

DISCERNMENT IN CATHERINE OF SIENA

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[Editor's Note: St. Catherine of Siena's works contain a profound theology of discernment difficult to thematize since she wrote in a literary style full of metaphorical language quite unique to her. The author attempts to analyze the saint's teaching on discernment which she saw as the capacity to recognize and carry out the truly good. This capacity unfolds as the person's potential for love is ordered so that charity and discernment are inextricably connected.]

CATHERINE OF SIENA'S writings contain a rich theology of discernment worthy of her title Doctor of the Church. However, this theology is not easily accessible since it is based on her mystical experience and communicated in an intricate literary style.¹ Her wisdom regarding discernment is inextricably connected to her teaching about growth in charity, which involves both growth in union with God and growth in the capacity to practice unselfish care for self, others, and created reality. Capacity for discernment depends on charity.

While Catherine lived after the 12th-century controversies contrasting knowledge acquired through mystical contemplation and knowledge acquired through reason and dialectics, the knowledge for which she was rightly named Doctor of the Church is mystical. This knowledge reflects the gift of wisdom described by Thomas Aquinas, a knowledge infused by the Holy Spirit through union of love with God.² In his homily proclaiming Catherine Doctor of the Church, Paul

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¹ There is no comprehensive study in English of Catherine's spirituality of discernment. Sandra Schneiders describes Catherine's teaching based on the image of the tree, the only significant work in English on this topic: "Spiritual Discernment in *The Dialogue of Saint Catherine of Siena*," *Horizons* 9 (1982) 47-59. In French, François Dingjan describes discernment in the letters and gives the most comprehensive summary of Catherine's teaching, placing it in the context of the two traditions on discernment: "La pratique de la discrétion d'après les lettres de Sainte Catherine de Sienne," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 47 (1971) 3-24. In Italian, A Lemmonyer gives a very succinct summary of Catherine's teaching on discernment: "Il discernimento nell'insegnamento di S. Caterina," *Santa Caterina da Siena* 6/6 (1955) 8-15.

² Aquinas described the gift of wisdom in *Summa theologiae* 2-2, q. 45. Conleth Kearns discusses Catherine's gift of wisdom in "The Wisdom of Saint Catherine," *Angelicum* 57 (1980) 324-43.

VI made this point: "What strikes us most about the Saint is her infused wisdom. That is to say, lucid, profound and inebriating absorption of the divine truths and the mysteries of the faith contained in the Holy Books of the Old and New Testaments. That assimilation was certainly favored by most singular natural gifts, but it was also evidently something prodigious, due to a charism of wisdom from the Holy Spirit, a mystic charism."³ Catherine saw her wisdom as bestowed on her directly by God.⁴ Her mystical knowledge was combined with a theological formation that was the fruit of spiritual direction, spiritual reading, and the preaching she heard. Catherine was not a trained theologian; as a 14th-century lay woman, she had little education.⁵

Since the Church has recognized that Catherine's writings were illumined by the Holy Spirit, they represent an important source for theological study.⁶ However, her teaching is difficult to study and to present in contemporary terms that contribute to reflection on spirituality and theology. Catherine did not present her wisdom in the language and style of the systematic theologian; rather, the logic of her exposition reveals the interconnected and intuitive understanding of the mystic. Her writing style is that of the novelist or poet who communicates through images and metaphors. In Catherine's case, these often overlap or carry multiple meanings. She writes in spirals of metaphor, often repeating herself, while adding a key new aspect in the midst of her repetition.

The purpose of this article is to thematize Catherine's spirituality of discernment through a study of the images, metaphors, and themes related to this topic. A study of Catherine's teaching on discernment based only on passages where she explicitly alludes to discernment would not yield the depth of her teaching on this theme. Besides using multiple words to refer to discernment,⁷ she used images to

³ *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, October 15, 1970, 6-7.

⁴ Catherine's spiritual director, theological mentor, and friend quoted her as confiding to him that her wisdom was taught to her directly by God; see Raymond of Capua, *S. Caterina da Siena*, 5th ed., trans. Giuseppe Tinagli (Siena: Cantagalli, 1982) I.9.84; English translation, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Conleth Kearns (Wilmington: Glazier, 1980).

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the influences on Catherine's thought, see Giacinto D'Urso, *Il genio di Santa Caterina: Studi sulla sua dottrina e personalità* (Rome: Cateriniane, 1971) 60-69; this work also contains a detailed discussion of Catherine's formation. For a good summary in English of influences on Catherine's thought, see Mary O'Driscoll, "Catherine the Theologian," *Spirituality Today* 40 (1988) 4-17, at 11-12.

⁶ For a discussion of Catherine as theologian, see O'Driscoll 4-7.

⁷ Catherine used more than one word for discernment. By *discrezione* she meant at times "discernment of spirits"; sometimes this word referred to the virtue of discernment; at other times *discrezione* meant recognition of the truly good. Occasionally she used *cognoscimento* for the noun "discernment." For the verb "to discern" she uses *discernere*, but also *giudicare* (to evaluate, to pass judgment) and *cognoscere* (to know in a discriminating fashion).

develop her teaching. It is Catherine's metaphors and images that most clearly point to the interconnections between discernment and other aspects of her spirituality. The depth of her spirituality of discernment emerges as these interconnections are understood.

Catherine's teaching on discernment is primarily developed in a number of her letters⁸ and in her main work, *The Dialogue*,⁹ which is presented as God's response to four petitions that Catherine addressed to God for herself, for reform of the Church, for the world and peace among human beings, and for the unfolding of God's providence.¹⁰ Several of her prayers¹¹ reflect aspects of the teaching on discernment found in *The Dialogue* and in her letters.

