one of many medieval holy women who were well known for their excessive fasting, often to the point of being practically unable to eat at all. It was in fact expected that women called to serious discipleship of Christ would fast in this way. While the phenomenon was not confined to women mystics, the number of women who did so far outnumbered the men.

This was not unconnected with the symbolic value of food in the middle ages. Nurturing others is a very womanly characteristic. Denying oneself food made a person a feeder, a nurturer of others. The issue of control is also at stake. Women controlled food in that they bought it, prepared it and served it. They controlled food far more than they controlled other aspects of their lives such as whom they married, sex, the number of children they bore, money or politics. Bynum explains:

Fasting and charitable food distribution, and their miraculous counterparts - surviving on the eucharist alone, food multiplication miracles, the female body that exudes food or curing liquid, were thus, in one sense, religious expressions of social facts. They manifested in religious behaviour the sexual division of labour. Since late medieval spirituality valued both renunciation and service, each gender renounced and distributed what it most effectively controlled: men gave up money, property and progeny; women gave up food.³

The similarities between *anorexia nervosa* and what Bell calls "holy anorexia" include:⁴

³ Bynum 1987:192-3

⁴ Bell 1985:2

1. Onset before age twenty-five.
2. Lack of appetite accompanied by loss of at least 25% of original body weight.
3. A distorted, implacable attitude towards eating that overrides hunger, admonitions, reassurance or threats.
4. No known medical illness to account for the loss of appetite and weight.
5. No other known psychiatric disorder.
6. At least two of the following manifestations:
 - (a) amenorrhea;
 - (b) soft, fine hair;
 - (c) slow pulse;
 - (d) periods of overactivity;
 - (e) episodes of bulimia;
 - (f) vomiting, which may be self-induced.
7. Some contest of wills or quest for autonomy, often in relation to men, with a need to control all bodily drives and thus oneself.⁵
8. Preludes to the anorexic condition such as survivorship, parental dominance or negative experiences of sex.
9. Socially, anorexics of both types often come from families that are wealthy or at least comfortable.

Despite the many similarities between "holy" and "nervous" anorexics, there are some very significant differences. Whereas modern *anorexia nervosa*

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These last two points are from notes by Noffke from a talk given on 29 April 1994: Catherine of Siena: A Work in Progress.

has emerged in the context of a culture that places a high value on thinness, "holy anorexia" is not concerned with personal appearance but is preoccupied with God. People suffering from *anorexia nervosa* are obsessed with body weight; for the "holy anorexics" it was not an issue. While *anorexia nervosa* is usually accompanied by extreme self-absorption, regression to childish ways of reasoning and even psychotic-like thinking, the medieval holy women who fasted to the point of starvation were loving, caring, often remarkable people who spent themselves in prayer and in the service of others. The modern anorexic is usually recognizably sociably maladjusted and distorted in her thinking;⁶ the medieval "holy anorexics", despite what their critics had to say, were generally regarded as both admirable and holy. They were well able to maintain stable relationships, to make a contribution to church or society and to function as mature adults.

1.1 Eucharist

One very important aspect of medieval fasting was its link with the Eucharist. For most if not all of these women, Eucharistic piety was central. As they fasted from ordinary food, they came to live more and more on the Eucharist. Physical hunger was the symbol of hunger for God and it was satisfied by sacramental communion. Bynum says:

Abstinence was seen less as self-control ... than as a never-sated physical hunger that mirrors and recapitulates in bodily agony both Christ's suffering on the cross and the soul's unquenchable thirst for mystical union.⁷

Physical hunger that was controlled and focused on the Eucharist, would be met with the bread from heaven. There was a very close link seen, in the High Middle Ages, between Eucharist and suffering.

⁶ cf Bell 1985:14

⁷ Bynum 1987:33

The food on the altar was the God who became man; it was bleeding and broken flesh. Hunger was unquenchable desire; it was suffering. To eat God, therefore, was finally to become suffering flesh with his suffering flesh: it was to imitate the cross.⁸

To the "holy anorexics" themselves, fasting, meditation and eucharistic devotion were part of their preparation for the grace of contemplation. They were much more radical about both abstinence and eucharist than most people, fasting severely for long periods and often going into a frenzy or a trance when receiving the eucharist.

