

LITTLE TALKS WITH GOD

PARACLETE ESSENTIALS

Little Talks
with God



ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA
Foreword by Jon M. Sweeney

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH VERSION
BY HENRY L. CARRIGAN, JR.



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FOREWORD

Although I grew up with a fairly robust spiritual life in an American town with churches of many different denominations, I didn't step into a Catholic church until I was nineteen and living in the Philippines. I was a Baptist missionary at the time, and my job was to convert Catholics. I wasn't very good at it. Instead, I just learned to love them.

It wasn't the power of the Church, or the architecture, or the doctrinal subtleties that drew me to Catholicism. It was the extravagant love and devotion that individual Catholics demonstrated for God. I was able to recognize the strength of their commitment, even though the ways they lived out that commitment were sometimes unusual, sometimes inspiring, and always fascinating to someone with my different background and experiences.

St. Catherine of Siena is one of the amazing people that I discovered that year. There were paintings of her and chapels devoted to her, and I heard that she was a "Doctor." Her life was full of love and charity for the unfortunate; she fought for equality among all people; she even challenged the hierarchy of her Church when it seemed necessary, challenging priests and bishops and even popes to do better; and she loved people in personal ways with great vulnerability. The images, vibrancy, and stories that I first encountered that summer are still with me today, nearly a quarter-century later. Eventually,

the example of extraordinary people like Catherine led me to become a Catholic myself, and to spend years studying the saints.

The book you are holding, *Little Talks with God*, begins with this marvelous opening line:

When the soul is lifted by a great, yearning desire for the honor of God and the salvation of souls, it practices the ordinary virtues and remains in the cell of self-knowledge, so that it may know better God's goodness toward it.

This instruction is so simple and so rarely followed.

As Catherine says, she is drawn to her cell—both a literal one and a more figurative one. Her literal cell was a simple room where she could be all alone, just her and God. The “simple life” today usually means turning off electronic gadgets for a few hours, or driving to the country for the afternoon. But for Catherine, stepping into her cell was like entering another world entirely, a world where she was alone with God. She would do this daily, often many times a day. Her cell was where she was truly at home.

Her figurative “cell” was the place inside her where she listened for God's voice. It was, as she says, “the cell of self-knowledge,” and Catherine was expert—long before the word “psychology” was invented—at being truthful with herself about herself. In the pages of *Little Talks with God* we watch her practice a rigorous self-examination so that she might always know that it is God she is hearing and not some other motivations guiding her.

I mentioned that the extravagance of the saints, and particularly of St. Catherine, draws me. I realize that, for others, that's often not the case. Some people are repulsed by some of what seems strange today. For instance, as you go deeper into Catherine's life you will discover how she sometimes mistreated her body—eating little, fasting much, ignoring illnesses, driving herself in a way that surely contributed to a relatively youthful death. This is because she valued the soul far more than the body in ways that are hard for us to appreciate today. Above all, her faith in heavenly rewards and her ultimate feeling of being a stranger on this earth were always unshaken.

The other aspect of Catherine's spirituality that sometimes troubles twenty-first-century readers is her often ecstatic-sounding union with Christ. She uses wedding imagery to describe her bond with Jesus. Far from finding these ideas unsettling, I find them appealing; indeed, these were far more than ideas to her. As her near-contemporary the great poet Dante states, the joy of divine union begins with a light in the mind and grows into something more precious:

Light intellectual replete with love,
 Love of true good replete with ecstasy,
 Ecstasy that transcendeth every sweetness.
 (*Paradiso*, canto 30)

As you read this book you will notice that St. Catherine is a subtle thinker. Completely untrained in theological schools, she became an instructor of theologians. In 1970, Pope Paul VI designated her a “Doctor of the Church,” along with St. Teresa

of Avila. She is acknowledged worldwide as having produced writings that are of supreme importance for understanding who God is and how we may know God.

May your reading of these teachings guide you, too, toward that promised sweetness.

—JON M. SWEENEY

INTRODUCTION

On October 4, 1970, the Roman Catholic Church awarded the title of doctor of the church to two women: Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena. The writings and teachings of both these women remain very popular today, but it is Catherine's writings that teach us the most about incorporating our spiritual natures and our quests for union with God into our daily lives.

