

THE DIALOGUE *of*  
ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA

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# THE DIALOGUE *of* ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA

*A conversation with God on living your spiritual life to the fullest*

*Dictated by her, while in the state of ecstasy,  
to her secretaries,  
and completed in the year of Our Lord 1370*

*Together with*  
AN ACCOUNT OF HER DEATH  
BY AN EYE-WITNESS

*Translated, from the original Italian, and preceded by an  
Introduction on the Life and Times of the Saint, by*  
ALGAR THOROLD

A NEW AND ABRIDGED EDITION



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## PREFACE

**W**HY should you read *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena*? Because God speaks through this great Saint to you, and me, and His whole Church. Remarkable though she was, Saint Catherine merely served as a vessel for the Lord's message. In this spiritual classic, God's message covers four topics: Divine Providence, Discretion, Prayer, and Obedience. Each of these treatises contains instruction and inspiration for your daily life as they did for Catherine and her contemporaries.

Born in 1347 as the second youngest of 25 children, Caterina Benincasa was an extraordinary woman that God blessed with extraordinary experiences. Christ, Mary, angels, and saints appeared to her from the time she was six; the Pope heeded her requests and returned home to Rome from Avignon; Christ gave her His stigmata; and God the Father spoke to her as a dear friend.

One reason *The Dialogue* is applicable to you is because you have the fortunate yet challenging experience of living in the current culture. While we have more tangible blessings, more freedoms, and more opportunities to search for truth, we are also besieged with a moral murkiness that seems to worsen with every generation.

Catherine's *Treatise of Divine Providence* can remind you that God is alive and well in this world, awaiting an invitation into your life, into your family's life, into the life of anyone who forgets that God is

omnipresent—not only present to all things, but present in all things, as a creator is present in his greatest work. God’s greatest work is not the creation of man, but the creation of God-made-man, Jesus of Nazareth, who brought from Heaven an infinite mercy upon a fallen people. And thus, the Lord explains that His Providence is most recognizable in the mercy poured upon us. His mercy is so great that if you “carry yourselves with true patience, with grief for your sins, and with love of virtue for the glory and praise of My Name . . . I shall not remember that you ever offended Me.” Only an infinite God can make our gravest sins as if they never existed.

The Saint’s *Treatise of Discretion* can be a guiding light in a darkening world, where objective truth is shunned and relativism is promoted as the moral law. We live in an age where every choice is to be respected, where intolerance is the most grievous of sins, and where our children are taught to condone every act of their friends because it might be “right for *them*.” This treatise on discretion teaches, however, that moral virtue should be our guiding principle in all we do—and there is never an exception.

Our Lord said to Catherine, “if one single sin were committed to save the whole world from Hell, or to obtain one great virtue, the motive would not be a rightly ordered or discreet love, but rather indiscreet.” The great Catholic mind of John Henry Cardinal Newman made a similar declaration in his *Apologia*: “The Catholic Church holds it better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions on it to die of starvation in extremest agony . . . than that one soul . . . should be lost . . . should commit one single venial sin, should tell one willful untruth, or should steal one poor farthing without excuse.” It is the virtue of discretion that can assist the human mind in understanding that morality never grants the slightest compromise.

But it is the same virtue that simultaneously dictates that a soul “should love her neighbor with such devotion that she would lay down a thousand times, if it were possible, the life of her body for the



salvation of souls, enduring pains and torments so that her neighbor may have the life of grace.” It is discretion that shows that a bodily sacrifice, as Christ’s very own, is the perfect sign of love. Perhaps for us this means selflessly attending to the family by cooking dinner or keeping house, mowing the grass or sitting through a long commute, or perhaps it means studying hard to prepare for a greater future. Life is full of “laying down your life” moments, and discretion tells us to embrace them. And if we are to obtain discretion in its fullness, we must turn to God in prayer, which leads us to the next treatise.

We live in a culture where a vibrant faith is many times ridiculed, where prayerful worship is often considered an anachronistic and meaningless ritual. Some applaud prayer as an exercise in self-awareness, or worse yet, self-worship. Even the faithful people that bend their knees to adore our Lord have innumerable distractions. It seems that every minute of our lives is filled with noise, sometimes from without, and sometimes from within. Our Lord explains, however, that too often we merely use “vocal” prayer rather than true “mental” prayer. Be sure that your prayers are more than just words, He instructs us. Be sure that your prayers are words of love.