In our times, it is perhaps only in countries such as Ruanda that terrible, nationwide starvation is known, where millions subsist on grass, berries, stalks, scraps of refuse, or starve without any food at all. The recurring Black Death of the fourteenth century contributed to the widespread hunger. It is noteworthy that Catherine's inability to eat bread, which was part of her diet up to that time, started after the famine of 1370 which broke out in Siena.

It is against this religious and social background that we must consider Catherine's increasingly severe fasting. She began fasting in her teens from a number of very mixed, even paradoxical motives.⁹ They include possible survival guilt in being the surviving twin and the one to outlive both her older sister, Bonaventura, and her younger sister, Nanna. Catherine may have had to live with the frequent reminder from her mother that she owed her life to the fact that her mother had nursed her and not the others. Conflict with her domineering mother from the time she was weaned could have been another contributing factor. Her adolescent guilt about her spell of "wordliness" which ended with Bonaventura's death was very probably also a motive; Catherine partly blamed herself for her sister's death. Conflict with her family over her proposed marriage to a man she found repulsive

⁸ Bynum 1987:54

⁹ Bell, Bynum and Noffke have all written on the motivating forces which led to Catherine's fasting.

brought on what was possibly the most severe aversion to food. Catherine also bargained with God for her family, her disciples and the church and she used fasting as her bargaining tool. This last motivation was, of course, conscious, while many of the abovementioned motives were not.

Another clearly conscious motivation would have been medieval practice and tradition regarding holiness and its link with fasting. This was part of Catherine's heritage of faith. Spiritually precocious as she was, she would have been familiar with the medieval attitude that fasting was an essential ingredient for holiness, particularly for women. She would have been edified by stories she heard, and later read, of the mothers and fathers of the desert and their stringent fasting. She would probably have heard of some of the saints of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and their practice of fasting, coupled with their love for the Eucharist. Severe fasting would have been set before her eyes as an eminently desirable and admirable practice for anyone serious about God. It was a way of uniting oneself with the sufferings of Christ and sharing in his redemptive love. But she went too far and could not reverse the process.

2. Criticism of Catherine's fasting

Catherine's inability to eat elicited sharp criticism from some quarters. We have an interesting letter of Catherine's written in reply to a "religious person in Florence" who had been passing severe judgment on Catherine's way of living, especially on her extreme fasting. He had asked whether she could consider the possibility that she was deluded. She replies that in this matter of eating and in all her other actions, she is fearful of her own weakness and the cleverness of the devil, for she does indeed believe that she could be deluded. Her critic has also suggested that she ask God for the ability to eat. Her response is as follows:

I tell you, my father - and I say it in the sight of God - that in every way I have been able to manage I have forced myself to take food once or twice a

day. Over and over I have prayed and do pray and will continue to pray God for the grace to live as other people do in this matter of eating - if it is his will, for it is certainly mine. When I have done as much as I can, I enter within myself to get to know my own weakness and God.¹⁰

When Catherine writes this, she is twenty-nine. Her attitude to stringent fasting has softened, so that she can now refer to it as an *infermità* (a weakness). It has indeed become her greatest weakness, for it is irreversible.

3. Another Phenomenon connected to Medieval Austerity

A strange phenomenon which is found in the lives of some of the women who fasted radically is one which we find disgusting and almost inhuman. It was done in an effort to overcome their revulsion at the stench of a sick person's sores. What is reported is that they forced themselves to drink the pus from these sores. However, one must be careful both of medieval exaggeration¹¹ and of careless translation. In Catherine's case, writers like Bynum state that she drank the pus from the breast of Andrea, a *Mantellate* member who was dying of cancer and whose ulcerous breast gave off such a loathsome smell that people could hardly bear to come near her. Bynum is using Lamb's translation of Raymond's *Life of Catherine*. The newer

¹⁰ Letter T92, DT 19; Noffke 1988:79.

