


Catherine of Siena on persons created in God's image: Basis for a spiritual path



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The belief that persons are images of God offers powerful constructs for imagining and thinking about a spiritual journey. What about; who we are makes a relationship possible with God? What are the goals of a spiritual journey given who we are to God? Catherine of Siena's wisdom regarding persons as images of God offers answers to these questions. This study presents a textual analysis of Catherine's metaphor-filled rhetoric on this topic and shows how Catherine, an uneducated woman mystic appropriated the foundational systematic teaching of Augustine of Hippo on persons as images of God having memory, understanding and will. Catherine asserts that persons as images of God having these three powers of the soul are created out of God's love with a capacity to love and to be in a relationship of love, first of all, with God. The spiritual journey essentially consists in transcending – through God's redemptive love – all that obscures this created capacity.

Contribution: This study contributes by highlighting the importance of theological anthropology – both as a theological tenet and as a belief – to the way persons imagine and live a spiritual journey. Furthermore, it shows how Augustine of Hippo's formulations, foundational for Christianity, influenced a medieval mystic and can be relevant for spiritual practice today. Accordingly, this study concludes with suggestions about how this patristic and medieval understanding of persons can be appropriated for today's spiritual life.

Keywords: Catherine of Siena; image of God; spiritual growth; spiritual transformation; image of God; memory, understanding and will; three powers of the soul; theological anthropology; Augustine's anthropology; medieval spirituality; medieval women mystics.

Introduction

The belief that persons are images of God offers a powerful construct for imagining and thinking about the spiritual journey. What about; who we are makes a personal, experiential relationship possible with God? Who are we to God? What are the goals of a spiritual journey given who we are to God? Catherine of Siena's¹ wisdom regarding persons as images of God offers answers to these questions. Her wisdom reflects an elaboration of a tradition rooted in Scripture and developed in patristic times especially by Augustine of Hippo. Appropriating existing tradition in new ways, Catherine sought to communicate to others the wonder and mystery she learned about God through her mystical experience. She sought to motivate others to wonder with her at the mystery that persons are images of God and at the mystery of love this reveals. Deeply absorbing such truths would motivate persons to pursue a relationship with God and engage in an ever-deeper journey of transformation.

This study presents a textual analysis of Catherine's rhetoric regarding persons as images of God and shows how it is significant for a relationship with God. Catherine was an uneducated medieval woman who dictated her wisdom to scribes, so that her teaching is not found in one place or in an orderly systematic presentation.² Indeed, much of her wisdom is expressed in metaphors that must be unravelled. Accordingly, a goal of this study is to bring together texts, especially from Catherine's letters, in order to offer an orderly narrative about her wisdom and an

1. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) was a member of a lay penitent order guided by Dominican friars and was eventually guided by them to become involved in the ecclesiastical politics of her day. For biographical sketches see (Vauchez 2018:1–69) and (Villegas 2023).

2. She dictated 383 letters and *The Dialogue* (Catherine of Siena 1980). Hereafter cited as *Dialogue*. The complete English edition of Catherine's letters is in (Catherine of Siena 2000–2008) where letters are presented in historical rather than numerical order; index in vol. IV. As her writing is not systematic, Catherine's wisdom must be culled from throughout these works.

Note: Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

explanation of her metaphors. By showing the roots of her wisdom in texts from Augustine of Hippo, this work manifests how Catherine's teaching is rooted in the concepts of a major patristic author, and it discloses how Catherine developed these concepts in her creative, image and metaphor laden, non-systematic style. The author is not aware of a thematisation in English of Catherine's image of God anthropology, and while Augustine's influence on Catherine has been described, there is no detailed comparison of their texts.

This study also illustrates methodological issues in the discipline of Christian spirituality, which highlights the significance of experience. On the latter see Perrin (2007). It discloses how the experience of God of two classical authors in the Christian tradition influenced the formulation of their wisdom, a wisdom which has had significant influence in the history of Christian spirituality. Furthermore, this study addresses the importance of belief in the interpretation and practice of spirituality showing that belief in image of God anthropology can shape practice of the Christian faith.