Finally, the *Treatise of Obedience* is especially applicable to today’s culture where there is little if any formality, respect for the old, or reverence for the sacred. We find our model of obedience in Jesus Christ, perfectly obedient to His Father. And with obedience comes a peace beyond any fleeting consolation the world can offer. On the flip-side, disobedience, like that of Adam before you, only brings isolation, fear, and misery. Remember that the gates of Heaven were closed by disobedience and reopened by obedience—and so will your heart be opened by humble obedience to Our Lord.

God may not speak with you directly, as He did with Saint Catherine, but He still provides you with the opportunity to hear His voice through these pages. *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena* is a timeless classic because it contains a timeless message. Our Lord is waiting to

begin His own dialogue with you in these pages and through the virtues that these pages will help you obtain.

*J. Conor Gallagher  
Vice President of Publishing  
Corpus Christi, 2008*

# INTRODUCTION

IT WOULD be hard to say whether the Age of the Saints, *le moyen âge énorme et délicat*, has suffered more at the hands of friends or foes. It is at least certain that the medieval period affects those who approach it in the manner of a powerful personality who may awaken love or hatred, but cannot be passed over with indifference. When the contempt of the eighteenth century for the subject, the result of that century's lack of historic imagination, was thawed by the somewhat rhetorical enthusiasm of Chateaubriand and of the Romanticists beyond the Rhine, hostility gave place to an indiscriminating admiration. The shadows fell out of the picture; the medieval time became a golden age when heaven and earth visibly mingled, when Christian society reached the zenith of perfection which constituted it a model for all succeeding ages. Then came the German professors with all the paraphernalia of scientific history, and, looking through their instruments, we, who are not Germans, have come to take a more critical and, perhaps, a juster view of the matter. The Germans, too, have had disciples of other nations, and though conclusions on special points may differ, in every country now at a certain level of education, the same views prevail as to the principles on which historical investigation should be conducted. And yet, while no one with a reputation to lose would venture on any personal heresy as to the standards of legitimate evidence, the same facts still seem to lead different minds to differing appreciations. For history, written solely *ad narrandum*, is not history; the historian's task is not over

when he has disinterred facts and established dates: it is then that the most delicate part of his work begins. History, to be worthy of the name, must produce the illusion of living men and women, and, in order to do this successfully, must be based, not only upon insight into human nature in general, but also upon personal appreciation of the particular men and women engaged in the episodes with which it deals. With facts as such, there can indeed be no tampering; but for the determination of their significance, of their value, as illustrative of a course of policy or of the character of those who were responsible for their occurrence, we have to depend in great measure on the personality of the historian. It is evident that a man who lacks the sympathetic power to enter into the character that he attempts to delineate, will hardly be able to make that character live for us. For in Art as well as Life, sympathy is power.

Now, while this is true of all history whatever, it is perhaps truer of the history of the middle ages than of that of any more recent period, nor is the reason of this far to seek. The middle ages were a period fruitful in great individuals who molded society, to an extent that perhaps no succeeding period has been. In modern times the formula, an abstraction such as "Capital" or the "Rights of Man" has largely taken the place of the individual as a plastic force. The one great Tyrant of the nineteenth century found his opportunity in the anarchy which followed the French Revolution. The spoil was then necessarily to the strong. But even Napoleon was conquered at last rather by a conspiracy of the slowly developing anonymous forces of his time than by the superior skill or strength of an individual rival. The lion could hardly have been caught in such meshes in the trecento. Then, the fate of populations was bound up with the animosities of princes, and, in order to understand the state of Europe at any particular moment of that period, it is necessary to understand the state of soul of the individuals who happened, at the time, to be the political stakeholders.

It must not be thought, however, that the personality of the prince was the only power in the medieval state, for the prince himself was held to be ultimately amenable to an idea, which so infinitely transcended

earthly distinctions as to level them all in relation to itself. Religion was in those days a mental and social force which we, in spite of the petulant acerbity of modern theological controversies, have difficulty in realizing. Prince and serf would one day appear as suppliants before the Judgment-seat of Christ, and the theory of medieval Christianity was considerably in favor of the serf. The Father of Christendom, at once Priest and King, anointed and consecrated as the social exponent of the Divine Justice, could not, in his own person, escape its rigors, but must, one day, render an account of his stewardship. Nor did the medieval mind, distinguishing between the office and the individual, by any means shrink from contemplating the fate of the faithless steward. In a "Last Judgment" by Angelico at Florence, the ministers of justice seem to have a special joy in hurrying off to the pit popes and cardinals and other ecclesiastics.