Although she is often called a mystic like Meister Eckhart, Catherine combined her own mystical experiences with a fervent activism. She was a Dominican, but she was not a cloistered member of that Order. Instead, from the very beginning she was active in ministering to the sick and aiding the poor. She also played a significant role in the politics of church and state in fourteenth-century Italy. Yet, in the midst of her activism, Catherine's quest for justice and equity was founded in her own experience of union with God. The knowledge and truth that she gained from this encounter strengthened her, as she worked tirelessly to share God's love and compassion with those around her.

Catherine reached out to her society by writing her works in the language of the people rather than in the Latin of the Church. So popular were her books that they were some of the first to be brought into print. She had a devoted and large following among all classes of society in Siena, and they considered her their teacher.

Catherine was a prolific letter writer, but it is *The Dialogue*, titled *Little Talks with God* in this edition, that has brought her

teachings to the widest audience. In it she offers a glimpse of the means whereby God's grace and mercy may be known in full knowledge and truth. *Little Talks with God* provides spiritual seekers a guidebook for incorporating the spiritual in the mundane.

B I O G R A P H Y

Biographers of Catherine have faced great difficulties in reconstructing the life of their subject, because her life is so embedded in legend and piety. In addition, some of the earliest biographies of Catherine were themselves hagiographies, creating a portrait of a pious mystical woman whose transports to God made her an unreachable subject. Even so, there are many facets of Catherine's life of which we can be sure.

Catherine was born in 1347 to a wool dyer in the Fontebranda district of Siena. Caterina di Giacomo di Benincasa, a precocious young girl, was the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children. She was a headstrong and independent child, clever and ingenious in her religious devotion. Catherine's passionate desire for truth and the knowledge of God motivated her very being, even in her youth.

The Dominican Order influenced Catherine greatly. She often visited the church and cloister of San Domenico, a hub of Dominican teaching, spending a great deal of time with these teachers. She was also influenced in Dominican teachings by the brother of her brother-in-law Tommaso della Fonte, who had joined the Dominican order in 1349.

Another group that impressed Catherine was a group of women in Siena known as the *Mantellate*. These women, who wore the habit of the Dominican Order, lived in their homes and ministered to the sick and poor. Even though they did not live in a cloister, they were directed by a prioress. By the time she was fourteen, Catherine had decided not to marry, and she sought and gained entrance to this group of women.

Raymond Capua, her earliest biographer and close friend, records that Catherine vowed her virginity to God when she was just seven years old. At fifteen, she defied her parents and refused their efforts to force her to marry, and at eighteen she obtained the Dominican habit. After she joined the Dominicans, she lived for a period of about three years in silence and solitude, leaving her room only to attend Mass. By the time she was twenty-one, she had experienced her “mystical espousal” to Christ. Soon after she began her work with the *Mantellate*.

Much like Mother Teresa, Catherine devoted herself to taking care of the sick and indigent. However, during this period of ministering to society, she never gave up her contemplative life, and could often be found at home in her room teaching her followers about the Bible, theology, and God’s grace and truth.

In 1370, Catherine had one of her most profound mystical experiences—her “mystical death.” For four hours she experienced ecstatic union with God, even though to outside observers she appeared to be dead. This experience led her to become more severe in her self-discipline, and enabled her to have a clear vision of the ways that she could introduce God’s truth to the world.

From the time of her “mystical death” to her physical death, Catherine worked tirelessly in political and religious affairs. In

1375, in Pisa, she preached that military strength could be best used to win unbelievers in the Holy Land. She preached that shedding one's blood for Christ was an honorable mission, and so she supported a Crusade through her words. In the same year she received the stigmata, though by her own request these wounds were not visible.

Catherine soon became involved in urging Gregory XI to move the papacy from Avignon back to Rome. During these years she was also active in preaching about clergy reform and martyrdom through Crusades. After Gregory's death, Urban VI replaced him as pope. Because many people opposed Urban when he was elected pope, Catherine foresaw the possibility that schism could occur in the Church. She began a furious letter-writing campaign in order to urge fidelity to the Church. Much of this urging makes its way into her book, *The Dialogue*.

