

forgive and can change the course of history of a nation though it may well be a minority group. This ability to forgive unconditionally is the greatest gift of the gospel to this world. It is the true antidote to violence.

- 1 Cf. E. Lévinas. *Difficile Liberté* (Paris, 1963, 21).
- 2 I.B. Boszormenyi Nagy and G. G. Spark. *Invisible Loyalties*. (New York, 1973).
- 3 Poetica IV. See for the role of imitation R. Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. (London, 1987).
- 4 K. Koch. *Spuren des Hebraischen Denkens*. (Neukirchen, 1991) 184-206.
- 5 For the practice of Jewish sacrifice see: E.P. Sanders. *Judaism. Practice and Belief 62 1 BCE-66CE*. (London, 1992) 471-45.
- 6 R. Girard. o.c.
- 7 Talmud, Joma VI,1.
- 8 See E.P. Sanders. *Jesus and Judaism*. (London, 1985) and J.D.G. Dunn. *The Parting of the Ways. Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity*. (London, 1991).
- 9 Lévinas o.c. 168.
- 10 E. Lévinas. *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris, 1968) 363-7.
- 11 Cf. A.D. Falconer (Ed.). *Reconciling Memories*, (Dublin, 1988)

## Catherine De' Ricci

### Part III

## Domenico di Agresti

[Translated and adapted by Simon Tugwell OP]

### Cheerful balance

'Desire nothing except to be pleasing to him and to do his most holy will' [CRE I 28]. This simple formula, inspired by the relationship between Christ crucified and his Father, and lived ever more intensely in the most radical way by Catherine, provides the key to an integrated reading of her spirituality, of which it is the heart. But how does it actually take shape in practice? Will it not don the emaciated face of renunciation, gloomy earnestness, human frustration, all-enveloping pain, self-denial and deprivation? The reality is in fact quite different. There is not a single letter in which Catherine does not invite people to be 'cheerful' [cf. CRF VII. 3 163-167]. This certainly does not mean a superficial, silly cheerfulness which is only skin-deep and unpredictable in its durability. What Catherine encourages is a cheerfulness which does not exclude the heights and the depths of the various states of spirit people find themselves in as their circumstances vary, whether internally or

externally, but which remains constant even in times of pain and tribulation. It is a cheerfulness which is rooted in its depths in the very mystery of God and whose intensity flows from faith, hope and the love with which it abandons itself to God's plan in the specific life of each individual.

Let us begin with some preliminary comments on Catherine's character. She was certainly not gloomy by temperament. Razzi, her first biographer, says that she was 'always cheerful and merry' [CRF III 141]. At the time when she was responsible for the young girls in the monastery, she was known there as 'snack-mistress'. She once told her Dominican uncle Timoteo, the nuns' confessor, that it was the Lord's will that he should be less severe in the way he rebuked the sisters [CRF III 133–134f BR 149].

On the other hand, the physical pain caused by her illnesses was sometimes such that she let slip that she 'cannot take any more' [CRE III 340, BR 220]. When in 1577, not least because of her own brethren, the great storm of calumny broke all around her, with accusations of disobedience, immorality, suspect behaviour and so on, until eventually the whole monastery was involved, she wrote to the provincial, 'Father, I am appealing to you in the name of Jesus, because I can no longer bear to see these squabbles and so much discontent outside and inside. I see and hear so much that is an offence to God I cannot bear it, it breaks my heart . . . My heart is caught between two millstones: one being you fathers and the other my nuns' [CRE III 401–402, SL 203. After that, she fell so ill that she nearly died, for all that she was entirely resigned into the hands of God and threw herself entirely into his arms. It was the same thing again when she heard that her brother Vincenzo was betraying his wife [CRE III 198–199]. Was her courage to go all to pieces?

Because she loves not only God, but also her neighbour with all her heart, every slightest thing can cause her joy, but also pain, to such an extent that she sometimes seems to be hypersensitive. She rejoices in everything, but she also suffers from everything. She is delighted if anyone sends her a flower [CRE I 118, III 147–148] or a flask of wine from the farm where she had lived as a child [CRE III 151]; everything she says is suffused with gratitude for such signs of affection. But she suffers and complains if she receives no line of thanks or acknowledgement for her own kindnesses and attentions to others. She enjoyed being with her fellow sisters so much that sometimes she seemed on the verge of bursting with sheer exuberance and had to run away to control herself [cf. CRF VII. 3 166]. But she was very upset to have to spend a great part of one day with her father and leave 'Jesus alone' [CRF 446–447].

