



CATHERINE OF SIENA, THE HIDDEN THINGS OF GOD¹ (1347–1380)

When I was a young boy living in Gallup, New Mexico, in the 1940s, I had no inkling of the spiritual awakening that would illumine my young life. From a boy who loved to play “cowboys and Indians” and fish and hunt with my dad, who loved to act out skits on neighbors’ porches and hang out after school with the military police at the Santa Fe Railroad depot, I suddenly became aware of the immediate and close presence of Jesus and Mary, of the saints whose pictures I would subsequently hang on the walls of my room like sports heroes or movie stars, of the call of God to become a priest in the footsteps of Saint Francis and of the Franciscans stationed at St. Francis of Assisi Church.

This vivid sense of God’s presence and of the protection and guidance of the saints precipitated a need to know more about who God is, who the saints are, so I began to read spiritual books voraciously, the lives of the saints especially. If they wrote their own lives, like Saint

Thérèse of Lisieux, I read and reread their words, but always with a tinge of fear that I might have to suffer what they suffered. But only a *tinge* of fear, and that was soon displaced by the conviction that God would give me the grace, as God gave me this feeling—and it was a feeling—that God would always be there tangibly.

This childhood experience led me at age fourteen to leave home and travel fifteen hundred miles on a Greyhound bus to the Franciscan seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, to begin a thirteen-year pilgrimage to ordination as a Franciscan priest, a pilgrimage that would be anything but what I had anticipated when I boarded the bus, all pumped up to become a saint and bring God to the world. How bitter and sweet would be the lesson that it is God's will that brings us peace and joy and not our own grandiose, adolescent will for fame or spiritual power or holiness.

At this remove it is difficult to reconstruct those years when I was entering adolescence and experiencing all the confusion and sexual awakening of any boy and at the same time being taught and encouraged in the way of chastity that one day I would have to vow as a way of life. My only defense, and this was largely my own doing, against the strong sexual urge was a subtle "denial" of my own body and an almost violent will to separate my body from the spiritual world I was trying to live in. I prayed and fasted, practiced custody of the eyes, as it was then called, and confessed every thought that might have had even a tinge of sex in it. Because I was an adolescent, sex was *the* sin, and also because I was an adolescent, I was obsessed with ridding myself of sexual thoughts and actions.

What I did not understand then was that asceticism is not an

endeavor to punish the evil body, but an attempt to shatter the illusion that we are simply our bodies. Asceticism strives to break the body's hold on us so that the spiritual can break through. The body's dominion prevents the spirit from revealing its presence in and through the body, or, more accurately, that we are not just body, but body and soul, the two not split, but one person, integrated only when body and soul have their say in a healthy, love-filled way.

The integration of soul and body that ensued during the thirteen years I prepared for ordination to the priesthood was a journey not unlike the journey that mystics describe. Their extreme penances and some of their attitudes toward the world and the body sometimes remind me of my own misdirected penances as a boy and make me suspicious at times of their motivation. I try in these pages to discern between healthy and unhealthy penance, as I had to do in my own life and journey toward a holistic spirituality.

With Saint Catherine of Siena we enter the world of the body: the world of birthing and nourishing, the world of the beloved and the lover, of the betrothal and mystical marriage. At the time of Catherine the body was seen variously as a residence as complex as a palace or church with a hierarchy of spaces within, as a temple within which one conversed with Christ in Holy Communion, as the skin that enclosed the soul as strictly as the walls of a fortress or a monastic cloister.

Of all these images the one most frequently used by Catherine was the body as the cloistered cell within which she conversed intimately with Christ, who had appeared to her when, as a child of six, she was walking home with her younger brother. From that moment on, until she was twenty years old, her life was an ever-increasing move inward

to the place of her encounters and ongoing relationship with the Christ of her visions. And what a visionary she was!

