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# CATHERINE OF SIENA'S WISDOM ON DISCERNMENT AND HER RECEPTION OF SCRIPTURE

## ABSTRACT

Catherine of Siena's wisdom on discernment represents a significant development in the history of this essential Christian theme. Her teaching is the fruit of personal wisdom rather than formal study as she was an uneducated lay woman in fourteenth century Italy. In this article I show how Scripture was central to Catherine's wisdom. First I show that she was exposed to Scripture primarily orally and that she assimilated what she heard through her life of prayer and relationship with God. I describe the central biblical themes at the heart of her teaching on discernment, namely growth in charity and capacity for truth, and I show how these are related to her wisdom on discernment. I then examine how Catherine applied her teaching through an analysis of a letter to Pope Gregory XI.

In this article I will show that central New Testament themes are at the heart of Catherine of Siena's teaching on discernment and I will describe how the knowledge of Scripture that suffused her teaching was not internalized as a result of formal study, but rather as a result of her experience of God in prayer and of her personal reflection. Her oral reception of Scripture became transformed through her mystical experience into wisdom that has become a major Christian classic; indeed Catherine is one of only three women named Doctor of the Church in the Catholic tradition.

## 1. BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Dialogue*, her main work, is presented in the voice of God responding to four petitions Catherine had made; she received the essential elements

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of this response while in ecstasy and dictated what she heard to scribes.<sup>1</sup> Much of her wisdom is found in her 353 letters directed to popes, cardinals and bishops, to kings and queens and members of the nobility, to leaders of city states, to artists, to judges and physicians, to priests and religious, to friends and family; in other words, to a broad array of persons. There is also a collection of some of her prayers. The letters and prayers were also dictated; there is a possibility that she wrote a few letters herself towards the end of her life.<sup>2</sup>

Catherine was born in Siena in 1347 and died in Rome at the age of 33. According to her hagiographers,<sup>3</sup> at the age of six she experienced a vision of Christ which stirred a powerful desire for a personal relationship with God (Raymond of Capua 1.1.29-30). She persuaded her family to let her remain unmarried yet not join a religious order, a choice radically opposed to the customs of the time; she did, though, become a member of a group of women, primarily widows, affiliated with the Dominican order. She continued to live at home, developing a complete relationship with God until she was 20 years old when she had a vision of Jesus inviting her to leave her room and serve others. This experience began her thirteen years of involvement in service and ministry.

## 2. CATHERINE'S RECEPTION OF SCRIPTURE

### 2.1 Education and oral reception

Catherine did not study Scripture as did the Dominican Preachers who formed her or as did other patristic and medieval writers on discernment such as Origen or Bernard of Clairvaux. Rather, she was exposed to Scripture through the liturgy; through the preaching of Dominican Friars, both the local ones from the church near her house, as well as those who visited and preached in the square of the same nearby Church (Noffke

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- 1 In the introduction to the critical edition of *The Dialogue*, Giuliana Cavallini discusses the different scholarly perspectives on the composition of this work and concludes that essential parts were indeed received while Catherine was in ecstasy; there was also a period when she engaged in additional composition and editing (probably also with the aid of scribes). See Catherine of Siena (1995: xxiv-xxxvi).
  - 2 See below for discussion and documentation regarding her ability to write.
  - 3 The most widespread of the early hagiographies and one that remains central today is that written by Raymond of Capua, a Dominican assigned to Catherine as spiritual director. See bibliography for English, Italian and original Latin editions.

1996:42-3; Cavallini 1981:59). Catherine also learned about the Scriptures through discussion with her spiritual advisors and the many priests and religious who became her friends and disciples. In other words, she was primarily exposed to Scripture orally. This was the case because as the female child of a merchant in a fourteenth century Italian city state, she did not receive an education (some daughters of the nobility did learn to read and write). Indeed, the matter of whether and when Catherine learned to read and write and how well she knew Latin (the language of Scripture and the liturgical texts at the time) has resulted in many pages of scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Since these are significant issues when exploring Catherine's reception of Scripture, I summarize them here. There is mostly consensus that she learned to read, probably sometime just before her twentieth birthday and before the beginning of her more public life.<sup>5</sup> Whether she learned to write is still debated, though she probably did so towards the last years of her life.<sup>6</sup> There is evidence (see example below) that through daily attendance at the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours as well as some tutoring from her spiritual advisors she came to know enough Latin to understand and reflect on the liturgical texts that were the main sources of her exposure to Scripture, though it is unlikely she ever became proficient in Latin.<sup>7</sup> The full Vulgate version of the Bible in use in the fourteenth century was available almost exclusively to clerics considered capable of its correct interpretation, so it is unlikely Catherine would have had direct access to this text.<sup>8</sup> Catherine also read in the vernacular books of pious works that included references to Scripture or quotes of Scripture passages.<sup>9</sup>

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4 Jane Tylus, professor of Italian literature discusses Catherine of Siena's works as examples of how oral communication becomes significant written literature, especially at a time in history when the written vernacular was emerging in Italy. In the process of this discussion, Tylus reviews scholarship in various languages regarding Catherine's ability to read and write, her knowledge of Latin and questions about editions of her works given that they were dictated. Tylus (2009).