In other words, her equilibrium is not the result of a state of idyllic tranquillity and indifference which does not involve her soul and even her body. She knows how to combine firmness and prudence with love and tenderness, and that means that she knows how to choose, to decide, to say yes or no, even if it is all coloured by the affection she has for some particular person (as when she ignores, or rather transcends the vow of poverty just to embellish her sister-in-law's house), even if it is sometimes extremely embarrassing, as when she refuses a request of her own bishop [CRE I 298–300, SL 36–37; CRE 352] or of a benefactor of whom in fact she was very fond [CRE I 1393, or when she declines to accept the invitation of another saint, Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, to involve herself in a plan for the reform of the church [CRE IV 287, SL 26]. The life of a saint, if it is rooted in reality, is made up of things like this, tensions, disagreements, misunderstandings, crosses.

Catherine is not uninvolved, she knows no ethereal imperturbability. In any case, it would not be virtuous not to be shaken to one's foundations by the trials that come from other people and from God. Nevertheless saints have a fundamental imperturbability of their own, even in the midst of devastating storms, even when they are tossed about by the waves. It is as easy to say where this imperturbability comes from as it is hard to live it in practice: it is the fruit simply of the three theological virtues. Let us see how Catherine responds both in her thought and in her life. 'Sickness and health and everything we do,' as she wrote to Alessandro Capponi on 19 January 1578, everything in fact of which this life is made up, is 'in God', foreseen and willed by him. This is the interpretation which faith gives us of history as a whole and of the life of each individual. With our own unaided powers we will not be able to comprehend or to conform ourselves to God's plan, but we should not be dismayed: provided we ask him in prayer, God's help 'never lets anyone down.' This is where the virtue of hope comes in. It is all a matter of abandoning ourselves to the will of God, believing in the love he has for us, of which the crucifixion is the supreme, irrefutable proof, and responding to such love with a corresponding love on our part, 'relying on his most holy goodness'—the virtue of charity, in other words [CRE IV 13].

Moving from theory to practice, it suffices to refer to one letter, seen in its context, to grasp how Catherine lived out her equilibrium and to see what it was based on. 'The Lord has been pleased to make us too poor, for which may his holy name be blessed for ever, because I am extremely satisfied with whatever pleases him'. The letter was written to her bishop, Pierfrancesco da Gagliano, on 11 July 1552. Till then he had been devoted to Catherine, and he had several times had recourse to her when he was ill or when he was suffering from various problems caused by his previous

life (which was not entirely exemplary). Moreover, on more than one occasion he had been her protector and benefactor. But then, all of a sudden, because of an inheritance, he brought an action against the monastery and became merciless in demanding everything without delay; refusing all attempts at reconciliation, he made himself deaf to all pleas for a delay in payment. Given its poverty, the monastery could not find anyone to lend it the sum required and it was forced to sell land (indeed to sell it off cheap) and look forward anxiously to a year of hunger. 'The Lord has been pleased to make us too poor': this is not their normal poverty, which they are used to. They have touched bottom. 'At this time', as Catherine's letter goes on, 'I am in greater need than ever because I need to get supplies' of grain and oil for three hundred mouths. 'I am begging for pennies.' If necessary she will have to 'strip one altar in order to cover another'. She is without oil, without bread, without money, but she does not complain; on the contrary, she says, 'may his name be blessed for ever.' How can she remain calm in such a storm? How can she not lose her confidence? How can she go so far as to say that she is 'extremely satisfied with whatever pleases' the Lord? [CRE I 272]

