

traditional social forms—not least the family—are threatening to disintegrate, in which a worrying trend of individualism is threatening to spread out and take root in the Western world, churches are challenged to make their *communio* established by God tangible and effective in a word which is threatening to fall apart. More than ever before, in the future Christians will only be heard when they raise their voices together. Only together can they contribute in forming a more just and more peaceful world and to fellowship among nations. Church as *communio* is more than a programme of the Church; it is an offer for the world—for a more peaceful world.

Catherine De' Ricci

Part I

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I have devoted a good thirty years of my life to the study of Catherine de' Ricci, from the early 60s, when the *Collana Ricciana* began to appear, up to the two volumes of the *Breviario Ricciano* which appeared in 1990 to mark the opening of the sixth centenary of the saint's death. Here I have nothing new to add to all that I have said already, only a brief synthesis of how over the years, I have come to see this extraordinary woman. But any synthesis involves a choice, and any choice involves excisions and gaps and is inevitably wide open to criticism. The risk is real and I have accepted it; I ask for the reader's understanding. This present essay seeks only to present a simple and clear picture, unburdened by an excess of scholarly apparatus. In it I will try to highlight, often in the saint's own words, three crucial points in her spirituality: love, which is its source and gives it its scope; obedience to the will of God, which is the golden rule by which this love is lived; and the joyful human and supernatural equilibrium which results from it.

Love

It may seem obvious to the point of banality to say that love, or charity, is the soul and heart and root and fullness of the christian life, that interior growth is measured by the progressive development of love, that the apostolic life in its entirety derives its fruitfulness from love, that any mystical advance is only the gradual process of union between God and the creature, whose means yet again is always and uniquely love. But no two saints are the same. Each has his or her own proper way, because God's love for his creatures is not expressed in the abstract or in general. He loves each of us with a love which is quite personal, marked with its own peculiar purpose, and so for each one of us he maps out a path which is particularly our own. So no saint has the same countenance as any other. So what of Catherine? How was she distinguished by the loving purpose of God? One false expectation must be cleared out of the way immediately: Catherine was not a professional theologian, and she did not develop elaborate theories or write formal treatises about the spiritual life. We know her thought through her letters, which are all occasional writings responding to particular situations and events. They are communications whose significance depends on their real life contexts, with concrete suggestions and advice, often reduced to simple maxims and undeveloped affirmations. We must not be deceived by their brevity: what is distilled in them is her very life, they are like chinks through which we can see a little of her own intimate world.

Let us begin with one of her affirmations. She often used to say, 'God is jealous for our souls, so he does not want us to love anything apart from him' [CRF IV 134]. Even before we think of individual souls, the whole story of the people of Israel (and not only their story) is played out on the basis of this twofold relationship of love and jealousy. God loved us before we even existed, from all eternity in fact, so our very existence is the result of his eternal and infinite love, with all that this implies in time. it could not be otherwise. But the particular nature of Catherine's language is immediately evident: she talks the language of marriage, making two hearts and souls become one.

Speaking in the name of Jesus, she says, 'How do you want me to give them [the sisters] love, if they are not disposed to receive it? How can I fill their hearts with my love if they do not first empty them of self-love and of all the other things that fill them so that I cannot enter?' God will not content himself with some corner, some narrow cranny; he will not stoop to compromise or stop half way—he would not be God if he did. Self-love and worldly affections mean that he 'cannot enter'. Without a complete stripping off of everything, it is impossible to live in

loving union with God. The first thing that must be done is to 'detach oneself', to free oneself bit by bit, 'from all that one feels for every creature'. Thus we begin to explore the depths, with a stripping off of every worldly attachment or, more generally, of our ego which governs our thoughts and desires and actions and which is at the root of our most hidden intentions. This is a struggle to begin to live, Catherine goes on, in a quite different inner state, consisting of simplicity and purity of will, which means willing only what he wills and as he wills it. 'Purity means not mixing your heart with anything other than him who is most pure'. This self-emptying is not an end in itself it is the negative aspect of, or better, the precondition for, becoming pure for 'him who is most pure'. It is the beginning, the launching, under the impulse of grace, of the inner journey which consists 'in the desire to please God alone', in becoming every day ever more 'desirous to suffer for his love and to be totally conformed to his will' [CRF VII. 3 130–172].

