

“Good Nights” for Saturday April 27, 2019 - 2nd day of the Triduum:

### “Saint Catherine of Siena and the works of mercy”

#### I. The style of Jesus Christ in the work of Saint Catherine

St. Catherine of Siena’s style of life was from the beginning poor and penitent, marked by a strong apostolic commitment, which was followed by many people, laity, religious and priests. In her, an extraordinary mystical life is admirably joined with an inexhaustible dedication to the most needy and suffering. Thus eventhough she had her own style which was manifest in her being and in all of her works, one could say that through her familiar contact with the Incarnate Word she acquired *the style of Jesus Christ*.

The strength and marvel of her charity were revealed through bold initiatives in favor of all classes of people. Hence, her example reveals itself to us as being extraordinarily relevant for the way in which she links the love of God with the love of neighbor.

This double precept of love is clearly explained in the *Dialogue of Divine Providence*,<sup>1</sup> where Our Lord tells her that He has put us in the midst of our neighbors so that, out of the love that God has had for us, we can do for others what we cannot do for God himself, in such a way that by loving our neighbor without expecting any benefit from him, we can in some way return to God the love that is due.

#### II. Our Lord explicitly commands St. Catherine to dedicate herself to the good of her neighbor

Blessed Raymond of Capua<sup>2</sup> (who was the confessor and spiritual guide chosen by the saint in the last 6 years of her life 1374 -1380, as well as her spiritual son and interpreter before the Pope) relates that Our Lord had poured out upon His favored spouse a full measure of the sweetness of His grace. He had tried her spirit in combat and in victory; He had imparted His admirable instructions to her and enriched her with superior virtues; and so, as the soul radiated with such a splendid light, it could not remain hidden. The spouse was well prepared to make a return ‘with interest’ of the talents that the Lord had entrusted to her. “Open to me,” she was told, “the doors of souls that I may enter into them. Clear the way for my sheep, that they may come and graze freely. Open, again, to me (that is to say, to my honor), your casket of heavenly treasure- containing both doctrines and graces- that it may be poured into the laps of the faithful. Open to me, you who are by conformity of nature my sister, by intimate charity my friend, by simplicity of mind my dove, by purity of body and soul my immaculate one.” Saint Catherine responded to this call, although she confessed to Blessed Raymond that, many times when Our Lord commanded her to leave her cell and converse with men, she felt such a sharp pain in her heart that it seemed as though it was about to break.

It is interesting to note that Our Lord gradually introduced her into the active life only after He deigned to enter into a mystical marriage with her; and then He did not deprive her of His heavenly communications, but, on the contrary, as Blessed Raymond tells us, He increased these so as to lead her slowly to a higher degree of perfection.

Often in her apparitions, after the Lord had spoken to her about Himself and His kingdom, and revealed some of His secrets to her, having recited the psalms with her, He would then say: “Go; it is dinner time; and the rest of your family are about to sit down at table; go and be with them, and then come back to me.” Upon hearing these words, Saint Catherine would cry bitterly and say, “If I have offended Your majesty, here is this little body of mine: let it be punished at your feet before you: I

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<sup>1</sup> Cf II Dialogo Della Divina Provvidenza, Edizioni Cantagalli, Siena, 2011, chap. LXIV, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Blessed Raymond of Capua, , *The Life of St. Catherine of Sienna* (translated by George Lamb), Harvel Press and P.J. Kenedy & Sons, New York 1960, p. 105-110.

myself will be perfectly happy to do this. But do not let me be obliged to endure the harsh punishment of being separated from you, my most loving Bridegroom, in any way or for any time. What do I care for food? I have a kind of food unknown to those you order me to go to. Does man live by bread alone? Is not the soul of every wayfarer made to live by the word that comes out of your mouth? I, as you know better than I do myself, have avoided all other company so that I might find you, my Lord and my God; now that by your mercy I have found you, and, though unworthy, by your condescension possess you with delight, I surely cannot be obliged to forgo such an incomparable treasure and involve myself again in human affairs, so that once again my ignorance returns and I quietly slip back and become a reprobate in your eyes. No, Lord, it is far from the immense perfection of your goodness, to order me or any one else to be in any way separated from that same goodness.” With these words which were spoken amid sobs, she cast herself at His feet in hope that He would consent to her. The Blessed Raymond continues to narrate that the Lord would then reply in these or in similar words:

