

Sacred Fire: A Rare Glimpse into Purgatory

by Denise Sinclair

“I believe no happiness can be found worthy to be compared with that of a soul in Purgatory except that of the saints in Paradise. And day by day this happiness grows as God flows into these souls, more and more as the hindrance to His

entrance is consumed. Sin’s rust is the hindrance, and the fire burns the rust away so that more and more the soul opens itself up to the divine inflowing.”

This rare glimpse into Purgatory is from a book entitled *Fire of Love* by a

fifteenth century mystic named St. Catherine of Genoa.

She was born Caterinetta Adorna to an aristocratic family and was denied entrance to the convent at age 13 because of her young age. After the death of her father, her eldest brother, for political and financial reasons, arranged a marriage for Caterinetta. The marriage was a disaster. Catherine’s husband was unfaithful to the point of having a mistress and child and squandered his fortune. The first five years of her marriage, Catherine withdrew from society. Her family pleaded with her to get involved with the social life of Genoa, thinking this would help. After another five years, Catherine instead fell into a deep depression.

Catherine’s depression was so deep that while making her Lenten confession, she was incapable of confessing her sins and could only ask for a blessing. She experienced an abrupt and profound love of God and contrition for her sins and experienced a total conversion. “No more world for me! No more sin,” she vowed.

Catherine practiced penance and mortification, while at the same time, ministering to the sick and poor of Genoa. Catherine’s husband also experienced a conversion and the couple agreed to live celibately in a little house near the Pammatone Hospital. They spent the remainder of their lives caring for the sick and ministering to their needs.

Sometime in the late 1470’s, Catherine began to undergo spiritual ecstasies which she eventually shared



with her disciples in a treatise known as *On Purgation and Purgatory*.

Although the Church's teaching on Purgatory had deep roots in biblical and patristic tradition and had been defined at the councils in Lyons in 1245 and 1274, and again in Florence in 1439-1444, because of the scandal of selling indulgences, doubts about Purgatory were rampant at this time. In fact, shortly after Catherine's death in 1510, the Church's teaching on Purgatory would be totally rejected by the Protestant reformers.

But our good God raises up men and women in His Church to counteract untruth with truth and that is what He did with St. Catherine. Catherine's treatise on Purgatory was a remarkable teaching that focused on God's love and mercy and the willingness of a soul to be purged of "all rust" in order to spend eternity with God in heaven.

"So intimate with God are the souls in Purgatory and so conformed to His will, that in all things they are content with His most holy ordinance," she wrote.

"And if a soul were brought to see God when it still had the smallest thing of which to purge itself, a great injury would be done to it. For since pure love and supreme justice could not brook that stained soul, and to bear with its presence would not befit God, that soul would suffer a torment worse than ten Purgatories. To see God when full satisfaction had not yet been given to Him, even if the time of purgation lacked but the twinkling of an eye, would be unbearable to the soul. It would sooner go to a thousand Hells to rid itself of the little rust still clinging to it, than stand in the divine presence when it was not yet wholly cleansed."

According to Catherine's teaching, when a soul repents at the hour of death, the guilt due to their sin is immediately forgiven, but the "rust" of sin is left, from which they will be cleansed by the pain of Purgatory's fire. While the pain the soul experiences in Purgatory is similar

to the pain of hell, because the soul realizes the grievousness of sin and the great offense it is toward God, it would gladly throw itself into Purgatory for as long as necessary. All the while, the soul sees how very much it is loved by God and since it cannot yet be united with Him, this is the greatest cause of its pain.

St. Catherine goes on to teach about a remarkable transformation that occurs within the soul when it stands before God. It becomes united and in total

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--St. Catherine of Genoa

agreement with the holy will of God. There is no questioning the length of time or the pain that they may have to endure in Purgatory. There is no jealousy when another soul is released to heaven because no one wants to leave until all has been cleansed.

The treatise explains that there are rays and shafts of light that go forth from divine love to the soul which purify and destroy. "Unceasingly God draws the soul to Himself and breathes fire into it, never letting it go until He has led it to

the state from which it came forth—that is, to the pure cleanliness in which it was created," she writes.

She likens the souls in Purgatory to gold being purified to twenty-four carats. When it is pure, it can no longer be consumed by any fire. Like gold, only the dross can be burnt away. That is what God does to our soul. Self is destroyed within it until it is pure in God.

"When the soul has been purified it remains wholly in God, having nothing of the self in it; its being is in God who has led this cleansed soul to Himself. The soul can suffer no more, for nothing is left in it to be burnt away. Were it held in the fire when it has thus been cleansed, it would feel no pain. Rather the fire of divine love would be to it like eternal life and in no way contrary to it."

Catherine's work ends in explaining that God gives the soul, in an instant, an understanding of Purgatory. He allows the soul to "know" the justice of Purgatory, which gives them the willingness to accept it and see it as God's great love and mercy, which allows them to suffer without complaint. He also allows them to see the happiness they feel as they ponder God's will and His love and mercy as He purifies their soul.

Because of a special grace that is given to the soul by God, an immense happiness is bestowed upon them that grows deeper as they come closer to God.

St. Catherine of Genoa's teaching on Purgatory is both fascinating and comforting and is a true gift to the Church. St. Catherine died on September 15, 1510. Pope Clement XII canonized her in 1733. Her body is incorrupt and her feast day is September 15. Her other great work is entitled *The Spiritual Dialogue*.

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