The article concludes with reflections on how image of God-language and Catherine's metaphors could be valuable for a contemporary spiritual journey, proposing that 21st century spirituality can be inspired by this form of envisioning God, ourselves and our relationship with God.

Created in the image of God

Assuming the contention that spirituality is guided by beliefs (Villegas 2018), that which we consciously or unconsciously believe guides how a spiritual journey is envisioned and how it is lived. Theological anthropology articulates beliefs regarding how we understand who we are as humans from the perspective of faith and how this makes possible a relationship with God. The beliefs undergirding Catherine's wisdom are based on articulations of the faith common in medieval Italy. One of these beliefs was that persons are created in the image of God, a concept that had its roots in scripture, (Gn 1:26, 2 Cor 3:18, 2 Cor 4:4, 1 Cor 11:7, 1 Cor 15:49) and in the doctrine of the incarnation interpreted by early Christian authors.³ One prominent author was Augustine of Hippo (354AD–430AD) whose conception of humans as reflections of the Trinity provided foundational language about who we are to God and what our purpose is in terms of God's creative intent. Augustine's language influenced the ideals of the monastic spiritual journey and many formulations of mysticism well into the Middle Ages.⁴ Thus, in the 14th century, Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) would have learned language for understanding creation, ourselves and God's relationship to us through wisdom imbued with Augustine's formulations and those based on

3. See (Thunberg 1985) for a general discussion of image of God theological anthropology.

4. Bernard McGinn, in his classical history of western mysticism, considers Augustine a founding father of mysticism. See McGinn's chapter on Augustine's spirituality in (1991:228–262).

Augustine, which were articulated by major medieval writers such as Bonaventure and Bernard of Clairvaux.⁵

While Augustinian language and theological anthropology illuminated Catherine's language and beliefs,⁶ the wisdom she articulated based on these influences was uniquely her own, especially in terms of the way she expressed herself. Catherine's genius lies in the creative symbolic rhetoric in which she expressed herself. She communicated in metaphors, sometimes in apparently unrelated layers, and she used words in her own unique manner.⁷ This unique communication opens reception of concepts that have a dimension of mystery, that is, of that which cannot be fully grasped in a conceptual manner. Like poetry, her use of language provides meaning by stimulating the imagination more than appealing to the rational mind. Catherine's affective, symbolic rhetoric also functions as does a sermon, that is, as an exhortation to motivate engagement in a spiritual journey of relationship with God. For the genius of wise Christian teachers such as Catherine, is evidenced in the way in which the truth of Revelation and the best wisdom of tradition are reframed so that new generations or different groups of persons can receive and appropriate traditional wisdom and teaching. Augustine gifted Christianity with one of the first systematic formulations of the Christian message, while Catherine has contributed to a literary approach that appeals to the affective, experiential reception of that message. I will first present a brief summary of Augustine's wisdom followed by the presentation of Catherine's showing Augustine's influence.

Augustine

The basis for Augustine's reflections that influenced Catherine and the Christian tradition was his personal experience of God. The experience that most deeply taught Augustine about God's love was feeling relentlessly pursued by God over many years. For Augustine had avoided Christianity – the faith of his mother – for years, yet God persistently pursued him, eventually leading him to personally know God's love for him and God's desire to be in relationship with him. That God so deeply and relentlessly wanted him, overwhelmed Augustine with love for God and created in him a profound certainty of the indescribable, ineffable nature of that love, a love meant to be lived as relationship. As the following passages show, Augustine learned that creating persons out of love meant that God desired persons to respond in kind:

[With] your word you have transfixed my heart, and I have loved you. (*Confessions* 10.6) Within the hidden depths of my soul, Oh Lord, you urged me on. (*Confessions* 8.11) You were with me, but

5. These early medieval scholars of mysticism were widely influential in Catherine's time. McGinn tells us, 'There can be no argument that the 12th century was fascinated with the mystery of the human person as *imago Dei* and brought to the study of this mystery a systematic ordering mentality not seen before. . . The great mystical theologies . . . were rooted in anthropology' (McGinn 2000:323).

