

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Message of the New Doctors of the Church

St. Teresa calls the Christian world — “Back to the supernatural”; St. Catherine’s message: “Love the Church and Christ on earth.”

St. Teresa’s most distinctive message is addressed to priests, religious persons and the Catholic laity. It is exceptionally relevant at a time when increasing defections from the priesthood and religious life are observable almost everywhere. The conditions of contemporary life have anesthetized the religious sensitivity of modern man. The most serious weakness of the human mind is its inability to sustain awareness of the greatest realities, which unfortunately today we find so extremely hard to grasp and accept.

The Reformation brought about an eclipse of the supernatural over a large sector of the Christian world. Its baneful effects are penetrating the holy of holies. In the course of the past three hundred years Rousseau’s invitation “retournez a la nature” and Renan’s blunt assertion “Il n’y pas de surnaturel”, have been implanted into the very depths of man’s sub-conscious structure. The divine is either rejected or “humanized”, and the supernatural, if not rejected, “naturalized”. The great tragedy in our day lies in the practical denial of the supernatural, the liquidation of the inner life of man with God. Teresa’s call is: “Back to the Supernatural.” Catholic Christianity reveals to us the existence of a relation of *inconceivable intimacy* between God and ourselves, the mystery of Christ in us,—the hope of Glory; the life of grace, nay, the glory of grace in the depths of our sanctified existence, for truly the Kingdom of God is among us (*Lk. 17:12*), nay, within us. Teresa is the heaven-sent advocate of this “inner life of man with God” in the very core of man’s soul. She speaks from the book of her own personal experience. She believed there must be

constant evidence to the world that here on earth there can be a real foretaste of the life of heaven. Where God is, there lie the springs of our strength, of the new order, of our creative youth. Teresa, one of the most humanly supernatural of the saints, one in whom the gifts of nature and grace blended so harmoniously, spoke from a life-time personal experience, more distinctively from the time she "surrendered" finally and *without reserve* to the action of grace.

The dazzling eminence of sanctity she attained radiates light and love of God in her deeds and writings directed to us priests and sisters and brothers. We shall not find cause for life-long regrettable decisions if we only keep company with God for some sensible time each day or so, as the "Mistica Doctora" did teach us. Furthermore, as a well-known theologian observes — the man or woman *who does not listen attentively to God*, has nothing worthwhile to say to the world.

St. Catherine's profound ecclesial sense in today's world.

The doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ which has been so strongly emphasized in recent years plays an essential part in her life. We may say in all truth that the feature which very specially stands in her short but extremely significant life (1347-1380) is her extraordinary understanding and love for the Church. Her life of intense devotion to the cause of the Church and of the Vicar of Christ is in fact, the best commentary on her doctrine as found in her *Dialogue*, in her *Letters* and in her *Prayers*. Catherine's devotion to the Church incarnated itself in intense activity on its behalf: in painful and exhausting journeys, in ardent pleadings with Popes and Princes, in most fervent prayers and painful penitential practices offered for the welfare of the Holy Father, and the Church. For all the intensity of her exterior activity on behalf of the Church, the divinely enlightened Catherine deeply realized that the purification of the Church (today we may call it the *renewal* of the Church) was to be effected in a very special way, by personal prayers, inward expiation, flowing from a heart afire with God's love. This is a difficult lesson so many of us priests and religious must learn today.

Catherine's tireless devotion to the Church and to the Pope, and her deep sense of responsibility for its welfare, cause her to tell the

Pope, and some Cardinals the most unwelcomed truths in the language they could understand well . . . but she never for a moment forgot the reverence due to him, as the Vicar of Christ. She always saw in him (the Pope) *Christ on earth*. And far from speaking about the Church with any tone of contempt she always saw in it "*the sweet bride of Christ*" however disfigured that Bride manifested herself to her realistic vision. Her unshakeable conviction about the necessity of absolute attachment to the Church in spite of whatever evils might afflict It, is particularly well illustrated in a letter she wrote to the rulers of Florence: "He who is disobedient to *Christ on earth* has no share in the inheritance of the Blood of the Son of God . . ."

It is most interesting to note what Paul VI said years ago about the relevance of the life and teaching of Catherine of Siena. I quote his words: "The contribution of spiritual energies to the Church's Hierarchy from the Catholic people, from a simple people to the Pope, makes us think of the Saint whom the Church will honor tomorrow with a special feast, St. Catherine of Siena, the humble, learned, undaunted dominican virgin who, as you all know, loved the Pope and the Church with a loftiness and strength of spirit that no one is known to have equalled . . . Furthermore, the Church and the Papacy can and must be loved, so Catherine teaches us, even if their countenance be dimmed by human infirmity."

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