CATHERINE'S TEACHING IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the 14th century the most influential and dominant centers of spirituality shifted from the Latin to the Germanic countries where the Rhineland school of speculative mysticism flourished with writers such as Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, and Henry Suso. At the same

⁸ In particular see Letters 33, 201, 213, 245, 307, 341; also 56 and 183. For this article I follow the numbering of Catherine's letters that appears in the 1860 collection edited by Nicolo Tommaseo, which has been the most complete and until recently most used edition of Catherine's letters. Citations are from Catherine of Siena, *Epistolario*, 3rd ed., ed. Umberto Meattini (Rome: Paoline, 1979), a modern edition of Tommaseo's collection. Translations are mine, as none of the letters cited here are translated in the edition cited below. There is a critical edition of only 88 of Catherine's letters published to date and these are numbered differently than those of the Tommaseo edition. For the Italian critical edition see *Epistolario di Santa Caterina da Siena*, ed. Eugenio Duprè-Theseider, *Fonti per la storia d'Italia*, Reale Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, *Epistolari: Secolo XIV* (Rome: Sede dell'Istituto, 1940). For an English translation based on the critical edition, see *The Letters of St. Catherine of Siena* 1, trans. Suzanne Noffke (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1988).

⁹ For a critical edition, see Catherine of Siena, *Il Dialogo della divina Provvidenza: ovvero Libro della divina dottrina*, 2nd ed., ed. Giuliana Cavallini (Siena: Cantagalli, 1995). Citations in this article are from Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist, 1980). For a discussion in English about the composition of *The Dialogue* and its manuscript tradition, see Noffke's introduction (*ibid.* 11–20).

¹⁰ There are several sections of *The Dialogue* that include Catherine's wisdom on discernment. It appears in "The Way of Perfection" (Noffke 28–47), which is God's response to the first petition; in the section on "The Truth" (Noffke 184–204), which is part of God's response regarding mercy for the whole world; and in the section on "Divine Providence" (Noffke 277–327), which is God's response to the fourth petition.

¹¹ For a critical edition of the prayers, see Catherine of Siena, *Le Orazioni*, ed. Giuliana Cavallini (Rome: Catheriniane, 1978). For an English translation, see Catherine of Siena, *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist, 1983). Noffke has arranged the prayers in chronological order, so that her numbering of the 26 prayers differs from that of the critical edition. In referring to the prayers, I will give the numbers of the critical edition, followed by the numbers in Noffke's translation. For references to discernment, see Prayers 5 (Noffke 7), 10 (Noffke 17), 14 (Noffke 25), 19 (Noffke 9), 20 (Noffke 10), 21 (Noffke 11), and 22 (Noffke 12).

time, several movements arose separately from each other, which nevertheless shared several characteristics in common. They distrusted speculative mysticism; they regretted the divorce of spirituality from theology; and they emphasized the psychological aspects of religious experience. Among their number in England, for example, were the mystics Richard Rolle and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and in the Low Countries the representatives of the *devotio moderna*.¹²

Catherine, who lived from 1347–1380, did not belong to either of these currents in spirituality.¹³ Rather, she formed part of a tradition in the history of spirituality where women formed by mystical experience became influential in the politics of the time and in the spiritual guidance of church officials. Eventually, these women also became influential in the spiritual currents of their day. Women in this tradition include Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th century, Mechthilde of Magdeburg in the 13th, and Bridget of Sweden in the 14th.¹⁴

At the age of 18, Catherine became a Dominican *mantellata* (the *mantellate* were a group of widows who worked with the sick and poor of Siena and who were affiliated with the Dominicans). While continuing to live at home, she spent the next three years mostly in solitude and prayer. Through her contemplative experience she eventually felt urged to become more involved in the work of the *mantellate*. Following the urgings and guidance encountered in prayer, she progressively became involved with a wider circle of people and a broad spectrum of spiritual, social, and political concerns.¹⁵ She acted as spiritual mother to many who gathered in her room at her parents' home; she mediated between individuals of rival families; she attempted to mediate with and influence leaders of city states; she advised the pope,¹⁶ cardinals, and other church officials. This unfolding

¹² Jean Leclercq, François Vandenbroucke, and Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the Middle Ages* (New York: Seabury, 1968) 373, 407–46.

¹³ For a summary in English of Catherine's life, see Mary Ann Fatula, *Catherine of Siena's Way* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1987) 23–29; for a chronology of her life, see *ibid.* 204–6. An annotated bibliography on works about Catherine's life is contained in Suzanne Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: Vision through a Distant Eye* (Collegeville: Glazier, 1996) 239–43.

¹⁴ Maxine Gorce, "Catherine de Sienne," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1957) 2.345–46.

¹⁵ The categories into which Catherine's letters have been divided demonstrate the variety of people she advised: popes, cardinals, bishops, kings and queens, aristocrats and the nobility, leaders of city states, artists, judges and physicians, relatives, disciples, nuns, monks, hermits, priests, the *mantellate*, craftsmen (see *Epistolario*, cited in n. 8).

¹⁶ Her attempt to influence the spirituality and actions of the pope can be seen in her correspondence with Gregory XI (Letters 185, 196, 206, 209, 218, 229, 231, 233, 238, 239, 252, 255, 270, 285; all but 209, 238, 270, and 285 can be found in Noffke's translation) and with Urban VI (Letters 291, 302, 305, 306, 346, 351, 364, 370, 371).

of her life into wider service to community and church exemplifies the spirituality that I will later describe. Her interior encounter with God and with self before God led to a transformation of her own desires and perceptions, so that the good of others and the good of the Church became consuming concerns for which she was willing to sacrifice herself.

History of the Notion of Discernment

In order better to understand Catherine's teaching on discernment and better to appreciate the significance of her contribution to current spiritualities of discernment, it is important to see how Catherine's doctrine fits into the history of the notion of discernment. Historians of this concept distinguish between the discernment of spirits (*discretio spirituum*)¹⁷ tradition and the virtue of discernment (*discretio*) tradition. Catherine's contribution is to the *discretio* tradition which has not been significantly explored since the late Middle Ages¹⁸ and which does not often inform contemporary spiritualities of discernment.

