

ST. CATHERINE DE RICCI

HER LIFE, HER LETTERS, HER COMMUNITY

F. M. CAPES

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ST CATHERINE
DE' RICCI



ST. CATHERINE DE RICCI,
From a death-mask preserved by the nuns of Prato.

ST CATHERINE DE' RICCI

*HER LIFE HER LETTERS
HER COMMUNITY*

By

F. M. CAPES

*Preceded by a
TREATISE on the MYSTICAL LIFE*

by

F. BERTRAND WILBERFORCE O.P.

Preacher-General of the Order

BURNS & OATES

28 ORCHARD STREET

LONDON W

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J. S. NORTHCOTE
Censor Deputatus

Imprimatur

✠ FRANCISCUS
Archiepiscopus Westmonast.

To

*The Right Rev. Lady Abbess Parker, O.S.B.
and the Community*

of

St Mary's Abbey, East Bergholt,

this Book

*is most Affectionately Dedicated by the
Writer*

PREFACE

ST CATHERINE DE' RICCI, one of the three canonized Dominican women of the "Third Order,"* holds a different position from that of either her great predecessor and namesake of Siena or the Saint of the New World who was a little girl when she died, Rose of Lima. These two were "Tertiaries" in the strict sense of the word, remaining inmates of their respective parents' houses to the end of their lives.

St Catherine de' Ricci, on the contrary, was not only a "conventual" tertiary, but she belonged to a community which, although of the Third Order, was enclosed behind a grille and led a strictly contemplative life. Its members had nothing to do with hospitals, orphanages, schools, or any kind of charitable institutions, doing no "active" work except what was absolutely needful for their own support:—such as needlework or confectionery, etc., which they sold; and even these occupations were lessened as far as possible under Catherine's rule, to give more time for prayer. In fact, had it not been that their constitutions were of a less severe nature as to fast and abstinence, the sisters of her convent might almost as well have belonged to the Second Order as to the Third. Hence it is as a model rather of a contemplative nun, than of what we in England usually understand by a conventual tertiary, that this contemporary of St Philip Neri and St Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi must be regarded.

Again, wide as was her acquaintance with "seculars" of every kind, so that her life was by no means a hidden one like St Rose's, the nun of Prato was not a great historical character like St Catherine of Siena, whose wonderful vocation was clearly inconsistent with a cloistered life. Catherine de' Ricci had great fame in her own time and country,

* There are many "Blessed."

but it was more for her extraordinary mystical life than for any of her personal actions that people were drawn to her, at least to begin with; though, when they came to know her, the beauty of her character and the good that she did to others with true Dominican activity of mind and heart warmly attached them to her. She was prioress of her convent for a great part of her life, and as such was renowned for her wise and holy government. Thus, her position with regard to the public lies, as it were, between that of the other two saints. Her life, we may say, contains a triple interest:—that of the pure mystic; that of the practical Religious superior in her own community; and that of the essentially loving and tender woman, spreading beneficent influence around as far as the circumstances of her calling allowed.

The substance of this new life of the saint* is mainly taken from the *Vie de Ste Catherine de' Ricci* by Père Hyacinthe Bayonne, O.P. (Paris: Poussielgue, 1873), which the present superiors of the French province have most kindly allowed to be freely used. Many of its narrative portions have, however, been omitted or simplified, the French life being often either too long and wordy or rather too flowery in style for English taste. Also, whilst the accounts of St Catherine's celebrated lasting miraculous favours—her ecstasy of the Passion, her receiving the sacred stigmata, and the like—have been retained in full, some only of the stories given by Père Bayonne of incidental miracles or visions have been chosen for insertion, and even these frequently told in shortened form.

Considerable additions have also been made to the older work, consisting in several original letters of the saint which either do not appear at all in the French life, or are merely quoted there.

These letters form, it need hardly be said, a particularly valuable portion of the present work, by enabling the saint to speak to us herself from behind her *grille* of three centuries ago. It would perhaps be impossible

* The narrative has been here and there supplemented or corrected by reference to *Guasti's* admirable introductory notes, etc., to the "Letters."

to characterize them more truly than a Dominican doctor in theology, Père Berthier, has done in this pithy antithesis:

“These simple and practical letters of the nobly-born Catherine de’ Ricci form a fitting *pendant* to the grand—we might almost say the aristocratic—style of Catherine of Siena, the dyer’s daughter.”*

In one case, throughout this English version, not the substance only but the words of the French writer have been kept to:—i.e., wherever an explanation or dissertation of theological nature, concerning the Religious life or any spiritual matter, is in question. As Père Bayonne was a noted Dominican friar, which means a first-rate theologian as well as an authority on the spirit of his Order, it would be an impertinence to substitute any expressions for his own, or to omit anything of consequence that he had said, where such things were concerned. Moreover, his words on these subjects are often of considerable beauty and power in themselves, and greatly add to the interest of the biography.

As to the original sources for St Catherine de’ Ricci’s life, which are mainly Italian, and date from immediately after the saint’s death, Père Bayonne gives a full and careful account of these at the beginning of his work, besides making frequent reference to them, with many quotations, throughout the text. This latter plan has been followed here; but the account of authorities, being too long for reproduction in full, is given merely as a “List” at the end of this book.

Any reader who becomes sufficiently interested in Catherine to feel inclined to hunt up and examine the old Italian chroniclers for himself will probably be well rewarded for his trouble, especially in the case of Serafino Razzi. If we may judge from the extracts given by Bayonne, and from some others in Mother Francis Raphael’s “Spirit

* See a letter of approval prefixed by the *Oullins* nuns to their French translation. St Catherine of Siena’s academic style, it must be remembered, was supernatural, she having learnt to read and write miraculously. Catherine de’ Ricci had had the ordinary woman’s education of a well born and bred, but *not* literary, family, and wrote merely as her natural intelligence dictated.

of the Dominican Order," that bygone writer has a grace and charm in story-telling, combined with faith and devotion, quite peculiar to himself.

Three points connected with this English Life—i.e., the letters, the portrait, and the mixed name-system here adopted—need some prefatory explanation:

1. Two full editions of St Catherine de' Ricci's letters were brought out in the latter half of the nineteenth century (besides a small earlier one consisting only of fifty letters, chiefly to her family, edited with no notes or explanatory matter). One of these two, edited by Alessandro Gherardi, at Florence, is as late as 1890, and contains four hundred letters, some of them being taken from an earlier edition, which is the most important of all. This is the collection edited and annotated by Cesare Guasti, and published after his death, at Prato, by Ranieri Guasti, in 1861. This edition contains about three hundred and fifty letters, with some most useful and interesting prefatory matter (by way of notes), which throws much light on various points connected with the saint, her family, and her friends and correspondents; as also on the connection of herself and her community with Savonarola.

It is on this Italian edition that the latest and largest volume of the saint's letters is based: i.e., the full French edition brought out by the Dominican nuns at Oullins (now banished to Bissighem-lès-Courtrai, in Belgium) in 1900.* This volume contains some letters from Gherardi besides those of Guasti, bringing them altogether up to four hundred and sixty-two in number; but as regards "notes," etc., it is an actual translation of Guasti's work. From this very valuable book—leave to use which was most kindly given by the nuns—the present writer has chosen the letters to be published in English; but—with the exception of a few that have been done from the French—all those here given have been translated straight from the Italian, so as to secure the reproduction of the saint's own words as nearly as possible. This part of the work was

* The French volume is actually not dated by publishers (Douniol, Paris) or editors. The date is therefore quoted from memory.

undertaken by two friends of the writer's, one of whom has passed away since she gave her kind help: namely, by the late Miss Cecilia Simeon (who translated a few family letters, and several of those to Filippo Salviati); and by Miss E. Kislingbury, who is the translator of the main portion. The latter, "in addition to the apology owing to her readers for her own shortcomings in style," desires, in partial justification, to quote the following lines from the preface of Guasti, with whose opinion she fully concurs from her own experience in translating the letters, which have sometimes been very difficult to put into grammatical English:

Catherine [remarks her Italian editor], as I have said, was not a literary woman, neither did she know anything of the artificialities of style. But the words came from her heart with a spontaneity which is nearer to nature; and when her discourse changes from the singular to the plural, and back again to the singular; when the verb does not correspond with the nominative, or the noun which she has in mind is not even expressed; if the reason for this is not in the grammar-books, it is to be found in her own heart, which felt the efficacy of certain constructions, irregular perhaps, in that they are foreign to precedent, but well within the spirit of the language and approved by the authority of the people, the highest law-giver.*

To make choice, from so many, of a few special letters for insertion here has of course been a difficult task. The writer has gone on the plan of choosing those which seemed best to illustrate, not merely the saint's own character, but that of her community, and the nature of her general surroundings: thus enabling the portion here presented of her familiar correspondence to give as vivid a picture as possible of contemporary "manners," Religious and secular, of everyday life. Whether the right letters for this purpose have been picked out or not must, however, of course be a matter on which opinion may differ, should any readers of this volume already know the whole collection, or be disposed to turn to it after making acquaintance with these specimens.

It is greatly to be regretted—as in the case of so many letters published posthumously—that we have not the other

* Guasti's *Lettere Spirituali*, etc., p. 24.

side of the correspondence preserved, in some instances, to complete the picture.

2. The portrait of St Catherine here given is taken, with permission, from the French volume of letters. This portrait—as might be conjectured by its general expression—is from a mould taken after death, which was preserved at Prato. M. Guasti, in the year 1860, had an engraving done after this mould, considered to have been very successful; and the said engraving was lent by his daughter to the French nuns, who had it photographed and reproduced for their translation of the letters.

There are various portraits of St Catherine de' Ricci about—some engravings which more or less resemble the one here published, and some “pious” coloured pictures of the beautified sickly-sentimental order, as absolutely unlike it as possible. That these last are also utterly unlike the original is clear from a comparison of the older engravings with this one taken from the “mask,” which appears to be the only really authentic portrait preserved. Some of the older drawings represent St Catherine as uglier than this—making the features coarser and the chin more receding—but none of them attempt, like the modern productions, to make her “pretty.” M. Guasti's engraving (it is thought by some who have looked at it critically, with a view to the question of prefixing it to the *English Life*), if repellent at first sight, has the merit of repaying a more careful study by the discovery of much sweetness, dignity, and, above all, great saintliness of expression in the worn and even plain features. It must be remembered that the mould from which it is taken was not only that of a dead woman, but of one sixty-eight years old and exhausted with bodily penance and spiritual effort.