¹¹ There is a similar account of Francis of Assisi which shows definite exaggeration as the story was told and retold. In Thomas of Celano's *First Life of Francis*, Francis kisses a leper, ashamed because he had earlier scorned their foul smell. In Celano's *Second Life of Francis*, Francis kisses the leper and gives him alms. In Bonaventure's *Legenda maior*, Francis kisses and gives alms to lepers and tears off his clothes for beggars. Only in the fourth recounting, in Bonaventure's *Legenda minor*, do we find Francis placing his mouth on the pus of leper's sores. (Bynum 1987:343).

Francis died more than a century before Catherine's birth. By that time the legends of Francis of Assisi would have had time to spread throughout Italy and to change and grow. This may well have been the case with the stories of other mystics, including that of Catherine herself, when her turn came.

translation by Kearns, however, is a more exact translation of the original which reads:

...inclinata la faccia sul petto dell'inferma, accostò la bocca e il naso sull'orribile piaga, e rimase in quella posizione finchè non le parve che lo spirito avesse vinto l'indescrivibile nausea, e domata la carne che si opponeva allo spirito.¹²

...bending over the breast of the sick woman, she pressed her mouth and nose upon the festering sore, and in that position she remained a long time, until she felt that the power of the spirit had subdued the indescribable nausea and that she had stamped out the rebellion of the flesh against the spirit.¹³

There is no mention of drinking or swallowing; merely of pressing her mouth and nose against the sore. Catherine may have kept her lips closed and, as it were, kissed the ulcer. Enduring the putrid smell and feel of it must have been revolting enough. Catherine's motivation is also worth noting. As she felt her stomach heaving, she wanted to remind herself that the sick woman was her sister in Christ, redeemed by the blood of the Saviour, therefore it was important to Catherine that she overcome her disgust at the overpowering stench.¹⁴ Overcoming oneself in this way was not unknown among saints in the Middle Ages.

¹² Tinagli's translation of the Latin, IV, 155.

¹³ Kearns 1980:149, slightly adapted to make the translation more literal.

¹⁴ Van den Heever's description of Catherine as 'craving for Christ's blood, as for pus ...' (1993:77) is simply untrue. He states that after her vision of Christ in which she was fed from Christ's side (a symbol of the motherhood of Christ and of his being her source of sustenance), Catherine 'feasted only on the pus and the eucharistic host.' To say that Catherine 'craved' and 'feasted on' pus is unfounded and turns Catherine into a monster. There was only this one incident in Catherine's life involving pus and the operative verb is *accostò* (pressed), for Raymond says she pressed her mouth and nose against the sore. No verb of drinking or swallowing is present. Van den Heever is quoting Bynum (1987:172) who bases her conclusions in regard to Catherine on a loose English translation and who does not take into account the literary genre of Raymond's *Life* of Catherine.