Much modern literature on discernment has exemplified the *discretio spirituum* tradition. It has focused on discernment in the Ignatian tradition that emphasizes reflection on inner movements of consolation and desolation and the implications of such movements for the discovery of God's will. Catherine wrote about consolation and desolation when she taught about the action of the evil spirit on the person and described ways of recognizing this action.¹⁹ Since her teaching on this theme was not extensive and did not make a significant contribution to the tradition, it will not be explored here.²⁰

Discernment in the *discretio* tradition is the virtue that regulates or modifies other virtues and the activities of the spiritual life. It is a

¹⁷ For a history and description of the tradition regarding discernment of spirits, see Jacques Guillet et al., "Discernement des esprits," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1957) 3.1224–26; for an English translation of this article, see *Discernment of Spirits*, ed. Edward Malatesta, trans. I. Richards (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1970).

¹⁸ For a historical discussion of this tradition, see François Dingjan, *Discretio* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1967). For a shorter summary of the history of *discretio*, see Jacques Guillet et al., "Discrétion," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1957) 3.1311–29. Dingjan concludes that Aquinas's inclusion of *discretio* in his theology of prudence initiated the development whereby *discretio* became part of a moral theology of prudence, thus eclipsing *discretio* as a significant theme in spirituality (*Discretio* 205–28).

¹⁹ See, e.g., *Dialogue* 89 and Letters 203, 315, 345 on the actions of the evil spirit; for descriptions of how Satan acts as an "angel of light," see *Dialogue* 133, 199, 200.

²⁰ For a discussion of Catherine's teaching on discernment of spirits and how her teaching compares to that of Ignatius Loyola, see Diana Villegas, "A Comparison of Catherine of Siena's and Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Discernment" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1986) 114–39.

virtue based on knowledge of self acquired in prayer. When this virtue is operative, a person develops an internalized capacity to distinguish what is most ordered and measured and to act accordingly. For some authors *discretio* is also the virtue that orders the practice of charity.²¹

Catherine's teaching on discernment goes beyond these dimensions of the *discretio* tradition as she intertwined her wisdom about discernment with her wisdom about her central theme: coming to know and live truth and love.²² In these contexts discernment is no longer one of several virtues, or even the virtue that orders the others. Rather, discernment is a concomitant fruit of the person's capacity for love and truth, capacities for which the person is created. The capacity for discernment and the quality, as it were, of a person's discernment is inextricably tied to the process of conversion and the growth of one's potential for truth and love. The basis for this theology of discernment can already be glimpsed in the first paragraph of *The Dialogue*:

She [the soul] has for some time exercised herself in virtue and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God's goodness toward her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it. But there is no way she can so savor and be enlightened by this truth as in continual humble prayer, grounded in the knowledge of herself and of God. For by such prayer the soul is united with God, following in the footsteps of Christ crucified, and through desire and affection and the union of love he makes of her another himself.²³

The more a person is transformed into "another Christ," the more she is able to recognize what is true and to desire what is according to love; dialectically, the more the person comes to know the truth about God and herself, the more she seeks that transformation.²⁴ As these insights are elaborated in her works, Catherine asserts that as the person grows in union with God (charity), her desire becomes trans-

²¹ See, e.g., Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, 4 vols. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1976-1980), Sermon 49 nos. 5-6, trans. Kilian Walsh and Irene M. Edmunds, 3.25-26.

²² For an excellent summary of key themes in Catherine's works, see Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: Vision* 1-125; this volume contains an annotated bibliography for English translations of Catherine's writings as well as studies on her life.

²³ *Dialogue* 25.

²⁴ Throughout her works, Catherine follows the common medieval usage of referring to the person as *l'anima*, "the soul." Since referring to the person as "the soul" appears stilted in contemporary English and may evoke a body/soul dichotomy, I have frequently used the term "person" when paraphrasing or commenting on Catherine's thought. In referring back to the soul, which in Italian is feminine, Catherine naturally uses the feminine pronoun "she"; I have often retained this usage, but obviously it is not intended to exclude masculine persons.

formed. Such transformation of desire results in the capacity to "see" and choose the truly good.

Catherine thus recognizes different levels of capacity to discern. As we shall see, when discernment is most advanced, it is a specific instance of the very gift of wisdom that Catherine exemplified. When a person's capacity for truth and love becomes most ordered, she "sees" and chooses out of connaturality with God.

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND KNOWLEDGE OF SELF

Grounded in the Thomistic idea that love follows upon knowledge,²⁵ Catherine's spiritual writings repeatedly alluded to knowledge of God and knowledge of self. No aspect of her spirituality could be properly appreciated without a consideration of these themes, since they connect with all her other major themes. Without these two forms of knowledge there would be no relationship with God, no spiritual life.²⁶ For Catherine, knowledge of God and self are necessary for the unfolding of the person's capacity to love. Without the unfolding of the capacity to love, discernment could not be present; so knowledge of God and knowledge of self are essential for discernment. These two forms of knowledge are different sides of the same coin. Yet, for knowledge of self to be constructive and bear fruit for growth in charity it must be experienced together with knowledge of God.²⁷

God and self are encountered in the house (or cell)²⁸ of self-knowledge. By "going into the cell of self-knowledge" Catherine means choosing to attend to inner experience in order to listen and experience in a felt way the truth revealed there both about oneself (good and bad) and about God's love. This attending to inner experience is part of what Catherine calls "continuous prayer"²⁹ and is an expres-

²⁵ For a discussion on Aquinas's influence on Catherine, see Marie Walter Flood, "St. Thomas's Thought in the *Dialogue* of St. Catherine," *Spirituality Today* 32 (March 1980) 25-35.

