



SILENT HOMILIES

The Fire That Was Love

*Catherine of Genoa, and the hope
she would not let become a cavern*



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Little Treasures



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cavern*

Before You Begin



Most of us meet Saint Catherine of Genoa already attached to a title. The saint who saw purgatory. The woman of the fire. A holy card that looks, if we are not careful, like a slightly kinder version of hell. Then somebody says she wrote a systematic treatise in her spare evenings, and the real woman sits between those two pictures, unheard: a laywoman in a hospital ward, speaking in fragments that other people later gathered.

Caterina Fieschi Adorno was born in Genoa in 1447. She was not a nun. She was married at sixteen to a man who did not yet know how to be faithful. She was converted, at twenty-six, on the way to a confession she had not yet made. She spent the rest of her life among the sick of the great hospital called Pammatone. The words we now call her *Treatise on Purgatory* were not a book she sat down to compose. They were sayings, remembered and arranged after her death, about a fire she insisted was love.

This little book is not the *Treatise*, and it is not another complete life. It walks through the marriage that did not fit, the wound received before she could speak her sins, the rooms where linen was washed, a plague year, a young notary who listened, and the surprising claim that the souls in that last purification cannot wish themselves anywhere else.

Read it if pictures of caverns have made you shy of a doctrine meant to comfort. Read it if you already pray for the dead and have never been told that a woman in a Genoese ward thought their joy was next only to paradise. On the holy cards the fire comes first. In her life the hospital came first.

Contents

<i>Before You Begin</i>	4
<i>Part One — The woman before the fire</i>	
1. Not a Nun, and Not a Cavern	6
2. A Fieschi Girl and a Marriage That Did Not Fit	8
3. The Wound on the Eve of Confession	10
<i>Part Two — Love becomes service</i>	
4. Rooms in a Hospital Called Pammatone	12
5. The Husband Who Came After Her	14
6. A Plague Year and a Young Notary	16
7. Words She Did Not Sit Down to Write	18
<i>Part Three — What she saw, and what the Church teaches</i>	
8. They Cannot Wish Themselves Elsewhere	20
9. The Rust and the Sun	22
10. Gold in the Fire	24
11. What She Did Not Claim to Know	26
12. Living as If the Last Washing Has Already Begun	28
<i>A last word</i>	30
<i>Sources and Further Reading</i>	31
<i>The work behind a small book</i>	32

Chapter 1

Not a Nun, and Not a Cavern



The first surprise is almost always the habit she did not wear. Catherine of Genoa is so often painted in a veil that many readers assume she belonged to a convent. She did not. As a girl of thirteen she asked to join her sister Limbania among the canonesses of Our Lady of Graces. The community judged her too young. The Church later honoured her as a laywoman who stayed in the world and turned ordinary work into a kind of cloister.

The second surprise is the picture we bring to her name. Purgatory, in too many imaginations, is a cavern with a window. Catherine did not talk like that. What she spoke of was an interior fire: the same love that had wounded her in a church before she could even begin her confession. She was not mapping the next world. She was living inside a purification so fierce that she began to understand what the last purification of the saved might be.

A useful distinction, before any chapter goes further, is this. The Church teaches that there is a purification after death for those who die in God's grace and friendship but are not yet ready for the joy of heaven. That is the Catechism. That is Florence and Trent. The Church has not defined the details of how that purification feels. Catherine's pages try to say what it is like when the flame is love, not hatred. That is not a new article of the creed. It is one saint helping us imagine a teaching the Church already holds.

If you have only ever heard her name attached to a frightening engraving, begin again with a woman in ordinary clothes, walking a hospital and speaking of joy. The cavern was never her room.

Reflection

Catholics sometimes imagine holiness as if it belonged more naturally to a habit than to ordinary clothes. Catherine is a quiet argument against that habit of mind.