5 Noffke discusses this in Noffke (1996:39-42).

6 See Tylus (2009:9-23) for a discussion of the scholarship and controversy on this topic.

7 See note 11 below regarding scholarship on Catherine's knowledge of Latin.

8 Because they are based on the Vulgate some passages used by Catherine have somewhat different meanings than they do in modern translations of Scripture. In her translation of the Letters, Noffke notes when Scripture passages used by Catherine have a different meaning from that in contemporary translations. She discusses this in: Catherine of Siena (2000-2008:vol 1.xlix).

9 See discussion of this in Tylus (2009:58, 127-28) which includes references to prior studies. Also see Noffke (1996:40-42).

Suzanne Noffke (translator of the most authoritative English versions of Catherine's works) believes that ultimately most of Catherine's exposure to Scripture came from oral reception.

It is my hunch – though this still needs systematic checking – that Catherine's biblical allusions are drawn almost entirely from the selections to which she was regularly exposed in the liturgies of Mass and Office. This hunch is frequently supported when a dated prayer or letter contains themes and allusions from the readings assigned in the fourteenth century Sienese liturgical calendar on or very near the same dates (Noffke 1996:43).

Giuliana Cavallini, editor of the critical edition of *The Dialogue* and *Prayers*, makes a similar point showing references in one of Catherine's prayers to Scripture texts for the days around its composition (Cavallini 1991:48).

The Scripture Catherine heard in preaching and discussions with the Dominicans and other members of religious orders would have often included interpretations by these men (Cavallini 1981:48-9). And yet, as we shall see, Catherine prayed with and reflected on what she heard and came up with her own interpretations. She had a tenacious personality; she was persistent and unrelenting in questioning those who could help her learn about Christ and about Scripture, and did not hesitate to put forth her perspective. We have an example of her detailed examination of Scripture and her quest to deepen her understanding from a letter written to her by Tommaso Caffarini, a Dominican friar who became a friend and disciple. Answering a question Catherine had posed about Psalm 131, Caffarini writes,

You asked me whether, in that verse of the psalm *Lord, my heart is not lifted up*, the expression is *sicut adlattatus* (adlactatus) without a b, or *sicut ablattatus* (ablactatuus) with a b.<sup>10</sup>

Caffarini then offers his research and exegesis of the passage. Besides showing Catherine's interest in exploring detailed meanings of Scripture, Caffarini's letter also highlights Catherine's oral reception of Scripture. It suggests she did not have the official Latin copy of the Office, for if she did (as Noffke points out) she would have looked up the actual rendering of the word herself. Further it shows how well Catherine absorbed and remembered what she heard (Noffke 1996:41). Caffarini's letter also shows that Catherine understood enough Latin to be able to engage in her own

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10 This example is discussed at length in Noffke (1996:40-41). *Adlattatus* and *ablattatus* are Caffarini's Italianized versions of the Latin words.

informal exegesis of passages of Scripture; we can then surmise that such exegesis informed her wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.2 Internalization of Scripture through mystical experience

In *The Dialogue* God advises Catherine that one should relate to the breviary (the book with the Office of the Hours) as to a spouse and to the Scriptures as to one's children (*Dialogue* 130:261).<sup>12</sup> These metaphors indicate the significance for Catherine of an intimate familiarity with the texts of Revelation; they point to the fact that Catherine assimilated Scripture primarily through an affective, intuitive experience the result of prayer and union with God. This deeply internalized familiarity with Scripture is reflected in her works. Giuliana Cavallini summarizes an article she wrote on the scriptural sources in Catherine's works by stating,

From all I have discussed we can conclude the following. All of Catherine's doctrine is solidly based on Sacred Scripture; Catherine adopted the Scriptures in a very free and personal way with the authority of one who has deeply assimilated the thought of Scripture and therefore does not feel bound by the letter of the text (Cavallini 1991:59).<sup>13</sup>

Noffke makes a similar generalization,

[The Scriptures] flow in and out of her sentences with such ease and integration that it is more often than not difficult to set them off with quotation marks. She so rearranges and combines passages around a single stream of thought that her own message and that of Scriptures fuse into one (Catherine of Siena 1980:10).