6. Many studies in Italian and English have examined the influences on Catherine's thought. Suzanne Noffke summarises major studies in (Dialogue:9–12).

7. On Catherine's language see (Villegas 2018:2). Italian literature scholars have contributed most to the study of her use of language. See the classical study (Bizzicari 1976).

I was not with you. You have called to me, and have cried out, and have shattered my deafness. You have blazed forth with light, and have shown up on me, and you have put my blindness to flight! (*Confessions* 10. 27)⁸

As Augustine surrendered to God's pursuit and received the love offered to him, his perception of reality changed. As a trained philosopher and systematic thinker, he sought to make sense of his experience of God, reflecting on the scriptures, especially Genesis and the Pauline epistles. As he dialogued between experience and reflection, he recognised both in his thoughts and in his contemplation that God as love is present in all of reality:

I asked the whole fabric of the world about my God, and it answered me, I am not he, but he has made me ... Heaven and earth and all things in them, behold! Everywhere they say to me that I should love you. (*Confessions* 10.6) I affirmed and firmly believed that you, our Lord, the true God ... made not only our souls but also our bodies, and not only our souls and bodies, but all men [sic] and all things. (*Confessions* 7.3)

Three powers of the soul

The experience and reflection briefly described above led Augustine to formulate his theological anthropology, namely that persons are created as images of God, out of God's love, with capacity for love; thus, by virtue of creation persons are meant to be fulfilled by actualising their capacity for love and for being in relationships rooted in love. While the fullness of Augustine's teaching regarding persons as images of God is philosophically deep and complex, the essence of his argument maintains that if persons are created in God's image and God is Trinity, then there should be a trinitarian structure to human persons.⁹ Augustin discerned a trinitarian structure, which he named memory, understanding and will, elements of the mind (*mens*),¹⁰ that is, human consciousness. Augustine tells us:

Hence, this trinity of the mind (*mens*) is not on that account the image of God because the mind remembers itself, understands itself, and loves itself, but because it can also remember, understand, and love Him by whom it was made. ... Let it, then, remember its God, to whose image it has been made, and understand Him and love Him. Or to express this more briefly, let it worship the God who was not made, but by whom it was made so that it is capable of Him and can be a partaker of Him. (*On the Trinity* 14.12.15)¹¹

Memory, understanding and will, the three powers of the soul, are capacities of human consciousness through which persons perceive and relate to the spiritual dimension of reality; it is this structure of consciousness – created in the

8. The *Confessions* written between 397 and 401 is a reflection on experience, as the title itself indicates. Translations from (Augustine of Hippo 1960); citations to book and chapter.

9. For a philosophical analysis of Augustine's image of God anthropology see (Dalpra 2021). It is not my intent to defend Augustine's formulation about the three powers of the soul, but rather to describe this teaching, showing its influence on Catherine of Siena.

10. *Mens*, translated as mind is a dimension of the soul, the part of the person that can consciously know God. See (Dalpra 2021:154–155).

11. Cited as book, chapter, section form (Augustine of Hippo 2002).

image of God – that makes possible persons' capacity to recognise God's presence within and to then respond to God and, thus, intentionally establish a relationship with God.

Memory

Memory refers to that part of consciousness capable of awareness and recognition of God's presence. Memory refers not only to what has been consciously known but also to the capacity to recognise the presence of God 'known' always, for God has been present to the *mens* – consciousness – from the moment of creation. In other words, through memory persons can become aware of God's reality and presence, as these have always existed in the depth of the person and, therefore, on some level known by the person. 'When it is found, it is recognised by the image which is within. We do not say that we have found what was lost, unless we recognise it, and we cannot recognise it, if we do not remember it. It was lost to sight but kept in memory' (*Confessions* 18.10).

As well, memory is the faculty that allows persons to keep in mind the ways God has acted in their lives, offering forgiveness, healing and blessings.