The answer comes in another illuminating letter, written to Servi on 29 June 1548, and it draws together all the elements of Catherine's spirituality: 'Gather up all your worries and make a bundle of them and throw them all into those most holy wounds of Jesus Christ. You could put them anywhere better than in Jesus and his most holy mother. They are the ones who are perfectly capable of consoling and calming the human heart, and anyone who looks for peace anywhere else will not find anything dependable, as you can know from your own experience and discover all day long.' Devotion to Christ crucified and devotion to his mother here become not theory, but life, behaviour, inner attitude. 'In this world,' she goes on, 'there is no stability, and so you should not cling to it, but take what you need, in accordance with God, and then pay attention to your heavenly home, which is saved up in the future for whoever will toil here below for love of the Lord, who toiled so enormously for us, treading down a path for us to walk on without getting lost. So for love of him put up willingly with whatever he sends you' [CRE I 124]. What if the future ahead of us is stormy? Accept everything from God's hand. That is the secret of Catherine's basic imperturbability. Tribulation is the follower of Christ's daily bread, but it is 'a sign that Jesus wants us for himself' [CRE I 122, SL 59]. The struggle is hard and agonising, it demands endurance and patience, but we need never doubt: 'I know that he is good and does not fail to help anyone who has recourse to him with lively faith and a humble heart' [CRE I 189]. Catherine's strength and peace and cheerfulness are all based on this self-abandonment to God.

At this point it is possible to enter into our saint's inner life a little more. Let us point out some features. Peace and equilibrium are subject to and qualified by a precise awareness, specifically the awareness of being a sinner, and this not as a matter of speculation or theory or metaphysical discourse, but of the experience of being a creature, the experience of finitude and sin. 'When I go to my Spouse having nothing to offer him, since there is nothing good in me, I give him the things that are his own. In place of my wickedness I offer him his own goodness, in place of my carelessness I offer him his own perfect and holy deeds'. Humility does not crush or prostrate people or make them despair; if it did, it would be pride, not humility. 'If we do not want to be rejected when we come before him, we must bathe our sins first in contrition and then offer them to him together with our good intentions'. Nor does humility separate us from God; in fact it enables the soul to recognise the gifts it has without ascribing the merit for them to itself as if they belonged to it by right. 'Earthly men seek rich, noble, beautiful, well-dressed wives, but that is because they cannot make them into anything they are not already; but the Lord chooses poor girls, full of every kind of wretchedness, because he is able and willing to adorn them and enrich them with all good.' So humility means a full acceptance of ourselves: 'Anyone who wants to follow God by any path other than that of humility finds himself surrounded by continual crosses and labour,' because of his own egoism. Humility means not being a judge of other people's faults, because if we are 'inquisitive about the failings of others, the only benefit we get from it is rebellion and disturbance.' Instead, humility is a matter of placing one's confidence in God, because 'God does not want us to have any guarantee that we shall persevere in the good, so that we shall continue to be humble and not scorn our neighbours.' Humility means making God our purpose in everything, putting all our hopes in him and expecting nothing from ourselves, without 'losing heart when God takes his time over granting us his favours, because such delays are compensated for by the unexpected enjoyment of favours when he does grant them' [CRF IV 134–136].

Anyone who lacks the sense of being a sinner, in the fullest sense of the word, will never know true inner peace or the equilibrium which derives from it. 'If it makes you afraid to consider your ingratitude ... you must consider that we are all infinitely ungrateful. But in recognising our ingratitude, and how incompetent we are at any good work, we do in some measure become grateful for his gifts; and we please him more in recognising our inadequacy in doing good, than in anything else' [CRE I 281, SL 24]. This is what makes peace well up in the heart: we must abandon ourselves, not to despair, not to presumption, but to God. 'I do not want you to despair,' she told her sisters once in the name of Christ,

'do not be dismayed, but recognise your failings and humbly have recourse to me in all your needs and worries, because I am the only one who can help you. And I both can and want to help you' [CRF VII.3 163].

There are two major obstacles in the way of maintaining our peace. The first comes from remorse over past sins. The soul that is dominated by such remorse is slowed down and constantly troubled, and so it loses its serenity. 'Don't be dismayed,' she wrote to her nuns, 'if you find that you are not yet all that you ought to be.' So what ought we to do? Accept ourselves as we are, weak and frail, and translate such acceptance into a firm purpose of amendment, committing ourselves with all our might to change our lives; but, knowing how limited our capacity is to do good, we must 'run to him with great faith and hope', because (this is Catherine's most splendid definition of hope) 'he is bursting to give you some of his graces' [CRE I 359].