This is the most authentic hallmark of true love, tested like pure gold in the crucible of suffering. The soul which has become pure through emptying itself of all self-love is open to more complete union, to greater absorption into the divine will. Only so does God bring about his triumph in the soul that he loved before it ever existed, only so does he establish fully his reign in the heart of the creature. This is how the eternal plan of God becomes concrete and effective in time. And this is where true 'wisdom' is found. As Catherine comments, 'They [the sisters] will not be truly wise unless they are willing to be fools for his love; they will not care about human wisdom, but only about pleasing their God. If they wish to be wise with true wisdom, they will gladly lose their own wisdom, mortifying their appetites and their wishes in order to live with their dear and prudent spouse, who made himself a fool amongst men to give US true wisdom' [CRF VII. 3 132]. It is certainly foolishness 'for the animal man, who does not perceive what pertains to the spirit' [1 Cor. 2 14] , to renounce the tangible and alluring good things and joys of this world, to follow something which cannot be seen. But love reveals to Catherine a spouse who 'made himself a fool', and for him she is disposed to become a fool too.

What is the outcome? In a letter to her nuns on 17 November 1554 she writes: 'My dear daughters, give yourselves totally and cheerfully to Jesus, as he has freely given himself to you . . . Cheerfully and willingly accept the labour and observance of your holy religious life. Don't be dismayed if you find that you are not yet all that you ought to be, but humbly ask pardon of Jesus, with a firm purpose of improvement. Run to him with great faith and hope, because he is your father, he is your spouse and, so to speak, he's bursting to give you some of his graces,

but he wants to be asked. So go to him with great confidence and do not doubt that you will be heard' [*CRE* I 359].

All the same, Catherine does not get lost in abstract theories about this foolishness of love, which makes almost no concessions to the outside world. Its true dimensions are to be found in inner purity. In concrete terms, it is usually a matter of doing what was always done, but with one's heart totally turned to God, asking oneself in all that one says or does, 'What sort of benefit it can bring to one's own conscience, what sort of instruction to one's neighbour, what sort of honour to God, whom alone we should seek to please' [*CRF* VII. 3 132].

Here we notice one of the key phrases in the inner dynamism of Catherine's life: 'the honour of God'. This is what she aims at with all her might, in complete forgetfulness of self. Under the impulse of an all-consuming love, she goes all out to see that in all things her spouse is feared, loved and glorified.

We must not think, however, that Catherine's message is directed solely to her own sisters, even if her bridal language applies particularly to them (how could it be otherwise?). She does not change the substance of her doctrine when she addresses the laity and married people. On Maundy Thursday 1573 she writes to her brother Vincenzo and his wife, 'In these most holy days and at Easter I shall not fail to pray for you, as I do constantly, in my desire that you should be good and give yourselves totally to Jesus, giving him thanks and love in return for the great love he has shown you in his passion and death. And the love you ought to show him is to observe his holy commandments and seek his honour in everything that you have to do' [*CRE* III 193].

To be good is, for Catherine, the same thing as to give oneself totally to Jesus. Goodness in creatures and in human acts may mean different things. Some people are naturally good, understanding and pleasant. This is not to be despised, but it is something which can be found even in people who are not turned towards God, whose motivation and goals are purely horizontal. For Catherine, being good means making Jesus the centre of your life, the treasure you strive to possess with all your might. And in the first place this requires 'giving him thanks', because it is all his gift and nothing can close the hand of God's bounty except ingratitude. In the second place it requires 'returning love for the great love' he has first shown us. 'And', she concludes with her usual practicality, 'the love you ought to show him is to observe his holy commandments' (or, as she puts it elsewhere in more personal terms, to accept his will) 'and to seek his honour in everything that you have to do'. This is nothing but an explicitation of the commandment of Jesus: 'Whoever loves me will keep my word' [John

14:23]. Love attains its highest and fullest form only when we 'seek his honour in everything', putting that in the first place, above and before our own personal benefit, ourselves and our feelings, giving his honour absolute priority among all our desires. Love like this in its entirety is required as our response, however inadequate, to all the love that 'he has shown us in his passion and death'.