This incorporation of Scripture so that it became part of her own wisdom is the source of Catherine's creativity and it came about through her desire to know Christ and through the depth of her knowledge of God in mystical experience. Catherine herself repeated many times that God was the

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11 While there is debate regarding how much Latin Catherine knew, the foregoing example shows she knew enough to interpret familiar texts. See Noffke (1996:42-43) and Tylus (2009:36ff, 88ff) for discussion of Catherine's knowledge of Latin.

12 English references to *The Dialogue* include chapter and page numbers from Catherine of Siena (1980). Italian citations are from both Catherine of Siena 1995 and 2002b. Italian text: "e debbono tenere per sposa il breviario, e i libri della santa Scrittura per figliuoli." (*Dialogo*, 130).

13 Translation mine.

teacher of her spiritual wisdom.<sup>14</sup> As we saw, her main work, *The Dialogue*, is presented as God speaking to Catherine, highlighting that it is God's wisdom she is communicating. In *The Dialogue* even Thomas Aquinas' knowledge and teaching about the Scriptures is described as infused by grace.

The tongue cannot describe it, but the holy doctors have shown it well when, enlightened by this glorious light [grace], they explained Holy Scripture ... the glorious Thomas Aquinas ... gained his knowledge more from the study of prayer and the lifting up of his mind and the light of understanding than from human study (*Dialogue* 96.181).<sup>15</sup>

Below I analyze a passage from *The Dialogue* which develops in greater detail how Catherine viewed the connection between experience of God and understanding of Scripture.

### 3. CATHERINE'S WISDOM ON DISCERNMENT

#### 3.1 Communication style

Given that Catherine was not formally educated she communicated the wisdom developed through reflection and prayer in a unique style that was not systematic; she did not set out to create a logical treatise or a sermon composed according to a form learned during priestly formation. Rather, her letters are passionate exhortations expressed in spontaneous oral forms very much her own; as one reads her letters, one can imagine her coming up with images and metaphors to communicate what she had learned in the depth of her intuitive, spiritual center. *The Dialogue* also has intertwining images and metaphors. Thus, when discussing the influence of Scripture on Catherine's teaching on discernment one cannot go to one

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14 At several junctions in *The Dialogue*, the form of God speaking to Catherine is interrupted by Catherine's reflections on what she is learning directly from God. See for instance, *Dialogue* (13.48, 16.55, 87.160, 167.363) page numbers from Catherine of Siena (1980). Raymond of Capua, spiritual director, friend and hagiographer describes how Catherine ascribed her spiritual wisdom directly to God, either through inspiration or through words she heard in ecstasy (Raymond of Capua 1.9.84)

15 "Ma bene ve 'l dimostrano i santi dottori alluminati da questo glorioso lume, che con esso spianavano la santa Scrittura. Unde avete del glorioso Tomaso d'Aquino che la scienza sua ebbe più per studio d'orazione ed elevazione di mente e lume d'intelletto, che per studio umano; il quale fu uno lume che lo ò messo nel corpo mistico della santa Chiesa, spegnendo le tenebre de l'errore." *Dialogo* 96.

place in her works and say, here is her teaching on discernment buttressed by these passages of Scripture. Rather, one can make the case that her works are deeply influenced by Scripture, a case I have argued above. One can show that the way she articulates the goals of the spiritual journey corresponds to central New Testament themes and one can then show how her teaching on discernment is intimately tied to her formulation regarding the spiritual path.

### 3.2 Central goals of the spiritual journey

Catherine teaches that the Christian path encompasses a journey of transformation into the images of God we were created to be so that we can grow in capacity to see as God sees and act as God acts, and therefore serve God well. This transformation involves growth in capacity for truth and for charity, where charity consists of becoming progressively able to give of self for the good of the other. The capacity for truth and love are central to the human journey because we are images of God who is Truth and Love. God says to Catherine in *The Dialogue*,

Now you have seen that I, Truth, have shown you the truth and the doctrine to achieve and persevere in great perfection. [my translation] . . . This charity is attained with the light of understanding, with a heart sincere and free gazing into me as its object—for I myself am this charity (*Dialogue* 12.45).<sup>16</sup>

So God is Truth and the path to truth; and God is Charity and the path to charity.

