St. Catherine of Siena on the Eucharist

From *The Dialogue*

# Reading 1

Chapter 52

##### Here, touching something concerning the Sacrament of the Body of Christ, the complete doctrine is given; and how the soul proceeds from vocal to mental prayer, and a vision is related which this devout soul once received.

"Know, dearest daughter, how, by humble, continual, and faithful prayer, the soul acquires, with time and perseverance, every virtue. Wherefore should she persevere and never abandon prayer, either through the illusion of the Devil or her own fragility, that is to say, either on account of any thought or movement coming from her own body, or of the words of any creature. The Devil often places himself upon the tongues of creatures, causing them to chatter nonsensically, with the purpose of preventing the prayer of the soul. All of this she should pass by, by means of the virtue of perseverance. Oh, how sweet and pleasant to that soul and to Me is holy prayer, made in the house of knowledge of self and of Me, opening the eye of the intellect to the light of faith, and the affections to the abundance of My charity, which was made visible to you, through My visible only-begotten Son, who showed it to you with His blood! Which Blood inebriates the soul and clothes her with the fire of divine charity, giving her the food of the Sacrament [which is placed in the tavern of the mystical body of the Holy Church] that is to say, the food of the Body and Blood of My Son, wholly God and wholly man, administered to you by the hand of My vicar, who holds the key of the Blood. This is that tavern, which I mentioned to you, standing on the Bridge, to provide food and comfort for the travelers and the pilgrims, who pass by the way of the doctrine of My Truth, lest they should faint through weakness. This food strengthens little or much, according to the desire of the recipient, whether he receives sacramentally or virtually. He receives sacramentally when he actually communicates with the Blessed Sacrament. He receives virtually when he communicates, both by desire of communion, and by contemplation of the Blood of Christ crucified, communicating, as it were, sacramentally, with the affection of love, which is to be tasted in the Blood which, as the soul sees, was shed through love. On seeing this the soul becomes inebriated, and blazes with holy desire and satisfies herself, becoming full of love for Me and for her neighbor. Where can this be acquired? In the house of self-knowledge with holy prayer, where imperfections are lost, even as Peter and the disciples, while they remained in watching and prayer, lost their imperfection and acquired perfection. By what means is this acquired? By perseverance seasoned with the most holy faith.

"But do not think that the soul receives such ardor and nourishment from prayer, if she pray only vocally, as do many souls whose prayers are rather words than love. Such as these give heed to nothing except to completing Psalms and saying many ‘Our Fathers’. And when they have once completed their appointed tale, they do not appear to think of anything further, but seem to place devout attention and love in merely vocal recitation, which the soul is not required to do, for, in doing only this, she bears but little fruit, which pleases Me but little. But if you ask Me, whether the soul should abandon vocal prayer, since it does not seem to all that they are called to mental prayer, I should reply *'No*.' The soul should advance by degrees, and I know well that, just as the soul is at first imperfect and afterwards perfect, so also is it with her prayer. She should nevertheless continue in vocal prayer, while she is yet imperfect, so as not to fall into idleness. But she should not say her vocal prayers without joining them to mental prayer, that is to say, that while she is reciting, she should endeavor to elevate her mind in My love, with the consideration of her own defects and of the Blood of My only-begotten Son, wherein she finds the breadth of My charity and the remission of her sins. And this she should do, so that self-knowledge and the consideration of her own defects should make her recognize My goodness in herself and continue her exercises with true humility. I do not wish defects to be considered in particular, but in general, so that the mind may not be contaminated by the remembrance of particular and hideous sins. But, as I said, I do not wish the soul to consider her sins, either in general or in particular, without also remembering the Blood and the broadness of My mercy, for fear that otherwise she should be brought to confusion. And together with confusion would come the Devil, who has caused it, under color of contrition and displeasure of sin, and so she would arrive at eternal damnation, not only on account of her confusion, but also through the despair which would come to her, because she did not seize the arm of My mercy. This is one of the subtle devices with which the Devil deludes My servants, and, in order to escape from his deceit, and to be pleasing to Me, you must enlarge your hearts and affections in My boundless mercy, with true humility. You know that the pride of the Devil cannot resist the humble mind, nor can any confusion of spirit be greater than the broadness of My good mercy, if the soul will only truly hope therein. Wherefore it was, if you remember rightly, that, once, when the Devil wished to overthrow you, by confusion, wishing to prove to you that your life had been deluded, and that you had not followed My will, you did that which was your duty, which My goodness (which is never withheld from him who will receive it) gave you strength to do, that is you rose, humbly trusting in My mercy, and saying: '*I confess to my Creator that my life has indeed been passed in darkness, but I will hide myself in the wounds of Christ crucified, and bathe myself in His Blood and so shall my iniquities be consumed, and with desire will I rejoice in my Creator*.'
You remember that then the Devil fled, and, turning round to the opposite side, he endeavored to inflate you with pride, saying: '*You are perfect and pleasing to God, and there is no more need for you to afflict yourself or to lament your sins*.' And once more I gave you the light to see your true path, namely, humiliation of yourself, and you answered the Devil with these words: '*Wretch that I am, John the Baptist never sinned and was sanctified in his mother's womb. And I have committed so many sins, and have hardly begun to know them with grief and true contrition, seeing who God is, who is offended by me, and who I am, who offend Him.*' Then the Devil, not being able to resist your humble hope in My goodness, said to you: '*Cursed that you are, for I can find no way to take you. If I put you down through confusion, you rise to Heaven on the wings of mercy, and if I raise you on high, you humble yourself down to Hell, and when I go into Hell you persecute me, so that I will return to you no more, because you strike me with the stick of charity*.' The soul, therefore, should season the knowledge of herself with the knowledge of My goodness, and then vocal prayer will be of use to the soul who makes it, and pleasing to Me, and she will arrive, from the vocal imperfect prayer, exercised with perseverance, at perfect mental prayer; but if she simply aims at completing her tale, and, for vocal abandons mental prayer, she will never arrive at it. Sometimes the soul will be so ignorant that, having resolved to say so many prayers vocally, and I, visiting her mind sometimes in one way, and sometimes in another, in a flash of self-knowledge or of contrition for sin, sometimes in the broadness of My charity, and sometimes by placing before her mind, in diverse ways, according to My pleasure and the desire of the soul, the presence of My Truth, she (the soul), in order to complete her tale, will abandon My visitation, that she feels, as it were, by conscience, rather than abandon that which she had begun. She should not do so, for, in so doing, she yields to a deception of the Devil. The moment she feels her mind disposed by My visitation, in the many ways I have told you, she should abandon vocal prayer; then, My visitation past, if there be time, she can resume the vocal prayers which she had resolved to say, but if she has not time to complete them, she ought not on that account to be troubled or suffer annoyance and confusion of mind; of course provided that it were not the Divine office which clerics and religious are bound and obliged to say under penalty of offending Me, for, they must, until death, say their office. But if they, at the hour appointed for saying it, should feel their minds drawn and raised by desire, they should so arrange as to say it before or after My visitation, so that the debt of rendering the office be not omitted. But, in any other case, vocal prayer should be immediately abandoned for the said cause. Vocal prayer, made in the way that I have told you, will enable the soul to arrive at perfection, and therefore she should not abandon it, but use it in the way that I have told you.