3. The name-system followed in this *English life* of St Catherine may be justly charged with inconsistency; but it is an inconsistency adopted of set purpose, with a method in it, and the method is this:

Where proper names—whether of people or places—have become so familiar to us in their *English* form that to give them in their native *Italian* would appear to ordinary

readers either strange or pedantic, they have been Anglicized here. Where this is not the case the Italian form has been preserved, as being not only more suitable to the book, but in almost every case far superior in beauty. For example, the name of the saint herself has been given as "Catherine," English people being so used to all the saints of that name under this form, that "Caterina" would seem most unfamiliar. Again, in the case of St Philip Neri, the Oratorians in this country have made the English spelling so universal that to spell it "Filippo" would seem absolutely pedantic; whilst Dominicans are also familiar with St Vincent Ferrer. On the other hand, the name of the Prato convent has no place among us in English, and may therefore have—as also may the saint's relations—its own musical name of San Vincenzio left to it; and for the same reason Catherine's friend and "spiritual son," Salviati, may keep his Christian name in its original form as "Filippo": and so on in other instances.

This explanation will show readers that what may seem an odd system of mixed nomenclature does not arise from carelessness; and they will probably be grateful for as little Anglicising as possible when they come across some of the double names that appear pretty often. Pierfrancesco, for instance, and Gianbatista, are soft and graceful appellations in their native contracted form; but who could endure to see "Peter Francis" or "John Baptist"?

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ON THE MYSTICAL LIFE

BY FATHER BERTRAND WILBERFORCE, O.P.

THE writer of this Life of St Catherine de' Ricci has asked me to help readers by pointing out what is meant by "the Mystical Life." This may assist those who have not read any work on mystical theology to understand better the dealings of almighty God with souls who, like St Catherine, are led by His special grace into close union with His divine Majesty.

The first fact evident about St Catherine is that a great part of the interest and importance of her life belongs to its hidden and mystical aspect. Externally, her biographer has but few striking events to record of her, having not very much more to tell than might be told of many Christian maidens who have led an innocent early life in their fathers' homes, and then left them for the cloister, where, after finishing their course, they have died a holy death.

This almost sums up the outward life of St Catherine de' Ricci. There were certain exceptions to such an ordinary career in her case, as will be seen; but, speaking generally, she did no visible work that the world would admire. Unlike St Catherine of Siena, to whose mystical life hers bore much resemblance, she had no public calling which would have brought her before men. She spent her life in a secluded convent, and for the most part in a constant round of duties that the world would despise as trivial, and that many would be inclined to condemn as useless.

The wonders of her life were hidden with Christ in God. They were mystical in the first and widest sense of that word, namely, being hidden, secret, invisible to the eye of man. A mystery is a hidden thing, invisible not only to the bodily eye but also to the mental and rational sight, being above and beyond the comprehension of man. God Himself is the deepest of all mysteries, and His divine Life, that never

began, can never change and will never end, is the most mysterious, the most mystical of all possible lives.

What is most wonderful in the life of St Catherine is thus secret and invisible. The intense interest of the history of souls like hers consists in studying, as far as possible, the progress of their inner life and the process by which almighty God drew them into closest intimacy and most exalted union with Himself.

If we desire a short yet comprehensive description of the mystical life, we cannot have a better than that given by St Paul in his Epistle to the Colossians.*

The Christian mystic is one who being "risen with Christ, seeks the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God; one who minds the things that are above, not the things that are upon the earth."

St Catherine was eminent among these, and of her it could be truly said at any time of her mortal life here below: "You are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God." And we can add with infallible certainty of her: "When Christ, who is our life shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory."†

A mystical life therefore, though a very real life, is hidden; it is concealed by the bright cloud that makes God invisible. It is a life more true, more beneficial, more noble and exalted than any merely natural life, but it is secret, invisible and spiritual.

St Thomas gives *secret and hidden* as the first meaning of "mystical," and in treating of the word *secret*, in his commentary on the words of Isaias,‡ "My secret to me, my secret to me," the holy doctor tells us why the wonders of God are, for the most part, secret and veiled from the eyes of men.

1. They are hidden from many on account of their very greatness, as our Lord said of the grace of perpetual chastity, "All men take not" (cannot understand) "this word, but they to whom it is given."§ In another place also He said, "I have spoken to you earthly things, and you believe

* Col. iii, 4.

† Col. iv, 1-5.

‡ xxiv, 16, Vulgate.

§ Matt. xix, 11.

not; how will you believe if I shall speak to you heavenly things?"*

2. A second reason for the secret nature of God's divine operations is on account of their supreme dignity, as our Lord explains to His apostles, saying: "To you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given."†

3. Many things are hidden from certain souls because they are unfit to receive them and too carnal-minded to understand them. "Give not that which is holy to dogs, and cast not your pearls before swine, lest perhaps they may trample them under their feet, and turning upon you they may tear you."‡

From this principle came the "discipline of the secret" in primitive ages, when such sacred doctrine as the Real Presence was kept carefully from the knowledge of those outside the Church.

It is a maxim of the spiritual life that the more we love, the more we know. In illustration of this, a story told of Gregory Lopez, a very simple man, but a high contemplative, comes to the mind. Knowing that Philip II, King of Spain, when the candle was put into his hand at death, had exclaimed, "Now for the great secret," Gregory said as he himself held the death candle, "No longer any secret for me," and smiled with joy as he went to his Lord.

The life of our Lady and the wonders of God in her soul were all mystical, in the sense of being secret, hidden from the eyes of men. Her outward and visible life was that of a village maiden, afterwards married to a working-man, the village carpenter, and with great simplicity and humility doing the various duties of her state of life. That she, alone among the daughters of Eve, was conceived immaculate; that she was chosen to be the Mother of God Incarnate; that she was sinless and destined to be the spiritual Queen of Heaven, were all favours of God utterly hidden, known only by revelation.

Every one has two lives; the outward one made up of the daily actions of the visible life, and the inner life of the

* John iii, 12.

† Matt. xiii, 11.

‡ Matt. vii, 6.

soul, consisting for the most part of desires, thoughts and affections. When the soul is living in God's grace and is moved by the Holy Spirit, this inward life is supernatural, and, in a wide sense, we may call it a mystical life. But the proper signification of "mystical" is attained when the inner life of the soul is raised above the common, and consists in an extraordinary degree of union with God in both knowledge and love.

What we mean then by saying that St Catherine was a "mystic," is that she led a life, by God's grace, of most exalted and perfect contemplation of God and of fruitful, as well as most sweet, love of Him, intimately present and united to her soul.

No one, manifestly, could attain to this state by his own exertions. It must be a special and singular gift of God. No human effort could possibly attain to the lowest state of true contemplation, in the sense in which that word is used in mystical theology, without the gift of God; for contemplation means the supernatural visit of God Himself to the soul, filling the intellect with wonderful knowledge of Himself and uniting the will to Himself in the close embrace of spiritual love. In this state God illuminates the soul by bestowing on it a simple intuition* of Himself with a most ardent movement of love. This visit is sometimes of very short duration, but however brief it repays all the trials and pains, whether of soul or body, that have preceded it.

It will be useful here to lay down a few elementary principles of mystical theology, drawn from St Thomas and other holy and approved authors.

1. In the first place, what is meant by mystical theology? Theology (*θεος* and *λογος*) is the science that deals with and discourses about God, and the things of God. It is manifest that we can consider the infinite nature of God in many ways. We can point out how far the human mind can know God by the mere light of reason. The department of theology that does this is called "natural theology." Then we can proceed to consider what revelation makes known to us

* An "intuition" means simple and direct mental sight without process of reasoning. We all see by intuition that light is not darkness, black is not white, that a part is less than the whole, etc.

about God, considered in Himself and in His works. This is called "Dogmatic Theology." Moral theology treats of God's law, pointing out what He commands and forbids.

Spiritual theology teaches how the soul of man is to work out the great end of its creation, which is to become united with God in intellect and will, by faith and love. Spiritual Theology is divided into ascetical and mystical theology.

Ascetical theology lays down the ordinary rules which apply to all men, showing how they are to avoid sin in order to please God, and what they must do in order to become united to Him.

Mystical theology ascends higher and instructs men as to what they must do to prepare themselves for the gift of contemplation, in case God should deign to bestow it on them.

Mystical theology therefore differs from dogmatic (or *scholastic*) theology because, instead of being merely speculative and abstract, it is practical, and from moral and ascetical theology because it is not content to show men how to avoid sin and attain salvation and ordinary virtue, but treats of the more excellent way of love, and of that intimate union with God in this world which is the foretaste of heavenly glory.

The end and object of mystical theology, or the science of true wisdom and of the secret of divine union, is to guide the soul of man into the most perfect degree of the love of God.

Mystical theology is therefore a sublime science, since it points out to man the way to ascend to God. It is, moreover, of extreme utility because it is the true practical wisdom, not consisting merely in theoretical disputations "which minister questionings," but showing how we are to avoid evil and become closely united to the infinite good. It directs us at once to "the end of the commandment—charity—from a pure heart and a good conscience, and faith unfeigned."*

The spiritual life in general is considered to have three principal divisions, through which in some degree all those

* 1 Tim. i, 4, 5.

who save their souls must pass. They are indicated in Psalm xxxiii, 15 :

Depart from evil, and do good;
Seek peace and pursue it.

“Depart from evil.” The purification of the soul from all sin, mortal and venial, and from all affections and desires that are not for God, is the first stage of the spiritual life, and is called the “purgative state,” or the state of purification.

“Do good.” These two words indicate the second stage of the soul’s life, which is called the “illuminative state,” and consists in meditating on and practically imitating the life and virtues of Jesus Christ, the light of the world. The third stage is called the “unitive way,” because the purified soul, formed after the model of Christ, does all that is possible to unite itself to God in perfect love.

In these three ways, the ways of the Lord, all must walk continually. The beginner, though still unpurified, must try to follow our Lord and to be united to God by love, and the soul most advanced in perfection will always find defects to be amended and virtue to be practised more generously. But at first the chief work will be to purify the soul, while after a time the main object will be to form virtuous habits by imitating the life of Christ, and at last the union of love will be the one absorbing thought and desire. This union can be always made more and more perfect; it can increase without measure.

Before proceeding further it will be useful to explain what is meant by the term “spiritual life,” and what is understood by “union with God,” for many use these words without any very definite idea of their meaning.

By spiritual life is meant habitual or sanctifying grace. This grace is a supernatural gift of God, poured into our souls by the Holy Spirit, and remaining there clothing the soul as a habit. It is not a passing movement of the Spirit of God, but something dwelling in the soul and raising it to a supernatural state. The effect of this noble gift of God’s goodness is to make the soul holy, righteous and pleasing

to God. It makes us the adopted children of God, the members of Christ and heirs of the kingdom of heaven. This abiding grace is the source of all good to us in the supernatural order, the root, of virtues, of meritorious actions, of the sight and love of God. Without it we can do nothing to merit eternal life or to promote supernatural union with God.

Our Lord declares that to bestow on us this great principle of spiritual good was the precise object of the Incarnation: "I have come that they may have life, and may have it more abundantly."* St Thomas† teaches us that as the soul gives life to the body, so God giveth life to the soul, and the holy doctor quotes the words "He is thy life."‡ He is the cause of the supernatural life of the soul by bestowing on it habitual and abiding grace.