She wanted religious life. She was not given it. She became, instead, one of the Church's most interesting voices on purification after death, and she did it as a married laywoman running a hospital. That should enlarge our idea of vocation. Sanctity is not a costume. It is a life claimed by God, wherever that life happens to be spent.

This also helps us hear her teaching. A woman who spent her days washing sick bodies was never likely to describe the last purification of the soul as a cavern. She knew what cleaning looks like when you care for the person.

If you have ever thought that the great Catholic insights belong only to cloisters and lecture halls, Catherine is inconvenient. A hospital administrator can become a saint. A wife in a hard marriage can become a teacher of the Church's hope for the dead. Holiness was not waiting for her somewhere else. It found her in ordinary clothes, in a hospital, among the sick.

A Short Prayer

*Lord Jesus, keep us from dressing this woman in a habit she did not take,
and from hanging a cavern behind a teaching she called love. Amen.*

Chapter 2

A Fieschi Girl and a Marriage That Did Not Fit



Genoa in the middle of the fifteenth century was a republic of ships, factions and old names. The Fieschi were one of those names. Catherine was born there in 1447, the youngest of five. Her father, Giacomo Fieschi, died while she was still small. Her mother, Francesca di Negro, kept the house Christian enough that the elder daughter, Limbania, entered religious life. The youngest daughter, looking at the same door, was told to wait.

Waiting, in a city of alliances, often meant a wedding. In 1463, at sixteen, Catherine was married to Giuliano Adorno. The match was meant to ease a long quarrel between two houses. It did not ease the girl who had wanted a grille and a habit. Giuliano was fond of company, fond of risk, and unfaithful enough that the marriage became, for ten years, a room Catherine could neither leave nor love.

A marriage that does not fit is not automatically a vocation. Sometimes it is only a grief. Catherine's later holiness did not cancel that grief. Grace came into a life that had already been emptied by it. When she finally walked toward a confessional in March 1473, she was not a girl looking for an experience. She was a wife of ten years who could no longer live on what the city called enough.

Those ten years matter because the later fire is sometimes told as if it fell on a ready saint. It did not. It fell on a woman who had tried the world's consolations and found them thin. Benedict XVI, speaking of her in 2011, did not tidy this away. After ten years, he said, there was in her heart a profound emptiness.

Reflection

It would be easy, and wrong, to make an unhappy marriage sound spiritually useful. Suffering is not good because a saint later came out of it. An unhappy marriage is not a programme.

What the story actually shows is quieter. Grace can enter a life whose history already contains real pain. God does not need the pain to have been good. He needs only a person who is still there when He comes.

Catherine is not a lesson that people should stay passively in every hard situation because holiness might follow. She is a lesson that God can find someone even after years that look wasted. The emptiness Benedict XVI named was not a virtue. It was the space that mercy later filled.

If you know a house that does not fit, do not force Catherine's story onto it. Pray for the people in it. Leave room for conversion. And do not decide too early that the story is already finished.

A Short Prayer

Lord, be near every marriage that has become a bitterness nobody can name, and do not let us pretend that pain is good simply because You can still work in it. Amen.

Chapter 3

The Wound on the Eve of Confession



On 22 March 1473 — some early sources say the 20th — Catherine went to the church connected with Our Lady of Graces. She had meant, at last, to make a confession. She knelt before the priest. Before she could begin the list she had carried for ten years, something happened that she later named in the only words that would hold it. She received, she said, a wound in her heart of the immense love of God. With it came a vision of her own wretchedness so clear, and of God's goodness so much clearer, that she nearly fainted.

She did not finish the confession that morning. A few days later she went back and made it properly. In between, at home, her early biographers speak of a vision of the Crucified. After that the pictures stop. The rest of her life is not a sequence of apparitions. It is a long obedience to a wound that never really closed.

The detail worth keeping is the order. The love came before the list. Many Catholics approach Confession as though they must first convince God to forgive them. Catherine's conversion ran the other way. She was pierced by mercy first. Only then could she bear to tell the truth about herself.