Sometime between 1375 and 1378, Catherine founded a women's monastery outside of Siena in the old fortress of Belcaro. During these years she wrote *The Dialogue*. In this, her most famous writing, she expressed many of her concerns about Church unity, personal austerity and devotion, love of neighbor, clergy reform, God's grace and mercy, and the passionate search for God's truth.

From the time Catherine was thirty until her death at thirty-three, she directed a "household" in Siena where women and men lived by strict observance to poverty and alms. Her final years were filled with physical agony, even though she managed to attend services at Saint Peter's each day. She died on April 29, 1380, and since 1969, the Roman Catholic Church has observed this day as her feast day.

THE DIALOGUE

Although there is some controversy about whether Catherine wrote this, her most famous work, or dictated it, there is no question that its genesis is in some powerful ecstatic experience. Her friend Raymond of Capua writes:

So about two years before her death, such a clarity of Truth was revealed to her from heaven that Catherine was constrained to spread it abroad by means of writing, asking her secretaries to stand ready to take down whatever came from her mouth as soon as they noticed that she had gone into ecstasy. Thus in a short time was composed a certain book that contains a dialogue between a soul who asks the Lord four questions, and the Lord himself, who replies to the soul, enlightening it with many useful truths.

In another passage Raymond notes, “When peace had been proclaimed, she returned home and attended more diligently to the composition of a certain book, which she dictated in her own dialect, inspired by the supernal Spirit.”

The structure of the book itself derives from Catherine’s own concerns about the nature of truth and the unity of the Church. *The Dialogue* opens with her four prayers to God: for herself, for the reform of the Church, for the whole world and for those causing schism in the Church, and for a particular unnamed sinner. Each portion of Catherine’s little talks with God reveals God’s answers to these four prayers.

Above all, these talks involve Catherine’s own restless search for the truth that is God. According to *The Dialogue*, our ecstatic

union with God teaches us the humility we need in order to know God as Truth and Love. Out of God's great love, we are enabled to love our neighbors with the love that God has for us. Nowhere is this better expressed than in the opening paragraph of these "little talks":

When the soul is lifted by a great, yearning desire for the honor of God and the salvation of souls, it practices the ordinary virtues and remains in the cell of self-knowledge, so that it may know better God's goodness toward it. It does this because knowledge must come before love, and only when it has attained love can it strive to follow and to clothe itself with the truth.

And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it. Catherine's "little talks" provide us with a means whereby we can fold our own eager quest for God's love and truth into the many and busy pathways of our daily lives.

A WORD ABOUT THE TEXT

I have used Algar Thorold's translation of *The Dialogue*. Thorold's translation was first published in 1907 by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., London.

To make the text more relevant for today, I have abridged it considerably. I have not included many portions of *The Dialogue* that pertain to Catherine's religious community and the rules that govern it. The material in this edition focuses on how to live the spiritual life.

I have remained true to the spirit of the text, even where I have mildly modernized it. Mostly, my modernizations have come in three areas. First, I have replaced archaic words and forms of address with more modern ones. Thus, “thou” and its related pronoun forms become “you” and its related forms, throughout. Second, I have attempted to use inclusive language in this edition, but I have retained the masculine pronouns for God so as not to be anachronistic. Finally, I have altered Catherine’s syntax and sentence structure to make it livelier and more appealing to a contemporary audience. Most often this simply means casting sentences in the active rather than the passive voice.

I am grateful to Robert Edmonson, Buzz Elmer, and Rebecca Howell for their close readings and astute suggestions. This edition is much improved because of their gracious efforts.

I hope that Catherine’s words will speak to you even as they spoke to her followers and to the Church over 500 years ago.

—*Henry L. Carrigan, Jr.*

BOOK I
A TREATISE OF
DIVINE PROVIDENCE



A TREATISE OF
DIVINE PROVIDENCE

*How a servant of God,
elevated by her desire for God's honor
and for the salvation of her neighbors,
after she had seen the union of the soul with
God, exerted herself in humble prayer and
asked of God four requests.*

When the soul is lifted by a great, yearning desire for the honor of God and the salvation of souls, it practices the ordinary virtues and remains in the cell of self-knowledge, so that it may know better God's goodness toward it. It does this because knowledge must come before love, and only when it has attained love can it strive to follow and to clothe itself with the truth.