The soul of man, the principle of life, has certain powers by which it acts, which we call intellect and will. These are necessary for every rational act. In like manner the habitual grace of God has certain virtues by means of which it acts in the supernatural order, and these powers are faith, hope and charity which unite the soul to God. The moral virtues are also infused into the soul when it receives supernatural grace and charity, even though they may have been acquired before by the light of reason and practised as natural virtues.

But in order that these virtues may produce their fruit actually, the help of God by actual grace is necessary. These actual graces are movements of the Holy Ghost. These graces are necessary because man is so weak, that he cannot even use the virtues poured by God into his soul, without actual light given to the mind and strength to the will. "Without Me you can do nothing."§

God is so generous that besides grace making us holy and pleasing to Him, and actual graces (light and strength) continually bestowed upon us, we have also the gifts of the Holy Ghost, which are poured into the soul in baptism.

St Thomas shows at some length || that these gifts are

* John x, 10. † I, II, qu. 1 10, art. i ad 2. ‡ Deuteronomy xxx, 20.
§ John xv, 5. || 1a 2æ, qu. 68, art. 1.

really distinct from virtues, though some virtues, e.g., fortitude, are called by the same names.

Of these gifts, four perfect the reason or intellectual faculty, namely, wisdom, knowledge, understanding and counsel: and three perfect the will, or the power of desire, and these are, fortitude, piety and the fear of the Lord.

On this interesting, though rather abstruse subject, St Thomas writes as follows:

“In order to distinguish the gifts from the virtues, we must follow the way of speaking we find in Scripture, in which they are described to us not indeed under the name of gifts, but of spirits. For we read, “The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him [Christ], the spirit of wisdom,” etc.*

Now these words clearly give us to understand that the seven gifts here enumerated are within us by divine inspiration. But inspiration implies a certain movement from outside ourselves. For we must remember that in man there is a twofold principle moving the soul: one in the soul itself, which is our reason; the other exterior, which is God.

It is clear that everything that is moved must bear proportion to the mover. If we consider a thing as able to be moved, its perfection in that respect would consist in being able to be well and easily moved by the one moving it. By how much therefore the mover is higher in his nature, the one moved ought to be disposed to movement by a more perfect disposition; as, for example, a more perfect state of mental activity is necessary in a pupil to take in a more difficult teaching of his professor.

Now it is evident that human virtues perfect a man's natural reason, for it is natural for a man to be moved by reason in those things he does, whether within his soul or in outward action.

It is necessary, therefore, for the human soul to have certain higher perfections to put him into the right state to receive divine movements, and these perfections are called “gifts,” not only because they are poured into the soul by

* Isa. xi, 2.

God, but also because by them the human soul is put into such a state that it can be promptly moved by the divine inspiration. This state is indicated by Isaias, in the words: "The Lord God hath opened my ear, and I do not resist: I have not gone back."*

Habitual or sanctifying grace, with the abiding virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit, are bestowed in baptism on every Christian; but, over and above, God often adorns His friends with certain special favours, which are called "graces freely or gratuitously given." They are thus called because they are not essential for salvation or for holiness, but are ornaments and treasures by which the spiritual favourites of the King are enriched. We see a type of this in the natural talents and advantages given to some men and not possessed by others. Some have remarkable musical or artistic powers, others inherit great riches and honours, others enjoy extraordinary literary or poetical gifts. These special talents are not necessary to perfect their nature. Those who have no sign of them are equally men, though they lack many advantages which the ones enriched by these special talents enjoy.

In the spiritual and supernatural order also God is pleased to single out certain select souls and to bestow on them, according to His will, certain graces that do not render them more holy, but make them wonderful and illustrious among His servants.

St Paul enumerates some of these special endowments in his first epistle to the Corinthians.† Among these royal favours are included the gifts of prophecy, of miraculous healing, reaching the hearts of others, and wonderful intercourse with the unseen world by visions, ecstasies, raptures and other things. These are not necessary for salvation or perfection, but are freely bestowed upon His faithful servants, chiefly for the good of others, though sometimes as the reward of virtue. They do not increase sanctifying grace, and therefore do not render those that receive them more holy or more pleasing to God. They are rather signs of virtue and of God's good pleasure. After St Peter had cured

* Isa. l, 5.

† 1 Cor. xii, 8-11.

the lame man,* he was no holier than before, but the wonderful sign showed the people that God was with him, and made them more willing to listen to his teaching.

Having laid down these elementary principles we shall be more easily able to understand the extraordinary events in the lives of saints like St Catherine de' Ricci.

The spiritual life is essentially the same in every soul. Every baptized person receives sanctifying grace, as the principle of all holy life, and with it the supernatural virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost. All have to be purified from sin, to practise virtue, and to be united to God by charity. But some do this much more perfectly than others. Many pass through their whole lives without much progress. Constantly falling away from God by sin they come to the end of their probation very little purified, with very weak virtue and slight union with God, leaving the work of their purification to be accomplished in the next world. Others make holiness the one object of their lives, and attain, by God's grace, to very intimate union with Him even in this mortal state. Of these the Holy Ghost says: "The path of the just as a shining light, goeth forwards and increaseth even unto perfect day." †

Before proceeding further it will be useful to explain what is meant by the state of contemplation. We often hear of the contemplative orders, the Carthusians and Cistercians among men, and the Carmelites and Poor Clares for women. Those who enter these orders adopt a quiet life of prayer and penance instead of devoting their energies to works of charity. The members of these Orders are called contemplative Religious, or members of a contemplative Order, but they are not on that account in "a state of contemplation," in the sense that mystical theology understands that term.

Contemplation is a free gift of God to a faithful soul. It is a divine visit made by God to the soul, enlightening it and uniting it in most ardent and sweet love with Himself. In this supernatural state the soul, in some way, sees God, not by the indirect way of reasoning and meditation but by a simple intuition or spiritual sight. This heavenly visit may vary very much in details, as regards intensity,

* Acts iii. † Prov. iv, 18.

duration and the like, for being a perfectly gratuitous favour of almighty God, it is evident that no rules can be laid down in the matter.

Writers of mystical theology treat of "ordinary" and "extraordinary" contemplation.

Contemplation is described as "ordinary," not because it is a common thing, but because it is an elevation of mind into God, not by reasoning and meditation, but by simple intuition, by means of special divine light and with most ardent love, but still within the laws of God's ordinary providence in dealing with holy souls. This kind of contemplation is called in a certain sense "acquired," and may be said in a measure to depend on the exertions of the soul, but only in a limited sense. For it is a distinct gift of God and without the free action of His grace it cannot be secured by anything the soul can do or suffer. But the soul can dispose itself for the divine visit, and thus invite God to come and bestow His special favours upon it.

We must remember that this ordinary contemplation is a supernatural state implying intense love of God and entire submission to His will, and therefore is totally different from a merely speculative and philosophical contemplation of truth, which may carry away the mind, but without any supernatural action of God. The main difference consists in its being the action of God's grace on the intellect and the will, and therefore not speculative only, but implying also a vehement motion of love to God.

Benedict XIV, in his work on the canonization of saints, describes contemplation as being "a simple intellectual intuition (or mental insight) of divine things with the relish of love." This proceeds from a special action of God on the intellect and will, by which the soul sees and realizes divine truths. The soul is attracted and drawn into God by a singular brightness of light in the intellect and united to Him by burning love in the will.

The words of Psalm xxxiii, 9, "Taste and see how sweet the Lord is"; and Psalm xlv, 11, "Be still and see that I am God," are considered to refer particularly to the soul when thus visited by God. Also the Beatitude, "Blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God." For, though

in this life in the body we cannot see the divine essence, still these words of our Lord seem to imply that a soul truly purified can be raised by His light to a simple intuition of His presence.

There is such a thing as a merely natural rapture, by which a man is carried out of himself, and loses consciousness of where he is or what he is doing or suffering by intense concentration of the mind on one thought. In such cases the rapture is only partial.

This is a power we often see in the lives of eminent thinkers. Sir Isaac Newton, Gladstone, Newman, and many others, had this power of concentration of mind in a marked degree. St Thomas Aquinas possessed it, as few others ever did. We are told that when the surgeons came to perform an operation on his leg, the holy doctor so concentrated the whole force of his mind upon the mystery of the blessed Trinity, that he felt no pain. This need not have been miraculous. It may have been the effect of intense concentration of mind, amounting to entire rapture, the holy man thus anticipating the merciful office of chloroform.

Quite different, however, not only in degree but in kind, is the extraordinary contemplation of the saints.

Contemplation is called extraordinary when there is an elevation of the mind into God by simple intuition and most ardent affection of love, above the ordinary laws of God's dealings with souls. We may call it miraculous contemplation; for it is as miraculous in the order of grace as it would be in the natural order to fly in the air, or to pass through fire without injury.

Instances of this miraculous state of union with God are found in the holy Scripture. One notable example is found in the transfiguration of our Lord on Mount Thabor, during which the three apostles were by special privilege allowed to see His glory and were carried out of themselves by an ecstasy of love, speaking words, yet "not knowing what they said."*

Also the marvellous rapture described by St Paul † is an example of miraculous contemplation of the highest kind,

* Mark ix, 5.

† 2 Cor. xii.

in which the apostle was "caught up," by the Spirit of God, "into paradise, and heard secret or 'mystical' words which it is not lawful for man to utter."

St Thomas in his commentary on 2 Cor. xii, considers that the apostle speaks of two different raptures, one in verse 2, in which (whether in the body or out of it he knew not) he was "rapt to the third heaven"; and another in which (again not knowing whether his soul left his body or not) he was caught up to paradise, and saw the very essence of God.

The first rapture, when his soul was rapt, or carried away by the power of Christ, to the third heaven, is an example of extraordinary contemplation resting on the authority of the inspired word. St Thomas conjectures that it took place during the three days in Damascus,* after his conversion, which he passed in blindness and neither eating nor drinking.

Whenever the miraculous ecstasy occurred, the apostle declares that he was rapt, that is transported, out of himself, by the power of God. He had, in other words, a mystical ecstasy.

As the soul possesses the twofold power of intellect and will, the rapture may be principally directed to one or the other, though both will be always acted upon, for the soul is simple, and cannot really be divided.

If the effect is primarily on the will, then the soul is carried away from the love of self to the intense love of God and the things of God. A rapture of this nature is called seraphic.

On the other hand, when the action of God affects directly and principally the intellectual faculty which is out of itself and is flooded with intellectual light, then the rapture is called by mystical writers cherubic. In both cases there is light and love, but in the first the will is primarily and principally affected, and in the second the intellect.

The rapture of St Paul was cherubic, because the first and chief effect was the illumination of the intellect, though

* Acts ix.

accompanied, as in all true contemplation, with intense love uniting the will to God.

The reason of raptures being called either cherubic or seraphic is found in analogy to the two choirs of the angelic host which are nearest God. These are the seraphim and cherubim. The seraphim excel all the other choirs in that which is the highest thing of all, in loving union with God, and the cherubim know the divine secrets in the most excellent degree.