But in her twentieth year, Christ, who by then had become her bridegroom in a profound mystical marriage, told her she was from then on to move beyond the cloister of her soul into the world at large and minister to others as he had during the years of his public ministry. This Catherine did with a zeal that embraced first the members of her family, then the citizens of Siena, the warring factions of Siena and Florence, and ultimately, the church itself in her efforts to bring the pope back from the so-called Avignon Captivity, which had begun when Urban V left Rome for France in 1309, and she saw happen in the person of Gregory XI, who finally returned the papacy to Rome from Avignon, France, a few years before Catherine's death in Rome at the age of thirty-three.

The details of this inner and outer life are most interesting and illuminating for us living seven hundred years after the fourteenth century, which the historian Barbara Tuchman called a "distant mirror"¹ of the twentieth century. Catherine's life, in fact, reads like the life of a heroine in a fairy tale. So, like a teller of fairy tales, I begin this story at the very beginning.

Catherine Benincasa was born the twenty-fourth child of a family of twenty-five children, a prosperous wool-dyer's family of the Italian city of Siena. Her three-story family home still stands, an emblem of the prominence of the Benincasa family, whose name means "well-housed."

Her first years were those of a lively, much-loved child who delighted in her family. Then one day, when she was six years old,

Catherine and her younger brother were walking home; suddenly she saw in a vision Christ wearing a papal tiara. From that moment on Catherine began to change. When she was seven, she made a vow of perpetual virginity, and when she entered adolescence, her mother had to cajole her into washing properly and caring for her hair.

I remember, as a young seminarian, thinking that this was not the saint to emulate. She seemed wildly crazy to me, a young girl not unlike a deranged young woman in a horror movie, or like the mad woman in the attic of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. I was not alone in my judgment.

Catherine seemed so indifferent to men that her mother, alarmed, as I was in reading about her, decided to elicit the help of Catherine's married sister, of whom the young Catherine was very fond. Her sister instructed her in the ways of a young woman, and for a while Catherine made half-hearted efforts to conduct herself like her contemporaries of marriageable age. But when her sister died unexpectedly in childbirth, the household was turned upside-down, and the family decided it was time for Catherine to marry. She, however, rebelled and, with the encouragement of her confessor, cut off her hair.

Outraged, her parents relegated her to the job of a servant in the home and, much like Cinderella, she was subjected to ridicule and taunts. But Catherine entered wholeheartedly into her new role, thinking of her family as the holy family of Nazareth whom she was appointed to serve. She was also at this time deprived of her own room, which she countered by imagining an inner room, a cell located in a private place inside her heart where she prayed and communed with

God. How often, in our own times, do women and men alike yearn for a room of their own, away from the noise and busyness of life, and find it only within, in the room of prayer and contemplation.

Catherine's goal at this time was to join the lay Dominicans, a group of local women who served the poor while living a consecrated life at home. But because of her youth and beauty, the Dominicans were reluctant to accept her, until Catherine was struck with a disease, probably chicken pox, which left her face disfigured.

Her family, too, eventually approved of Catherine's entrance into the Dominican Third Order, and after her father had seen a dove hovering over her as she prayed, she was again allowed to have her own room. Almost immediately her inner life began to blossom, and she experienced so many and such vivid visions that she began to doubt that they were of God. But Jesus reassured her that they were real because of her humility, and he gave her a rule of thumb for discerning the authenticity of her visions: She was to remember that she is one who is not, and God is the one who is. If she held on to that knowledge, the enemy would never deceive her.

Some cringe when they hear, "You are she who is not," because they hear these words psychologically. They hear, "You're nothing; you don't matter." But those living in the medieval era did not hear these words psychologically, nor was that the intention of God in uttering them to Catherine. The words are metaphysical; they refer to the infinite distance between the Creator and the creature, between the one who *is* ("I AM I WHO AM," God says to Moses in Exodus 3:14) and the one who is not, as compared to the one who *is*. We are completely dependent for our existence, for our ability to say, "I am," upon the one who is pure being, who alone can say, "I AM."