And so, with exercise in perseverance, she will taste prayer in truth, and the food of the Blood of My only-begotten Son, and therefore I told you that some communicated virtually with the Body and Blood of Christ, although not sacramentally; that is, they communicate in the affection of charity, which they taste by means of holy prayer, little or much, according to the affection with which they pray. They who proceed with little prudence and without method, taste little, and they who proceed with much, taste much. For the more the soul tries to loosen her affection from herself, and fasten it in Me with the light of the intellect, the more she knows; and the more she knows, the more she loves, and, loving much, she tastes much. You see then, that perfect prayer is not attained to through many words, but through affection of desire, the soul raising herself to Me, with knowledge of herself and of My mercy, seasoned the one with the other. Thus she will exercise together mental and vocal prayer, for, even as the active and contemplative life is one, so are they. Although vocal or mental prayer can be understood in many and diverse ways, for I have told you that a holy desire is a continual prayer, in this sense that a good and holy will disposes itself with desire to the occasion actually appointed for prayer in addition to the continual prayer of holy desire, wherefore vocal prayer will be made at the appointed time by the soul who remains firm in a habitual holy will, and will sometimes be continued beyond the appointed time, according as charity commands for the salvation of the neighbor, if the soul see him to be in need, and also her own necessities according to the state in which I have placed her. Each one, according to his condition, ought to exert himself for the salvation of souls, for this exercise lies at the root of a holy will, and whatever he may contribute, by words or deeds, towards the salvation of his neighbor, is virtually a prayer, although it does not replace a prayer which one should make oneself at the appointed season, as My glorious standard-bearer Paul said, in the words, '*He who ceases not to work ceases not to pray*.' It was for this reason that I told you that prayer was made in many ways, that is, that actual prayer may be united with mental prayer if made with the affection of charity, which charity is itself continual prayer. I have now told you how mental prayer is reached by exercise and perseverance, and by leaving vocal prayer for mental when I visit the soul. I have also spoken to you of common prayer, that is, of vocal prayer in general, made outside of ordained times, and of the prayers of good-will, and how every exercise, whether performed in oneself or in one's neighbor, with good-will, is prayer. The enclosed soul should therefore spur herself on with prayer, and when she has arrived at friendly and filial love she does so. Unless the soul keep to this path, she will always remain tepid and imperfect, and will only love Me and her neighbor in proportion to the pleasure which she finds in My service."