²⁶ Giuliana Cavallini, a major Catherine scholar, has organized Catherine's teaching on progress in the spiritual life according to these two themes; see her "La verità nell'ascesi catheriniana," *La nuova rivista di ascetica e mistica* 1 (1976) 27-43, at 39.

²⁷ See, e.g., *Dialogue* 36 and 124-25.

²⁸ The terms "house" and "cell" of self-knowledge are used almost interchangeably by Catherine. The image of the cell almost certainly comes from her experience of retreating to the solitude of her room, her cell (*cella*), in order to devote herself to prayer. This image has recently been studied in detail by Patricia Fresen in "The Cell of Self-Knowledge in the Writings of Catherine of Siena" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1995).

²⁹ There are numerous places in Catherine's writings where she alludes to prayer as continuous or faithful or humble and where she relates such prayer to knowledge of God and self; see Letters 245 and 213; *Dialogue*, 25, 120, 126, 304. Catherine's notion of continuous prayer has been studied by D'Urso and compared to Cassian's notion (*Il genio di Santa Caterina* 123 ff.).

sion of love for God. "By the very fact that her eye is watching in the knowledge of me and of herself, the soul is praying continuously. This is the prayer of a good and holy will, and this is a continuous prayer."³⁰ In her letters Catherine continually advises her correspondents to go into the cell of self-knowledge in order to learn to experience charity (God's love) and in order to learn about charity (how to love neighbor and God).

Knowledge of God encompasses both the felt experience of how much God loves us because we are precious to God and the felt experience that we need God. God tells Catherine in *The Dialogue*: "In the dignity of her existence she tastes the immeasurable goodness and uncreated love with which I created her."³¹ That is, in learning how deeply she is loved by God, she learns that she is created in God's image, endowed with a sacred dignity which needs to be revered in herself and others. Being created in God's image means also that she is capable of goodness and her life is intended for love, so that the meaning of her life lies in unfolding this capacity for goodness and love.³²

For Catherine, a most significant aspect of knowledge of God is learning about God's infinite mercy, which is God's infinite patience with our failings, and God's infinite desire to empower our potential for love. A person learns this by grasping in the cell of self-knowledge that without God she is incapable of transcending selfishness and weaknesses, unable to practice virtue and live as an image of God. Thus she learns about God's mercy as she learns about herself, and about herself as she encounters God's mercy. And this knowledge fuels transformation of desire. "Thus, self-knowledge and the consideration of her sins ought to bring her to know my goodness to her and make her continue her exercise in true humility. . . . The soul, then, should season her self-knowledge with knowledge of my goodness, and her knowledge of me with self-knowledge."³³

Knowledge of self involves coming to an honest appraisal of one's selfishness and acquiring the felt consciousness that this is the root cause of disordered desires and behaviors. In the cell of self-knowledge one learns of one's vulnerability to sin and disordered behavior, and one recognizes one's incapacity to change merely through will power.³⁴

When a person is present to experiences of distress, weakness, helplessness, incapacity to pray or to be faithful to her desire to follow God, and she does not experience God's comfort, she is in the cell of self-knowledge.³⁵ Similarly she is in the cell of self-knowledge when, following upon such experiences, God's comforting, empowering pres-

³⁰ *Dialogue* 120.

³² See, e.g., *Dialogue* 48.

³⁴ E.g., *ibid.* 104.

³¹ *Ibid.* 104.

³³ *Ibid.* 124-25.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 120.

ence is felt so that she learns how much difference God's love makes, and how little she can do for herself without God's help. The recognition of the need for God motivates one to seek further union with God in charity.

It is, therefore, in the interior encounter with God's love and with self in the presence of God's love that the capacity to love is ordered, and thus perception and desire as well. "And so the soul is inebriated and set on fire and sated with holy longing, finding herself filled completely with love of me [God] and of her neighbors. Where did the soul learn this? In the house of self-knowledge. . . . Every perfection and every virtue proceeds from charity. . . . To attain charity you must dwell constantly in the cell of self-knowledge."³⁶ Since the capacity to discern unfolds as the capacity to love is ordered, spending time in the cell of self-knowledge is essential for discernment.

THE VIRTUE OF DISCERNMENT

Catherine's most explicit and complete description of discernment in the "virtue of discernment" tradition occurs in her letter to Sr. Daniella of Orvieto.³⁷ Catherine there states that discernment involves recognizing what one owes to whom and then being faithful to this recognition with ordered measure. When the virtue of discernment is operative, one has the desire and capacity to give to God, to self, to others, and to created reality in right ordered measure. To be able to recognize what one owes and to whom, one must learn through knowledge of God and self that one is made for love and that one needs God to actualize this potential.

What does a person owe to God?³⁸ She owes the effort of directing all of her affectivity toward God's glory and honor. She owes directing her desire toward that which God would desire rather than toward her self-centered desires. She owes to both God and herself the "humble, faithful, continuous prayer" necessary for knowledge of God and self. In other words, one owes God attentiveness to God that is ongoing in one's life and occurs often throughout the day.

What do we owe ourselves? In order to answer that question, we must learn that we are created for love. Knowing this, we owe ourselves nurturing virtue. We are to seek experiences and situations

³⁶ *Ibid.* 123, 118.

³⁷ Letter 213.

³⁸ The teaching in the following paragraphs regarding what one owes to God, self, and others is taken from Letter 213 unless otherwise noted. See also Letter 245 to a member of the Franciscan Third Order and Letter 307 to a complaining woman. In Letter 245 Catherine highlights how rightly ordered love for God is necessary in order to have rightly ordered love for others.

that nurture virtue and avoid what could foster vice. We owe ourselves care for the body as this is the instrument through which virtue is practiced and charity is made operative. Catherine insists that all members of the body—the eyes, the ears, the tongue, the hands, the feet—all need to be honored with care that fosters growth in virtue since all members of the body are necessary to carry out charity.