A rapture, then, means an elevation of soul from a natural to a supernatural state by the action of a higher power. The raising up of the soul from the ordinary state of intellect and will to an extraordinary condition by the action of God.

St Paul, in describing his first rapture, says he was carried "even to the third heaven." We may ask what is meant by this expression?

One interpretation considers that allusion is made to the air above us, the spaces of the sidereal heavens, and the empyrean heaven, which was considered to be the highest heaven, where the pure element of fire was supposed by the ancients to subsist.

But this ancient notion, founded on mistaken notions of the physical universe, was considered by St Thomas as too material. So the holy doctor reminds us that there are three kinds of vision:

1. Corporeal vision, with our material eyes, by which we see and know bodily objects.

2. Imaginary vision by which we can form in the mind the likeness of a material object that we have seen. The imagination cannot represent things we have never seen.

3. Intellectual vision, or sight, by which we can see the natures of things in themselves. By this kind of sight we see an abstract truth, for instance that a thing cannot be and not be at the same time.

If these three kinds of sight are exercised in the ordinary way they are simply natural. They cannot in any sense be called "heavens."

But any one of them may be called "heaven," if they

come to be exercised by the action of God in a way above the natural power of man.

1. If with the bodily eyes a man sees something above the ordinary power of nature, he may be said to be rapt to the first heaven. In this way was Baltassar or Belshazzar affected when he saw the mysterious hand writing on the wall.*

2. But if the soul is lifted up, and enabled to see, not an object appearing to the eyes of the body, but some interior image of the mind representing figuratively a supernatural truth, then a man may be said to be carried to the second heaven. An instance of this may be found in St Peter's vision when he saw "heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as if it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth; wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts and creeping things and fowls of the air, etc.†

This was a heavenly vision presented to the imagination, to teach St Peter the Christian doctrine that not only the Jews but all nations of the earth were called to the Catholic Church and to salvation. St Peter was in an ecstasy, or as the English version translates it, "a trance," during which, having lost consciousness of outward things he was carried to the "second heaven" and interiorly instructed by an imaginary vision.

But St Paul tells us of his own case that he was carried higher still, to "the third heaven," because he was so utterly raised above all sensible and bodily things and favoured with a vision of things purely intellectual in the same way in which they are seen by the angels and souls separated from their bodies. What is more wonderful, he saw in this rapture even the essence of God Himself, as St Augustine clearly maintains.‡

Nor, continues St Thomas, is it probable that Moses, the minister of the Old Testament to the Jews, should see God, and the minister of the New Testament to the nations and the doctor of the Gentiles should be deprived of this privilege.

* Dan. v. † Acts x, 11.

‡ XII super Gen. ad litt. et in Glossa et ad Paulin. in libr. de videndo Deum.

Now it is clear that Moses did see the essence of God. He asked this favour in so many words, saying "Show me Thy Face."* Though it was at that time denied, we are not told that his petition was finally rejected. St Augustine's opinion is that it was conceded at some other time, and that this is implied by the expressions in the book of Numbers, where the Lord said: "Hear My words: if there be among you a prophet of the Lord, I will appear to him in a vision or speak to him in a dream; but it is not so with My servant Moses, who is most faithful in all My house. For I speak to him mouth to mouth, and plainly, not by riddles and figures doth he see the Lord."†

For this transient sight of the Essence of God it was necessary that St Paul should be carried completely above all sensible and bodily things. It would be impossible for God to be seen face to face in this life by a man not entirely abstracted from all sensible things, because no image, nothing represented by the imagination, could be a medium sufficient to show the essence of God. In order to see Him a man must be rapt to the third heaven.

There is another way of interpreting the words "the third heaven."‡ There are in heaven three hierarchies of angels, in each of which there are three choirs. These three hierarchies may represent the three heavens, and, according to this interpretation, St Paul was rapt to the third heaven in this sense, that he saw the essence of God as clearly as the angels of the highest hierarchy see Him. They, the Cherubim and Seraphim and Thrones, see Him so clearly that they are enlightened immediately by God Himself and thus they know the divine mysteries. This same high illumination was given to St Paul.

An objection might be made to this interpretation. It might be said that, were this true, St Paul would have been in his mortal life glorified and a "comprehensor": that is, one who enjoys the beatific vision.

But this was not so. Even though he did see the essence of God he was not one of the glorified, because it was not

* Exod. xxxiii, 13.

† Numbers xii, 6, 7, 8.

‡ St Thomas in loco.

a permanent and abiding vision but only transient and during his rapture.

We must notice that St Paul says of his rapture, "Whether in the body, I know not, or out of the body, I know not, God knoweth." In what sense are we to understand this expression?

Some consider that by these words the apostle declares that he did not know whether, in this rapture, his body, as well as his soul, was carried away, or whether his soul only ascended or was assumed into the third heaven; whether he was carried up in a bodily way, as we read of Habacuc in the last chapter of Daniel, or in the way Ezechiel describes in the eighth chapter of his prophecy.

St Augustine and St Thomas do not admit this interpretation, considering that if St Paul had been carried up, in the body, into a corporeal heaven he must have known it; and therefore they interpret the passage to mean that the apostle did not know whether, in that vision, his soul was so utterly abstracted from all sensible things as to be for the time entirely out of his body; or whether his soul was all the time still animating the body and only raised in mind above all sensible and corporeal things. The words of God in Exodus, "Man shall not see Me and live,"* are considered to mean that man cannot see God unless the soul is entirely separated from the bodily life, either in the sense of being completely out of the body and separated from it, as after death; or when, remaining still as the life of the body, it is completely abstracted from sensible things: i.e., the second rapture.†

The difference between the two aforementioned visions or raptures is that, in the first St Paul describes himself as "rapt to the third heaven," and in the second as "caught up into paradise."

If we accept the more spiritual meaning of the "third heaven," as indicating that the soul did not receive a mere imaginary vision, but entirely abstracted above all visible and corporal things so as to see purely intellectual truths in themselves, then there will be no distinction of place be-

* Exod. xxxiii.

† 2 Cor. xii, 3, 4.

tween the "third heaven" and "paradise." One and the same is meant by both expressions, namely the glory of the saints; but looked at from two different points of view.

For by the word "heaven" is meant a certain marvellous elevation of mind with singular brightness of intellectual light, while by the word "paradise" is indicated a wonderfully high degree of joy and sweetness. In the first is indicated primarily the illumination of the intellect and in the second the delight of the will—light and sweetness.

The angels and the blessed who see God face to face possess light and sweetness both in an excellent degree. There is in their minds wonderful brightness of glory by the light of which they see God, and intense sweetness which comes from the possession and fruition of God. And therefore they may be said to be in "heaven," if we consider the brightness of their vision, and in "paradise," if we consider the sweetness and joy of their union with God. "You shall see, and your hearts shall rejoice."

Both these gifts were bestowed upon the apostle in these mystical visions, for he was lifted above all earthly things into the very highest spiritual brightness of vision, and thus was "rapt to the third heaven"; and he moreover had joyful experience of the sweetness of divine union, and thus was "caught up into paradise."

"O how great is the multitude of Thy sweetness, O Lord,
Which Thou hast hidden from them that fear Thee,
Which Thou hast wrought for them that hope in Thee,
In the sight of the sons of men."†

"To him that shall overcome I will give the hidden (or mystical) manna."‡

This sweetness, this mystical manna, is the joy flowing perpetually from the full possession of God, of which it is said, "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."§

The exalted nature of the ecstasy with which he was favoured is shown by the following words. St Paul tells us "he heard secret (or mystical) words, which it is not granted to man to utter."

By the expression "he heard secret words" is meant that

* Isa. lxiii, 14.

† Ps. xxx, 20.

‡ Apoc. ii, 17.

§ Matt. xxv.

he perceived by the light of God in his soul, secret or unspeakable things about the divine essence.

As St Paul was miraculously rapt from earth to heaven and saw, in a passing manner, the very essence of God Himself, it is evident that it was impossible for him to describe what had been communicated to him, in human language. Words are symbols by which we convey to others the ideas of our own mind, but these exalted truths were so much above human ken that they were secret, mystical, incomprehensible to ordinary men.

Before speaking of this rapture, which was far more wonderful than any related of St Catherine de' Ricci, St Paul says: "If I must glory (it is not expedient indeed), but I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord."

As St Catherine and the other mystics had so many visions and revelations, it will be interesting to ask what is the difference between them.

Every revelation, by which God makes known to the human mind some truth by an inner and supernatural light, may be called a vision. By the action of God, the soul sees something invisible to unaided knowledge.

But, on the other hand, every vision is not a revelation.

It may happen that a man's soul receives a supernatural communication from God, but the man understands not the meaning of what is represented to him. In that case there is a vision, but no revelation.

The visions of Pharaoh and of King Nabuchodonosor were of this nature, and were not revelations.†

On the other hand, where there is an understanding of the spiritual meaning of the thing seen, then there is a revelation.

So Pharaoh and Nabuchodonosor had a vision only, but Joseph and Daniel both a vision and a revelation.

Both the vision and the revelation are sometimes from God. "There is God in heaven, who revealeth mysteries."‡

Sometimes, however, visions and revelations may come from the evil spirit: "They [the prophets of Samaria] prophesied in Baal and deceived My people Israel."*

* Gen. xli; Dan. ii. † Dan. ii, 28; compare Osee xii, 10. ‡ Jer. xxiii, 13.

The apostle St Paul had both visions and revelations, because the secret (mystical) things he saw he fully understood by the action of the Lord, not by any deception of the devil.

The word "revelation" signifies the taking away of a veil that hides truth. This intellectual veil may be twofold:

1. The veil may be in the mind of the man who sees the vision, and may be the effect of infidelity or want of faith, sin or hardness of heart.*

2. Or the veil may be over the thing seen; when, that is, a spiritual truth is represented to a man's mind under sensible figures. Weak minds, weak in faith and love, cannot take in spiritual things if they are presented to their minds as they are in themselves. This is typified by the rule given to the priests, that they should carry the vessels of the sanctuary veiled. All things in the old law were figures of the spiritual realities of the new dispensation; and this is a type of the truth that souls weak in light and love (faith and charity) are not able to understand, take in and see spiritual things as they are in themselves. These things must be represented to them under figures, allegories and parables. Therefore our Lord spoke to the people in parables. But to those more enlightened He said: "Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear." †

Another divine Gift bestowed on God's Servants, not to increase their Sanctity but for the good of others, is that of Prophecy

1. What is meant by a Prophet?

The word is derived from a Greek word signifying to foretell. A prophet, therefore, denotes a man who can see certain things afar off. In early times a man thus enlightened was called a "seer," or "one able to see." †

Prophecy, then, is the sight of things afar off, either because they are future and contingent (that is possible but not necessary to occur), or because they are above the reason of man and require supernatural light.

* 2 Cor. iii, 14.