That order is older than Genoa. The father in the parable runs before the son has finished his speech. St John says we love because He first loved us. A confession that begins in terror and never arrives at love is not the confession she made. A woman walked into a church meaning to speak. God spoke first. Everything that followed — the hospital, the hunger for hiddenness, the strange teaching about the dead — was an attempt to live inside that first sentence without taking it back.

Reflection

There is a Catholic mistake that treats Confession as an interview we must pass. We assemble the list. We hope it is complete. We wonder whether God will be persuaded.

Catherine's morning in that church turns the order round. Mercy arrived before the inventory. She saw God's love first, and her own poverty second, and only then could she speak. The sacrament did not become unnecessary. It became possible.

This is closer to the Gospel than we sometimes admit. Forgiveness is not the prize at the end of a successful self-accusation. It is the light that makes honest accusation possible at all.

If you have stayed away from Confession because you cannot get the speech right, Catherine is on your side. Walk in. Let love speak first. Then tell the truth. The priest is not waiting for a performance. He is waiting to give you what she received: mercy that does not need to be earned by the quality of the list.

A Short Prayer

Lord who wounds with love before we have finished our list, do not let us turn Confession into a room where mercy has to wait its turn. Amen.

Chapter 4

Rooms in a Hospital Called Pammatone



Pammatone was not a shrine. It was the great hospital of Genoa, grown from a fifteenth-century foundation and enlarged until it gathered the city's scattered infirmaries into one house. Beside the wards for the acutely ill there was a place for the chronic poor. The chapel that served the hospital is the church where Catherine's body still rests.

Around 1478 she began to live near that house. By 1479 she and Giuliano occupied two small rooms inside it, serving without pay and at their own expense. For more than ten years she worked as an ordinary nurse: linen, basins, the turning of bodies that no longer wished to be touched. From 1490 until 1496 the directors asked her to take charge as *rettora*, the woman who kept the place running. Administration is not the romance we expect of mystics. In her case it is the proof that the fire did not lift her off the floor.

A hospital in that century was a loud theology. People died in rows. The smell was part of the work. Catherine's companions remembered that she went to the most abandoned beds, including places where disease had made faces hard to look at. The later teaching about a fire that purifies without hatred was not invented at a desk. It was learned where bodies were already being washed.

If you want to know what her purgatory is not, remember the ward before you open the Treatise. She did not need a cavern. She had corridors. The purification she described is closer to those corridors than it is to any engraving of chained souls.

Reflection

Why did one of the Church's most interesting descriptions of purgatory come from somebody who spent years washing sick bodies?

Perhaps because purification was not an abstract idea for her. She knew what it meant to clean something because you cared for the person. You do not wash a patient in order to punish them. You wash them because filth and fever are in the way of life. The work can hurt. It is still love.

That is a much better picture than a cavern. It also fits the older biblical language. Malachi speaks of a refiner's fire. Hebrews says our God is a consuming fire. Neither text is a tourist guide to the next world. Both say that God's holiness is not a cold light. It burns what cannot remain. Catherine learned that in linen and basins. If our teaching about the dead has become only architecture and fear, we may have forgotten the ward. Doctrine that never smells of a hospital is easier to paint and harder to trust.

A Short Prayer

Lord of basins and of corridors, bless every uncounted hour spent turning the sick, and do not let us paint Your mercy far from the rooms where it already has its sleeves rolled up. Amen.

Chapter 5

The Husband Who Came After Her



Giuliano Adorno is easy to leave in the first chapter as the problem. The sources will not quite allow that. At some point after Catherine's conversion — the exact year is less clear than the fact — he was drawn after her. He put aside the life that had made the marriage a bitterness. He became a Franciscan tertiary. He sold what he could and came to live the hospital life beside the wife he had not known how to cherish.

He died on 10 January 1497. By then they had shared the two rooms for years, and the work had become a common obedience rather than her private heroism. A conversion that reforms only the wronged party is a thinner miracle than the one the hospital actually saw.