But humble and continuous prayer, founded on knowledge of oneself and of God, is the best way for the creature to receive such a taste of the truth. Following the footprints of Christ crucified, and through humble and unceasing prayer, the soul is united with God. He remakes it in his image through desire, affection, and union of love. Christ seems to have meant this when he said: Those who keep my commandments are the ones who love me, and I will reveal myself to them; they shall be one with me and I one with them. In several places we find similar words, by which we can see that the soul becomes another Himself through the effect of love.

So you may see this more clearly, I will mention a story that a servant of God told me. When she was exalted in prayer, God did not conceal from her the love that he has for his servants. Instead, he revealed that love, saying to her, “Open the eye of your intellect and gaze into me, and you shall see the beauty of my rational creature. Look at those creatures whom I have created in my image and likeness, and have clothed with the wedding garment of love and adorned with many virtues, by which they are united with me through love. Yet if you should ask me who these are, I should reply,” said the gentle and loving Word of God, “they are another me, for they have lost and denied their own will, and they are clothed, united, and conformed to my will.” It is therefore true that the soul is united with God through love’s affection.

So this servant of God, who wanted to know and follow the truth more faithfully, addressed four requests to the supreme and eternal Father. First, she prayed for herself, for this servant believed that she could not be an example to her neighbor in matters of doctrine and prayer if she did not first obtain her own virtue. Her second prayer was for the reformation of the holy church. The third was a general prayer for the entire world, particularly for the peace of Christians who rebel against and persecute the holy church. In the fourth prayer she asked for divine providence to sustain the world, and to be active in a certain case with which she was concerned.

*How the soul's desire grew when
God showed it the world's need.*

This servant's desire was great and continuous, but it grew even greater when the eternal Truth showed her the world's neediness and its tempestuous offenses against God.

She understood this matter even better from a letter she received from her spiritual father, in which he explained to her the pain and sadness caused by such offenses against God, the loss of the soul, and the persecutions against the holy church. This knowledge inflamed her holy desire with grief over the offenses against God. She anticipated joyously that God would provide against such great evils. She looked forward to morning's arrival in order to hear Mass. In such communion, the soul binds itself firmly to God, and knows better his truth, since the soul is then in God and God in the soul.

When the hour of Mass arrived in the morning—it was the feast day of Mary—she anxiously sought her usual place. From a deep knowledge of herself and with a feeling of holy justice, she was ashamed of her own imperfection, for it seemed to be the cause of all the world's evils. In this knowledge, she cleansed the stains covering her guilty soul, saying, “Eternal Father, I accuse myself before you, so that you may punish me for my sins in this life. Since my sins cause my neighbor to suffer, I beg you, in your mercy, to punish me for them.”

*How finite works are insufficient for punishment
or requital without love's enduring affection.*

Then the eternal Truth seized her desire and drew it more strongly to himself. Just as in the Old Testament, when a sacrifice was offered to God, a fire came down and drew to him the sacrifice that was acceptable to him, so the pure Truth did to that servant's. He sent down the Holy Spirit's merciful fire and seized the sacrifice of desire that she made of herself, saying: "Dear daughter, do you not know that all the sufferings the soul endures or can endure in this life are insufficient to punish even the smallest fault? The offense done to me, the infinite Good, calls for an infinite compensation. Yet, not all the sufferings in this life are punishments; they are given in order to correct and chastise a person's offenses.

"However, the infinite desire of the soul and true contrition, not the endurance of finite pain, can absolve both the guilt and the penalty. For God, who is infinite, desires infinite love and infinite grief. I seek infinite grief from you in two ways: One is through the sorrow for your own sins that you have committed against me, your creator; the other is through your sorrow for the sins you see your neighbors commit against me. But those who have infinite desire and grieve when they offend me, or see me offended, are infinitely worthy. And their sufferings, whether spiritual or bodily, compensate for their guilt that deserves an infinite penalty. Even though their works are finite and done in finite time, as long as they possess infinite desire, sustain their suffering with contrition, and express infinite displeasure with their guilt, their pain is worthy.