† Matt. xiii, 13.

‡ 1 Kings ix.

For prophecy, four things are necessary.

1. The first requisite is that in the imagination should be formed the likenesses of those things that appear to the mind; for it is impossible for a ray of divine light to shine upon us unless wrapt in a variety of sacred veils.

2. The second thing required is intellectual illumination of the mind that it may know and understand the things shown which are above natural knowledge. For unless the one who sees the images formed in the imagination understands their secret significance, he is a dreamer—not a prophet—as Pharaoh was.

3. The third thing required for a prophet is boldness to announce what has been communicated to his mind.

4. The fourth is the working of miracles done to show the truth of the prophecy. For unless the prophet does something above the power of nature, men will be slow to believe that he can see the future by a supernatural light.

Different Degrees

Sometimes a man appears in whom all these four things are combined. He sees imaginary visions and, having the knowledge of what they portend, he boldly proclaims it to others, at the same time working miracles as the credentials of what he foretells.* On the other hand, a man is sometimes called a prophet who has only imaginary visions, but in a very indistinct and remote way.

Again, the name of prophet used to be given to one who had intellectual light, which enabled him to explain imaginary visions that have come to himself or others; or to expound the dark sayings of the prophets or the writings of the apostles. In this way any one is a prophet who understands the writings of the wise, for by the same spirit from whom they come are they interpreted. Solomon and David are thus called prophets because they had intellectual light by which they could see clearly the dark mysteries of God. David's visions were intellectual only.

Moreover, in a wide sense, the name of prophet was occasionally given to a man, only from the fact that he an-

* Numbers xii, 6.

nounced or explained the sayings of the prophets or sang them in church, and in this way it was said that Saul was among the prophets, that is, among those who chanted the words of the prophets.

Lastly, a man who has the gift of miracles is sometimes called a prophet, as, for instance, when it is said of Eliseus, "After death his body prophesied,"* that is, his relics worked a miracle.

What St Paul says in chapter xiv of 1 Corinthians is to be understood of those who are prophets in the second sense, namely, by being able through divine intellectual light, to explain the meaning of visions shown to himself or to others.

Gift of Tongues

In the primitive Church there were few to whom was given the office of preaching the faith of Christ through the world, therefore our Lord, for the more easy spreading of the word of salvation to a greater number, bestowed on preachers the gift of tongues, by which they might announce salvation to all. They spoke all languages. "I thank God that I speak with all your tongues."† Many in the primitive church had this gift from God.

The Corinthians desired this gift more than that of prophecy. When the Apostle then writes of "speaking with tongues," he means speaking in an unknown tongue and being understood; as, for instance, if a man spoke in German to a French man, who was ignorant of German, and was understood.

Many saints received the gift of tongues, either speaking in their own language and being understood by those who knew not their tongue, or speaking miraculously languages they had not learnt. St Vincent Ferrer, St Lewis Bertrand, St Francis Xavier and many others, are instances of this wonderful gift.‡

In the light of these instances of the higher mystical

* Eccles xlviij, 14. † 1 Cor. xiv, 18, and Acts i.

‡ In the first Epistle to the Corinthians (xiv) the Apostle seems to speak of the gift of tongues as merely, or at least chiefly, bestowed as a sign of the indwelling Spirit. Neither the speakers nor the hearers appeared always to have understood.

life, from St Paul, explained to us by St Thomas, we are more able to understand the life of St Catherine and the other mystics and the wonderful favours bestowed on them by our Lord.

St Catherine was an instance of one chosen and singled out by God for the state of extraordinary contemplation, which means that she was visited, or acted upon, by His divine Majesty in a miraculous manner.

She was prepared for this state of extraordinary union with God from her infancy. God took possession of her soul in a special way, not granted to ordinary people, and He bestowed upon her extraordinary lights and helps to prepare her for her future union with Himself by charity.

At what period of her life she first received the gift of contemplation it is difficult to say. The ordinary rule is that the gift is not bestowed on any soul that has not undergone a long and painful course of purification, so as to become, by cleanness of heart, "the King's friend." "He that loveth cleanness of heart . . . shall have the King for his friend."*

This purification from the least and most hidden vestige of self-love is generally a long and painful process, in which are recognized two different stages, which may be either simultaneous or succeeding each other. The first is called the active, the second the passive, purification.

In the first the soul is purified by what it does itself, with God's grace. All kinds of austerities that afflict the body are of this class and especially all self-restraint that mortifies the inner powers of the soul. In it is included the whole region of mortification, exterior as well as interior.

The second stage is much more painful and searching. It is when God takes the direct management of the purifying process into His own hands, and begins to cleanse the soul Himself: the soul is then passive under His divine touch.

Those who have read the Life of Blessed Henry Suso will remember how, after several years of strict austerity and brave penance, he was told that he might now cast away his instruments of corporal mortification. He was delighted, and describes in his simple, childlike way, the joy of being

* Prov. xxii, 11.

delivered from these hard and difficult exercises. Then he is shown under the figure of an old cloth, tossed up and down, carried hither and thither, torn and rent by the teeth of a dog, how God was now about to take his soul into His own hands, and that torn clout was an image of how his soul must be treated. Descending into the cloister Blessed Henry rescued the cloth from the dog and preserved it with great care as the image of himself.

Then he was subjected to such a series of searching trials without and within, calumny, persecution, sickness, temptation, aridity and desolation, that all the austerities and penances he had inflicted on himself appeared to him as mere child's play.

Of these terrible sufferings he lovingly complains to the Eternal Wisdom in his Dialogue, saying: "It may well be, Lord, that afflictions are most wholesome, if only they are not too great. But, O Lord God, who alone knowest all hidden things, Thou Thyself dost see that my sufferings now are without measure and entirely beyond my strength." To this the Eternal Wisdom replies: "From thy own experience surely thou hast learnt that the crosses sent by Me (the passive purification), if a man knows how to use them aright, come more home, penetrate more deeply and more quickly urge a man to give himself to God and in a way force him into God, than any chosen by his own will" (active purification).

What is the object of all this suffering, of all this long series of painful afflictions of body and soul? It is to cleanse the soul, to cast out self-love, to prepare the inner sanctuary of the spirit to be the marriage-chamber in the spiritual nuptials between God and the soul.

And what is meant by purifying or cleansing the soul? It is an allegory taken from the idea of cleaning a room or washing stains from the hands or face or from white garments. The cleansing of the soul must be the casting out of the memory and intellect every thought that is not God or for God. This is, in other words, making the soul love God with its whole mind. The memory has to be so completely mortified before God can visit the soul, as to remember

nothing but God, and the things necessary to be remembered for the service of God. In like manner the intellect must be so restrained as to be occupied only with God and the things of God.

This no doubt renders very holy men not such pleasant companions to those who are in a lower state of soul. They can take interest in few things. Their thoughts and desires are all entirely centred on God and invisible things. They can take a lively interest in nothing else. So we are told of St Dominic that he could talk only of God or to God, because his memory and intellect were full of the thought of God and nothing else.

Besides this, the will has to be purified. What is meant by having the heart and will, the desires and affections made clean and pure? Pure means unmixed. Pure water, pure wine, are not mingled with any other substance. Wine mixed with water is not pure wine. The human will is likewise pure when it has one only desire—God and union with God. This must be the state of the soul before it can be ready for the supernatural visit of God, called contemplation. All self-love must be entirely excluded. The movement of grace must be the beginning of every deliberate action, and God's glory must be its end. The love of God, that is the desire to please God, must be the motive for doing or not doing everything, the will of God must be the rule regulating every action, whilst the presence of God must be the sunshine illuminating and animating everything.*

This is a simple process of prayer, of which all are capable, but mystical contemplation is impossible without the special and gratuitous visit of God to the soul.

For this happy and holy state the soul must have learnt complete, prompt and perpetual submission to God's will,

* In the Spiritual exercises of St Ignatius some exercises are called meditations, others contemplations. The word "contemplation" here means something quite distinct from the supernatural visit of God, either ordinary or miraculous. In the exercises called "meditations" the principle thing is the discourse of the mind reasoning about the subject, in order to draw the will to prayer; in the exercises called "contemplations" the soul looks at the mystery as a kind of picture, without so much reasoning, and speaks to those seen in the picture, listens to them, watches them, etc.

and this heavenly knowledge can be acquired nowhere save in the school of suffering, the divine school of the cross.

Give sorrow leave awhile to tutor me
To this submission.

Nothing else than the cross can give this submission, absolute, entire, unhesitating, cheerful and loving, to God's will.

When the soul has been thus purified, God may, if He pleases and when He pleases, bestow upon it the grace of contemplation, either in an ordinary or in an extraordinary manner, in divers degrees and for different lengths of time.

All this may be traced in the life of any saint. In St Catherine we have an instance of a soul purified in great measure from early childhood, kept clean from sin and unruly desire by the indwelling Spirit of God, though not without her own co-operation. Therefore much less purification was necessary, and the gift of ordinary contemplation was evidently bestowed at a very early age. The more wonderful favour of extraordinary contemplation was bestowed also at an early age, or perhaps from the very beginning.

God intended her light not to be under a bushel, but to be put on a candlestick, that it might shine unto all that are in the house of His Church. Therefore he added many wonderful "graces freely given," such as visions, raptures, prophecies, miracles and other extraordinary manifestations of His wisdom, goodness and power.

These things, it should be remembered, did not make St Catherine holy. She would have been as holy without them. Her holiness consisted in the high degree of sanctifying grace and union with God to which she was raised by the Divine Majesty.

But without these signs of God's special favour she might have remained one of the vast multitude of hidden saints, not recognized on earth.

Having a special work to accomplish, as the instrument of God, in the Church and for individual souls, it was necessary that she should be favoured by many outward and

visible manifestations of God's special and miraculous dealings with her soul.

From what has been said it follows that the words "mystic," "mystical," "mysticism" are often used in modern literature in a sense very different from that in which Catholic writers employ them. Often indeed it is not easy to understand what modern authors do mean by these phrases, and perhaps the writers themselves could not very clearly explain. It might indeed be considered almost as profane to demand a definition of so vague an idea, as it would be to inquire of certain modern poets what exactly they meant by their verses. They express probably a kind of universal tendency of general vagueness that cannot be precisely defined.

Thus, philosophical writers are sometimes described as "mystical" who have a symbolical way of looking at abstract truths. Again writers of fiction often describe their characters as "mystically inclined," because their minds have a tinge of melancholy and regard ethical or religious truth in a dreamy, imaginative and unpractical kind of way.

The Catholic mystical theologians have on the other hand, as has been shown in this essay, a very definite and precise meaning when they use the word mysticism, and can indicate very clearly what they signify by calling a man a mystic or by saying that he walked in mystical ways.

They mean that the soul was chosen by our Lord to lead a life of close and constant union with God. Such a soul, in a most perfect way, realizes the ideal held out by St Paul in the words: "Always rejoice, pray without ceasing, in all things give thanks." *

A mystic in this real and highest sense fully appreciates that lovely distich of Cowper, who possessed so religious a mind that, had he only been a Catholic, he might himself have walked in mystical ways, instead of being driven into madness by the blasphemous horrors of Calvinism.