These last words bring us to the distinctive heart of Catherine's spirituality. The extent to which she wanted to love is expressed in a formula she used when she was young in preparation for Easter: 'I turn to the Seraphim with all my heart and pray with all my mind and all my strength that I may love my creator and redeemer and immerse myself totally in the eternal Fire, which is God, not with my own love, but as God's love has loved us. . . . Over and over again I shoot a dart of love at my dear Jesus, because I feel myself consumed with a desire to love him myself and that everyone should love him as much as possible'. Catherine's attitude can only be understood by reference to the model which inspired it, Christ crucified. If Catherine is determined 'to love him as much as possible', it is simply in order to respond to 'the way in which he loves such a miserable creature as me' [CRF IV 22–23], that is, even to the extent of dying on the Cross. This theme is always present, even if sometimes in the background; it dominates Catherine's mind and her language adjusts itself to it in all kinds of ways, whose incredible variety is a sign precisely of how central it is to all her concerns, and since she was a woman with little taste for abstraction, her words are usually a tissue of concrete images.

'I was delighted', she wrote to Giovanni Michelozzi in 1571, 'to see that you are so well disposed, so docile to God, and that you are taking him as the book you read. You will not find it a struggle to open that lovely book of Jesus crucified and read there its five short books, so deep and so profound.' What does this book talk about, what does it contain? Everlasting love in God, his infinite mercy, his boundless kindness, all printed and nailed up on the crucifix, so that no one could have any doubt about them. His five wounds are like five books bound into one, revealing in Jesus the Father's plan for us. The feet tell us the way he took to come to us, the arms are wide-open to welcome and embrace us, the heart is open and pierced so that we can take refuge there as in a cave. 'Go to that book,' Catherine continues, 'feed there and take your fill' [CRE III 145]. Another image, this time that of eating and taking one's fill, and these are but two images from a whole range which she uses.

The singleness of Catherine's vision makes her refer everything to the mystery of the Passion, whether she is considering some saint's day

or the liturgical celebration of the Incarnation or even the account of the miraculous multiplication of bread. What are the five loaves mentioned in the gospel [Matt. 14:17], if not the five wounds of Christ? 'When they are pondered in our heart, they easily satisfy our five senses, which are like 5000 men because of the huge number of their desires. But when these five loaves are eaten, that is, when the five holy wounds are chewed over, they are delightful to our taste like the best bread . . . and as they are eaten they come to be enough to satisfy this great multitude of our appetites. But with them we must also eat the two fish, that is, the divinity and the humanity of Jesus. Dear father, when we enter a little into these sacred wounds and see them made in that humanity of Jesus which is united with his Godhead, this fish becomes the salvation of anyone who eats it' [CRE II 172]. Feeding and being satisfied, eating and chewing over the wounds of Christ, making them 'our holy dwelling place and our business' (this is another image Catherine uses, in a letter to Buonaccorso Buonaccorsi in 1559 [CRE II 109])—this is what us makes our mind stand 'stock still in amazement' at the deep mystery it contains, and this is also what separates us from everything that is 'earthly and vain' and inspires us to run towards 'the abyss' of God's love [CRE I 333].

'When we enter a little into these sacred wounds . . .' In them is enclosed a mystery of love, and this is where, for Catherine, the way of love begins, burgeons and is rooted. These wounds, as she chewed them over and they became her food and her life, impressed on her mind the vivid image of Christ living in her and with her. This, as she explains to one of her disciples, Giovambattista de' Servi, 'is the cause which unites us to him and detaches us from the world, making us desire only heavenly blessings. By desiring and contemplating these, even in this life, we come to share the glory of eternal life in our understanding and to make our wills one with the will of God, because we concern ourselves with nothing but him, considering him alone to be our entire good. Happy and blessed is anyone whose heart feels nothing except for his Saviour and whose deeds achieve nothing except for him' [CRE I 264]. To fix one's mind and heart on 'this sprinkling of the precious blood of Jesus' is to discover there 'such exalted mysteries', and to find the proof and vivid reflection 'of the goodness, wisdom and power of our Redeemer', even if 'I am not capable of entering into it, nor is any human tongue or mind capable' of stating it—that is a pure gift from God. But 'so great is the kindness and love of Jesus towards us, his creatures, that he opens the ray of his grace to enlighten any mind that is disposed to receive it' [CRE II 109].