For it is an insufficient criticism that has led some to suppose that the medieval Church weighed on the conscience of Christendom solely, or even primarily, as an arbitrary fact: that the priesthood, aided by the ignorance of the people, succeeded in establishing a monstrous claim to control the destinies of the soul by quasi-magical agencies and the powers of excommunication. Nothing can be further from the truth. . . .

Sabatier points out truly that the medieval saints occupied much the same relation to the ecclesiastical system as the Prophets of Israel had done, under the older dispensation, to the Jewish Priesthood. They came out of their hermitages or cloisters, and with lips touched by coal from the altar denounced iniquity wherever they found it, even in the highest places. It is needless to say that they were not revolutionaries—had they been so indeed the state of Europe might have been very different today; for them, as for other Christians, the organization of the Church was Divine; it was by the sacred responsibilities of his office that they judged the unworthy pastor.

An apt illustration of this attitude occurs in the life of the Blessed Colomba of Rieti. Colomba, who was a simple peasant, was called to the unusual vocation of preaching. The local representatives of the

Holy Office, alarmed at the novelty, imprisoned her and took the opportunity of a visit of Alexander VI to the neighboring town of Perugia to bring her before his Holiness for examination. When the saint was brought into the Pope's presence, she reverently kissed the hem of his garment, and, being overcome with devotion at the sight of the Vicar of Christ, fell into an ecstasy, during which she invoked the Divine judgment on the sins of Rodrigo Borgia. It was useless to attempt to stop her; she was beyond the control of inquisitor or guards; the Pope had to hear her out. He did so; proclaimed her complete orthodoxy, and set her free with every mark of reverence. In this highly characteristic episode scholastic logic appears, for once, to have been justified, at perilous odds, of her children. . . .

\* \* \*

MIDWAY between sky and earth hangs a City Beautiful: Siena, *Vetus Civitas Virginis*. The town seems to have descended as a bride from airy regions, and lightly settled on the summits of three hills which it crowns with domes and clustering towers. As seen from the vineyards which clothe the slopes of the hills or with its crenellated wall and slender-necked Campanile silhouetted against the evening sky from the neighboring heights of Belcaro, the city is familiar to students of the early Italian painters. It forms the fantastic and solemn background of many a masterpiece of the *trecentisti*, and seems the only possible home, if home they can have on earth, of the glorified persons who occupy the foreground. It would create no surprise to come, while walking round the ancient walls, suddenly, at a turn in the road, on one of the sacred groups so familiarly recurrent to the memory in such an environment: often indeed one experiences a curious illusion when a passing friar happens for a moment to "compose" with cypress and crumbling archway.

Siena, once the successful rival of Florence in commerce, war, and politics, has, fortunately for the more vital interests which it represents, long desisted from such minor matters. Its worldly ruin has been com-

plete for more than five hundred years; in truth the town has never recovered from the plague which, in the far-off days of 1348, carried off 80,000 of its population. Grassy mounds within the city walls mark the shrinking of the town since the date of their erection, and Mr. Murray gives its present population at less than 23,000. The free Ghibelline Republic which, on that memorable 4th of September 1260, defeated, with the help of Pisa, at Monte Aperto, the combined forces of the Guelf party in Tuscany, has now, after centuries of servitude to Spaniard and Austrian, to be content with the somewhat pinchbeck dignity of an Italian Prefettura. At least the architectural degradation which has overtaken Florence at the hands of her modern rulers has been as yet, in great measure, spared to Siena. Even the railway has had the grace to conceal its presence in the folds of olive which enwrap the base of the hill on which the city is set.

Once inside the rose-colored walls, as we pass up the narrow, roughly-paved streets between lines of palaces, some grim and massive like Casa Tolomei, built in 1205, others delicate specimens of Italian Gothic like the Palazzo Saracini, others again illustrating the combination of grace and strength which marked the domestic architecture of the Renaissance at its prime, like the Palazzo Piccolomini, we find ourselves in a world very remote indeed from anything with which the experience of our own utilitarian century makes us familiar. And yet, as we rub our eyes, unmistakably a world of facts, though of facts, as it were, visibly interpreted by the deeper truth of an art whose insistent presence is on all sides of us. Here is Casa Tolomei, a huge cube of rough-hewn stone stained to the color of tarnished silver with age, once the home of that Madonna Pia whose story lives for ever in the verse of Dante. Who shall distinguish between her actual tale of days and the immortal life given her by the poet? In her moment of suffering at least she has been made eternal. And not far from that ancient fortress-home, in a winding alley that can hardly be called a street, is another house of medieval Siena—no palace this time, but a small tradesman's dwelling. In the fourteenth century it belonged to