There is a quiet lesson here for anyone who has decided that a difficult marriage can produce only one saint, and that the saint must be the wounded one. The Church canonised Catherine. She did not canonise Giuliano. She also did not require us to freeze him at twenty-five. Grace, in a house, sometimes arrives for the second person after it has already remade the first. That is not a verdict on him. It is simply the order in which mercy came.

When later painters put Catherine alone in a glow, they are not entirely wrong. The wound was hers. The words about the fire were hers. But the ward had two pairs of hands in it for a long time, and one of those pairs had once been the reason she could not breathe. That is a more interesting holiness than a widowhood invented early for the sake of a cleaner story.

Reflection

Catholicism believes in conversion. That means we should be careful about freezing another human being at the worst point in his story.

Giuliano was unfaithful. The marriage was a grief. Those facts remain. They are not cancelled by his later years. But his later years remain as well. He became a tertiary. He served in the hospital. He died beside the work his wife had begun.

We are often quicker to remember the damage than the change. Sometimes that is justice. Sometimes it is only that we will not let the story continue.

Catherine's story is not a demand that every wounded spouse wait for a matching miracle. Many do not receive one. The point is smaller and harder. Do not decide too soon which person in a house is capable of being found. God is allowed to arrive late for the second name.

A Short Prayer

Lord, You can follow a husband into a hospital years after You have already followed his wife. Do not let us decide too soon which person in a house can still be found. Amen.

Chapter 6

A Plague Year and a Young Notary



In 1493 a deadly fever passed through Genoa. Catherine was already known in the wards. The year intensified both her work and her reputation. It also brought her a friend who would matter more than any painter for the survival of her teaching.

Ettore Vernazza was a young Genoese notary, perhaps in his early twenties when they met, Catherine already forty-six. He was drawn first by the charity and then by the interior life he saw in her. In 1497 he helped to found in Genoa the Company of Divine Love, a brotherhood of lay people and clergy who bound themselves to the hospitals and to a hidden life of prayer. Around Catherine there gathered others: Tommasina Fieschi, the priest Cattaneo Marabotto who later heard her confessions, a small school of people who had seen that a mystic could also keep accounts.

Without Vernazza we would have far less of her. He listened. He remembered. In the years after her death he and those near him wrote down the life and the sayings. The manuscript work that stands behind the printed book of 1551 is, as far as scholars can tell, his gathering first of all. A later generation enlarged some pages with theology that sounds less like Catherine and more like a classroom. The distinction is worth keeping. Her own way of speaking is short and fierce. The later editors like to explain.

The Church's memory sometimes needs a notary. We would know far less of her if a busy lawyer had not thought her sentences worth writing down.

Reflection

There is a hidden Catholic vocation in remembering accurately. Someone has to listen. Someone has to write. Someone has to distinguish a saint's words from later additions.

Ettore Vernazza is easy to miss because he is not the fire. He is the notebook. Without him Catherine's teaching would have thinned into rumour. The Church depends not only on dramatic saints but on careful witnesses.

That is still true. Parish memory, hospital memory, the memory of the dead: all of them need people who will write a name down and not improve it. Accuracy is a form of love. So is the humility to say, this sentence may be hers, and this one may not.

If you have ever thought that only the visionary matters, remember the notary. Someone had to write it down.

A Short Prayer

Lord of notebooks and of careful friends, thank You for those who write down what the saints are too busy to copy, and keep us honest about which sentences are theirs. Amen.

Chapter 7

Words She Did Not Sit Down to Write



In 1551, forty-one years after Catherine's death, a book was printed in Genoa with a long title that later ages shortened. It contained a Life, a treatise on purgatory, and a Dialogue between the soul and the body. The title page presented all of it as the doctrine of the blessed Caterinetta of Genoa. Readers ever since have spoken of "Catherine's Treatise" as if she had kept office hours.