Medieval mystics, and in particular Catherine, had a strong sense of self. They were not “ones who were not” in their relationships with others, only in their relationship to God. Catherine was a strong, formidable woman who knew who she was as a woman among men and women, but she also knew who she was as a creature of God. She was of God, but not God.

If she was tempted to think that her visions made her someone special or better than others, she very soon learned that visions are not all sweetness and light. At one point in the three years of solitude in her cell, the sweet presence of Christ was replaced with demonic visions and voices, including vivid visions of naked couples copulating all around her cell. The buzzing in her ears, too, became so bad that she left her room and sought out churches where she could remain and pray without demonic oppression. But as soon as she returned home to her room, the demons would start assaulting and tempting her again.

No doubling of her prayers and petitions helped. In the end, when she was about to succumb to complete exhaustion, she remembered to remember that she was the one who was not, and she threw herself upon the mercy of God, trusting wholly in her beloved. She then told the demons to do with her as they pleased; she found them merely amusing! Almost immediately the demonic visions and voices began to diminish and disappear.

Later in her life Catherine said that what was terrifying in this experience was not the presence of demons but that they were in her mind, and she did not yet know that she was not her mind. She was able to mock them at last because she could distance herself from her own thoughts. Thoughts change, but the center of who we are, the self,

transcends and is more permanent than changeable, fleeting thoughts.

We all have experiences analogous to Catherine's. For example, there is something we've been afraid of all our lives, something that terrifies us, and we keep running from it, letting it tyrannize our minds. Then one day we turn around and face what has been pursuing us, and there's no one there, or what is there is much smaller, much less threatening than what our minds have made of it. God told Catherine not to argue or get into a conversation with the demons because they would then have a hold on her. But throwing herself upon the one who *is*, and then mocking the demons who are powerless without God, the demons themselves were rendered powerless over her.

Of course, some readers, I'm sure, see in Catherine every sign of psychosis: the split personality, hearing voices, demonic visions and a mystical marriage. The signs, to be sure, are there, but even if her experiences up to this point had proven to be temporary mental illness (which they were not), what happens next locates Catherine among the saints and intimates of God.

In a series of visions and intimate conversations with Christ, Catherine is betrothed to Jesus, who then weds her in a profound mystical marriage, giving her a ring made of the circumcised foreskin of the infant Jesus. Catherine literally put on the flesh of Christ, becoming his bride. On another occasion when Catherine had prayed for a clean heart, Christ took her heart for a few days then brought it back. It beat, she said, louder and more strongly than before, and she knew she had been given the heart of Christ to love others. Both of these visions may still seem madness to some, psychological projections of a

twisted young mind. But the most convincing proof that Catherine had not “gone around the bend,” irretrievably lost in some self-absorbed inner world, occurred when she was in her twentieth year. Christ appeared at the threshold of her cell, but did not enter. He asked her to come out of her cell, and from then on she was to love him by loving others. She was to live, as he had, a public life of service, which Catherine did selflessly and heroically, dying in Rome thirteen years later, like Jesus, in her thirty-third year.

Teresa of Avila says that in true prayer one enters in, remains a while, and then has the good sense to know when to come out. Jesus is Catherine’s good sense, as he is ours. The pattern of his own life of prayer is what he now offers to Catherine: going aside to pray but then returning to the highways and byways of the world to preach and heal and minister to others, then going aside again, then coming out to minister—over and over again the same pattern of prayer and charity, charity and prayer, neither one wholly separated from the other. For when we pray, we are exercising charity, and when we act charitably, we are praying—though there are times when prayer predominates and times when action predominates. Neither one is possible for any length of time without the other.

What Catherine experienced in her years of solitude in her cell was an uncovering, through visions, of what is going on in all of us but what we don’t have eyes to see: the battle between God and Satan, the intimacy with God that we experience most tangibly in the Eucharist, the transformation into Christ that takes place imperceptibly and is only revealed by the fruits of our lives, our virtues and goodness, the love we show to others in concrete acts.