# Reading 2

"My ministers in the mystical body of the holy Church, so that you may have life, receiving His Body in food and His Blood in drink. I have said to you that this Body is, as it were, a Sun. Wherefore, you cannot receive the Body without the Blood, or the Blood or the Body without the Soul of the Incarnate Word; nor the Soul, nor the Body, without the Divinity of Me, the Eternal God, because none of these can be separated from each other, as I said to you in another place that the Divine nature never left the human nature, either by death or from any other cause. So that you receive the whole Divine Essence in that most Sweet Sacrament concealed under the whiteness of the bread; for as the sun cannot be divided into light, heat, and color, the whole of God and the whole of man cannot be separated under the white mantle of the host; for even if the host should be divided into a million particles (if it were possible) in each particle should I be present, whole God and whole Man. When you break a mirror the reflection to be seen in it is not broken; similarly, when the host is divided God and man are not divided, but remain in each particle. Nor is the Sacrament diminished in itself, except as far as may be in the following example.

"If you have a light, and the whole world should come to you in order to take light from it -- the light itself does not diminish -- and yet each person has it all. It is true that everyone participates more or less in this light, according to the substance into which each one receives the fire. I will develop this metaphor further that you may the better understand Me. Suppose that there are many who bring their candles, one weighing an ounce, others two or six ounces, or a pound, or even more, and light them in the flame, in each candle, whether large or small, is the whole light, that is to say, the heat, the color, and the flame; nevertheless you would judge that he whose candle weighs an ounce has less of the light than he whose candle weighs a pound. Now the same thing happens to those who receive this Sacrament. Each one carries his own candle, that is the holy desire, with which he receives this Sacrament, which of itself is without light, and lights it by receiving this Sacrament. I say without light, because of yourselves you can do nothing, though I have given you the material, with which you can receive this light and feed it. The material is love, for through love I created you, and without love you cannot live.

"Your being, given to you through love, has received the right disposition in holy baptism, which you receive in virtue of the Blood of the Word, for, in no other way, could you participate in this light; you would be like a candle with no wick inside it, which cannot burn or receive light, if you have not received in your souls the wick which catches this Divine Flame, that is to say, the Holy Faith, which you receive, by grace, in baptism, united with the disposition of your soul created by Me, so fitted for love, that, without love, which is her very food, she cannot live. Where does the soul united in this way obtain light? At the fire of My Divine love, loving and fearing Me, and following the Doctrine of My Truth. It is true that the soul becomes more or less lighted according to the material which it brings to the fire; for although you all have one and the same material, in that you are all created to My image and similitude, and, being Christians, possess the light of holy baptism, each of you may grow in love and virtue by the help of My grace, as may please you. Not that you change the form of what I have given you, but that you increase your strength in love, and your free-will, by using it while you have time, for when time is past you can no longer do so. So that you can increase in love, as has been said, coming with love to receive this Sweet and Glorious Light, which I have given you as Food for your service, through My ministers, and you receive this Light according to the love and fiery desire with which you approach It.

"The Light Itself you receive entire, as I have said (in the example of those, who in spite of the difference in weight of their candles, all receive the entire light), and not divided, because It cannot be divided, as has been said, either on account of any imperfection of yours who receive, or of the minister; but you personally participate in this light, that is in the grace which you receive in this Sacrament, according to the holy desire with which you dispose yourselves to receive it. He who should go to this sweet Sacrament in the guilt of mortal sin, will receive no grace therefrom, though he actually receive the whole of God and the whole of Man. Do you know the condition of the soul who receives unworthily? She is like a candle on which water has fallen, which can do nothing but crackle when brought near the flame, for no sooner has the fire touched it, than it is extinguished, and nothing remains but smoke; so this soul has cast the water of guilt within her mind upon the candle which she received in holy baptism, which has drenched the wick of the grace of baptism, and, not having heated it at the fire of true contrition and confession, goes to the table of the altar to receive this Light with her body, and not with her mind, wherefore the Light, since the soul is not disposed as she should be for so great a mystery, does not remain by grace in that soul, but leaves her, and, in the soul, remains only greater confusion, for her light is extinguished and her sin increased by her darkness. Of the Sacrament she feels nothing but the crackling of a remorseful conscience, not through the defect of the Light Itself, for that can receive no hurt, but on account of the water that was in the soul, which impeded her proper disposition so that she could not receive the Light. See, therefore, that in no way can this Light, united with its heat and its color, be divided, either by the scanty desire of the soul when she receives the Sacrament, or by any defect which may be in the soul, or by any defect of him who administers it, as I told you of the sun which is not defiled by shining on anything foul, so the sweet Light of this Sacrament cannot be defiled, divided, or diminished in any way, nor can it be detached from its orbit.

"If all the world should receive in communion the Light and Heat of this Sun, the Word, My only-begotten Son, would not be separated from Me -- the True Sun, His Eternal Father -- because in His mystical Body, the holy Church, He is administered to whoever will receive Him. He remains wholly with Me, and yet you have Him, whole God and whole man, as I told you, in the metaphor of the light, that, if all the world came to take light from it, each would have it entire, and yet it would remain whole."

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Chapter 74

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