“The glorious apostle Paul shows that finite works are not satisfactory, either as punishment or compensation, without love’s affection. He says: ‘If I had the tongues of angels, or could prophesy, or even gave up my body to be burned, if I am without love, these works would do me no good whatsoever.’”

*How desire and contrition of heart compensate,
both for the guilt and the penalty in oneself
and in others; how sometimes they compensate for
the guilt only, and not the penalty.*

“**D**earest daughter, I have shown you that guilt is not punished in this finite time simply by suffering itself. The pain that the soul endures through the desire, love, and contrition of the heart punishes the guilt, not because of the pain itself, but because of the soul’s desire. Every virtue, including desire, has its own life through the crucified Christ, since the soul draws its love from him and faithfully follows his footsteps. Only through the pure and intimate love gained in knowing my goodness, and in the bitterness and contrition of heart gained by self-knowledge, do virtues possess value and do sufferings compensate for the fault. Such knowledge produces in the soul hatred and disapproval of sin and the soul’s own sensuality. Through this knowledge, it judges itself worthy of sufferings and unworthy of reward.”

The sweet Truth continued: “Notice how such souls, through true repentance, true love, true patience, and true humility, judging themselves worthy of pain and unworthy of reward,

endure the patient humility that comprises the above-mentioned recompense. You ask me for sufferings, so that I am compensated for the offenses that my creatures commit against me. You also pray for the will to know and love me, the supreme Truth. Yet, if you want to know and enjoy the eternal Truth perfectly, you should never abandon knowledge of yourself. For by humbling yourself in the valley of humility, you will know me and yourself. From this knowledge you will draw all that you need.

“No virtue has life in itself, except through love and through humility, which nurses and nurtures charity. Humility will come through self-knowledge, for you will learn that even your own existence comes from me. I have loved both you and others who lived before you. Through my inexpressible love for you, I willed to create you anew in grace. In the blood of my only-begotten Son, poured out with such a great fire of love, I have washed you and made you a new creature.

“This blood teaches the knowledge of the truth that comes when self-knowledge melts away self-love. In this knowledge of me the soul arouses itself with an inexpressible love, for which it endures constant pain. However, this pain does not afflict or shrink the soul. Instead, it enlarges the soul. Since the soul has known my truth, as well as its own faults and humanity’s ingratitude, it endures intolerable suffering, grieving because it loves me. For if it did not love me, it would not suffer so.

“Therefore, you and my other servants who have learned truth in this way will endure and suffer many trials, injuries, and insults for my name’s praise and glory. Carry yourselves, then, with true patience, with true repentance for your sins, and with love of virtue for the glory and praise of my name.

If you act in this way, I will forgive your sins and those of my other servants, for the pains you will endure will be sufficient, through the virtue of love, for forgiveness and reward, both in you and in others.

“You yourself will receive the fruit of life when the stains of your ignorance are washed away, and I will forget that you ever offended me. I will forgive others, because of the love and affection I feel for you. I will give to them according to the attitude with which they receive my gifts.

“To those who receive humbly the doctrine of my servants, I will grant pardon for their guilt and will remove its penalty, since they will come to true knowledge and sorrow for their sins. Through prayer and their desire to serve me, they will receive the fruit of grace, in greater or lesser degrees, according to the extent that they exercise virtue and grace in general. Because of your desires, they will receive forgiveness of their sins. Be sure, though, that they are not so obstinate in their despair that they condemn the Blood that has so sweetly restored them.

“What fruit do they receive? The fruit I have ordained for them is light. I awake in them the hound of conscience. I make them smell the odor of virtue, and make them delight in my servants’ conversations.

“Sometimes I let the world show them its diverse passions, so they will know how unstable the world’s passions are and may lift their desires beyond the world and seek their native country, which is eternal life. I use this, and many other ways you cannot see, to lead them back to grace, so that in them my truth can be fulfilled. I do this because I love them so deeply, for I created them out of my measureless love. I do this also because of my

servants' love, desire, and grief, for I accept their tears, sweat, and humble prayers. I am the One who gives them this love for the good of souls and grief for their loss.