Understanding

Understanding is the capacity to reflect with self-awareness about what is perceived. Understanding makes possible the conscious comprehension of experience of God; it is also the conscious wisdom persons acquire – with the infusion of grace – through reflection on experience, on Scripture and on other sources that teach wisdom about God and reality in terms of God. Augustine tells us, 'I have assigned to memory everything that we know, even if we were not thinking of it, but to understanding the formation after a certain special mode of the thought. For we are usually said to understand what, by thinking of it, we have found to be true' (*Trinity* 15.21.40).¹² Understanding allows persons to discern what is true or equivalent to God's perspective.

Will

The will includes most centrally desire, which is the motivation emerging from our core self that moves us towards something. When persons have, through memory, recognised God and through understanding comprehended who God is, then desire moves towards God and that which is congruent with God. This movement is the will in action, that is, the will making choices moved by desire or the core of one's motivation:

For the gaze does not return to anything except by remembering it, and does not care to return unless by loving it: so love, which combines the vision brought about in the memory, and the vision of the thought formed thereby, as if parent and offspring, would not know what to love rightly unless it had a knowledge of what it desired, which it cannot have without memory and understanding. (*Trinity* 15.21)

12. Translation from (Augustine of Hippo 1887). The next passages from the *Trinity* are from this older, but clearer classical translation.

In other words, Augustine tells us that by having in our consciousness (memory) what we have learned about God (understanding), we love God and actively desire connection to God; desire then moves the will towards choice and action congruent with God's will.

Augustine's theology of sin also informs this anthropology. While created in the image of God, persons have lost their likeness to God because of sin. Sin tarnishes and distorts the powers of the soul that make possible recognition and knowledge of God. Accordingly, concurrent with consciousness (memory) of God, persons must acquire awareness of their sinful condition and tendency. Together with understanding about God, there must also be understanding about what is against God's love and truth, against God's will, in other words, sin. For without recognition of sin and repentance from sin, we would be impaired in our capacity to understand, know and desire God. Our will would go astray:

That which is meant by 'created after God', is expressed in another place by 'after the image of God'. But it lost righteousness and true holiness by sinning, through which that image became defaced and tarnished; and this it recovers when it is formed again and renewed ... That image may begin to be formed again by Him by whom it had been formed at first. For that image cannot form itself again, as it could deform itself. (*Trinity* 14.16.22)

The goal of the spiritual journey, then, involves becoming conscious of God as love, engaging in a relationship of love and allowing what is learned through relationship with God, as well as through worship and formation, to transform us. This transformation involves understanding our sinfulness or how God's intention for us is distorted by sin. Both the recognition of God's love for us and our need for God to remove the tarnish of sin become the motivation to pursue a relationship with God, a spiritual journey.

Catherine

Augustine was a pioneer in articulating a Christian understanding of experience of God and offering systematic arguments for his formulations. As mentioned before, Catherine used language and constructs elaborated by him,¹³ but her gift was in expressing these concepts – which she found congruent with her mystical experience – in metaphors and language aimed at persons' affectivity, inviting them to a spiritual journey.

Catherine learned about the ineffableness of God's love and that it suffuses all reality through her own experience, as did Augustine. In the following passage, Catherine shares with two close friends, Dominican friars, that while looking out upon the endless vastness and stillness of the sea she had a profound mystical intuition that we – and all creation – are made of love because created by God who is love:

¹³Augustine was a primary, although not the only influence on Catherine's use of language to express her experience about persons as images of God.

Through such passionate love, I invite you to contemplate a peaceful, deep sea. I have discovered something new there – not that the sea is new – but I have a new feeling in my soul when contemplating the words, 'God is love'. As the mirror reflects a person's face, or the sun reflects light onto the earth, 'God is love' mirrors in my soul that everything is pure love, that all is made only of love, which is why he says, 'I am God-love'. (Letter 146)¹⁴

Contemplating the sea, Catherine was transported into awareness that all reality is suffused with God's love, 'everything is pure love,' including persons.