She did not. Baron Friedrich von Hügel, who spent years on her circle, showed how much of the Dialogue in particular belongs to later hands, especially to Battista Vernazza, Ettore's daughter. The Treatise itself is closer to Catherine: short chapters, repeating images, a heat that does not sound like a schoolroom. Even there, later sentences have been stitched in. A careful reader learns to hear two tempos: the sudden image, and the paragraph that explains the image twice.

None of this makes the book useless. The Church has never required a saint's pages to be autograph in order to be nourishing. What it does require of us is modesty. Catherine did not deliver a private tour of the next world with labelled corridors. She spoke out of an experience of purifying love in this world, and she used that experience as a way of imagining the last purification of those who have already been saved. The insight is precious. It is not a map of the next world.

Benedict XVI, speaking of her in 2011, did not pretend she had written a manual. He began with the wound of 1473 and the hospital, and only then with the teaching. That is the right order.

Reflection

Catholics are sometimes too eager to turn a mystic into a textbook. We want maps. We want every room labelled. Catherine will not give us that, and the Church has never asked her to.

Private revelations, even humble ones, are received with respect and with caution. The caution is not unbelief. It is the old knowledge that God is larger than a saint's best metaphor. Florence and Trent defined that there is a purification and that the souls there are helped by prayer and especially by the Mass. They did not quote Catherine. They did not need to.

Her gift is different. She rescues the imagination. She takes a doctrine that preaching had often painted as a smaller hell, and she gives it back as the last act of a love that will not carry rust through the door.

We can receive that gift without pretending she inventoried the furniture. The Creed does not need her images. Our prayer for the dead may still be helped by them.

A Short Prayer

Lord of remembered sentences, teach us to love a saint's teaching without forcing her to have written every line that later bears her name. Amen.

Chapter 8

They Cannot Wish Themselves Elsewhere



The first movement of the Treatise, in the form that reached print, is already a refusal of the usual picture. The souls in purgatory, Catherine says as far as she can understand the matter, cannot wish themselves elsewhere. They do not sit and inventory the sins that earned the place. They do not keep score of who will leave first.

In the traditional wording of those pages, they remember nothing of themselves or others that would increase the pain they endure. They are so satisfied with what God has ordained that they cannot even think of themselves in the midst of their greatest sufferings. That is a later English rendering of a difficult Italian original. The thought, if it is hers, is clear enough. Self-love is the last rust. If a soul in that fire could still turn back upon itself — my delay, my ranking, my preferred timetable — the fire would be feeding the very thing it is meant to consume.

A person who has only ever heard purgatory described as a sentence will hear this as softness. It is not softness. It is a harder mercy. That last work does not negotiate. It also does not humiliate. The souls are not being taught a lesson they can argue with. They are being made true, and they want the truth more than they want the old comfort of managing their own case.

Elsewhere, still stained, would not be heaven. Revelation says that nothing unclean shall enter the heavenly Jerusalem. Catherine takes that sentence seriously. The souls do not want escape. They want to be ready. That is why she will not let them wish themselves out of the fire one moment before the rust is gone.

Reflection

There is a difference between wanting pain and wanting to be completely ready for God even when becoming ready hurts. Those are not the same thing.

Catherine's souls do not love suffering. They love God. Because they love God, they accept the work that still has to be done. That is a very different picture from people who believe God is against them.

The Catechism is plainer and safer. Purgatory is not a second chance for the damned. It is for those who die in God's grace and friendship and still need purification. Heaven is their destination. They are saved. Catherine adds a colour the Catechism does not forbid: they know they are saved, and they do not want to arrive unfinished.

If you have only been able to imagine the holy souls as frightened prisoners, try her picture for a moment. Not because every detail is defined doctrine. Because it may help you pray for them as people who belong to God, not as people God has set aside in anger.

A Short Prayer

Lord, give us even now a little of that inability to prefer our own timetable to Your truth. Amen.

