

## CATHERINE OF SIENA

For these and all sorts of other reasons they turn back and are not constant or persevering. All this happens to them because the root of selfishness has never been dug out of them. This is why they do not persevere. Rather, they accept my mercy and hope not as they ought, but foolishly and with great presumption. And presumptuous as they are, they put their trust in my mercy even while they are continually abusing it.

I have not given nor do I give my mercy for people to abuse, but that they may use it to defend themselves against the devil's malice and inordinate spiritual confusion. But they do precisely the opposite: They use my mercy as a weapon against me. And this happens to them because they fail to act on their first change of heart, when they were roused by fear of punishment and hurting from the thorns of so many troubles, from the wretchedness of deadly sin. So because they fail to change, they never attain love for virtue, and therefore they do not persevere.

The soul cannot but move: If she does not go forward, she turns back. So if these souls do not go forward in virtue, rising from the imperfection of fear to love, then they will necessarily go backward.

50

*Then was that soul's longing stirred up. She considered her own and others' imperfection. She grieved to hear and see such blindness on the part of creatures, for she had seen how great was God's goodness. He had never ordained that anything in this life should be an obstacle to peoples' salvation, no matter what their situation, but that everything should serve the exercise and proving of virtue. But in spite of all this, because of their selfishness and disordered love, people still went the way of the river below, and if they did not reform, they would certainly end in eternal damnation. And many of those who began to reform turned back. She had learned the reason for this when he in his tender goodness had stooped to show himself to her. This made her bitterly sad, and, fixing her mind's eye on the eternal Father, she said:*

O immeasurable love! How greatly are your creatures deluded! I wish you would explain to me more clearly—when it pleases your goodness—the three stairs imaged in the body of your only-begotten

## THE DIALOGUE

Son. Show me what people must do to escape completely from the flood and keep to the way of your Truth, and who are those who climb these stairs.

51

*Then divine Goodness looked with the eye of his mercy upon that soul's hungry longing and said:*

My dearest daughter, I am not scornful of desire. No, I am the one who answers holy longings. Therefore I want to explain to you what you ask.

You ask me to explain to you the image of the three stairs, and to tell you how people must act to be able to escape from the river and mount the bridge. I did describe for you earlier people's delusion and blindness, and how they taste even in this life the pledge of hell and, like martyrs of the devil, reap eternal damnation. I told you what fruit they harvest from their evil actions. And when I told you these things, I showed you how they ought to behave. Still, to satisfy your longing, I will now explain it to you more fully.

You know that every evil is grounded in selfish love of oneself. This love is a cloud that blots out the light of reason. It is in reason that the light of faith is held, and one cannot lose the one without losing the other.

I made the soul after my own image and likeness, giving her memory, understanding, and will. The understanding is the most noble aspect of the soul. It is moved by affection, and it in turn nourishes affection. Affection is love's hand, and this hand fills the memory with thoughts of me and of the blessings I have given. Such remembrance makes the soul caring instead of indifferent, grateful instead of thankless. So each power lends a hand to the other, thus nourishing the soul in the life of grace.

The soul cannot live without love. She always wants to love something because love is the stuff she is made of, and through love I created her. This is why I said that it is affection that moves the understanding, saying, as it were, "I want to love, because the food I feed on is love." And the understanding, feeling itself awakened by affection, gets up, as it were, and says, "If you want to love, I will give you something good that you can love." And at once it is aroused by the consideration of the soul's dignity and the indignity into which she has fallen

## CATHERINE OF SIENA

through her own fault. In the dignity of her existence she tastes the immeasurable goodness and uncreated love with which I created her. And in the sight of her own wretchedness she discovers and tastes my mercy, for in mercy I have lent her time and drawn her out of darkness.

Affection in turn is nourished by love, opening its mouth, holy desire, and eating hatred and contempt for its selfish sensuality seasoned with the oil of true humility and perfect patience, which it has drawn from this holy hatred. After the virtues have been conceived, they are born either perfect or imperfect, according to how the soul exercises the perfection within her, as I will tell you further on.

So also, on the other hand, if sensual affection wants to love sensual things, the eye of understanding is moved in that direction. It takes for its object only passing things with selfish love, contempt for virtue, and love of vice, drawing from these pride and impatience. And the memory is filled only with what affection holds out to it.

This love so dazzles the eye that it neither discerns nor sees anything but the glitter of these things. Such is their glitter that understanding sees and affection loves them all as if their brightness came from goodness and loveliness. Were it not for this glitter, people would never sin, for the soul by her very nature cannot desire anything but good. But vice is disguised as something good for her, and so the soul sins. Her eyes, though, cannot tell the difference because of her blindness, and she does not know the truth. So she wanders about searching for what is good and lovely where it is not to be found.

I have already told you that the world's pleasures are<sup>50</sup> all venomous thorns. Understanding is deluded at the sight of them, and the will in loving them (for it loves what it should not love), and the memory in holding on to them. Understanding is acting like a thief who robs someone else, and so the memory holds on to the constant thought of things that are apart from me, and in this way the soul is deprived of grace.

Such is the unity of these three powers of the soul that I cannot be offended by one without all three offending me. The one lends a hand to the other, for good or for evil, by free choice. This free choice is bound up with affection. So it moves as it pleases, whether by the light

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50. S, E, F, add "without me."

## THE DIALOGUE

of reason or unreasonably. Your reason is bound to me, unless free choice cuts you off through disordered love, And you have that perverse law that is always fighting against the spirit.<sup>51</sup>

There are, then, two aspects to yourself: sensuality and reason. Sensuality is a servant, and it has been appointed to serve the soul, so that your body may be your instrument for proving and exercising virtue. The soul is free, liberated from sin in my Son's blood, and she cannot be dominated unless she consents to it with her will, which is bound up with free choice. Free choice is one with the will, and agrees with it. It is set between sensuality and reason and can turn to whichever one it will.

It is true that when the soul decides to gather her powers with the hand of free choice in my name, all the actions that person does, whether spiritual or temporal, are gathered in. Free choice cuts itself off from sensuality and binds itself to reason. And then I dwell in their midst through grace. This is what my Truth, the Word incarnate, meant when he said: "Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I will be in their midst,"<sup>52</sup> and this is the truth. I have already told you that no one can come to me except through him. That is why I have made of him a bridge with three stairs, the latter being an image of the three spiritual stages, as I will describe for you later.

52

I have explained the image of the three stairs for you in general in terms of the soul's three powers. These are three stairs, none of which can be climbed without the others if one wishes to go the way of the teaching, the bridge, of my Truth. Nor can the soul persevere without uniting these three powers as one.

I spoke of this perseverance earlier. You asked me to explain more clearly the three stairs, the way these travelers should behave if they would escape from the river. And I told you it is impossible to reach one's goal without perseverance.

There are two goals, vice and virtue, and both require perseverance. If you would reach life, you must persevere in virtue, and if you would reach eternal death, persevere in vice. So it is through persever-

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51. Rm. 7:23.

52. Mt. 18:20.