

Catherine of Siena and the Cell of Self-Knowledge

“Let our hearts explode wide open, then, as we contemplate a flame and fire of love so great that God has engrafted himself into us and us into himself! O unimaginable love!”

-Catherine of Siena to Raymond of Capua¹

Life in Christ conduces not to ice, but fire. Religious life is no different. Being celibate friars is not a story of cold showers and passionless relationships, but of vigorous love. This is the call of our sister Catherine – to freely burn with zeal for the Lord in every fiber of our being. Our vocation is not to remove our sandals before the burning bush, but to be grafted onto it and blaze in charity.

Unfortunately, sustaining the life of charity is not guaranteed. Flames go out. With the Church at Ephesus we have sometimes “abandoned the love [we] had at first” (Rev 2:4b). Like lighter fluid on wet wood, we may flame up and then sputter out. Once lit, we fail to feed the fire only for it to smolder and die. What will set us ablaze? What keeps us burning?

Catherine’s drumbeat ought to pound in our ears: enter the cell of self-knowledge and be purified of the self-centeredness which extinguishes charity.² Hear the voice of the Lord saying, “You are [he] who is not and I Am He Who Is.” In our cells (both physical and metaphorical) the light of truth reveals us to ourselves. We come face to face with our limits, yes, as sinful individuals, but also as creatures who are not gods.

Yet, in discovering we are not, we find our dignity – our nothingness isn’t worthlessness! To see the gulf between my existence and God’s does not mean my life has no purpose or value. Nor is it merely a discovery of contingency – the realization that the world can easily exist without me. After all, I do exist! For no other reason than the generous goodness of God, I have some share in the joys of life. In the inner room, we discover the love of God who has breathed life into each one of us.

Perhaps a different way to think of our nothingness is to say that the good which can make me happy is not me. God is goodness and being. I am not my own goodness or perfection. If I seek myself, I find nothing. I am not. I exist to seek higher goods. To enter the cell of self-knowledge is to discover time and again my neediness. I cannot be happy in pure solitude; escapism will lead me to a living hell. My salvation comes in friendship with God who promises to raise me from the dead to even greater life. He calls me to live in his love.

This cell is not merely for religious – Catherine beckons everyone to enter it. The bedroom a husband shares with his wife is a place to discover the truth of his love for her. Marriage does not magically free him from lust by the mere profession of a vow. It does not eliminate

¹ As quoted by Paul Murray, OP, *Saint Catherine of Siena: Mystic of Fire, Preacher of Freedom*, pg. 111

² Ibid, pg. 75-76.

selfishness or the desire to escape from the challenges of life. Sharing a room with another person is no guarantee of communion. Married couples can lie in bed on their phones, oblivious to one another. The reason for their union is brought into focus alone in their room – are they seeking the goods of marriage? Are they people only pretending to have become one? Is their love one that seeks to bear fruit in the world?

The challenge we each face in our cells is not so different. It is where we are alone with the Beloved. It is meant to be a purposeful place, but it can devolve into a restless one. As friars, we should frequently ask ourselves: What do I seek in my cell? To simply escape from the world? To relax? To feel any number of physical pleasures? To accumulate things I vainly hope will satisfy my longings? Do I block out holy solitude with endless distractions? Am I being rejuvenated in my cell? Am I encountering my beloved anew? Am I becoming fire or ice?

It is not so long ago that we worried having TVs in bedrooms would destroy the heart of religious life. But distractions weren't new then. In a newsletter from 1904, Rose Hawthorne Lathrop lamented the ennui which leads many Sisters (she includes herself) to “sink into an easy-chair in a pretty room, with fancy-work close at hand and an amusing book open before us, and no doubt something piquantly sweet in a bonbon box not far off. How the time flies along when we are amusing ourselves with being at ease!”³ 120 years later, the entire world is scrolling past our fingertips!

This is not to claim all entertainment is bad. YouTube, Netflix, novels, news - are these automatically opposed to a life of prayer? One certainly could be entertained with Christ. If we can have a shared experience of a movie with a brother, it shouldn't be impossible to share our temperate amusements with Christ. Created goods should lead us to the Creator, the finite to the infinite. Sure, modern pleasures can easily become idols, but that isn't new. Humanity has always had the means to numb itself and extinguish the flames of grace. Perhaps inhabiting the cell of self-knowledge is harder with a smart phone, but being present to God and neighbor has always required determined choice.

A retreat to the cell is not an escape from the world or a pursuit of mindlessness. Being there is not the goal of our life, but rather kindling for contemplation and charity. The great turning point in Catherine's life came when God called her out of the cell she made in her family home to serve a tumultuous world. The self we discover in our cells is ultimately the one made new in the Holy Spirit, a new Christ, burning in love without being consumed. The cell is the place of Pentecost. Just as the disciples received the Spirit and went out to preach the Word, the Father says, “so it is with the soul who has waited for me in self-knowledge. I come back to her with the fire of my charity... after she has come to perfect, free love, she lets go of herself and comes out.”⁴

³ Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, “Reflections of a Conscience”, in *The Dominican Tradition* by McGonigle and Zagano, pg 83.

⁴ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, n. 74.

Saint Catherine of Siena's Prayer to the Blessed Trinity

O holy Spirit, come into my heart,
by your power draw it to yourself,

God,

and give me charity with fear.

Guard me, Christ,

from every evil thought,

and so warm

and enflame me again

with your most gentle love

that every suffering

may seem light to me.

My holy Father

and my gentle Lord

help me in my every need.

Christ love! Christ love!

(trans. S. Noffke)