Chapter 9

The Rust and the Sun



Catherine's favourite image is almost domestic. An object is covered. The sun is shining the whole time. The object cannot answer the rays, not because the sun has failed, but because a covering stands in the way. Let the covering be burned away, and the thing begins to respond. The covering, she says, is the rust of sin. The sun is God.

She also says, in the traditional wording of the Treatise, that she does not believe any joy can be compared with that of a soul in purgatory except the joy of the blessed in paradise — a joy which increases as God more and more flows in upon the soul. Whether every clause is hers or an editor's, the picture is consistent. The suffering does not stop being suffering. What increases without pause is the joy of being opened to God.

The image quietly corrects a superstition. The sun does not start shining because the soul has finally deserved it. The sun was already at work. Purgatory, in her telling, is not God changing His mind about someone. It is the last obstacle giving way to a light that never agreed to be absent.

Hebrews says, "Our God is a consuming fire." Malachi speaks of a refiner sitting over the gold. St Peter speaks of faith tested like gold in the fire. None of these verses is a complete doctrine of purgatory. Together they help us see why Catherine's sun and rust did not sound foreign to Catholic ears. The fire is not necessarily something separate from God, standing between the soul and heaven. The unbearable thing may be encountering perfect Love while still carrying what cannot live inside perfect Love.

Reflection

What if the fire is not God's anger standing in the way of heaven? What if the pain is meeting Love clearly while something in us still cannot answer it?

That is Catherine's great suggestion. It is not a defined dogma. It is an imagination baptised by Scripture. A consuming fire. A refiner. Gold that becomes itself by losing what is not gold.

The point is not to make purgatory sound lovely. Purification is serious. Attachment to sin is serious. Becoming ready for God is serious. The point is to stop picturing the One who purifies as an enemy.

If the sun was already shining, then prayer for the dead is not an attempt to change God's mood. It is a way of joining the work Love is already doing. That is why a Mass for the dead is not a bribe. It is participation.

A Short Prayer

Lord who shine whether or not we have yet lost our covering, burn what still keeps us from answering You, and do not let us call that burning hatred. Amen.

Chapter 10

Gold in the Fire



Another image she uses is older than Genoa. Gold in a furnace grows purer as it is fired. The dross is cast out. Catherine sees, she says, rays of divine love so intense they would seem able to annihilate not only the body but the soul itself, were that possible. The rays do two things. They purify. They destroy — not the person, but the false self that cannot enter the feast.

She will not let the reader choose between pain and happiness as if they were enemies. Only a soul that wants God more than it wants relief can call such a fire a joy. The comparison with paradise is not a claim that purgatory is already heaven. It is a claim that the same Love is at work in both, and that the saved already know whose house they are in.

St Paul, writing to the Corinthians, speaks of a person's work being tested by fire. Some work remains. Some is burned. The builder himself may be saved, "but only as through fire." Catholic Tradition has long heard in that passage a hint of purification after the foundation, which is Christ, has already been laid. It is not a complete map. It is one of the reasons the Church never found Catherine's furnace unthinkable.

A smaller surprise is her insistence that this fire can be tasted on earth. She believed she had lived inside it. The hospital, the hidden fasting, the long illness of her final years: she read them as the same furnace, begun early. That is not a programme for the rest of us. It is her modest account of her own life.

If this still sounds private, remember what the Church has said. There is a purification. It is for the saved. It is serious. Catherine adds only that the soul would not leave the fire before the rust is gone.

Reflection

Joy next to paradise is a scandalous phrase if you have been taught that purgatory is only punishment. It is a natural phrase if the souls already belong to God.

They are not trying to escape an enemy. They are being made able to live with a Friend. The pain is real because the rust is real. The joy is real because the destination is certain.

Hold both. If you drop the pain, you have made sin cheap. If you drop the joy, you have made God an adversary of the people He has already saved. Catherine refuses both mistakes.

This is why All Souls is not a gloomy feast. We pray because the work is not finished. We pray with hope because the people we pray for are not lost. November is not the Church pretending that death won. It is the Church refusing to stop loving people who can no longer do anything useful for us.