While Catherine did not have the experience of being pursued by God's love – as did Augustine – she did experience that God desired to be in a mutual relationship of love, that is God desired Catherine as much as he wished her to desire God. 'I Catherine, useless servant, die of desire, returning from the depth of my soul where I experienced pain and weeping upon recognising and tasting our ignorance and lukewarmness in not offering love to God (Letter 127). Here Catherine expresses her mystical recognition (returning from the depth of her soul) that God desires from God's beloved sons and daughters a response of love. And this motivates her own desire for God (I ... die of desire).

In another passage she explicitly tells us that persons are created by God to respond with love. This is the essential nature of persons. 'The soul cannot live without love. She always wants to love something because love is the stuff she is made of, and through love I created her' (*Dialogue*:51:103).¹⁵ As persons are made out of love and for love, they seek an object to love; if the love originates from God's presence within the person, then the object of that love is God.

We see that following beliefs rooted in Augustine, Catherine taught that persons were created out of love and for love, intended to be in relationship with God, the Creator. Here she referenced the infinity of the sea as metaphor for the infinity of God's love. In the next passage, she uses a more unconventional metaphor to express the amazing reality about our creation:

For through love you were birthed from the womb of my Father who created you with his wisdom, and so through love you are held together for you are made of nothing else but love. If he removed his love, with the power and wisdom with which he created you, you would cease to be.¹⁶ (Letter 16)

Catherine uses the startling metaphor of God as a father who has a womb and gives birth. She urged her listeners to imagine being birthed from God's womb and therefore being part of God, as a child is a part of her mother. This metaphor

¹⁴Citations of the letters are the author's translations based on the original critical text (Catherine of Siena 2016); Translations forthcoming in 2025, Villegas, D.L., *Selected letters of Catherine of Siena*, Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ. The letter numbering according to Tommaso.

¹⁵Citations to *The Dialogue* indicate chapter and page number in the 1980 edition unless otherwise noted.

¹⁶This wisdom is presented in Jesus' words, a common rhetorical tool in the letters. In *The Dialogue* it is God, the Father, who addresses Catherine.

also suggests our very existence depends upon God, as that of a newborn child depends on her mother. Furthermore, the metaphor evokes the love of a mother in her willingness to endure pain to give life to her child (a reference to the cross).

Through a completely different metaphor Catherine again invites meditation on how much we are like God, created in God's image, and loved by God so that we should be motivated to pursue a relationship with God:

[In] him you find yourselves as a gift of grace ... for he created you in his image and likeness. May our hearts burst upon recognising that humans are grafted onto God and God onto humans [through the incarnation]; may they [our hearts] be pierced by such a fire, such a flame of love! O boundless love, if persons could appreciate it, it would suffice. (Letter 226)

In this passage we are invited to imagine persons grafted onto the divine nature and vice versa. If one grafts a branch onto a tree, the sap that gives life to the tree will flow to the branch and return to the trunk. In other words, as images of God we have God's very life, which is love, flowing through us and this love should flow back to God. Thus, the sap flowing back to the trunk suggests that we are meant to respond to God's gift. Consciousness that we are created in God's image and that through us flows the divine nature should affect us as profoundly and deeply as being pierced by a flame. If we are so deeply affected by this knowledge of love, 'it would suffice,' implying that such knowledge would fill our understanding and activate the depth of our motivation (our will) to seek God.

Three powers of the soul

Understanding and will referenced here, are two of the three powers of the soul. Catherine expressed her appropriation of Augustine's trinitarian formulation of the three powers of the soul in her own creative language adding nuances through metaphors that invite the use of imagination in order to grasp transcendent reality.

Understanding

Catherine most often refers to the understanding as the eye of understanding, and less frequently as the eye of the soul. 'Eye' coupled with 'understanding' highlights that this power of the soul involves perceiving correctly, as it is the dimension of consciousness through which one is able to *see* and *recognise* what is true about God, about ourselves, and about all that we live and experience. Understanding is the power of the soul through which we know God and know ourselves *accurately*, the key dynamics – according to Catherine – for a spiritual journey of transformation.¹⁷

Faith is the pupil of the eye, so the eye of understanding is healthy when it is illuminated by faith,¹⁸ – meaning here trust

17. For Catherine's wisdom on knowledge of God and knowledge of self as the core dynamics of a spiritual journey, see (McDermott 2007; Villegas 2017:4–5).