Thus, the capacity to see the truth means a person is able to discern what is in and of God. The capacity to desire the good as free as possible from selfishness results in wanting what God wants. Discernment in Catherine's works, then, refers to these capacities to see and to desire as God would. Progress in capacity for charity and truth are central topics repeated throughout Catherine's works, and at the center of her understanding of discernment.<sup>17</sup>

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16 "Ora ài veduto che lo, Verità, t'ò mostrata la verità e la dottrina per la quale tu venga e conservi la grande perfezione ... La quale carità è acquistata col lume dell'intelletto, con cuore schietto e liberale, riguardando in me, obietto, che so' essa carità." (*Dialogue* 12).

17 See especially, Letters 33, 201, 213, 245, 307, 341 (numbering of letters according to Tommaseo). In *The Dialogue* see the following sections (The Way of Perfection, chaps. 3-12; The Truth, chaps. 98-109; Divine Providence, chaps. 135-153). For my study of the passages in *The Dialogue* and *Letters* related to discernment see Villegas (1997).

No scholarly arguments are needed to assert that growth in capacity to give of self for the good of the other is a central theme of most of the New Testament, especially the Gospels and the Letters of Paul, the main texts to which one finds references in Catherine's works. Similarly it is clear that the theme of capacity for truth is central to the Gospel of John and other New Testament texts.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Catherine herself explicitly sees Scripture as the source of knowledge of God as Truth: "as my Truth admonished you in the Holy Gospel ... (*Dialogue* 121.233)." Given the influence of Scripture on her formation and given the centrality to her work of these central New Testament themes, one can say that her teaching on discernment is ultimately influenced by her assimilation of the truths of Scripture.

### 3.3 Prayerful knowledge of Scripture and discernment

The excerpt below gives a detailed rendering of Catherine's view of Scripture and her wisdom regarding the importance of grace to its assimilation; further, this passage shows the connection between discernment and prayerful integration of Scripture. The passage is from *The Dialogue*; as most of this work, it is written in the voice of God speaking to Catherine.

Holy doctors, [Referring to Aquinas, Augustine, Jerome and others] enlightened by my Truth, understood and knew my Truth in the midst of darkness. I am referring to Holy Scripture, which seemed darksome because it was not understood. This was no fault of Scripture, but of the listener who failed to understand. So I sent these lamps to enlighten blind and dense understandings. They raised their mind's eye to know the truth in the midst of darkness and I the fire ... carried them off and gave them light, not naturally but beyond all nature, and in the midst of darkness they received the light and so came to know the truth ... So you see, the eye of understanding has received a light beyond any natural light, infused by grace, and in this light the doctors and the other saints came to know the truth in the midst of darkness, and from the darkness light was made. For understanding existed before Scripture was formed; so learning came from understanding, for in seeing is discernment (*Dialogue* 85.156).<sup>19</sup>

#### 3.3.1 Light (grace) required to understand Scripture

Throughout her works Catherine repeats that true understanding of Scripture depends on grace. Light and supernatural light are frequent images for grace as an infused capacity to see truth. When she states that

18 "Ma, come v'aroni la mia Verità nel santo Evangelio, [Mt23/3]" (*Dialogo* 121)

19 See appendix for Italian version of this text.



in the darkness light was made, she is suggesting that what could not be understood correctly without grace was made clear through infused grace. When she states that holy persons and doctors were carried off in order to receive this light she means these persons were immersed in experiences of union with God which resulted in a true understanding of Scripture. In short, images for light and its reception point to the importance of God's work in the human mind and heart if persons are to perceive the truth of Scripture correctly.

### 3.3.2 Understanding (*l'intelletto*)

When Catherine speaks in the above passage about understanding (in Italian *intelletto*) she is referring to the medieval tripartite conception of persons as made up of memory, understanding and will. Understanding or *intelletto* refers to much more than the intellectual capacity of a person. It refers more deeply to the intuitive understanding at the heart of person's capacity for spiritual experience. Thus what is illuminated by grace in order to reveal the meaning of Scripture and truth is not primarily the capacity to understand with one's reason, but also and more importantly, the spiritual/intuitive capacity to see. This capacity to see is the capacity to discern, that is to distinguish correctly according to Truth.

Let me go back to one of the sentences above that may seem somewhat mysterious: "For understanding (*intelletto*) existed before Scripture was formed; so learning came from understanding, for in seeing is discernment." In other words, the human capacity for spiritual, intuitive knowledge of God and truth existed before Scripture was communicated. But Scripture reveals truth and reveals God and God's perspective and this perspective can be received through that human capacity for intuitive/spiritual knowledge, when this capacity is illuminated by God. This point is reinforced when she says, "Every light that comes from Holy Scripture has come and still comes from that light." That is, the Truth gleaned from Scripture comes from the infused grace of God empowering the human capacity to see and understand and to do so accurately. This accurate seeing what is of God is discernment.