The second obstacle is the torment of doubt, which makes us wonder whether we have really done all we could have done to respond to God's love. Catherine's answer is categorical: 'Don't labour beyond your strength,' she wrote to Buonaccorso on 27 July 1553, 'You must rest and you must take the Lord's way gently. Do everything for love of him and then you will win merit in everything, because his goodness feeds on our good will; on our good deeds too, as far as possible, but he only wants of us what we can do . . . If you don't think you are doing for him what you would like to do—and no one does do all he would like to do—don't torment yourself over it, but offer everything to him and cheerfully give him what you do do' [CRE I 302].

This reveals to us a Catherine quite different as a spiritual guide from what we should have expected, knowing her spirit of sacrifice and penance. 'They commit faults enough', she said to her nuns in the name of the Lord, 'but I have compassion on them, because they are weak. I have compassion on you, my daughters, because you are weak and I know that your sins are committed through frailty, not through malice. I would prefer them to commit fewer sins, I wish they were not so attached to their bodies and that they did not pursue their own comforts so much or so eagerly. I pardon you, but I want you to improve, to give up your murmuring . . . I do not want you to be dismayed . . . I do not want them to suffer lack. I want them to sleep, eat, enjoy themselves.' So what does she require of her fellow-sisters in Christ's name? Only that they will 'keep him in their hearts, on their tongues and in their hands.' In the name of Jesus she concludes with this heartfelt invitation: 'Come, know my love, know my love' [BR 206–207].

If this is how she addresses religious, her message to the laity is no different: Jesus does not ask them to stay up all night keeping vigil, but

only to remain with him in intention and desire [cf. *CRE* II 234]. He 'feeds on our good will' and only asks such works as we can do. Penances are effective only 'within reason and moderation' [*CRE* II 232]. Catherine is no fanatic about penance and renunciation for their own sake. In her typically forceful way she writes to Buonaccorso in 1555 that 'affliction never helps to cure any ill, of whatever kind it may be' [*CRE* II 19]. Inner equilibrium, revealed in a soul at peace, is not the product of an irresponsible, superficial, insensitive character, but of the heroic practice of the theological virtues, fully equipped both humanly and supernaturally. Here is the programme Catherine gave herself, when she was young: 'I struggle to keep myself from all faults, however slight, as far as I can; to be always united with my Jesus in my mind, as far as possible; above all to be cheerful and to see that I am not disturbed by anything that happens to me, and to keep myself from disturbing others, because this is very pleasing to Jesus . . .' Her aim is 'to receive cheerfully every tribulation as if it were a joy sent to me by my dear Jesus' [*CRF* IV 21–22].

To complete our admittedly schematic picture of Catherine, it remains only to say something about her joy, as the tangible sign of her equilibrium, her inner peace.

To an old sister who had been superior, one of the foundresses of the monastery, in fact, who was so full of the spirit of sacrifice that she carried a ball of wormwood in her mouth every Friday, and who was also very severe with her subjects, Catherine said, 'I cannot bear to see people afflicted and I cannot tell you how much I suffer when I see people melancholy.' Even when she was a novice, she said, to see a superior behaving grimly churned her up inside and caused her terrible distress [*CRF* VII.3 163]. When she in turn became superior herself, 'if her position and rank required her to punish any imperfection . . . she could not go to bed that evening without first speaking to the person she had punished and saying something to console and encourage her' to make sure that no sadness remained [*CRF* III 189]. As a kind of echo of her attitude to religious life, in 1562 she wrote to Salviani, 'It is enough . . . that you remain cheerful and always keep your heart full of Jesus, making sure that no melancholy or despondency enters there, because then Jesus could not stay there, because that is not how he likes a heart decked out, but with peace and calm and conformity to his will' [*CRE* II 247]. If sadness supervenes, it is either because we have offended God, in which case it suffices to hurry to regain his love by repentance and the sure hope of his pardon and help, or because of some snare of the devil, who wants to go fishing in the troubled waters of a disturbed conscience, where he can plant depression, lack of confidence, despair, but in that case it

suffices to abandon ourselves totally to God, believing in his love for us; either way, we shall regain our joy. If glumness enters the heart, Jesus leaves it. The reason is clear: to people who love themselves and their own comforts, every trial, every difficulty is a burden they find it difficult to endure; but if there is love for Jesus in the heart, then it is possible to discover the joy of the cross, or the joy of the heart.