18. The need for faith in order to know God and oneself as loved by God is also a significant theme in Augustine, who asked the question of whether reason was

in God's love – a trust undergirded by *reception* of God's love.¹⁹ In other words, understanding's capacity to discern, to grasp correctly that which it sees, depends on a heartfelt conviction that human persons are connected to God:

Filled with the light of most holy faith, the true eye of our soul is understanding, as long as the light of faith is not covered by the veil of selfish self-love.²⁰ (Letter 51) Most holy faith is the pupil of the eye of understanding; it is a light, and if the soul did not have this glorious light, she would lose her way ... The cloud of selfish self-love and permissiveness in their own regard [referring to those on the wrong path] has clouded the eye of understanding, leaving them to move through the darkness while blind (Letter 87).

A healthy eye of understanding is essential for the dynamics of transformation into persons capable of the love for which we are created; for understanding is critical to seeing and recognising the root of our sinfulness, selfish self-love – which is the inability to perceive the common good, the good in others and the good as that which is according to God's will. Catherine's metaphor of the eye is related to her metaphor 'light' – a metaphor Catherine uses frequently – to refer to that which makes accurate sight possible; light is at the same time, truth and discernment, meaning that which is congruent with God's love.

Catherine's wisdom is congruent with Augustine's teaching that the image of God in persons is tarnished by sin. She names selfish self-love as the root of sin and offers metaphors that image how sin tarnishes the soul: selfishness is a cloud or veil that obscures the capacity of persons to see and recognise they are created in God's image and are called to live out of love.

To summarise, understanding is a critical dimension of consciousness because without this capacity to grasp and weigh what is ordered according to love, the person would be acting in darkness, that is deprived of what is true in God; she 'would lose her way'. Through the metaphor of the eye, Catherine highlights comprehending, recognising and discerning that must be rooted in faith, that is, in heartfelt conviction that we are connected to a God of love. These metaphors invite appropriation of understanding as a form of spiritual knowing and discernment. Through these metaphors Catherine offers nuances to Augustine's formulation of understanding as 'knowing' which can emphasise learning and even be interpreted as an intellectual task.

Memory

Catherine's wisdom about memory is similar to that of Augustine. Memory 'remembers' God's reality as Creator – our being depends on God – and keeps in our consciousness

enough for this knowledge and concluded it was not; faith, a gift of God was also needed. See (Gilson 1960).

19. 'From love is born living faith. I have as much faith and hope as I have love' (Letter 32).

20. Catherine's term for self-centredness.

God's blessings thus motivating and empowering our response to God. Catherine communicates the significance of this power through her rhetorical style, appealing to the affective consciousness of her correspondents. In the following passage, Catherine makes an impassioned appeal to God to empower her memory emphasising the critical nature of this grace. 'Love, benevolent love, open, open up our memory to receive and keep before us so much goodness received from him; and open our understanding, because in understanding we love' (Letter 41).

Stressing that the powers of the soul are the fruit of God's creative love, she tells a correspondent that memory is brought forth from the power of the Father. 'The powers of the soul, which are spiritual, are the fruit of this love. Memory, assimilated from the eternal Father's power is – through the *affetto*²¹ of love – bound to hold and keep in mind the benefits that she has received from him, and to be beholden and grateful' (Letter 259). And elsewhere Catherine asserts that filled with knowledge of God's goodness, it is impossible 'for memory not to hold her benefactor in consciousness' (Letter 182). Holding in awareness that God is our benefactor is tied to Catherine's teaching that God is He-who-is and we-are-not,²² that is, at a foundational level we need God's love to actualise our potential to act as images of God. Memory allows us to keep this reality close to consciousness.