### 3.3.3 Understanding and conversion from self-centeredness

The above passage continues,

What made it clear that this was the truth? The light given by grace, given to whoever wants to receive this light beyond natural light. Every light that comes from Holy Scripture has come and still comes from that light. This is why foolish, proud, and learned people go

blind even though it is light, because their pride and the cloud of selfish love have covered and blotted out this light. So they read Scripture literally rather than with understanding. They taste only its letter in their chasing after a multiplicity of books, never tasting the marrow of Scripture because they have let go of the light by which Scripture was formed and proclaimed (*Dialogue* 85.157).<sup>20</sup>

In this passage we see Catherine's teaching that the accuracy of discernment depends on the level of transformation away from selfish self-love and towards charity. In this case the teaching is applied to discerning the truth in Scripture. Those who do not understand Scripture correctly – those who do not see or discern accurately – are victims of “the cloud of selfish love” a phrase often repeated by Catherine to communicate that self-centeredness or preoccupation with self-serving behaviors obscures perception and reception of the truth. In a similar vein using a wonderfully descriptive metaphor, Catherine asserts that self-serving preoccupations result in failure to “taste the marrow of Scripture.” Turning away from the light in the last sentence above means deviating from a path of relationship with God, for it is this transforming relationship that assures persons of the light of truth.

### 3.4 Knowledge of God and knowledge of self

Knowledge of God and knowledge of self are the building blocks for the journey of transformation away from self-centeredness and towards capacity to care for the good of the other. These two forms of knowledge are two sides of the same coin, and this double sided knowledge is also the foundation of discernment. Referring to penance, we read in *The Dialogue*:

Being done without the discerning light of the knowledge of oneself and of my goodness, it [penance] would fall short of my truth. It would be undiscerning, not loving what I most love and not hating what I most hate. For discernment is nothing else but the true knowledge a soul ought to have of herself and of me. In this knowledge is the root of discernment and discernment is an offspring of charity (*Dialogue* 9.4).<sup>21</sup>

20 For Italian text see appendix. A similar point to the one above can be found in (*Dialogue* 124.239-40, 127.249).

21 Last sentence, translation mine. “In altro modo, cioè facendo il fondamento sopra la penitenza, impedirebbe la sua perfezione, perché non sarebbe fatta con lume di cognoscimento di sé e della mia bontà discretamente, e non piglierebbe la verità mia, ma indiscretamente, non amando quello che lo piu amo, e non odiando quello che lo piu odio. Ché la discrezione non è altro che un vero cognoscimento che l'anima debba avere di sé e di me: in questo

The connection between discernment and knowledge of God and self is affirmed in no uncertain terms. "This knowledge is the root of discernment," Catherine asserts. As a fourteenth century person, by knowledge of self she did not mean a psychological knowledge of self. She did not have in mind introspection regarding one's unconscious motivations or the roots of one's behavior in early childhood history. Rather, she meant understanding that we are created in the image of God, that is, that we are made for love, a concept often repeated in her works. The process of acquiring a deeply internalized conviction that we will be most fulfilled, most ourselves, most at peace when we actualize our true nature as capable of giving of ourselves is one part of the journey of acquiring knowledge of self. The other part of the journey involves experiencing God's infinite mercy, which in part means the realization that without God's mercy we will remain trapped in some form of self-centeredness. Knowing about God's mercy is also the process of coming to trust in and depend on God's forgiveness and grace so that we are able to confront our sinfulness and surrender this to God. In this way we allow God to transform our tendency to be self-centered in our perceptions and actions. When our self-centeredness is transformed, we can love what God loves and hate what God hates. This is ultimately what Catherine means when she says that discernment is an offspring or offshoot of charity.<sup>22</sup> Implied in the assertion that we must know ourselves and God is another of Catherine's central themes: our life must be rooted in a relationship with God for it is God, Truth and Charity who reveals to us the dual truth about ourselves and works within us the transformation of our capacity for truth and love.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.5 Style

The long passage analyzed in this section illustrates how much Catherine's communication is based on images and metaphors. The image of light is

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cognoscimento tiene le sue radici. Ella è un figliuolo che è innestato e unito con la carità." (*Dialogo* 9.)