“In general, though, I do not pardon the *punishment* due to them; I forgive only their guilt, since they are not disposed to receive my love or my servants' love with perfect love. They do not grieve bitterly over their sins, nor do they display perfect remorse for the sins they have committed, so they are not pardoned from the punishment, but only from their guilt. Complete forgiveness requires the proper attitude from both giver and receiver. Thus, since they are imperfect, they receive imperfectly the virtues of those who offer them to me, for the sake of sinners in suffering. Because of the light of their conscience, these flawed ones do receive forgiveness for their guilt. And when they begin to learn, they pour forth the corruption of their sins, and thus receive the gift of grace.

“These people are in a state of ordinary understanding. If they have trouble, they receive it as a means of correction. They do not resist too much the patience and compassion of the Holy Spirit, but, coming out of their sin, they receive the life of grace. If they are foolish and ignore me and my servant's labors, those things given to them through mercy turn to their own judgment and ruin. This is not a defect of mercy, or of the one who asked mercy for the ungrateful one, but it is due to the person's own hardness of heart. With the hands of his own free will, he has covered his heart with a diamond that, if the Blood does not break it, cannot be broken.

“In spite of this hardness of heart, he can use his free will, while he has time, to pray for my Son's blood. Let him with his own

hand apply this blood to the diamond over his heart and shatter it. He will then receive the imprint of that blood that has been shed for him. If the person delays, though, he has no remedy, because he has not used the dowry that I gave him. I gave him memory, to remember my benefits; intellect, to see and know the truth; and affection, so he should love me, the eternal Truth, whom he would have known through the use of his intellect.

“I have given this dowry to you all, and it should return fruit to me, the Father. If someone sells it to the devil, the devil has every right to seize everything that that person has acquired in this life. Filling his memory with the delights of sin and with the recollection of shameful pride, greed, self-love, hatred, and unkindness to his neighbors, his intellect is obscured by his unruly will. Such people as these will receive eternal pain, for they have not repented truly of their sins with regret and displeasure for their guilt.

“You now understand how suffering assuages guilt by perfect remorse, not by finite pain. Those who are perfectly repentant receive not only forgiveness for their guilt, but also pardon from their punishment. If they abandon mortal sin and receive grace, but are not sufficiently remorseful and loving to receive pardon for the punishment also, they go through the pains of Purgatory, which is the second and last means of forgiveness.

“Forgiveness comes, then, through the soul’s desire to be united to me, the infinite Good, according to the measure of love attained by the recipient’s desire and prayer. A person receives as much of my goodness as he gives to me.

“Work, therefore, to increase the fire of your desire. Do not let a moment pass without crying to me in humility, or without

continual prayers to me for your neighbors. I say this to you and your confessor, whom I have given you on earth. Have courage and make yourselves dead to all your own sensuality.”

*How very pleasing to God is the willing
desire to suffer for him.*

“**T**he willing desire to bear every pain, even death, for the salvation of souls is very pleasing to me. The more the soul endures, the more it shows that it loves me. By loving me, it comes to know more of my truth. The more it knows, the more pain and intolerable grief it feels at the sins committed by others against me.

“You asked me to sustain you and to punish the faults of others in you. You did not say that you were really asking for love, light, and knowledge of the truth. I have already told you that as love increases so do grief and pain. Those of you who grow in love also grow in sadness. I say to you all, if you ask, I will give it to you, for I do not deny anything to the one who asks of me in truth.

“The love of divine charity is so closely joined in the soul with perfect patience that neither can leave the soul without the other. If the soul chooses to love me, it should choose also to endure pains for me in whatever way that I send them. Patience cannot be proved in any way other than suffering, and patience is united with love.

“Have courage, for, unless you do, you will not prove yourselves to be spouses of my Truth, and faithful children, nor of the company of those who relish the taste of my honor, and the salvation of souls.”

*How every virtue and every defect is
obtained by means of our neighbor.*

“**Y**ou achieve every virtue and every defect by means of your neighbor. Those who hate me, therefore, injure their neighbor and therefore themselves, who are their own chief neighbors. This injury is both general and particular. It is general, because you are obliged to love your neighbor as yourself. Because you love your neighbor, you should help him spiritually, through prayer and by counseling him with words. Assist him spiritually and temporally with your good will, according to his needs.