In the following passage, Catherine advises her disciples to let their memory be filled with the blood of Christ crucified. The blood is a metaphor for God's love through Jesus' giving his life for us. 'Filling our memory' is a powerful metaphor for having our awareness totally focused on something, in this case Jesus' life-giving love:

I want your memory to be filled and remain full of the blood of Christ crucified, of the graces of God and the awareness of death, so that you may grow in love ... I want you to contemplate all this with the eye of understanding and the light of holy faith, so that your will can speedily race forth without attachment or disordered love for what is not in God. (Letter 154)

Will

Catherine takes up Augustine's focus on desire as key dimension of the will; she uses the term *affetto*, which has several connotations related to desire. *Affetto* is the force of desire that moves towards an object – as in Augustine. When *affetto* is ordered and moves towards God, Catherine specifically means that *affetto* is desire in action; in this sense *affetto* can mean 'will'. *Affetto* also has the general meaning of desire for something, whether good or bad. Thus, *affetto* can be disordered by selfish self-love and directed towards that which is self-centred (and, therefore, sinful):

21. *Affetto* is a word Catherine uses with several related meanings. Here it means the desire and moving force of love originating in a person's deepest consciousness, moving her will towards an object. See discussion of *affetto* in (Villegas 2017:6) and in <https://catherineofsiena-spirituality.org/desire-and-affetto/> (Villegas viewed October 2023).

22. Reference to Exodus 3:14, 'God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"' (NRSV).

Once love removes selfish self-love, the eye [of understanding] remains clear and sees well, and so it is important that *affetto* wake up and desire to love its benefactor [God]. (Letter 51) Once the eye of understanding has clearly seen and discerned who leads one to the good and who to evil, and what is the good and what miserable evil, *affetto* – which follows understanding – quickly runs to love her Creator, recognising in his blood his unimaginable love. Then she loves all that she recognises can please him and unite her to him. (Letter 80)

As in Augustine's teaching, *affetto* moves towards God and what is in God when it is informed by understanding; that is, understanding precedes the action of the will. At times, Catherine appears to suggest the opposite dynamic, namely, that desire-*affetto* moves understanding. This formulation, however, reflects a rhetorical rather than conceptual difference:²³

As soon as the eye of understanding feels itself moved by *affetto*, it immediately opens and focuses on its object, namely Christ crucified, in whom understanding recognises the abyss of his unimaginable love, most especially in the blood. (Letter 51)

With this formulation Catherine highlights that a person's connection to God transforms desire. Here this connection occurs through *affetto* – as God's love dwelling within the person – unites with the person's own *affetto*-desire. Such union provides a form of knowledge – knowledge through union. Or stated differently, *affetto* – as God's luring love – transforms *affetto* (as desire) so that which is desired is God and what is of God. Through this nuance of *affetto*, Catherine intends to affirm that as images of God, persons innately desire God, although as already discussed, this desire can be obscured or distorted by sin.

Catherine's multivalent use of *affetto* expresses in a novel way anthropology formulated by Augustine about desire moving the will. Catherine's use of this medieval concept highlights the ineffable reality that God's love can unite to our capacity to love at the core of our being, in this way empowering a way of being in life congruent with our created capacity to act in imitation of Christ.

Powers personified

For Catherine the powers of the soul are at times personified, making her wisdom dynamic, and inviting contemplation through these 'action' images. The eye of understanding 'opens and focuses'. *Affetto*, moves the will to 'wake up', implying that this inner drive must come alive, it must be activated. The will is imaged as 'running' towards the ordered object, that is, God as Creator, suggesting the urgency with which God should be sought.

Three powers gathered through love

The three powers of the soul are intertwined and work together. Augustine tells us that it is the *trinitarian* structure of consciousness – the three powers of the soul – that reveals

23. One has to examine what Catherine intends to communicate with a given image or metaphor, that is, what is her rhetorical intent at that moment.

our given capacity for God and makes possible a journey to actualise this potential. Catherine has expressed this overall formulation when she tells us the three powers must work together through the dynamism of love:

Love regulates the powers of the soul and binds these three powers together for the soul is made of pure love. The will desiring to love something, moves understanding to open its eye. Becoming aware that the will wants to love, the understanding – if reasonable – chooses as object to love the ineffable love of the eternal Father, who has given us the Word, his Son. So, that which the eye of understanding has seen, the will pursues with ineffable love; and with a strong hand, the will places in memory this treasure it has grasped through love. (Letter 95)