A Short Prayer

Lord of the fire that makes gold honest, give us a faith that does not need to cancel either the burning or the joy. Amen.

Chapter 11

What She Did Not Claim to Know



The most Catholic sentence in the Treatise may be the one that sounds like hesitation. As far as I can understand. Catherine does not issue a timetable. She does not name the furniture. She does not describe demons walking the aisles with lists. When later editors add explanations, the certainty rises and the heat drops. The living woman was less certain and more fierce.

The Church, for her part, has never raised the Treatise to the rank of a council. Florence and Trent said that there is a purification, that the souls detained there are helped by the prayers of the living and especially by the Sacrifice of the Mass, and that the opposite opinion is to be rejected. They did not quote Catherine. Her gift is not a definition. It is a way of imagining the doctrine that does not make God look like an enemy of the people He has already saved.

Scripture had already given the Church reasons to pray. Judas Maccabeus takes a collection so that sacrifice may be offered for fallen soldiers, and the writer says it is a holy and pious thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins. St Augustine remembers his mother Monica asking not for an impressive burial but that she should be remembered at the Lord's altar. Catherine helps us imagine what that remembrance is for. Monica helps us see what Catholics actually do.

What we may take without anxiety is the centre. The saved can still be unfinished. Love can still have work to do after the last breath. That work is not hatred. Prayer, Mass, alms, the speaking of a name: these remain the ordinary helps the Church commends.

Reflection

Why do Catholics keep loving someone after there is nothing practical left for that person to do for us?

A Mass for the dead is an extraordinarily unselfish act. The person cannot thank us. Perhaps nobody even knows we requested it. Yet the Church goes on naming the dead, offering the Sacrifice, visiting graves, seeking indulgences for the departed. Love continues beyond usefulness.

Monica understood this before Catherine was born. She did not ask Augustine for a fine tomb. She asked to be remembered at the altar. That is the Catholic instinct in one sentence. The dead are not a closed file. They are still members of the household.

Catherine's images give that instinct a warmth it sometimes lacks. We are not shouting through a dungeon door. We are standing near a fire that is love, asking that a friend be made ready for the feast. The Church will not draw us a map of the next world. She is sure of mercy. That is enough.

A Short Prayer

Lord of things You have not told us, keep us faithful to the little You have bound, and keep us from pretending to know more about the next world than You have given us. Amen.

Chapter 12

Living as If the Last Washing Has Already Begun



Catherine died on 15 September 1510, in the sixty-third year of her life. She had been ill for a long time. The hospital remained her work to the end. Her body was kept in the chapel that served those wards. In 1675 she was beatified. In 1737 Clement XII named her a saint. The honour did not turn her into a specialist in the next world. It confirmed a laywoman whose doctrine had grown out of charity.

The practical fruit of her pages is not a new devotion with a logo. It is a change of tone when we speak of the dead. If that last work is love, we do not pray as people trying to bribe a jailer. We pray as people standing outside a door that opens toward a feast, asking that a friend be made ready sooner. A Mass said for the dead, a name read in November, a gift given because someone we love can no longer give it: these gestures fit her teaching without needing her visions.

There is an earthly rehearsal as well. Catherine thought the fire could begin here. She did not mean that we should invent sufferings. She meant that every humiliation of self-love, every hidden service in a ward or a kitchen, every confession that lets mercy speak first, is already a little of the rust coming away. The sun is already shining. We are the ones still wearing a cover.

Benedict XVI did not send the Church on a tour of caverns. He sent her back to a woman whose first experience was a wound of love, and whose work was a hospital. Visit the sick. Tell the truth in confession. Pray for the dead. And when the old pictures return, remember a Genoese laywoman who would not let the fire be hatred. She called it love.

Reflection

By the end, the question is not whether we can draw Catherine's map. The question is whether we will do the ordinary Catholic things that her map was meant to encourage.