“A person who does not love does not help his neighbor, and thus harms himself. He cuts himself off from grace, and harms his neighbor by depriving him of the benefit of the prayers and sweet desires he is bound to offer to me for his neighbor. Every act of help he performs should proceed from the compassion he has because of his love for me.

“Every evil is also done by means of your neighbor. If you do not love me, you cannot have compassion for your neighbor. Thus, all evils derive from the soul’s lack of love for me and its neighbor. Since this person does no good, it follows that he must do evil.

“Against whom does he commit evil? First against himself and then against his neighbor. But not against me, for no evil can touch me, except insofar as I count that evil he does to himself as evil done to me. He harms himself through sin, which deprives the neighbor of grace. He hurts his neighbor by not paying him the debt of love that he owes his neighbor. He ought to help his neighbor through the prayer and holy desire he offers to me on the neighbor’s behalf.

“This assistance is owed to every rational creature. But such help is more useful when it is offered to those close at hand. You are all compelled to help one another by word, doctrine, good works, and in other respects in which your neighbor may be in need. You should counsel your neighbor exactly as you would counsel yourselves, without any self-love. The person who does not love God does not do this because he has no love toward his neighbor. By not loving God, he does the neighbor a special harm. He does the neighbor evil, not just by not doing the good he might do him, but by doing him positive harm.

“In this way, sin causes a physical and mental injustice. The mental injustice happens as soon as the sinner enjoys the idea of sin, hates virtue, and takes pleasure in sensual self-love, which deprives him of the affection of love that he should have toward me and his neighbor. He then commits one sin after another against his neighbor, according to the various ways that please his perverse, sensual will. Sometimes he engages in cruelty.

“It is general cruelty to see oneself and other creatures in danger of death and damnation, and to do nothing because of lack of grace. The sinner is so cruel that he does not help himself or others by loving virtue and hating vice. He might even want to be crueler by playing the devil and tempting others to forsake virtue and embrace vice. This is spiritual cruelty, for he makes himself the instrument of destroying life and dealing out death.

“Bodily cruelty originates in greed. This cruelty not only hampers a person from helping his neighbor, but also causes him to seize things that belong to others. Sometimes he does this by the arbitrary use of power. At other times he accomplishes

this through cheating and fraud. He often forces his neighbor to recover his own goods, and sometimes his own body.

“This miserable vice of cruelty will eventually deprive the one who practices it of all my mercy, unless he practices kindness and compassion toward his neighbor! Sometimes he produces insults, and murder often follows them. He often defiles others and becomes a stinking beast, poisoning not only one or two, but everyone who approaches in love or fellowship.

“If a proud person holds a position of authority, he also produces injustice and cruelty. Whom does pride hurt? Your neighbors. You injure them when, in your opinion of yourself, you make yourself superior to them and look down on them.

“Dearest daughter, grieve over offenses committed against me, and weep over these dead ones, so that, by prayer, the bands of their death may be loosened! Notice how in every kind of person and in every society, sin is always committed against one’s neighbor, for there is no sin that does not touch others. You commit a secret sin when you deny your neighbor the things you should give him. You commit an open sin when you perform positive acts of sin.

“It is thus true that every sin committed against me is done by means of your neighbors.”

*How our relationships with our neighbors lead us to virtue,
and why it is that virtues differ in every person*

“I have told you how negative relationships with our neighbors lead to all sins, because we deprive people of the respect of love, which gives light to every virtue. In the same way, self-love,

which destroys love and compassion toward the neighbor, is the principle and foundation of every evil. All scandals, hatred, cruelty, and every sort of trouble issue from this perverse root of self-love. Such distorted self-love has poisoned the entire world, and has weakened the mystical body of the Holy Church and the universal body of the believers in the Christian religion. Therefore, all virtues grow out of the degree to which we love our neighbors. Indeed, love and compassion give life to all virtues. No virtue can be attained without compassion, which is the pure love of me.

“When the soul knows itself, it finds humility and hates its own sensual passion. It learns the perverse law that is part of its body and that always battles against its spirit. It begins to hate its own sensuality, fervently crushing it under the heel of reason. Then it discovers in itself the bounty of my goodness, because of the many benefits I have given it. It then ponders these things in itself.