This passage offers a summary of Catherine's wisdom on the three powers and captures the meaning of Catherine's metaphor that, 'each power lends a hand to the other, thus nourishing the soul in the life of grace' (*Dialogue* 51:103).²⁴

Contemporary applications

Image of God anthropology as articulated in early patristic times by Augustine and taken up in medieval times by Catherine depicts a belief about who we are. We are created by God out of love, capable of relationships of love. Humans are also sinful; we have a tendency towards self-centredness, root of all disorder and sin. Our happiness and actualisation lie in allowing God to transform us away from the tendency to self-centredness and towards our inherent capacity for love, which is the capacity to care for the good of the other.

These beliefs suggest a framework for a spiritual journey. We are invited to develop a lifestyle and practices that: (1) make possible consciousness (memory) of God's presence within and of how much God has blessed us; (2) help us grow in knowing about God both through formation and worship, while allowing God's grace present within to order these inputs so they add to our heartfelt knowledge of God (understanding); (3) help us grow in knowledge of that which tarnishes the image of God within us – that is, sin – which Catherine summarises is rooted in self-centredness; (4) through a relationship with God and foregoing, transform our cooperation with God's love so our desire is converted; in this way we are able to make choices congruent with what is in God's love and truth (will).

Thus, we need to create space in our lives to nurture a relationship with God, for it is through such a relationship that belief in God's love for us and God's call to actualise our capacity to love can become a felt conviction and it is this conviction that fuels the motivation and deepening desire for transformation. A relationship with God is nurtured by spiritual practices and by the time and space to pursue these. One of these could be meditating on the images proposed by Catherine in the passages described here. For instance, one could meditate on the image of God being a tree of love while imagining becoming a branch of that tree; indeed, this is a Gospel image (Jn 15:1–17). Or one can meditate on the image

24. See also (*Dialogue*:54; 13; 4).

of being in the womb of God and being birthed from that womb. Or one could engage in a contemplative practice repeating words such as, 'I am created out of love'. Any of Catherine's metaphors can invite contemplation on the wonder of being created in the image of God.

Catherine's three powers of the soul can be imagined in more contemporary terms to encourage these three ways of becoming conscious of God's presence to us and of imagining dimensions of how we may want to relate to God. The concept of *memory* suggests that it is important to have practices that help us keep God present in our consciousness. We might decide to read a sentence of Scripture twice a day; we might choose to repeat the Jesus prayer several times a day when we find our mind wondering. Once a week we may decide to review how God has helped us in our life that week. Others may want to do a review of blessings or consolations each night. These are all practices that focus our consciousness on God and how God is present in our life.

The concept of *understanding* suggests that it is important to read Scripture, engage in spiritual reading, in participation in worship; one could join a prayer, meditation or Bible study group, or engage in other activities that teach us about the Triune God. Such inputs nurture felt knowledge about God and about the dynamics of a spiritual journey. Through Catherine's wisdom about understanding, we are reminded that the transforming knowledge of God is central to accurate discernment, and, therefore, practices that nurture a close relationship with God will help us in any discernment and decision-making process. Understanding also involves recognition of the selfishness and other disorder in our lives, so any practice that includes an examination of conscience in the presence of God, where we offer our weaknesses, failures and limitations to God, will further knowledge of self as intended by Catherine.

The concept of the *will* driven by desire is particularly powerful. This power of the soul refers to the depth of the driving energy or motivation that moves us to action from the core of the self. This suggests that it is the core of our motivation that must be transformed. This concept in Catherine is similar to the notion of the 'heart' in those scripture passages where Jesus tells his listeners that God is most interested in that which emerges from the heart, the core of self (Mt 15:16–20). Amid the plurality of spiritual paths and practices, focusing on the transformation of the heart – of our deepest desires – is central for an authentic journey of Christian transformation. The concept of *affetto*-will reminds us that most of all, our heart needs to be transformed and this transformation requires a conscious openness to God's love following the sorts of practices named here.

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