“Be quiet, my sweetest daughter; it is necessary for you to fulfill your every duty, so that with my grace you may assist others as well as yourself. I have no intention of cutting you off from me; on the contrary, I wish to bind you more closely to myself, by means of love of neighbor. You know that the precepts of love are two: love of me and love of the neighbor; in these, as I have testified, consist the Law and the Prophets. I want you to fulfill these two commandments... Do you not remember that the zeal for souls which I planted and watered in your soul in the days of your infancy grew to such an extent that you planned to disguise yourself as a man and enter the Order of Preachers and go off into foreign parts, and so be more useful to yourself and other souls? What is there to be astonished at or to lament about if I lead you to do what in infancy you desired to do?”

Blessed Raymond recounts that St. Catherine would reply “Let your will, not mine, be done in all things, Lord, for I am darkness and you are light; I am not, whereas you are He who is; I most ignorant, and you the wisdom of God the Father...”

To these words Our Lord would reply not to delay in obeying Him, that He would send her out in public, but He promised her: “Wherever you may find yourself I shall not forsake you, or fail to visit you, as is my custom, and direct you in all that you are to do.”

It is then related that after hearing these words, St. Catherine bowed reverently before the Divine Savior and hurriedly left the cell and went off to join the rest of the family where they were gathered.

That is how the Saint learned to be with creatures physically, while remaining, in spirit, always with the Lord.

### **III. Some examples of her works of mercy<sup>3</sup>**

Blessed Raymond of Capua, in his account, also confirms that St. Catherine knew well that the best way to please the Divine Spouse is by being charitable to one's neighbor. The heart of the Saint burned for this: with the desire to succour all their needs; but having promised to observe the three vows of obedience, poverty and chastity, she could not use what belonged to others without their consent. Therefore, she asked her father to allow her to use a portion of the riches that God had given to his family for the benefit of the needy. The father willingly agreed because he saw clearly that his daughter was advancing on the path of perfection. Not only did he give her permission, but he announced the concession that he had made to his daughter to everyone of his house: “Let no one try to stop my dearest daughter from giving alms; for I give her a free hand to give away anything I have in the house.”

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<sup>3</sup> *ibidem*, p.118-119, 141

St. Catherine used the permission she had received quite lavishly. However, she had the gift of discernment and gave only to those she knew to be in great need. When she found one of these, she did not wait for them to ask her, but would meet their needs beforehand.

She was in contact with some poor families who lived nearby to her home and who were ashamed to beg, despite the great need in which they found themselves. Imitating St. Nicholas, she got up very early in the morning and brought them bread, wine, oil and whatever else they needed. As she did not warn them beforehand that she was coming, the doors were usually locked, but God opened them in a miraculous way for her. She would leave the provisions, close the door again without making any noise, and return home before anyone could know what good deed had just been done by her.

She was very compassionate with the needs of the poor, but her heart was even more sensitive towards the sufferings of the sick. In order to alleviate them, she would do incredible things. For instance, an admirable story is told where, in order to overcome the repugnance that she felt in treating the horrendous ulcer of a sick woman whom she attended to daily, she put her mouth and nose to the sore until she had overcome her nausea, thus triumphing over the snares of the enemy.

## **Conclusion**

As St. John Paul the Great expressed in his Apostolic Letter, “the interior impulse of the Divine Master awoke in her a kind of growing humanity. Therefore, although she was the daughter of artisans and was illiterate because she had no studies or instruction, she understood, however, the needs of the world of her time with such intelligence that she far exceeded the limits of the place where she lived, to the point of extending her action towards the whole society of man; there was no longer any way to stop her courage, nor her longing for the salvation of souls.”<sup>4</sup>

Let us ask the Blessed Virgin for the grace to burn in zeal for souls, like this great Saint, may we serve the Divine Bridegroom in the most needy neighbor, without the pretense to claim anything in return from them. On the contrary, may we seek only, through our service, to give back to God in some way the love that is due.

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<sup>4</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Amantissima Providentia*, part I.