“In its humility, the soul attributes to me the knowledge of itself it has obtained. It knows that, by my grace, I have delivered it from darkness and lifted it up into the light of true knowledge.

“When the soul knows my goodness, it loves it both with and without a mediator. It loves it even without placing itself as mediator, or any other to its own advantage. But virtue is a mediator that it has conceived through its love of me. It sees that it can become grateful and acceptable to me only by hating sin and loving virtue. When the soul conceives virtue through loving compassion, it bears the fruit of virtue to its neighbor. It cannot act out the truth it has conceived in itself in any other way. It can love me only in truth, and in the same truth it serves its neighbor.

“And it cannot be otherwise, because love of me and of one’s neighbor are one and the same thing; and, so far as the soul loves me, it loves its neighbor, because love toward one’s neighbor issues from me. This is the means I have given you, so that you may exercise and prove your virtue; because, inasmuch as you can do me no profit, you should do good to your neighbor. This proves that you possess me by grace in your soul, producing much fruit for your neighbor and making prayers to me, as you seek with sweet and loving desire my honor and the salvation of souls.

“The soul, enamored of my truth, never ceases to serve the whole world in general, and more or less in a particular case according to the disposition of the recipient and the ardent desire of the donor. For the endurance of suffering alone, without desire, is not sufficient to punish a fault.

“When the soul has discovered the advantage of this unitive love in me, by means of which it truly loves itself, extending its desire to the salvation of the whole world and thus coming to the aid of the world’s neediness, it strives to fix its eye on the needs of its neighbor in particular.

“Therefore, it helps those who are at hand, according to the various graces I have entrusted to it to administer. One it helps with doctrine, that is, with words, giving sincere counsel without any respect of persons. Another it helps with the example of a good life. Thus, indeed, all give to their neighbor the edification of a holy and honorable life.

“These are the virtues, along with many others too many to enumerate, that are brought forth in the love of one’s neighbor. But, although I have given them in such a different way, that is to say not all to one, but one virtue to one, and another to

another, it so happens that it is impossible to have one without having them all, because all the virtues are bound together.

“Learn, therefore, that in many cases I give one virtue to be the chief of the others. That is to say, to one I will give principally love, to another principally justice, to another principally humility, or a lively faith, or prudence, or temperance, or patience, or fortitude. I could easily have created men possessed of all that they should need both for body and soul, but I desire that one should have need of the other, and that they should be my ministers to administer the graces and the gifts they have received from me.

“Whether man desires to or not, he cannot help making an act of love. It is true, however, that that act, unless made through love of me, profits him nothing so far as grace is concerned. See then, that I have made men my ministers, and have placed them in differing stations and various ranks, in order that they may make use of the virtue of love.

“Therefore, I show you that in my house are many mansions, and that I wish for no other thing than love. For in the love of me is fulfilled and completed the love of one’s neighbor, and the law is observed. For only those who are bound to me with this love can be of use in their state of life.

*How virtues are proved and
strengthened by their opposites.*

“U

p to the present, I have taught you how one may serve one’s neighbor, and manifest, by that service, the love that one has toward me. Now I wish to tell you further, that

a man proves his patience by means of his neighbor when he receives injuries from him. Similarly, he proves his humility through a proud man, his faith through a faithless one, his true hope through one who despairs, his justice through the unjust, his kindness through the cruel, and his gentleness and graciousness through the irascible. Good men produce and prove all their virtues through their neighbor, just as perverse men do all their vices.

“Thus, if you consider well, humility is proved against pride in that the humble man extinguishes pride, because a proud man can do no harm to a humble one. Neither can the lack of faith of a wicked man, who neither loves me nor hopes in me, when brought forth against one who is faithful to me, do him any harm; his faithlessness does not diminish the faith or the hope of one who has conceived his faith and hope through love of me. Rather it strengthens and proves it in the love my servant feels for his neighbor. He sees that the faithless one is unfaithful because he is without hope in me, and because he does not love me. Such a one places his faith and hope rather in his own sensuality, which is all that he loves. My faithful and loving servant does not leave him, but instead, he extends to him my love and hope, which the other then has the choice of accepting or rejecting.

“And so it can be seen that virtues are developed, proved, and increased by their opposites in one’s neighbors.”