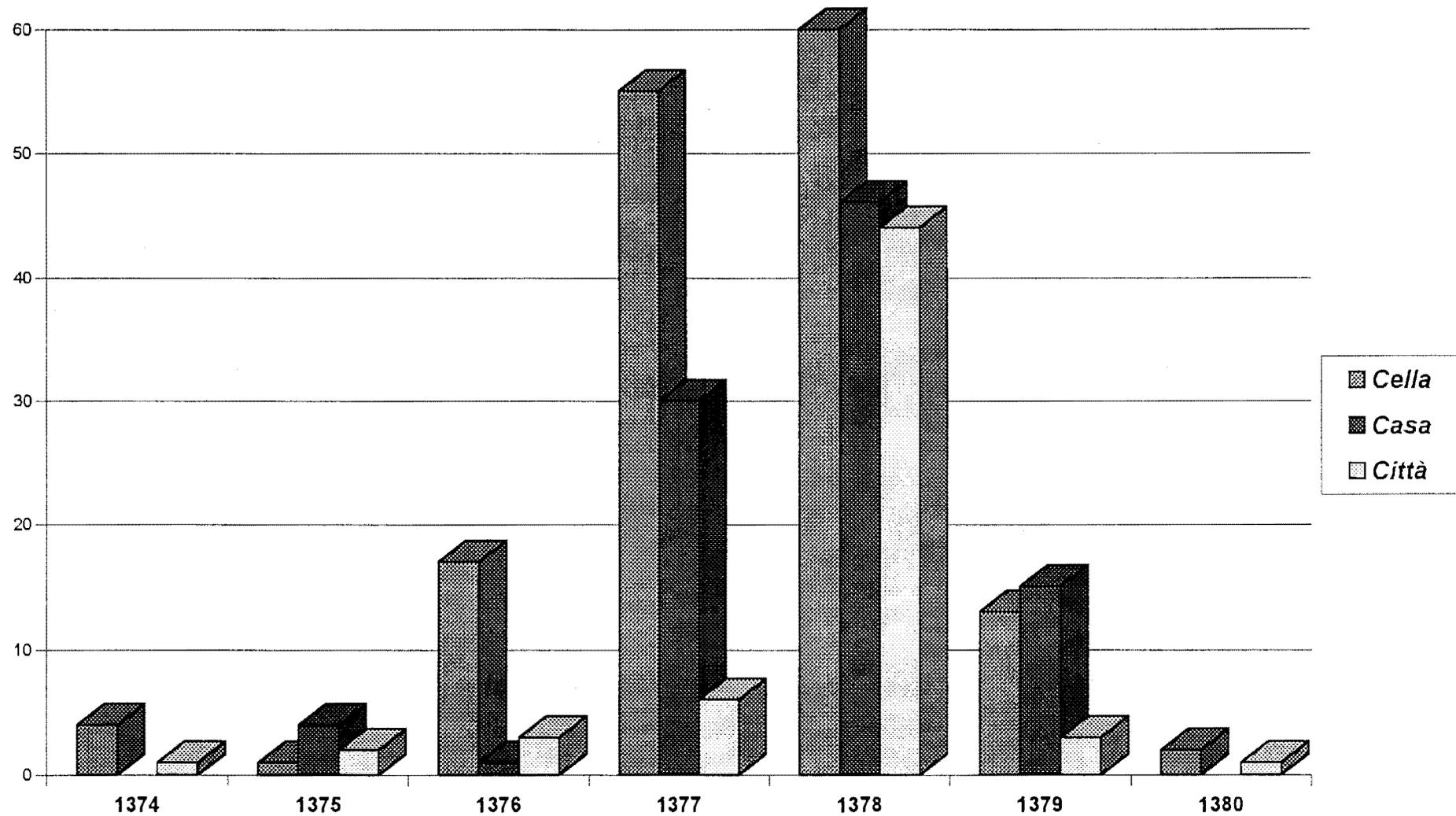
4. Catherine's greatness despite her weakness

Catherine's austerity in the matter of food was undoubtedly one of the major factors contributing to her death at the age of thirty-three. Yet to dismiss her as an anorexic is simplistic. Such a judgment ignores the vast difference between the fourteenth century culture and our own. Many medieval mystics would have to be dismissed together with Catherine if we were to take this stance, mystics of the first rank like Hildegard of Bingen, Angela of Foligno, Francis and Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Genoa, Margaret of Hungary and Nicholas of Flüe, to name only a few. And the few people of our own times who have reportedly lived for years on little or no food except the Eucharist, such as Theresa Neumann of Konnersreuth¹⁵ are not generally regarded as anorexic but as holy, as is Simone Weil,¹⁶ the philosopher and mystic who starved herself in solidarity with the poor and oppressed of the world.

¹⁵ Theresa Neumann, a Bavarian peasant woman who died in 1962 displayed both stigmata and miraculous abstinence. Like Lidwina of Schiedam, she was observed by a commission which solemnly authenticated her inedia as total and extended. (Bynum 1987:297) There were also some nineteenth-century cases, like Louise Lateau (d. 1883) and Domenica Lazzari (d. 1848). (Bynum 1987:419).

¹⁶ Simone Weil died in 1943. She had the concept of self becoming food as an image for personal suffering that fuses with the redemptive suffering of Christ. (Bynum 1987:297) This is similar to Catherine of Siena's approach to fasting.

THE OCCURENCE IN HER WRITINGS OF CATHERINE'S THREE MAIN SYMBOLS FOR
SELF-KNOWLEDGE: *CELLA*, *CASA*, *CITTA*



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