

ST CATHERINE OF SIENA AND DAME JULIAN OF NORWICH¹

PROFESSOR ARRIGO LEVASTI

IT is always attractive to make a comparison between mystics differing in their nature and formation; and a study of their experience, fundamentally the same, in its different interpretations, helps us to discover lights and shades, tones and accents, individual peculiarities that may escape our notice when we consider one mystic alone. This is so in the case of Catherine of Siena. Set by the side of other women mystics her world becomes more distinct, and her own figure takes on clearer outline. Compared with St Gertrude, for instance, she is more ecclesiastically-minded; compared with St Hildegarde, more positive; with St Teresa, more subtle; while perhaps she outstrips them all in enthusiasm and eloquence.

Of very different temperament was her contemporary the English mystical writer, Julian of Norwich, whose subject matter was somewhat similar to Catherine's. Catherine wrote her 'Dialogue' in the autumn of 1378: Julian received her 'Revelations' in March 1373, and may have written them out at once, revising and perhaps amplifying them in 1393, that is, thirteen years after Catherine's death. It is an interesting question whether Julian had come across her writings, or at least her letters. There is no proof of this, although some critics believe that she had. Only when the connections between England and Catherine's first disciples, the Caterinati, have been carefully studied shall we be able to answer this question. Meanwhile we have to consider the resemblances as purely fortuitous or, better, as resulting from the same faith, the same mystical experiences. Without analysing in detail the teaching of the two great Religious I shall indicate a few examples of their different approach.

Julian is a purely contemplative spirit. Rapt in profound concentration she experiences visions over which she reflects

¹ Translated from *Solenni Feste Nazionali a Gloria di Santa Caterina da Siena* (1940) by Dorothy M. White.

and from which she derives philosophical and mystical considerations. Catherine, instead, is more active than contemplative. She feels a constant need of souls to save, and so she is always urging men to cast themselves into that great faith which is her life, and which is true salvation.

Let us take a subject that both women mystics often deal with: the Precious Blood. For Julian, the blood has a cosmic or world-embracing significance, for Catherine it has a purifying and therefore moral function. Julian says: 'The precious plenty of his dear-worthy Blood descended into Hell and burst her bands, and delivered all that were there that belonged to the court of Heaven. The precious plenty of his dear-worthy blood overfloweth all earth, and is ready to wash all creatures of sin, which be of good-will, have been and shall be. The precious plenty of his dear-worthy Blood ascended into Heaven to the blessed body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and there is in him, bleeding and praying for us to the Father—and is, and shall be as long as it needeth. And evermore it floweth in all Heavens, enjoying the salvation of all mankind, that are there, and shall be—fulfilling the number that faileth.'

Catherine is far from this clear calm vision. Her soul, in continual ferment, cries out in its enthusiasm: 'The Blood inebriates and fortifies; it gives the warmth and light of Truth to the soul.' This men must discover for themselves through their own profound experience, and she implores them to do so, crying out impulsively in an almost terrifying crescendo: 'Drown yourselves in the blood of Christ crucified: bathe in his Blood: slake your thirst in his Blood: inebriate yourselves in his Blood: array yourselves in his Blood: mourn and rejoice in his Blood: grow strong in the Blood: lose your weakness and blindness in the Blood of the spotless Lamb'.

Catherine needs to appeal to the individual, for she is always an apostle: her own experience only acquires value in her eyes in so far as it enables others to share in the love of Christ. Julian, instead, speaks a more universal language, and contemplates her own intimate vision that loses itself in the operation of the Eternal Love.

The conception of love shows a similar diversity of charac-

ter. It is positive, clear, strong, steady in Catherine, general or universal in Julian. For the Sienese girl love gives life to all the virtues, and 'only love can bring forth love', 'love is never idle, but always undertakes great things'. Julian says: 'Wouldst thou learn thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Love was his meaning. Who showed it thee? Love. What showed he thee? Love. Wherefore showed it he? For Love. Hold thee therein and thou shalt learn and know more in the same. But thou shalt never know nor learn therein other thing without end.'

If we turn to a particular aspect of love, that is, maternal love, we see that both these mystics felt its spiritual grandeur: but while Catherine felt herself to be the mother of friends and foes alike, enfolding all in her embrace, Julian contemplated motherhood in all its sublimity, so lofty that only Christ himself could be the perfect mother. 'The mother's service is nearest, readiest, and surest: nearest for it is most of nature, readiest for it is most of love, and surest for it is most of truth. This office none might, nor could, nor ever should do to the full, but he alone. We know that all our mothers' bearing is bearing of us to pain and dying; but our very Mother, Jesus, he All-Love, beareth us to joy and to endless living.'

It would take too long to pursue the study of how the two mystics dealt with the same subjects and the same religious experiences. One might quote their differing treatment of fear, of consideration of time, of the devil, of Hell, of the soul sheltering in the pierced side of Christ, and all the aspects of God: Life, Love, Light, and so on, but in all these comparisons the same peculiarities would be evident. Julian meditates, and draws conclusions of universal application: Catherine's apostolic zeal transforms into action her profoundest experiences and those most rich in divine love. Her eager throbbing heart does not allow her to generalise too much: she has always before her eyes a world that is crashing in ruin, and she is out to snatch from the ruins more and more souls to plunge them into the wisdom and power of God.