These two lines St Catherine herself might have written, in her highest union of mystical love:

Give what Thou wilt, without Thee we are poor,
And rich with Thee, take what Thou wilt away.

* 1 Thess. v, 16.

St Paul, as we can easily draw from what he has written in his epistles, was an eminent mystic. We have already seen how he was favoured by the highest visions, raptures and revelations.

His hidden, secret (that is mystical), life of union with God can be gathered from incidental sayings about himself in his various epistles.

A man who is a Christian mystic lives an entirely supernatural life, having no object he desires in this world; and St Paul could say with full truth: "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me."*

A mystic is one who has no inclination for anything earthly, having tasted and found by experience how sweet the Lord is; and St Paul declares: "I count all things to be but loss, for the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as dung, that I may gain Christ."

A mystic has one and only one desire, union with God. St Paul testifies this concerning himself. Nothing else did he desire in life or death, nothing else could satisfy the hunger and quench the thirst of his soul. So he exclaimed: "To me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." †

A mystic is one utterly abandoned without reserve, in life and death, to Jesus Christ, and St Paul tells us: "With Christ, I am nailed the cross." ‡

A man walking in mystical ways speaks of himself as annihilated in Jesus Christ, in the sense that natural life is of no value to him except in as far as by it he can give glory to Jesus Christ, and what but this is expressed in those sublime words, "Now also shall Christ be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death" ? §

Mystical writers speak of holy people being transformed into Jesus Christ, meaning by this strong expression the intimate union of the purified soul with our Lord, and St Paul says that he bore in his very body "the marks of the Lord Jesus." ||

The mystical mind has so put on the Lord Jesus that it

* Gal. ii, 20.

† Phil. i, 21.

‡ Gal. ii, 19.

§ Phil. i, 20.

|| Gal. vi, 17.

looks on everything in the same light that He did, and this St Paul meant when he described himself as "not knowing anything, but Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

The will of a man in mystical ways is entirely and for ever united to the Will of God, expressed by that short, simple yet comprehensive aspiration of the Apostle, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?"

Lastly, the whole object of the mystical soul is to imitate and reproduce the character and life of Jesus Christ, and how perfectly did St Paul accomplish this before he exhorted the Corinthians to follow his example: "Be ye imitators of me, as I am of Christ"!*

The reader of the Life of St Catherine will see how perfectly she could apply all these sayings of St Paul to herself. They exactly describe her inner life, and this because she, as well as the apostle, was an eminent Christian mystic.

BERTRAND WILBERFORCE, O.P.

* 1 Cor. xi, 1.

ERRATA

Page 163, line 12, for "this" read "the"

Page 183, note, for "Chapter XIX" read "Chapter XII"

ST CATHERINE DE' RICCI

CHAPTER I

St Catherine's Family—Birth (1522)—Early Years

THE Ricci family, which gave birth to St Catherine, belonged to one of the patrician houses of Florence. Its members came of an ancient race of bankers and merchants, who had always divided their lives between the counting-house and the magistracy; and who—caring as a rule more for the good of their country, for cultivating the arts, and for enjoying public life, than for making their fortunes—had helped to form the energetic and brilliant, if somewhat turbulent, aristocracy of the Republic.

Nearly three hundred years before the saint's birth an ancestor of hers, Ugucione de' Ricci, is said to have taken a noted part in one of the great faction-fights of the time, and to have furiously defended a feudal tower of his family's, with the help of a mob, against his rivals the Albizzi.* The fight appears to have had its origin in some conspiracy formed by Ugucione for the purpose of raising the Ricci faction to power and humiliating the family they hated, which resulted in success for the Ricci; and in after days the latter seem on the whole to have favoured the Medici rule, though somewhat lukewarmly, not because

* This story of Ugucione de' Ricci is given without any authority named by Guasti in the Introduction to the "Letters" and copied from him by Père Bayonne. The present writer, looking carefully through Napier's detailed history of Florence, and other Italian chroniclers that he refers to, can find no mention of this particular fight, nor of any noted one in which a Ricci took part.

they genuinely approved it but because the Albizzi were against it, and it brought about their banishment.

The saint's father, Pierfrancesco de' Ricci, son of a Roberto, was a prominent man in Florence, and much valued by his fellow-citizens. Both before and under the Medici he held one important office of state after another, being in turn Prior, Gonfalonier, "Member of the Six," and later Member of the "Council of Two Hundred." Afterwards he filled posts of local government in both town and country, dying, as we shall see, a Maritime Consul; but all the time remaining head of the family bank, which he managed with the help of his eldest brother Federigo, who was his partner. Federigo was of equal consequence in the city with Pierfrancesco, and a man of considerable character. On the occasion of the revolt in 1527 which temporarily deprived the Medici of power, being made "Prior" for the moment, he chivalrously declined at great cost to himself to use his authority against the unpopular rulers.

Catherine's mother sprang from an illustrious Italian family, that of the Ricasoli, of which she was the last representative and sole heiress.* Her own name was Catherine de' Panzano, daughter of a Ridolfo, and she married Pierfrancesco de' Ricci in 1514.

Guasti, in his Introduction to the Letters, mentions a romantic but sad history—connected with a paternal aunt of St Catherine's, Marietta de' Ricci (a woman so renowned in her day for wickedness that she became the subject of many fictions)—which makes a strange contrast to that of her holy niece. In the saint's own generation, also, the two families of Federigo and Pierfrancesco had curiously contrasting lots, for poor Federigo had a daughter named Cassandra who followed in this aunt's footsteps and was a grief and shame to her family throughout her career. Neither of these two life-histories, however, appears to have actually crossed that of the saint, and they are mentioned

* In the South Kensington Museum, amongst a most interesting collection of mediaeval Italian "marriage coffers," there is one beautifully painted, showing the magnificent wedding procession of a Ricasoli, probably a maternal ancestress of our saint.

here only to make a picture of the family and surroundings from which she sprang.

The future saint (whose name of Catherine was only given to her in Religion) appears to have been the eldest* of her mother's children; she was born on April 23, 1522, and was baptized next day with the name of Alessandra Lucrezia Romola. Her birth did not take place in the old Ricci Palace, on the Corso, possessing the tower associated with her turbulent ancestor Uguccione, but in a palace called the Riccardi, which had come later to be owned by the family, and had very different associations. It was a house in which another saint had died: St Juliana Falconieri, foundress of the Mantellate of Florence, and sister to St Alexis Falconieri, one of the Seven Founders of the Servite Order. It stood close by their church of the Annunziata, in the Piazza of that name, and was originally called the Palazzo Griffoni; whilst in later times it has been again re-named, and is called the Mannelli Palace. Here St Juliana had established, about 1287, the first house of conventual Third Order Servite Sisters; which community she afterwards joined herself and lived in until her death.

The great characteristic of little Alessandrina—as the child came to be called in her own family—is said to have been, even from babyhood, an exceedingly sweet serenity, which she possessed to a degree felt by her friends and relations to be beyond mere nature, and the account of which reminds one of the descriptions given of Saint Rose of Lima in her childhood. It developed into a certain calm recollectedness of manner, accompanied by little graceful childlike acts and habits all tending to show a strong inclination to piety, which seemed to bear witness to extraordinary divine workings going on within the opening soul. One of her historians † even says that she forestalled as a tiny child her devotion for that which was afterwards to become the great object of her love and the subject of her ecstasies, by prayers and actions in honour of

* That is, she is the first named in genealogical tables; but others may have died first, as she was not born till eight years after her parents' marriage.

† Sandrini, lib. I, cap. i.

our Lord's Passion. "It was a marvellous thing," says her devoted biographer, "to see so small a child employing her thoughts on what her tongue could barely stammer forth; and to find that she showed herself, by transports of love, the true daughter of Jesus Crucified, even before she possessed the power of giving public and complete proof of it."

It is also held for certain by some of her biographers that God employed the visible intervention of a heavenly messenger in her spiritual formation, during her very earliest years:—namely, that of her own angel guardian.* He is believed to have appeared to her even in her cradle; and to have performed, in the matter of heavenly things, the office that is ordinarily that of a mother, by awakening and guiding her infant mind and senses, so that they should be directed towards prayer, and contemplation of divine mysteries, from the very beginning.

The little girl grew up beloved of God and man. All those of her own family who daily witnessed, in her conduct, the effects of those wonderful graces that were hidden from their own sight, felt the deepest respect and admiration for the child whose ways seemed to breathe an atmosphere which was not that of earth. Her mother, especially, so long as she lived, felt convinced—though respect for the handiwork of the Most High kept her silent on the subject—of the future eminent sanctity of her child. But this mother, who appears from the little we hear of her to have been truly worthy of her daughter, was not to witness on earth that daughter's development. She died while Alessandrina was still quite a small child; and when the latter was between four and five years old, Pierfrancesco took to himself the second wife who was destined to act the part of mother to the future saint. This step-mother was also a woman of high birth. Her name was Fiammetta da Diacceto; and she was daughter to that Francesco da Diacceto to whom Marsilio Ficino, when dying, recommended Plato's philosophy; whilst her brother was the unfortunate Jacopo who was beheaded in the conspiracy against Giulio de' Medici.

* *Compendio della vita di B. Caterina*, ch. i, p. 3. (See Appendix.)

This second marriage of her father's gave Alessandrina four brothers and five sisters. The eldest brother, Giovanbatisto, whilst quite young, became a Dominican in the Convent of San Marco, where he had the name of Fra Timoteo de' Ricci:—a name which had already been made honourable in the Order by the virtues of his uncle, a brother of Pierfrancesco, and to which he added lustre by his own holiness. The second brother, Francesco, died at Rome as a youth; the third, Roberto, took up the family profession, and eventually founded the flourishing "Ricci Bank" in Lyons; whilst the youngest, Vincenzo, remained in Florence, where he was in favour with the Medici. He attained to the highest magisterial offices, and had the posthumous glory of being great-grandfather to the celebrated Bishop Scipio de' Ricci.* Of the five sisters, one—named Catherine—died as a child, whilst the other four all became nuns at the monastery of Prato, in turn.

Fiammetta had nothing whatever of the traditional step-mother about her, but filled the place of a true mother with the greatest tact and delicacy to her husband's children. Her character was no less noble than her birth; and, with the mental sagacity, upright judgement and warmly generous heart that belonged to her, she very quickly learned to value the treasure that she found entrusted to her in the person of her small step-daughter. As she watched this child developing before her eyes, in all her modest grace—giving not the least sign of vanity in speech, in manners, or in dress—showing not the smallest inclination to egotism or self-will—always humble, gentle, and quick to fulfil everything required of her—Fiammetta was enchanted. Her affection for the little girl soon reached the point of actual respect; and she took to treating her with the kind of veneration that one shows to holy things and to souls consecrated to God. It is refreshing to read for once of an eminent virgin saint treated by her elders, in her youth, with delicate consideration, instead of with that strange want of sympathy (to give it a mild name) which one so

* Bishop of Pistoja and Prato in the 18th century. He got into trouble for heretical doctrine, but was reconciled before he died.

often finds shown to their daughters by mothers of saintly children.