Pray for the dead. Ask for a Mass. Keep a name. Keep All Souls. Visit a grave. Trust mercy. Take purification seriously. None of that requires a private vision. All of it requires a Church that refuses to treat the grave as the end of her responsibilities.

Catherine's gift is to change the face of the people we pray for. They are not abandoned. They are not damned. They are not finished. They belong to God, and God is not finished with them.

If you remember only one sentence from this booklet, let it be a simple one. The fire she saw was not God's last burst of anger against people He had already saved. It was Love, completing the work Love had begun.

A Short Prayer

Lord, begin in us now the honesty You will finish later, and teach us to speak of the dead as people Your love has not put down. Amen.

A Last Word



We have walked a short way with a woman who was not a nun, through a marriage that did not fit, into a church where love arrived before the list of sins, and along the corridors of a hospital that still knows her name. We have tried to hear her sentences without forcing her to have written every later paragraph. We have let her keep her two images — the rust in the sun, the gold in the fire — and her one stubborn joy, which she would set next only to paradise.

That is enough of Catherine for one sitting. The rest is in the Mass you can still ask for the dead, in the basin you can still carry to a sick room, and in the quiet competence of a Church that has never agreed to treat the grave as the end of her responsibilities.

May every parish speak of this purification without borrowing the language of despair. May the friends of the dying have linen in their hands as well as words. And may we remember that the saint who saw purgatory saw it from a ward, and called the fire by the only name that can be trusted.

St Catherine of Genoa, pray for us. St Monica, pray for us. All you holy souls, pray for us.

Sources and Further Reading



Holy Scripture, especially 2 Maccabees 12:43–46; Malachi 3:2–3; Matthew 5:25–26 and 12:32; 1 Corinthians 3:11–15; Hebrews 12:29; 1 Peter 1:6–7; 1 John 4:19; Revelation 21:27. Biblical wording follows the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition, or is closely paraphrased.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1030–1032, on the final purification of the elect, the help given by the prayers of the living, and the Sacrifice of the Mass. Council of Florence and Council of Trent, on purgatory and suffrage for the dead.

Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience of 12 January 2011, on Saint Catherine of Genoa. *Spe Salvi*, 45–48, on purification after death, used here only as wider teaching, not as a commentary on Catherine.

St Augustine, *Confessions* IX, 11, for Monica's request to be remembered at the altar of the Lord.

On Catherine's life: the early Genoese lives gathered around Ettore Vernazza and printed in 1551 with the *Treatise and Dialogue*. Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, remains the classic modern study of her circle and of later editorial layers, especially in the *Dialogue* associated with Battista Vernazza. Direct quotations in this booklet are treated with caution; where the traditional English wording of the *Treatise* is used, it is described as traditional wording rather than as a certified autograph sentence.

On Pammatone, Giuliano Adorno, the *Company of Divine Love*, and the dates of beatification (1675) and canonisation (1737), the standard Catholic historical notices and Benedict XVI's audience have been preferred to later devotional embroidery.

The work behind a small book



A Little Treasure is small when you hold it. Making one is not quite so small. Catherine's own teaching reached us because somebody listened and wrote. These booklets reach you because the same kind of slow work still has to be done: reading, checking, separating a saint's voice from later legend, and only then writing a page I am willing to leave in your hands.

I choose to keep the Little Treasures free to read. I want someone who cannot give anything to finish the last page without embarrassment. But free to read is not the same as free to make. Each booklet takes research, books, Scripture, Church documents, writing, rewriting, design, a website, and time. Sometimes one attractive story has to be checked against several sources before I will keep it.

If this book has given you something worth keeping, and you would like to help me continue, I would be truly grateful. A gift is not payment for what you have just read. That has already been given freely. It helps me find the hours for the next Little Treasure.

If you cannot give money, that is completely fine. Read another booklet. Send this one to somebody who prays for the dead. Remember the work in your prayers.

Thank you for reading. And thank you for helping these small books continue, in whatever way you can.

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