

Catherine of Siena lived at a very turbulent time in a very turbulent setting among people threatened not only with the plague but with the constant warfare between the various Italian city states and with a Church divided between Avignon and Rome. Astutely, she recognised that at the heart of all such turmoil and threats to the self was the self itself in all its internal division. Her many words and prayers carry authority because she recognises this division at work in herself as well as in others, indeed it is this self-knowledge which helps her discern the wounds in others and know how to heal them. She looks always to God as Trinity and to Christ as the bridge between humanity and God to overcome the sin within ourselves. Her devotion at times may seem excessive to our secularised ears but perhaps excessive times call for excessive expression and it was just such words the people of the time needed to hear, including cardinals and Popes. Here is part of a prayer from 1379 written when she was in Rome at the behest of Pope Urban VI:

*Why then, eternal Father,
did you create this creature of yours?
I am truly amazed at this,
and indeed I see
as you show me,
that you made us for one reason only:
in your light
you saw yourself compelled
by the fire of your charity
to give us being,
in spite of the evil we would commit against you,
eternal Father,
....
you took your eyes off the sin that was to be
and fixed your gaze
only on your creature's beauty.
....
crazy over what you have made.*

We rarely call God crazy any more but this emotive prayer brings Catherine to a sound conclusion:

Let me no longer be clothed in myself
and a prayer for the priest who has just given her communion:
*Strip him of himself,
and free him from himself;
clothe him in your eternal will.*

It is this burden of the self which Christ wishes to carry for us and has indeed done so on the Cross.

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