But all this was only a first revelation to the noble-hearted step-mother, who was to receive in time many more, as to the respect and honour due to her young charge. Alessandrina's humility made her so ingenious in hiding her own merits, that she lived for a long time under the close observation of her second mother before the latter found out anything about her secret mortifications. At last, thinking once that she had not seen her take any food for a whole day, Fiammetta determined to watch her step-child in this matter more closely than she had hitherto done; and the result was the discovery that it was not only her habit to keep prolonged fasts, but to keep them in a perfectly calm and natural manner which betrayed a most uncommon strength of soul—or rather, as the writer of an anonymous life of the saint remarks, “which proved that the love of God bestowed on her, as compensation for her courage, a superabundance of spiritual food.” The sight of such Christian fortitude in a little girl of about seven years old not only touched Fiammetta's heart with greater tenderness than ever for the child, but made her feel strongly convinced that a sanctity built on such a deep and solid foundation as this must be destined by God to reach very great proportions. Accordingly, she set herself to study the mind and soul of Alessandrina more and more carefully, and was rewarded by the constant discovery of fresh treasures of purity and holiness hidden therein. It is said that her admiration of the child's virtue, and conviction of her future greatness, became so overpowering that she could not keep silence about them, but frequently spoke to others in an almost prophetic tone of her step-daughter's future destiny; and at last declared that “instead of being herself appointed to act the part of mother to this child, it was the child who had become *her* teacher and mistress in virtue:—*her* refuge and comfort in the griefs and troubles of life.”*

* Sandrini, lib. I, cap. i, p. 3.

CHAPTER II

Alessandrina's Vocation—Her stay at Monticelli—Return to her father's house—Search for a Convent after her own heart

THE precocious development of Alessandrina's soul in a particular direction seemed a clear indication of the line that her spirituality was destined to take. Her strong bent towards the interior life, her love of solitary communing with God, and the pain and embarrassment that she always felt in company—betrayed at times by a kind of gentle melancholy in her conversation—all pointed to her having no vocation for the labours and excitements of an active career. She was clearly called to retreat and contemplative prayer in the shelter of the cloister.

Given up to divine love, and instructed, as we have seen, by the Holy Spirit, she began before long to find even the sanctuary of her father's house, where from her cradle upwards she had received so much light and guidance, insufficient for her need of retirement. Very early she sighed for "the wings of a dove, that she might fly away and be at rest" in the solitude and enclosure of a monastery; and she planned her desired flight with a calmness and deliberation suited to her character. She knew very well that, child as she was, she could no more expect to be received in any community as a Religious at her age than St Catherine of Siena or St Teresa could have gained their parents' consent for carrying out their enthusiastic childish dreams of going forth to a hermitage or a desert. But convents in Florence opened their doors to others than nuns, since most of them served as the ordinary places of education for girls. So Alessandrina began importuning her father to let her enter a cloister in the capacity of a pupil, without betraying her further private desires. Her father, however, was in no hurry to part with a child who was such a treasure at home, so it took her some time to get her own

way ; and she only did so at last by the help of her "second mother," whom she persuaded to take her part and to overcome her father's resistance.* Fiammetta was helped in this task by the unexpected intervention of Alessandrina's aunt, Lodovica de' Ricci, Pierfrancesco's sister, who was abbess of a Benedictine monastery called San Pietro de' Monticelli. Alessandrina was sometimes taken when her parents went to visit this aunt at her convent, and Lodovica, conceiving a great desire to have the little girl in her keeping, begged her brother to entrust his daughter to her care for a time. Finding his sister's suggestion coincide so exactly with his child's earnest wishes, and reflecting also that Alessandrina would gain great advantages from the fashionable education given to girls of high rank in this convent, Pierfrancesco agreed, and sent her there.

San Pietro de' Monticelli was one of the oldest and most respected Benedictine houses in Florence. Though not free from the then almost universal taint of monastic relaxation, it was nevertheless in certain respects regular and devout ; and amongst other venerable pious traditions, it specially cherished a devotion to the mysteries of our Lord's Passion. This devotion, as we shall see, besides winning Alessandrina's heart during her stay at Monticelli, became the means of betraying the advanced degree of sanctity that she had already reached.

In the convent church, facing the nuns' choir, there was a large picture, which represented our Lord on the Cross with such splendour and reality that it deeply moved the souls of all who looked upon it, and hence had become an object of most tender and earnest devotion. From the moment of Alessandrina's first introduction to this painting, it took such a passionate hold of her that she seemed to make her home at its feet : she could withdraw neither her eyes nor her heart from it. On her knees, with her gaze fixed on that adored face so filled with grief, each act of the bleeding drama of the Redemption appeared to her reflected thereon. So deep was the impression made upon her that its effect was wont to last long after she had

* *Vita Anonima*, cap. i, p. 4.

come away from the picture ; and she would speak of it with all the vividness and tender feeling of one who had been witness of an actual scene that she had just left. In vain did they try to induce her, as a relief from such thoughts, to spend part of her recreation in the games and other amusements of her school companions. Out of pure docility and obligingness she would smilingly join for a time in what pleased others, though it gave no pleasure to her ; but she always took the first opportunity of slipping away to return where her heart called her, and to take up her place again at the foot of her "crucifix"—as the picture is called by her biographers, though a painting. She used to hide herself beneath a curtain that hung over the choir *grille*, so as to be alone, and unseen by all but Him on whose image she was gazing ; and, when sometimes found there after some hours' absence, it was generally with her face bathed in tears.

Her aunt, the abbess, finding her so devoted to the crucifix, carefully taught her a certain pious practice that was in use amongst the most fervent sisters of the convent. This consisted in saying the Lord's Prayer five times, meditating with each *Pater* on one of the chief mysteries of the Passion—namely, on the Agony of Jesus and His seizing in the Garden of Gethsemane, His Scourging, His Crowning with thorns, His carrying of the Cross, and His Crucifixion and Entombment. The learning of this devotion was a great boon to our young saint ; and her practice of it soon became accompanied by a wonderful and moving phenomenon. Whilst engaged in the exercise, she so completely identified herself with the sufferings of Jesus Christ as to become a living representation of them. During the prayer for the first mystery, she was seen, to begin with, on her knees—her hands raised to heaven, and her face pale and agonized ; and afterwards with her arms held tightly to her breast, in a grave and dignified manner, as representing Christ bound in Gethsemane. At the second mystery she stood upright and immovable, her right hand clasping her shoulder, in imitation of Jesus fastened to the pillar of the flagellation—and so with the rest ; always

suiting her movements to the scenes of our divine Redeemer's sufferings.*

The sight of the little girl thus vividly realizing by the sheer force of loving sympathy the sacrifice of the divine Victim, was overpoweringly touching to all who happened to behold it; and tradition says that our Lord Himself sometimes worked a wonder in testimony of His own tenderness for His child-imitator, by making the crucifix appear to live on the canvas and to speak words of loving acknowledgement in return for her devotion. The consequence of these supernatural incidents—forerunners of yet greater marvels to come later in the saint's life—was that this picture became renowned, first throughout the community and afterwards beyond it, as *Sandrina's Crucifix*; and that it was eventually hung in a more public place for the people's veneration: finally being taken to the "chapel of St Antoninus" (Archbishop of Florence in the preceding century, and a Dominican), where it still remains for the homage of the faithful.

All these favours received, and special tendencies of devotion gratified, in the Monticelli Convent, would naturally point to Alessandrina's finding her ultimate vocation there: yet it did not turn out so; and the girl's decision—in spite of natural and supernatural attractions to it and of great affection shown her by its inhabitants—not to become a member of this community, is one of the most striking instances given in her biographies of both the precocity of her judgement and the clearness and strength of her early supernatural inspirations. She appears to have been specially called, not only to become herself a perfect model of the Religious life, but to be, even in her earliest youth, an instrument in the hands of God for warning and putting to shame those who lived in a manner not fully corresponding to their high vocation. The monastic spirit just at this period was at a very low ebb: so much so, that a community which kept up some vestiges of regular observance, and added to them a few pious practices, was counted by many very

* *Vita*, etc., da Serafino Razzi, lib. II, cap. i.

virtuous people to be setting an example of true evangelical perfection. Nothing could have been more calculated to keep down the standard of Religious life than this high esteem in which such convents were held by the world, and the consequent fact that they attracted many subjects. It was, therefore, both a much-needed and a fully-deserved chastisement and humiliation for one of these decayed institutions to be rejected by the wisdom and disdain of a mere child; and this was what happened to the Monastery of Monticelli. Alessandrina, whilst adopting, as we have seen, whatever devout practices she found there, appears to have entered her aunt's convent with an ideal already formed of what Religious life should be, which was very far from finding its fulfilment in the Benedictine nuns whom she had now to obey as her teachers and superiors. Instead of such virtues as she had dreamt of for the inhabitants of a cloister, and the spouses of a crucified Lord—in place of utter abnegation, of disinterested charity, of a spirit of humility and mortification—she saw around her only lukewarm virtues, accompanied by glaring imperfections and acts of narrow-minded selfishness—such as disputes amongst Religious over trifles, a love of possession that sought for gratification in trivial objects, and a generally worldly spirit which plainly showed how the evangelical standard had degenerated in the community. Such a state of things was enough to make her decide upon never choosing this monastery for her consecration to God; but, having taken this resolution, she tried in every possible way to lessen the pain that she knew her decision must give to her aunt and the other nuns. Whilst unable to help condemning the spirit of the community, she was full of tenderness for its individual members, feeling that they were not fully responsible for a situation which they had not themselves brought about, and which some of them were perhaps hardly conscious of. Moreover, besides the respect she felt for the personal virtues of many amongst them, Alessandrina had too noble and loving a heart not to feel greatly touched by, and very grateful for, the tender care and real devotion that had

been shown to her in the convent, and the earnest desire and hope which she knew the nuns had felt that she might take their habit and remain under their roof. All these motives, as well as a naturally sympathetic character which made her feel other people's griefs keenly, caused her to wish very much that she might have spared them the trouble of her departure, which—she instinctively knew—would be felt by them as a humiliation to the monastery, and perhaps even as an unfair action on her part. The only plan she could think of, when she found herself obliged to give some account of her intentions, was to shelter herself, so to speak, behind the authority of God who had made known His special will in the matter to her; and Sandrini tells us that, without directly mentioning their community, she managed delicately to explain “that God had put it into her heart to enter a house where strictly primitive observance was kept, and where she would be sure of finding perfect peace in the practice of most exact poverty”; and that, having done this, she redoubled the tenderness and trustfulness of her ways with the nuns, to show them that there was absolutely nothing personal in her resolution.