One should avoid penance for the sake of penance (this is self-centered behavior focused on one's own glory), yet in a measured way the body needs to be disciplined. At the same time that one cares for oneself, one owes oneself the willingness to suffer when necessary to actualize one's nature as made for love.

What do we owe others? We owe it to others to act with concern for their good rather than out of self-centeredness. Catherine explains that the rightly measured love will be expressed differently depending on one's vocation or state in life. For example, if one is married, one will nurture one's children with love ordered in God. If one is a nobleman, he will act in justice toward those under his authority. In advising an abbot, Catherine urges him to practice the virtue of discernment by making sure he is full of "the warmth of love" and desire for the greatest good of each monk so that he may recognize the right measured way of exercising his authority.³⁹ In her own words,

The most important thing [the virtue of discernment (*discrezione*)] does is this: having seen with discerning light to whom [the soul] is indebted and what she should offer, she immediately offers this with perfect judgment (*discrezione*), so that she renders glory to God and praise to his name. . . . After she has given honor to God she gives herself her own due, that is, hatred of vice and her sensuality. . . . With the same light with which she gives herself her due, she gives to her neighbor. . . . And she loves her neighbor as creature created by the supreme, eternal Father. And she gives her neighbor loving charity—more or less perfectly, to the extent that she herself possess it. So the principal effect of the virtue of discernment (*discrezione*) on the soul is that with its light she has seen what she owes to whom.⁴⁰

Discernment of Providence

By God's providence Catherine means the loving, caring action of God that works for the salvation of each person and the whole Church through all circumstances of life. Providence is a major theme in Catherine's writings and is expanded at length in *The Dialogue*, chaps. 135–53.⁴¹ Her wisdom regarding discernment of providence is

³⁹ Letter 33.

⁴⁰ Letter 213.

⁴¹ Carlo Antonio Prestipino provides a theological analysis of Catherine's teaching on providence: "La provvidenza divina nel pensiero di S. Caterina da Siena," in *Atti del congresso internazionale di studi cateriniani* (Rome: Curia Generalizia O.P., 1981) 380–98. Schneiders has a good summary of Catherine's theology of providence and how this is connected to discernment ("Spiritual Discernment" 58–59).

intertwined with this broader teaching and is developed in her letters.

Discernment of providence involves recognizing God's loving action and being able to see in faith the grace present in all the events and experiences of one's life. Catherine asserts that all that God allows can be transformed by God into grace for one's conversion and growth. When we are able to discern God's loving hand in all the events of life, we are able to accept them with reverence, and thus to cooperate in freedom with the reality of our life in a manner congruent with God's will.⁴² This also means we can make the rightly measured choices that cooperate with the salvific meaning of any life experience.

In discussing discernment of providence Catherine refers to knowledge of God and self as the experiences that disclose the truth about God's action. In a letter to a "complaining woman,"⁴³ Catherine exhorted her to focus on knowing that God loves her in an infinite manner and out of love created her in God's image so she would enjoy God's love. Such understanding indicates she possesses the "light of discernment" (*lume di discrezione*) and can thus correctly recognize that all God permits is for her good, her growth in holiness and union with God.

With such knowledge she can judge with truth how to relate to the realities of her life. Thus, if these realities are positive, she does not become possessive nor think she deserves what she has received. She can recognize positive realities as gifts of God's love, gifts to which she does not become attached but which she is to enjoy with right measure.

On the other hand, if the reality she experiences is painful, she is able to accept that God's love is allowing this pain for purification from sin and/or growth in virtue.⁴⁴ She is then able to accept the sorrow with patience and find the growth that God can effect in her through patient endurance. Without this "light of discernment" she would become impatient with suffering. She might then act with less "reverence and charity" toward her neighbor if she perceived her neighbor to be the cause of her suffering.

And with the light of discernment (*discrezione*) we judge rightly. When we are prosperous we acknowledge that this is from our Creator, given us not because of our virtue but because of God's infinite goodness. Because of this knowledge we love things with a well-ordered love, loving them for God's sake and keeping them as a loan rather than as our own, because they are not our

⁴² *Dialogue* 291-93.

⁴³ Letter 307.

⁴⁴ Implicit here is the view that God can "allow" evil for the spiritual progress of the person. Such a theological understanding of God's action was not uncommon in medieval spirituality, but it is one of the theological assumptions implicit in Catherine's teachings that needs to be examined and challenged.

own. . . . And if [our lot] is adversity and trouble we accept it humbly, with true holy patience. . . . They rightly discern (*giudicare*) God's will and providence for them, because his providence sees to our every need and his will wants nothing but our good.⁴⁵

CHARITY AND DISCERNMENT

In Catherine's teaching discernment and charity are inseparably connected. "Charity" in this context has two basic meanings. It means both the love that unites a person to God, and the practice of love of self, others, and created reality for which one is created. Without union with God through charity as the experience or knowledge of God's love, the person is unable to perceive the truly good and choose it. Choosing the truly good involves the practice of charity, that is, of unselfish and right ordered love.

As we have seen, Catherine presented her teaching in the language of the mystic and poet. Thus, the logic of her connections between charity and discernment needs to be inferred from her images and from a literary analysis of her writings. I will now examine her use of the image of the tree and the metaphor of light.

The Tree

The essential connection between charity and discernment is most succinctly seen in Catherine's image of the tree, an image she develops in both *The Dialogue* and her letters.⁴⁶ This key image discloses the interconnection between discernment and other central aspects of Catherine's spirituality. She imaged the person as a tree created for love, that can only live nurtured by God's love. The root of the tree is nurtured by knowledge of self experienced together with the felt knowledge of God's love.⁴⁷ Humility is the virtue that emerges from a

⁴⁵ Letter 307.