- 22 Catherine also elaborates on discernment as an offshoot of charity in other texts but particularly through a metaphor about the person as a tree (*Dialogue*, chap. 10). I discuss this metaphor in Villegas (1997:30-31) where I propose light as the presiding metaphor for discernment, while S. Schneiders argued that the tree is the presiding metaphor for discernment in Catherine's works. See Schneiders (1982).
- 23 For a comparison of Catherine's teaching on discernment to that of other patristic and medieval authors and brief theological reflections on this comparison see McIntosh (2004:82-124). McIntosh (2004:54-61) also offers a summary of Catherine's teaching on discernment as part of a presentation of critical historical works on this theme.

central; having light and understanding the truth are often equivalent. Truth comes up repeatedly through images for seeing clearly and understanding correctly. There are straightforward metaphors such as God is fire or discernment is the offshoot of charity; and more dense metaphors such as the eye of understanding being illuminated, or God's grace as lamps that shed light.

#### 4. DEVELOPMENT AND APPLICATION OF WISDOM: A LETTER TO POPE GREGORY XI

The teachings just discussed are repeated throughout Catherine's works; with each repetition in a different context the reader glimpses a new or deeper dimension of her wisdom. To illustrate this, I will show how the essential teachings described above are applied in an individual case. The extensive illustration below comes from a letter written to Pope Gregory XI; in it Catherine urges Gregory to acquire knowledge of self and God for the sake of his own conversion and so that he might do God's will as Pope. The first part of the letter is a general exhortation, followed by a very specific condemnation of Gregory's behavior. First the exhortation:

I long to see you a productive tree planted in fertile soil ... For a tree uprooted from the soil (I mean the soil of true self-knowledge) would dry up and bear no fruit. If we know ourselves we are humble ... We nourish within ourselves the sweet fruit of blazing charity, recognizing in ourselves God's boundless goodness. And aware of our own nothingness, we attribute whatever being we have to the one who is. So it seems we have no choice but to love what God loves and to hate what he hates (Letter 185.)<sup>24</sup>

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24 L 185 in Catherine of Siena (2000, vol. 1, 244ff). English citations of *The Letters* are from Catherine of Siena (2000-2008). Italian citations taken from Catherine of Siena (2002a; 2002b). Italian text of cited passage: "vedervi uno arbolo fruttifero, pieno di dolci e soavi frutti, piantato in terra fruttifera - ché se fusse fuore de la terra seccarebbe e non farebbe frutto -, cioè la terra del vero cognoscimento di noi. L'anima che cognosce sé medesima s'aumilia, però che non vede di che insuperbire; notrica in sé el frutto dolce dell'ardentissima carità, cognoscendo in sé la smisurata bontà di Dio; cognoscendo sé none essere, ogni essere che à retribuiscie poi a colui che è. Allora l'anima pare che sia costretta ad amare quello che Dio ama, e a odiare quello che elli odia." (L 185)

#### 4.1 The problem with self-centeredness: being planted in unfertile soil

The above passage shows the sort of subtle developments in Catherine's teaching that come about through different images and different emphases. In a sense, the developments in her teaching work as poetry does; that is, an image, a metaphor, a new way of using a word opens the imagination to a different way of envisioning and taking in the same truth; one could say that Catherine teaches through layers of depth rather than through sequential logic. For instance, using the metaphor of a person who is like a tree planted in fertile soil Catherine highlights the importance of a life that prioritizes self-knowledge. "Planted in fertile soil" implies being rooted in knowledge of our goodness yet our need for God. When this is the case, we will recognize God's will and will be empowered to act accordingly; that is, we bear good fruit. Thus to bear this good fruit, fertile soil is necessary; i.e., knowledge of self. Another dimension of this wisdom is highlighted as she explains that being planted in the fertile soil of self-knowledge one is able to nurture the sweet fruit of blazing charity. In Italian, blazing charity is "ardentissima carità." In this context one could also translate *ardentissima* as "very passionate."<sup>25</sup> The sentence would then read, "we nurture within ourselves the sweet fruit of very passionate love." This passionate language functions to make clear to the reader in an affectively motivating manner the significance and benefits of a life rooted in self-knowledge.

Catherine continues her instruction forcefully pointing out to Gregory the problem with self-centeredness, thus making urgent the need for transformation through self-knowledge. She tells Gregory,

For those who are isolated in their self-centeredness, loving themselves selfishly and not for God, can do nothing but evil. They are like a woman whose children are stillborn . . . because they have none of the life, the charity that is concerned only for the praise and glory of God's name (L 185).<sup>26</sup>

Here Catherine utilizes another powerful image to make her point about self-centeredness. The opposite of good fruit are bad fruit; bearing bad fruit is as tragic as a woman bearing a still born child. Choices made as a

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25 *Appassionato* is a synonym of *ardente* in contemporary Italian.