'When the creature does so dispose itself, then 'the things of

heaven' are imprinted in the mind . . . in accordance with the grace which the Lord grants it, and then the heart melts there and and dissolves in love of God.' This is how the need is born to detach oneself from everything, because everything appears to be 'a nothing in the mind' [CRE I 355], and to 'sit on the hay of earthly desires' and rest from all concern about them [CRE II 172] . In tandem with this detachment, the desire grows to be 'conformed to his will' [CRE I 354], because it is only in seeking his will that the creature can show God that it loves him and that it is entirely his and offers itself totally to him.

This self-oblation, according to Catherine's advice, must be made 'frequently, not wearing out the body, but with a gentle, loving movement towards him, our kind Jesus, who wants so much good for this creature of his.' We must offer ourselves totally to Jesus, with all our heart, just as he gave himself utterly to us on the wood of his most holy cross; we must offer him 'our soul, our heart and our body, with all our inner and external powers, and then all our possessions, our status, our family' [CRE II 156] . Thus the way is mapped out: 'This, my son, is the course we must follow and throw ourselves energetically into this great ocean and wash ourselves there' [CRE I 335]

This brings us to another favourite image of Catherine's. Among the olives in the monastery garden - which naturally led Catherine to think of the drama which unfolded in the garden of olives on the night of the passion - she underwent one of her most tremendous mystical experiences. Suddenly the cross which was venerated there came alive before her eyes and she saw Christ in his agony there. 'There was a huge opening in his breast, with a kind of fountain of blood gushing forth from it . . . All around the cross she saw a sort of lake of blood' [CRF III 112–113]. The impression this made on her caused her such anguish that she was bedridden for ten days afterwards. The vision of blood kept coming back to her, becoming an inward experience in her, so that whenever she spoke thereafter of the goodness and infinite mercy of God, they were always connected with that 'fountain of blood' springing up from the divine heart of Jesus, from the very heart of God therefore, as a pledge of divine life and a concrete proof of that infinite tenderness which stretches out to become a lake, a sea, an ocean of mercy. Drowned in this sea of mercy, which penetrated her through and through, and regenerated by this blood which filled her with new life, she seemed to herself to be transformed into God himself. When the sisters asked her one day to remember them before Jesus when she received communion, she replied: 'It should not seem strange if in that moment I am in such a state that I am scarcely mistress of myself; instead I seem to be transformed into God himself, and in such an

outstanding, uncommon and special way that I have no words with which to explain it to you. It is too elevated and hidden a place for me to be able to reach it with words. I am so united with Christ, so closely knit together with Jesus and fastened to him that whoever is commended to Jesus seems to be commended to me at the same time. So I cannot tell you how it all works, how I commend you to the Lord and how it is for me too with him to bestow his largesse' [CRF II 455]. In this way she was able to pray 'infinitely', as she wrote to Bianca Capello on 2 April 1583 [CRE IV, 179], and to exist and to act entirely through God and in God. On one occasion she was given a cherry branch, covered in leaves and fruit; holding it in her hand, she gazed at it intensely and said with great exultation, 'This is the work of my spouse', repeating these words over and over again, so that it was easy to see how thrilled she was by his might, wisdom and goodness [CRF II 506]. Another time we find her with the sisters responsible for doing the laundry; her thought turns to the 'laundry' of the heart, which must be 'given a good wash and scrubbed well' in the blood of Christ [BR 244–245]. Or look at her picking violets in the garden and suddenly exclaiming, 'How I love these violets! They signify the blood of Jesus.' While squeezing one in her fingers she went into a rapture, with a smile on her face, and stood like that for two hours and would have stood there longer, if the subprioress had not with great difficulty roused her to come and have her supper [CRF VII. 3 119].

- 1 Sources are indicated in the text, with the following abbreviations:
BR = *Breviario Ricciano* (Prato 1990), CRE = *Santa Caterina de' Ricci: Epistolario* (Florence 1973-1975), CRF = *Collana Ricciana, Fontes* (Florence 1963-1976), all edited by Domenico Di Agresti;
SL = *St Catherine de' Ricci, Selected Letters*, edited, selected & introduced by Domenico Di Agresti, trans. Jennifer Petrie (Dominican Sources, Oxford 1985).

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To be continued.