Once again we are brought back to the leitmotiv of Catherine's whole spirituality, love of Christ crucified. This is no mere pious posturing, it is a feeling of compassion all the more remarkable because it flows from an utterly feminine sensitivity towards the suffering of others. 'My father and, in Jesus, my dearest little son,' she wrote to Servi in 1552, 'I encourage you to give yourself entirely to Jesus . . . Anyone who desires spiritual contentment should think frequently about his life, passion and death and there he will find all contentment. So, father and dear son, think often of Jesus and offer yourself totally to him. Enter into that most holy side, and you will be safe . . . Remember that Jesus died for love of us, to give us paradise, and he asks us to love him with all our heart and to do everything for love of him, so let us cheerfully rely on him and be content with whatever pleases His Majesty' [CRE I 268–269].

On the face of it there is a contradiction: on the one hand 'life, passion and death', and on the other 'all spiritual contentment'. But in fact there is no contradiction. These things belong supremely together, because the spiritual contentment is to be found precisely in the life, passion and death of Jesus. True devotion to the passion, as understood by Catherine, creates the need to make a total gift of our hearts and of all that we do, at every moment.

We shall never find a better way to end this brief study than by quoting a page of Catherine's 'raptures', where, beyond whatever judgement may be passed on their value, the whole soul of Catherine can be felt vibrantly present in a style reminiscent of her great namesake from Siena: 'I laid myself on his breast. Then I felt such love for my Spouse that I could do nothing but weep and say, "My love! My love!" Then Jesus said to me, "My bride . . . I like you doing that. I am in love with you." Then I said, "What do you want me to do?" He replied, "I want you to follow me and never depart from me, and I shall never depart from you and I shall give you eternal life." O my beloved, make me drown in your blood so that I may abandon myself and be able to follow you' [CRF VII.3 235]. Among the last words she wrote, just before her death, were an exhortation to her sisters that we should 'continually, day and night, offer our hearts and vows to the good Jesus' [CRE V 163, SL 16]. This is Catherine's way and her essential message. It is simple and clear, apparently easy but in fact exceedingly difficult, sealed with the proven

authenticity of her extraordinary holiness. What Catherine puts before us is not a theory, but a lived experience, whose focal point is always Christ crucified. Her conformity to him was so intense that she relived every week the pains of the passion and bore the marks of the stigmata in her own body. If she speaks of it, though, it is only from the abundance of her heart.

Her way of speaking, precise, exact, varying in form but constant in its content, given to concreteness, breaks out into images and aphorisms and supernatural wisdom even when love made her immerse herself in the worldly business of the monastery or of her disciples so that the supernatural order is only hinted at. But she also speaks as a woman, strong, attentive, emotionally great; her language is always redolent of the immense love for Christ crucified which pervaded her life and which shows itself in her deep inner equilibrium and in that most captivating attraction which a human heart can possess, joy and cheerfulness.

### **Chronological Outline**

**1522** 23 April: born in Florence to the noble family of the De' Riccis and named Sandrina. Her mother, Caterina di Ridolfo da Panzano died when she was four.

**1535** In spite of the opposition of her family, at the age of 13 she entered the monastery of San Vincenzo in Prato, which was founded and guided by followers of Savonarola. She received the habit there on 18 May and made her profession in June 1536.

**1539** She fell seriously ill and, after two years, was miraculously healed by Savonarola.

**1542** She enjoyed a succession of extraordinary mystical gifts, among others weekly ecstasies, beginning in February, in which she relived in her own body the pains of the passion; these ceased in 1554.

**1547** She was elected subprioress; thereafter until the end of her life she was always prioress (7 times) or subprioress of the monastery.

**1558** She laid the first stone of the new church, and, beginning with a little group of small buildings, initiated the restructuring and expansion of the monastery, so that it could accommodate more than 300 nuns.

**1566** She was obliged to accept enclosure in accordance with the decrees of the council of Trent, but this did not prevent her from intervening on behalf of hundreds of girls and undertaking an ever-expanding work of spiritual direction among laypeople and ecclesiastics, nor did it stop her contacts with the most famous saints of the period (Charles Borromeo, Philip Neri, Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi).

**1590** She died a holy death on 2 February.

**1732** Beatified by Clement XII.

**1746** Canonized by Benedict XIV.