26 "Ché se elli è solo ed elli è amatore di sé medesimo, cioè che ami sé per sé e non sé per Dio, non può fare altro che male, e ogni virtù è morta in lui. Costui fa come la donna che parturisce i figliuoli morti, e così è veramente, perché in sé non à avuta la vita de la carità d'intendere solo a la loda e gloria del nome di Dio." (L 185)

result of self-centered judgments or motivations are death dealing. They are ultimately destructive.

## 4.2 Gregory's failure to discern and do God's will

So far, Catherine is exhorting and teaching her wisdom; however, as she continues her letter she applies her teaching to Gregory's concrete situation explicitly. She tells him he is caught in self-centeredness and lacks knowledge of self and God. He is afraid of the reactions of others; he is afraid of losing power; he is too preoccupied with his own strategic preferences to see what is best for the common good. As a result, he does not see (discern) or chooses not to see the disorder under his nose and lacks the capacity to act in an ordered fashion; he does not have enough charity activated in him to offer the ordered leadership required of his office. Catherine says,

Those who are in authority, I say, do evil when holy justice dies in them because of their selfish self-centeredness and their fear of incurring the displeasure of others. They see those under them sinning but it seems they pretend not to see ... They are forever afraid of offending and making enemies – and all this because of self-love ... Blind are the shepherd-physicians who look only to their own profit and desire to please, who to preserve such refrain from using either the knife of justice or the fire of blazing charity! ... A shepherd such as this is really a hireling! And all because he loves himself apart from God. He does not follow the gentle Jesus, the true shepherd who gave his life for his little sheep. How dangerous then, for oneself and for others, is this perverted love! How surely we must avoid it, since it does such harm ... hope, by God's goodness, my venerable father, that you will snuff this out in yourself. I hope you will not love yourself selfishly, nor your neighbors selfishly, nor God selfishly ... and will love yourself and your neighbors for the honor and glory of Jesus' dear name (L 185).<sup>27</sup>

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27 “Dico che, se elli è prelato, fa male, però che per l'amore proprio di sé medesimo, e per non cadere in dispiacimento de le creature – nel quale elli è legato per piacimento e amore proprio di sé – muore in lui la giustizia santa: però che vede commettere i difetti e peccati a' sudditi suoi, e pare che facci vista di non vedere, e non gli corregge ... cieco è il pastore che è medico che non vede né riguarda se none al piacere e a sua propria utilità, che, per non perdarlo, non ci usa né coltello di giustizia né fuoco d'ardentissima carità. Costui è dritto pastore mercennaio ... Tutto n'è cagione perché ama sé senza Dio; non seguita il dolce Gesù pastore vero, che à data la vita per le pecorelle sue. Bene è dunque pericoloso in sé e in altrui questo perverso amore; bene è da fuggirlo, ché a ogni generazione di gente fa tanto male. Spero per la bontà di Dio, venerabile padre mio, che questo spegnarete in voi, e non amarete voi per

We see in this passage that together with her indictment, Catherine offers the solution to Gregory's inability to see and do God's will. He must be converted from selfish self-love to loving himself as image of God. He must experience God's love for him, for it is this experience of being loved as sinner that will allow transformation. Knowing Jesus's mercy and desire to transform him will allow Gregory to love as Jesus loved, making it possible for him to make choices on behalf of the common good. Again, in a different context and form Catherine insists on her main theme: without the transformation made possible through knowledge of self and God we are unable to see what is good and we do not have sufficient charity to be able to choose the good.

### 4.3 Letter to Gregory XI and Catherine's own experience

That Catherine, a lay woman, actually wrote a letter such as the above to a Pope, who in the Middle Ages was a powerful temporal leader as well as spiritual leader, shows how Catherine herself lived the wisdom she teaches. As a result of her own process of transformation through knowledge of self and God, and her deep commitment to listening to God and following God's will, she was led to exhort a Pope, to dare to teach him about conversion, and to dare to criticize his spiritual life and his actions. Not only did she feel guided to take these actions, but she had the courage to do so. This courage would be an example of Catherine's teaching on discernment: discernment involves not only seeing what God wants but also having the capacity to choose the good no matter what the cost. Catherine's courage would thus be an example of charity.<sup>28</sup>

## 5. OTHER TEACHING ON DISCERNMENT

The material I have just presented lays out the key points of Catherine's teaching on discernment. As already mentioned, there are many passages that repeat the above themes as well as offering development.<sup>29</sup> Most

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voi, né 'l prossimo per voi, né Dio: ma amaretelo perché è somma eterna bontà e degno d'essere amato; voi e 'l prossimo a onore e gloria del dolce nome di Gesù." (L 185)

28 While Catherine's choice to exhort the Pope showed her own transformation and capacity to discern and act out of this discernment, scholars have also pointed out the influence of her advisors on this choice and the political meaning of her letter writing. See Luongo (2006).