⁴⁶ Schneiders considers the image of the tree as the "presiding" metaphor for discernment in Catherine's works, and her article is organized around a discussion of this image ("Spiritual Discernment" esp. 52). I would argue that the image of light is the image that most inclusively discloses Catherine's teaching on discernment, although the image means more than discernment. The metaphor of the tree is most helpful in disclosing the interrelation of Catherine's teaching on discernment with other central themes of her spirituality, thus pointing to the essence of her theology of discernment. Light appears in almost all sections of *The Dialogue* and in letters where discernment is discussed, whereas the tree as a metaphor for discernment appears only in Letter 213 and in *The Dialogue*, chaps. 9-10. For an index of the images in Catherine's works see, Gabriella Anodal, *Il linguaggio cateriniano: indice delle immagini* (Siena: Cantagalli, 1983).

⁴⁷ There are sections in Catherine's writings where she addresses the themes of knowledge of God and knowledge of self, and sections where she addresses the theme of charity. Knowledge of God and charity have similar meanings when charity means union with God. The experience of knowledge of God is an experience of charity (union with God).

balanced knowledge of God and self, and humility is necessary for the practice of discernment. In Catherine's imagery discernment is an offshoot (in Italian literally a "child") of the tree. In other words, discernment is a natural fruit when a person's intended capacity for love becomes ordered by grace.

So think of the soul as a tree made for love and living only by love [God's love]. . . . The circle in which this tree's root, the soul's love, must grow is true knowledge of herself, knowledge that is joined to me [God], who like the circle have neither beginning nor end. . . . This knowledge of yourself, and of me within yourself, is grounded in the soil of true humility. . . . So the tree of charity is nurtured in humility and branches out in true discernment. . . . And every fruit produced by this tree is seasoned with discernment. . . .⁴⁸

For Catherine, the practice of charity implies that several virtues, especially humility, patience, and obedience must be present. Thus the tree (the person) is solidly planted in humility and bears fragrant flowers, which represent other virtues. All fruits borne by the tree are seasoned with discernment, suggesting that when the person rooted in knowledge of self and knowledge of God practices virtue, such virtue is exercised in rightly ordered measure. Through this aspect of the image of the tree, Catherine follows in the *discretio* tradition, where the virtue of discernment is held to order the other virtues. At the same time, in imaging discernment as the "child" of the tree which is the person created for love, she points to the wider meaning of discernment, namely a capacity that unfolds naturally as the person's intended capacity for love unfolds. The teaching captured in this image is developed and unfolded as one examines Catherine's teaching about the levels of light and her metaphors for progression in one's capacity for charity.

Light

Light is one of Catherine's metaphors with a plurality of meanings, one of which is discernment.⁴⁹ When using light to signify discernment, Catherine is referring to the capacity to see what is truly good and to carry it out. "Seeing" here is not an intellectual recognition. Rather, it is an inner awareness arising out of the union of love with God, the Light. The union of love that enables the "seeing" affects desire, so that what is seen is also desired. Such desire results in motivation and ability to carry out the truly good.

Catherine not only asserts a connection between the knowledge of God's love and the capacity to "see" the truly good and carry it out,

⁴⁸ *Dialogue* 41–42.

⁴⁹ For instances of the metaphor of light in Catherine's letters, see Anodal, *Il linguaggio cateriniano* 44–46.

but she insists that there is a progression in this capacity. She teaches that the capacity to discern and the accuracy of discernment depend on the level of a person's conversion as one's capacity to love has been transformed by union with God and knowledge of self. Such transformation is characterized by growth in virtue, as desire fueled by selfishness yields to desire fueled by concern for others. The more one's choices are motivated by desire for the good of others, the more one grows in capacity to "see" clearly and accurately. Catherine's teaching about progression in capacity to "see" the truly good is found both in *The Dialogue* and in those letters where she describes different levels of light.⁵⁰

Catherine's description of the more advanced levels of discernment may be considered to reflect Thomas's description of the gift of wisdom. The gift of wisdom (which Aquinas distinguished from the virtue of wisdom) is a gift of grace acquired through union with God in charity, and it results in accurate judgment due to connaturality with God. The truly good is known through this connaturality, as the memory, understanding, and will are transformed through grace. Human actions are then guided by divine reason.⁵¹ In the more advanced levels of discernment, one's capacity for truth and love are so transformed by grace that one's perceptions and desires have become congruent with the truly good.

First/Imperfect Light⁵²

In *The Dialogue*, Catherine tells us that the first light "is an ordinary light in those whose charity is ordinary."⁵³ A person able to "see" by "first light" is beginning to acquire knowledge of self and knowledge of God. She comes to recognize in a felt way her weakness and readiness to rebel against God, her creator. She comes to recognize the need to relate to Christ as the only source of truth. She "sees" that God's judgment is more important than that of others and desires to live according to God's judgment. She "sees" the transitory nature of worldly possessions so that her desire is

⁵⁰ *Dialogue* chaps. 98–109; Letter 201 to a Carthusian monk. While not explicating the notion of different levels, Prayer 21 (Noffke 11) also develops Catherine's teaching on discernment through the image of light.

⁵¹ *Summa theologiae* 2-2, q. 45, a. 1 and 2.

⁵² The names Catherine used to designate the different levels of light are not consistent throughout her work. In *The Dialogue*, she speaks of "first," "second," and "third" lights as well as of "imperfect" and "perfect" lights; in the letters she referred to "imperfect" and "perfect" lights. Accordingly, it is difficult to correlate and organize her categories. The important point is that Catherine saw different levels of light and that there is a progression in the ability to "see" what is of God and in God.

