

Feast of St Catherine of Siena 2020

The Gospel for today's feast of St Catherine is taken from Jesus' Farewell Discourse at the Last Supper. Jesus paradoxically speaks of the intimacy that will continue to exist between his Father and himself on the one hand and those who believe in him, on the other even though he is leaving them: 'If anyone loves me, they will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.'

St Catherine in one of her prayers that have survived – we have 26, transcribed by her followers who were present when she prayed them aloud, and most coming from the last year or so of her life, when, though gravely ill, she spent hours praying in St Peter's in Rome for the healing of the Western Schism that had begun in 1378 with the election of an anti-pope.

In one of these prayers our saint gives us an image of the Trinity which conveys, in keeping with today's Gospel, the intimacy of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the disciple. In her prayer Catherine is focused not so much on the Trinity in itself, but offers an image of the Trinity for us. That is the key to appreciating her prayer.

First Catherine addresses the Trinity: "You, eternal Trinity, are table and food and waiter for us." The image of the meal or the banquet is profoundly scriptural. Introducing 'table' and 'waiter' is special to Catherine.

Our saint addresses the Father, drawing attention to who he is for us while going on to describe in more detail who the Son and who the Holy Spirit are for us. "You, eternal Father, are the table that offers us as food the Lamb, your only begotten Son. He is the most exquisite of foods for us, both in his teaching, which nourishes us in your will, and in the sacrament that we receive in holy communion, which feeds and strengthens us while we are pilgrim travellers in this life."

The imagery here of who the Father is for us draws on John chapter 6 where Jesus, sent by the Father, is the Bread of life who nourishes us through his wisdom and sacramentally in holy communion.

Catherine continues with who the Holy Spirit is for us, “And the Holy Spirit is indeed a waiter for us, for he serves us this teaching [of the Son] by enlightening our mind’s eye with it and by inspiring us to follow it. And he serves us charity for our neighbours and hunger to have as our food souls for the salvation of the whole world and for the Father’s honour.”

In the image of the Holy Spirit as waiter might we not see both John’s teaching of the Holy Spirit as Advocate and Paul’s teaching of the Spirit dispensing his gifts or charisms for the common good. Our saint is reminding us in particular that the Holy Spirit enables us to love our neighbour and desire their salvation, love being the greatest of the Spirit’s gifts as Paul says in 1st Corinthians.

Linking the intimacy of the Trinity to the believer’s concern for their neighbour’s well-being was central to Catherine. One of the great turning points of her life was her realization that God wanted her to play an active role in society without lessening her intimate relationship with God. At about the age of 20 she discerned that God was saying to her, “On two feet [that is by loving God and neighbour] you must walk my way.’

Catherine’s prayer gives us the Easter themes of Jesus as the Bread of Life, the Spirit as the Advocate and distributor of gifts, and the Father who gives us Jesus and with Jesus, the Holy Spirit. Indeed Catherine has given us an Easter meditation in her prayer that takes up the theme of who God is for Catherine and for us as well.

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