29 A newly published anthology with excerpts from all of Catherine's works includes a section collecting significant texts on discernment. See Catherine of Siena (2012:567-88).

significant are major sections of *The Dialogue* where Catherine elaborates several metaphors for progression in capacity for charity and truth. There is the famous metaphor of the Bridge, which itself contains other metaphors, such as going up the side of Christ's body; there are levels of light; there are levels of tears. These metaphors for progression all include connections to the teaching on discernment elaborated above, showing how the capacity for discernment progresses. As persons are progressively transformed their capacity increases to see and act as God would.<sup>30</sup>

There are also other strands of Catherine's teaching on discernment which ultimately refer back to the essential teaching described above. One of Catherine's letters in particular elaborates on discernment (*discrezione*) as the virtue of discretion following the Christian tradition on this theme.<sup>31</sup> There is also a section in *The Dialogue* regarding discernment of providence.

[This aspect of discernment] involves recognizing God's loving action; it involves being able to see in faith the grace present in all the events and experiences of one's life. . . . When one is able to discern God's loving hand in all the events of one's life, one is able to accept them with reverence, and thus to cooperate in freedom with the reality of one's life in a manner congruent with God's will. This also means one is able to make the right measured choices that cooperate with the salvation meaning of any life experience (Villegas 1997:28-30).<sup>32</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

The above discussion illuminates Catherine's remarkable wisdom offered in a creative fashion in a unique literary style shaped by oral reception and oral communication. The depth of this wisdom comes from her immersion in the Word of God as she listened to the daily recitation of the Office and attended Mass; the profoundness of this wisdom was made ultimately possible through her relationship with God. Despite her lack of education, her wisdom has remained timeless and become a Christian classic.

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30 See *Dialogue*, (The Bridge chaps. 26-87; Tears, chaps. 88-97; Light, chaps. 98-103). On the metaphor of light and discernment also see Letter 201. I discuss these metaphors and discernment in Villegas (1997:31-36).

31 Letter 213 to Sister Daniella of Orvieto. English version in Catherine of Siena (2007 vol. 3:295ff; 2012:570-75). See also Villegas (1997:23-5, 27-8) and Dingjan (1971); the latter reference includes a detailed history of the discretion tradition of discernment and places Catherine's teaching within this tradition.

32 See also (*Dialogue* 141.291-293) and Letter 307.



## APPENDIX

... dottori santi miei, alluminati dalla mia Verità, intendevano e conoscevano nelle tenebre la mia verità, cioè che la santa scrittura, la quale pareva tenebrosa perché non era intesa – non per difetto della scrittura, ma dello ‘ntenditore che non intendeva – e però lo mandai queste lucerne ad illuminare gli accecati e grossi intendimenti. Levavano questi l’occhio de l’intelletto per conoscere la verità nelle tenebre, come detto è; e lo, fuoco ... gli rapivo [1Re18/38] dandolo’ lume, non per natura ma sopra ogni natura, e nella tenebre ricevevano il lume conoscendo la verità per questo modo. Sì che vedi che l’occhio de l’intelletto à ricevuto lume infuso per grazia sopra del lume naturale, nel quale i dottori e gli altri santi cognobbero la luce nelle tenebre, e di tenebre si fece luce; però che l’intelletto fu prima che fosse formata la scrittura, unde dall’intelletto venne la scienza, perché nel vedere discerse.

Chi la dichiarò che questa fosse la verità? Il lume che fu dato per grazia ed è dato a chi lo vuole ricevere sopra al lume naturale, come detto è. Sì che ogni lume che esce della santa scrittura è uscito ed esce da questo lume . E però gl’ignoranti superbi scienziati acciecano nel lume, perché la superbia e la

nuvola dell’amore proprio à ricuperta e tolta questa luce, e però intendono più la scrittura letteralmente che con intendimento; unde ne gustano solo la lettera rivollendo molti libri, e non gustano il miollo della scrittura perché s’anno tolto il lume con che è dichiarata e formata la scrittura. (*Dialogo* 85)

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