⁵³ *Dialogue* 184.

not so focused on these.⁵⁴ With “first”⁵⁵ light the person begins to recognize the importance of virtue. She learns that practicing virtue is pleasing to God and begins to desire to please God by attempting such practice.⁵⁶

Second Light

The person able to “see” according to second light is one who has grown significantly in knowledge of God and knowledge of self so that she is grounded in the practice of humility. For example, a person acting with the humility of second light is ordered in her attitude toward penance. She does not desire severe penances and spiritual exercises; rather she prefers a measured approach to these practices.⁵⁷ Clothed in greater humility, such a person becomes less vulnerable to distortions of the truth resulting from selfish self-love or the judgment of others. Humility allows her to recognize that God sees in ways she does not see, giving her freedom from the disordered judgments of others. Thus, she desires and is able to choose God’s will despite the judgments others might have of her actions.⁵⁸

Third/Perfect Light

Catherine describes the person capable of practicing discernment according to the third “light” as one who has “clothed” herself in God’s will.⁵⁹ She writes to John, a Carthusian monk, “[I] desire to see you grounded in true and most perfect light; for without the light we would be unable to discern the truth.”⁶⁰ This third or most perfect light discloses to the memory, understanding, and will of the person (i.e., to the whole person) the nature of Jesus’ love in dying for us on the Cross. Such “seeing” elicits desire to imitate Jesus’ self-giving love that does not count the cost to self. The person “is clothed in perfect light and loves me sincerely without any other concern than the glory and praise of my name. She does not serve me for her own pleasure or her neighbors for her own profit, but only for love.”⁶¹ Such a person is not prevented by selfishness from choosing God’s will nor is she

⁵⁴ Ibid. 185–186.

⁵⁵ In Letter 201 Catherine called first light “natural” and second light “supernatural.” She implied that natural light is a grace of discernment available to all, while supernatural light is an infused grace that permits more advanced levels of discernment and is given to only a few. This infused grace seems a particular instance of what Aquinas described as the gift of wisdom (see n. 51 above).

⁵⁶ Letter 201.

⁵⁷ *Dialogue* 186.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 186–87.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 187–88.

⁶⁰ Letter 201.

⁶¹ *Dialogue* 189.

kept by suffering or difficulties or temptations from choosing what is best for God, self or others.⁶²

Together with such transformation of desire, the person who has come to practice discernment at this level is one who has become quite perfect in the practice of humility, patience, and obedience. The virtue of obedience has taken root in the person through the transformation effected by knowledge of God and knowledge of self, so that the person is able to let go of her own disordered will and desire and to stand firm in pursuing what is perceived as truth and truly good. Until this virtue is sufficiently rooted in the person, she would waver in carrying out what she recognizes as ordered, when temptation, trials and difficulties inevitably affect her life.⁶³

The virtue of patience, which Catherine images as the "marrow of charity" and the "sister of obedience," has also become a part of the person who has progressed to the practice of discernment in the more perfect light. In describing patience as the "marrow of charity" Catherine says that carrying out what is according to God's call to love requires that one be transformed into a patient person. Without patience the person would be unable to carry out what is perceived as most ordered; instead of persevering when the path of obedience is arduous, she would elect struggles of her selfish choosing or in her self-centered desire would prefer to avoid the struggle.⁶⁴

Growth in Charity

Progression in capacity to practice discernment depends on transformation of desire; self-centered desire must yield to desire for the truly good and rightly ordered. Catherine's teaching regarding this transformation of desire is further elaborated through the metaphors she uses to describe progression in ordering the capacity to love. There is progression symbolized by the image of climbing up the steps of Christ's body, from his feet to his side to his mouth.⁶⁵ There is progression according to growth in type of love, from mercenary love, to the love of faithful servant, to the love of friend, and finally to filial love. Catherine describes the same progression by the image of different types of tears, from tears of compunction to tears of devotion or consolation.⁶⁶ Given Catherine's style, a single image does not nec-

⁶² Ibid. 187-91.

⁶³ Letter 201.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ "This bridge, my only-begotten Son, has three stairs. . . . You will recognize in these three stairs three spiritual stages" (*Dialogue* 64); here we see an example of the intricacy of Catherine's use of metaphor and image.

⁶⁶ Alvaro Grion attempts to unravel and organize Catherine's different images of progression in the spiritual life; see his *Santa Caterina da Siena: dottrina e fonti* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1953) 98-135. A brief summary in English of Catherine's teaching regarding progression in charity can be found in Noffke, *Catherine of Siena: Vision* 65-73.

essarily correspond to a single level of growth. For example, friendship and filial love sometimes appear as the same level; at other times they represent two different levels. Also the levels of growth described by one set of images do not correspond precisely to the levels described by another.⁶⁷ Accordingly, I will present the general doctrine of growth in charity that can be culled from these diverse metaphors.

Beginning Levels of Charity

In the first stages of growth in capacity for charity, the person begins to desire God, starts desiring to rely on grace rather than on her own powers, begins to recognize her self-centeredness as disordered. At this stage these desires are characterized by "slavish fear." A person is not motivated by a desire to love God or order her life because of the good to others or self that such order produces. Rather, she fears punishment, or she has become weary of a life that is disordered and therefore painful. She hopes that life will become less painful if she turns toward God. At this first stage, motivated by fear, or expecting less weariness, she knows little yet about God's mercy, and so this mercy is not yet a moving force.⁶⁸

Intermediary Levels of Charity

In these stages there is a sincere desire to love God and neighbor, because she has experienced God's immense love and desire for each person's good.⁶⁹ Her affectivity is often directed toward the good of others and toward seeking God. However, such longings are mixed with a desire for the rewards, consolations and comfort of loving. Catherine wisely saw imperfection of love in this mixed motivation. If she is motivated by the rewards and consolation or comfort of loving, then she will withdraw her loving behavior once the consolation or rewards are withdrawn, or if these rewards fail to occur. "Do you know how you can tell when your spiritual love is not perfect? If you are distressed when it seems that those you love are not returning your love or not loving you as much as you think you love them. . . . All this comes of the failure to dig out every bit of the root of spiritual selfishness."⁷⁰

Such imperfect motivation could lead a person away from the truly good in various ways. She could falsely interpret the lack of consola-

⁶⁷ Gabriella Anodal places the images of progression in historical perspective and attempts to correlate them; she finds that when carefully examined these correlations are not always consistent ("Le immagini del linguaggio cateriniano e le loro fonti: La scala," *Rassegna di ascetica e mistica* [1972] 332-43).

