

What is the greatness of St Catherine?

She lived in a deep and intimate relationship with God. A relationship founded on grace and strengthening with the passing of time. We offer you a psychology-based understanding of this great saint, exploring her essential femininity; an exceptional person, poorly educated and yet in contact with popes and sovereigns, and today proclaimed Doctor of the Church, Patron of Italy and Europe.

When we enter the world of the saints, we have the sensation of entering a sort of magical world, inhabited by special persons, men and women who are always one step ahead of the rest of us, a special world where even that which seems impossible really happens. Too often we see it as a world so removed from ours that we cannot even imagine ourselves living there one day.... Perhaps this is due to the fact that each time we meet these great personages, 'the saints', we place them on very high pedestals and turn them into idols, so running the risk of forgetting that they too were, above all, real people of flesh and blood, with individual limitations and resources, people who had joys and sorrows, whose lives had an historical setting...

Those who know something about the origin of our own religious Family, the history of the Dominican Sisters of Saint Catherine of Siena, know also that the foundress – Mother Gérine-Catherine Fabre - partic-

ularly wanted this Siennese Saint as teacher and guide for her daughters, singling her out to them as 'a guiding star for the journey'. Yes, this saint, St. Catherine of Siena, doctor of the Church, patron of Italy and Europe. An extraordinary person, a colossus of Church history.

Who was Catherine of Siena before being canonised in 1461?

Catherine was, first of all, a woman of the Middle Ages, a woman who at a particular moment felt the call to offer the gift of her whole life to God, whose entire existence was consumed in the love of Christ and of her brothers and sisters. She knew how to take care of those in need and in suffering; she was able to intervene, with extraordinary wisdom and intuition, in the political and religious issues of her age, to which women normally had no access whatever; for many she was mother and sister, a woman who brought many souls to God. Yet Catherine was a woman theologically



St Catherine of Siena – unknown artist, first half 17th century (Naples, Royal Palace)

and educationally untrained: she could neither read nor write and had to dictate to her secretaries more than 300 letters addressed to popes, bishops, nuns and religious, to political men and women of her time who belonged to very different social classes.

Catherine was a tiny woman, physically frail. In reference to this, the American historian Bell named her in his 1985 thesis, s-



Fresco by Blessed Angelico, Museum San Marco, Florence - St. Catherine is shown on the right

peaking of her as of a 'medieval anorexic', interpreting her practices of fasts and self-induced vomiting as expressions of protest against feminine status in the social and religious context of the Middle Ages. She was a strong-willed and demanding woman, almost a perfectionist; it was with these personal traits that she dealt with herself and with others. She did not ask for anything more than the other was capable of giving, and indeed whatever she asked was for the good of the other and in the name of God; but it is undeniable that a certain severity, firmness and virility characterised her personality and that this was for her both a limit and a benefit, which she perhaps needed to work on.

Catherine was a passionate woman: it is enough to think of her relations with Tuldo, Nery di Landoccio and her other spiritual sons, to whom she was very much attached and towards whom she nurtured an intense

affection, for some of them almost a visceral one.

Catherine was familiar with the streets of Italy and Europe, but also with the streets of the heart.

How do we reconcile these lights and shadows of her personality? How was such a woman, with so many resources, but also with so many limits, elevated to the altars of the Church?

WHAT WAS IT THAT MADE
CATHERINE GREAT?

The greatness of Catherine was born from a relationship.

If we believe that men and women are created in the image and likeness of God, namely in a relationship of love, we must also be convinced of the fact that relationships mould our life, our personality, our whole way of being.

Conscience, understood as the capacity of understanding one's unique selfhood, is given to us because a YOU - our father and mother, and even before them, God - from the very instant in which we were conceived, entered into relationship with us, desiring us, first of all, and then interacting with us. 'Without the other (Buber writes) we cannot realise our unique identity. An I exists because there is a You.' Catherine, without any doubt, felt herself to be desired from her very childhood. (see *Legenda Maior*). Indeed, the relationship can be the very place of our learning and become the place of our development, inasmuch as we find in the other somebody who welcomes us, does not judge us, allows us to be what we are, and to whom we

can trustfully abandon ourselves. The greatness of Catherine was born from a RELATIONSHIP, from her relationship with God. 'O delightful love, O fire, O abyss of charity! O incomprehensible height...O Godhead, my love...O eternal Trinity, O my sweet love!'

I believe that the holiness, the uniqueness of Catherine's personality, was not based on the voluntary commitment of her life, but was a gift; it was the fruit of the gift of a singular, particular, intense, extraordinary relationship: the relationship with Her Lord. At seven years of age, Catherine made a vow of chastity, at sixteen she entered the Mantellate, at twenty Christ made her one with himself through the mystical sign of a nuptial ring. This relationship with God continued to intensify as time passed...in the context of grace alone, Catherine saw, touched, walked and prayed with Jesus, speaking with Him and constantly in his presence. Catherine felt desired, loved unconditionally by a God who wanted her totally for Himself, 'You, the abyss of charity, seem to be mad for your creatures, just as if you could not live without them, yet you are our God and do not need us...What moves you to so much mercy? Love: not a debt, or the need of us, for we are sinners and wicked debtors' (*Dialogue*).

'O my dearest little daughter...I created mankind with kindness; when I saw my creature in myself, I fell in love with it and I rejoiced to create it in my image and likeness...' (*Dialogue*).

Catherine received the gift of



S. Catherine dictating letters to her disciples - by William Tolde

living with God in the intimacy that normally characterises the relation between a man and a woman.

A man and a woman live their intimacy when they manage to experience in their 'togetherness' the profoundest depths of what binds them in terms of tenderness, affection, trust, reciprocal esteem, whatever in each pleases the other. They live their intimacy when they give the mutual invitation, 'COME!' (See Song of Songs). The relationship is free just because there is an 'invitation'. In their intimacy he and she say to each other, 'COME! I want to meet with you and tell you my love through the whole of myself! Come, because I am

here and I want to give myself to you! Come, so that our love-talk and our lovemaking may become a way of speaking to each other more deeply, a way of building up our love-story, because we shall always feel we have not said it all, because there is always something more to say and to discover about each other.'

I like to believe that all this must have been Catherine's experience with Jesus, '... since in communion the soul moves more sweetly towards God and knows his truth better, the soul being in God and God in the soul as the fish is in the sea and the sea in the fish...' (Dialogue). It is this 'union through relation-

ship' that characterised Catherine's uniqueness and was also her very reason for being, because God in no way confined her by this relationship of love, but opened her to others: God himself sent her out. She could not be limited by her horizons, but had to go beyond them; to seek others out, to extend her mission, her 'being for God and for her neighbours', because when we love a person, we love everything about them, their desires become ours and we become wedded to their projects. '...that all men/women may be saved!' (1 Tim 2,4): For Catherine this became the reason for her existence, for how she spent her life day after day, moment after moment.

If you feel loved, just as Catherine felt loved by God, then accepting yourself, accepting the lights and shadows, the limits and resources of your own person, becomes easier, because Another has already done it for you. Absolutely everything flows from this Relationship, (with a capital R), which was for Catherine the model and generator of her whole being.

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