⁶⁸ *Dialogue* 114, 127-28.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 116, 129.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 121.

tion or spiritual comfort as withdrawal of God's favor. She would then conclude that she is not sufficiently pleasing to God and thus give up her efforts to spend time in the cell of self-knowledge in faithful, continuous prayer. In attempting to love her neighbor by working for justice, reconciliation, healing, or conversion, she might desist if she were not rewarded with pleasing responses from the other. Here again, Catherine would say that the block to growth beyond this stage is the self-centeredness that seeks rewards for oneself rather than seeking the good of others or the perceived call from God.⁷¹

Advanced Levels of Charity

In the most advanced levels of charity a person's affectivity, all the energy that moves her desires and actions, is unconditionally directed toward the good of others and what is perceived as God's will. Such unconditional desire for the good of others means that significant virtues have become rooted in the person. These virtues are the "daughters" of charity; they are patience, courage, and perseverance.⁷²

In these advanced levels the person has so experienced God's mercy and uncreated love that she is able to surrender to God completely, without fear. Such surrender results in union with God that transforms her desire into one similar to that of Christ who did not count the cost to himself in attaining the salvation of others. She is thus willing to deal with any discomfort or suffering involved in pursuing the truly good; she is willing to part from consolation, comfort, or other rewards for her actions. She is motivated to work even more wholeheartedly and at any cost for the healing, redemption, and conversion of others. Passion for the salvation and conversion of others lead her to frequent intercessory prayer.⁷³ She also develops a passion for the proclamation of the truth, for "admonishing, advising, testifying, without any fear of the pain the world may please to inflict on her."⁷⁴ She is able to see the importance of redemptive suffering and to desire this form of suffering, as Jesus did.

Catherine's image of the tree describes the person as created for love, so that when this love is operative discernment is a natural offshoot. From this brief summary it is clear that Catherine imaged growth in charity as a transformation of desire and the capacity to "see" the truly good.

CONCLUSION

I have presented Catherine's spirituality of discernment, following her texts as closely as possible. Of value to contemporary spirituali-

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 132.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 140.

⁷² *Ibid.* 141, 144.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 136.

ties of discernment would be a dialogue between these and Catherine's wisdom, where her teaching on discernment would be "translated" into more contemporary language and categories.

In concluding, I offer a brief outline for a contemporary spirituality of discernment based on what I have described as Catherine's teaching. Her doctrine highlights three themes that can make a significant contribution to current spiritualities of discernment: relating discernment inextricably to charity; highlighting the importance of conversion of desire for arriving at choices congruent with God's will; and describing discernment as finding the rightly ordered behavior toward God, self, others, and created reality. These themes suggest important questions for reflection when embarking on a discernment process or examining whether one is following God's will.

In my experience as spiritual director and retreat director, I have encountered many situations where people want a "method" for discerning God's will. While such methods offer important guidelines for the inner journey necessary to uncover God's guidance in one's life, there is a danger in expecting a "method" inevitably to yield an encounter with truth or to guarantee that God's will has been found. I have also encountered many situations where a person wants help in discerning God's will for an important decision, almost as insurance that the decision will be correct, but the person is not engaged in a committed journey of relationship with God and self. Catherine's insistence on the inextricable connection between discernment and knowledge of God and self, and between discernment and the transformation of desire, offers a corrective to those approaches to discernment.

Catherine's teaching clarifies the importance of grounding a discernment process in an ongoing relationship with God and self, where disciplined prayer and interiority foster knowing oneself honestly at the same time that one seeks the felt knowledge of God's unconditional mercy and love. Catherine insisted that it is the ongoing journey of learning how much, without grace, one fails at love and truth that disposes the human heart to encounter God's redemptive love. This encounter with God's transforming love results in growing conaturality with God so that one becomes increasingly attuned to what is true, good, and ordered.

This grounding in relationship with God and self suggests a series of questions that could guide a discernment process. A person could ask, "What is my desire?" One could also ask, "Given my state in life, my commitments, the priorities that flow from my commitments, am I giving to God, self, others, created reality in rightly ordered measure?"

Reflections and answers that flow from these questions would need to be evaluated in the light of a parallel process of reflection that assesses where persons are on the journey away from selfish love and

toward healthy care and concern for the good of others. Questions that would help such an assessment would flow from Catherine's description of the stages of growth in capacity to love. Depending on the stage in which persons find themselves, they might be able to give more or less validity to their desire or to reflections regarding the rightly ordered measure they owe to God, self, others, or created reality.

These criteria would also be valuable for a spiritual director guiding another through a discernment process. Using Catherine's categories of growth in charity and questions derived from these, the director could help directees discover at what level of charity they are operating, and then could help them examine how ordered their desire might be.

One of the hallmarks of Catherine's own vocation was her concern that the wisdom she learned from God be of benefit to a variety of people, particularly to those in leadership in the Church. In her teaching, her correspondence, and her prayers, Catherine advocated the practice of interiority that enables transformation of the capacity to love and makes fruitful discernment possible for people in all walks of life. She urged a "complaining woman" to grow in capacity to love so that she might see God's providence in her life.⁷⁵ She also urged the pope to personal conversion so that he might better recognize how to lead the Church.⁷⁶ In her prayers she pleaded with God for the conversion of church leaders, that they might see and pursue the correct course of action.⁷⁷ Were Catherine alive today, we can imagine she would promote her teaching on discernment for all members of the Church, both for their own personal journeys and for their contribution to the life of the community.

⁷⁵ Letter 307.

⁷⁶ Letter 185 (no. 54 in Noffke's translation) to Gregory XI.

⁷⁷ See, e.g., Prayers 14 (Noffke 25) and 20 (Noffke 10).



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