However, before she had to leave the monastery, an occurrence took place which brought her true feelings much more plainly to light, though still indirectly, and in a way that could only edify her friends. The story of this incident in the saint's early life is specially interesting, apart from its connection with her, as an illustration of one particular form taken by conventual decadence in her day.

An old nun at Monticelli died; and in her cell was found a book of devotion adorned with rich illuminations, and with those graceful little paintings introduced by mediæval art, which—perfected during the Renaissance—had developed into *chef-d'œuvres* of good taste as well as of piety. Books of this kind—perfectly legitimate objects of satisfaction to pious people in the world—had become, in the universal lowering of the true Religious spirit, a veritable snare and source of abuses in monasteries of women. That ardent and enlightened promoter of Religious reform at the end of the fifteenth century—Girolamo Savonarola—

had severely stigmatized this abuse amongst others, not only in his own Convent of San Marco in Florence, but in numerous other houses of both men and women of various Orders.

He denounced it as an encroachment on the true spirit of poverty, and a cause of vain and curious research, introducing a secular and worldly spirit amongst the spouses of Jesus Christ. The *Année Dominicaine* (vol. 1861-2, p. 607) gives the following *verbatim* extract from a letter of Savonarola's to the Countess of Mirandola, which both details the kind of abuses in vogue, and expresses in vigorous terms his strong feeling on the subject. "In leaving the world," he says, speaking of Religious, "they have made great sacrifices; then, when they have hardly entered the state of Religion, they begin attaching themselves to all sorts of trivialities—to a cell, to a new garment, to a fine breviary, to a pair of scissors or a knife, and so forth. All this is an obstacle to purity of heart; it causes inward disturbance; and they live in the cloister like barren trees in a garden. Wretched weakness of human nature! They have given up gold and silver, and now they cling to sand and mud." Then, going on to personal direction, he exhorts her to such heroic perfection as this: "In the world, your dress and adornments put those of your attendants into the shade, therefore in the cloister you should wear the very poorest habit; for, in the warfare of Jesus Christ, you ought to surpass those whom you would have tried to surpass in the warfare of the world. You must, then, have *neither fine, nor constantly-renewed, clothes, nor books richly illuminated, nor a magnificent breviary, nor any objects of value*. Have a simple breviary, with no gilding, without silk ribbons, without illuminations, and with a marker of leather or thread."

One of the books thus referred to, then, was that left in her cell by the old nun in question; and it immediately became an object of desire to two young Religious, who both equally wanted it as a piece of personal property, and between whom it gave rise to stormy disputes followed by bitter resentment. Alessandrina could not see such a state

of things without a feeling of keen sorrow; and (as Sandrini tells the story) she "went apart, and thus breathed forth her complaints to God—'Is it possible that the spouse of Christ, who is all gentleness and humility, should give entrance in this way to anger and bitterness? Oh, good Jesus, where is poverty of spirit, death of self, separation from all creatures, to be found? Thou hadst neither home nor shelter in life, and in death Thou wast so poor that a borrowed shroud was thy grave-cloth. And now here are holy virgins, consecrated to Thee—the well-beloved of Thy Heart—quarrelling with each other over a few sheets of paper! What folly, for the sake of a worthless little book, to risk the danger of having one's name struck out of the Book of Life for ever!'"*

As Alessandrina, pacing the cloister, was thus grieving—and weeping the while—she was discovered by the nun who was mistress of the school, and who both comforted the child and gradually drew from her the cause of her grief. She seems to have been most tender and kind over the matter, in spite of the plainness with which her little pupil spoke of the shock she had received from the quarrel she had witnessed, and of her determination to go where true charity and poverty of spirit would make such things impossible. Her mistress's tenderness, however, in nowise shook the young saint's firmness, though she again tried to smooth matters over as far as possible by attributing her resolution to a call from God which she could not resist; and when her aunt, having heard from the mistress what had happened, sent for her, she gave her reasons for having finally decided to leave Monticelli with the greatest modesty and respect, but still with unmoved resolution; so that the abbess could no longer hesitate to believe that a special inspiration of the Holy Ghost was dictating to her niece what she must do. Lodovica then acted with real generosity: she humbly adored almighty God's designs on this child; made up her mind to the sacrifice of resigning all hopes about keeping her in the community; and let her sister-in-law, Fiammetta, know what Alessan-

* Sandrini, lib. II, cap. ii, p. 7.

drina's intentions were, that she might come and fetch her away from the abbey. The little girl parted from the nuns who had been so good to her, and whom she loved most sincerely, with genuine grief, and with the frank declaration that nothing but what she knew to be the will of God could have separated her from them. This declaration was corroborated by her attitude towards the nuns of Monticelli through the whole of her life. She never herself betrayed any of the serious reasons that had caused her departure, and never spoke of any things or persons belonging to the convent except in terms of affection and reverence.

When she got home again, Alessandrina at once took up the position of an intending candidate for the Religious life: not so much in words as by her whole behaviour. She managed to arrange her time so as to live as nearly as possible by conventual hours, making her own room into an oratory, and spending her days and the best part of her nights there, in quiet and prayer. Her father, delighted to have her back, humoured his child's tastes for solitude and monastic ways, never thinking of having to give his consent to anything definite. In fact, so far was he from taking the matter seriously that he looked forward, when the right time should come, to finding some suitable husband for her amongst the good Florentine families, so as to keep her always near him. He is said to have been specially devoted to this child, not only because of her great personal charms, but because of her being the only daughter left to him by his first wife, and very like her.

This strict and hermit-like way of life appears in no wise to have affected the relations of Alessandrina with the family and household, which remained as pleasant and affectionate as they had been before she left home for Monticelli. She was as much and as genuinely interested in other people's concerns as ever; took the greatest care to arrange her times of devotion, so as to interfere with no domestic arrangements; was so delightful with her young brothers that they would fain have had her always with them; and, in short, acted not merely with

perfect unselfishness, but with a degree of tact and prudence in her whole intercourse with others that astonishes one to read of in a girl of her still quite tender years. For her father she seems to have had as great an affection as he had for her; and a quaint story is told of one means that she took of showing it during this time. Pierfrancesco at last began rather to take fright at his little daughter's persistence in her exactly religious and retired life, and thought that perhaps he could cure her of such ways by depriving her of the means of solitude. Accordingly, on the excuse of having her nearer to him, he made her give up the room that had been appropriated to her use in a distant and quiet part of the Ricci palace, and had one arranged for her next to his own, in the most bustling and fully occupied part. Alessandrina made not the slightest complaint or fuss at the change, but went calmly on her usual way as far as her own practices were concerned; only she made use of the close neighbourhood to her father to see what she could do to show her love for him. She soon discovered what he probably did so quietly that his children had hitherto known nothing of it: that public and private business compelled the statesman and householder to get up extremely early, about 3 o'clock in the morning. As soon as she found this out, Alessandrina at once adopted the habit of rising herself at this hour, slipping quietly into her father's room, and—first kneeling for his blessing—putting all his things ready for him, and waiting upon him, in every way that a child could, as if she had been his servant, until he dismissed her with a second blessing. Then she would go back to her own room, and spend the rest of the early morning hours in prayer, entreating her Father in heaven, with ever-increasing earnestness, to help her in the fulfilment of her vocation and to show her the convent destined for her.

Besides praying about it, however, she took all human means within her reach for finding the right place; and in this search she got her ever-devoted "second mother" to help her. Fiammetta managed to get introductions to all the chief convents in Florence, and took her step-daughter

with her to visit them, the latter constantly hoping to find the evangelical perfection that she sighed for fully practised in some of them. But the search proved vain: ruins and shadows of the past were all she found. The spirit of the world had taken complete possession of those devoted by profession to the highest life, and had dragged them down in proportion to the height of their calling. In some cases Alessandrina, indeed, came across a state of things by comparison of which the monastery of Monticelli must have seemed a model community. Certain nuns of that time, Sandrini tells us—belonging to Orders whose rule and constitutions placed them behind *grilles* in strict enclosure, there to lead hidden lives of prayer—had persuaded themselves that they could best sanctify themselves by sanctifying others, in a manner little dreamt of indeed by their founders! This means consisted in giving “pious representations” of the Gospel History, or of the “acts” of saints and martyrs—in other words, by turning themselves into a *troupe* of pious actresses, who performed mystery or miracle plays within the convent walls, and invited all their secular friends to come and see them. Alessandrina, with her step-mother, was one day bidden to such a festivity, at a monastery in high renown with the Florentines—of what Order we are not told. She went, of course, expecting to see something of a religious and edifying description such as nuns might harmlessly represent, having heard no details of such performances, but only a talk of “pious spectacles.” The astonishment and grief of a girl with such ideals as she had we may imagine, when we find that in the performance she witnessed the nuns had discarded their habits and dressed up in secular *men’s* and women’s clothes, of great splendour; whilst they played their parts so truly to the life as to be little in harmony with Religious modesty. It is not to be wondered at that the holy young visitor was seized with a sudden pain and sorrow at the sight, so sharp that she could not quite restrain herself, but gave vent to her trouble in only half-suppressed sounds of grief and aversion.

The shock she received on this occasion, however, was

the cause both of a great spiritual consolation, and of her receiving for the first time a supernatural gift which was often granted to her in after life—that of being able to read the souls of others. As she was grieving inwardly over the spectacle that had so startled her as being a disgrace to the Religious state, and also over the sad condition of those who were dragged back to the world and its dangers by taking part in such a display, our Lord Himself vouchsafed to make known to her by some inward vision that He was grieving with her; and at the same time He showed her the state of certain among the souls of the Religious who were performing the play. By this revelation, Alessandrina was made to understand that Jesus Christ meant to encourage her in the endeavour to restore the honour of His spouses in the Church.

After this memorable scene, she tried harder than ever to find a convent in Florence where she could take final refuge from the world, but still without success. She had to go further afield for what she wanted.

CHAPTER III

Alessandrina's stay at the Villa San Paolo near Prato—She becomes acquainted with San Vincenzo's Monastery by means of two begging sisters—Gets her father's consent to a few days' visit there—Her compulsory return to Florence—Where she falls ill—Her miraculous cure—Her final entry into San Vincenzo's

SOME hours' walk from Florence, towards the north, lies one of the most beautiful spots in Tuscany. It consists of a vast plain, reaching from the banks of the Arno, which here bathes the foot of Fiesole's mountains, to the hills of Pistoja, where the Ombrone takes its rise. The fertile soil, the genial air, the clear sky, the beautiful and varied scenery—all combine to make this plain one of the pleasantest abodes in the world. Nearly in the centre of it, on the river Bizencio, stands the little town of Prato—so named from the beautiful meadow which forms its site. In and around this place the rich families of Florence vied with one another in acquiring land and building villas, so attractive was the country; and the Ricci family had, from time immemorial, possessed a fine estate there, which went by the name of San Paolo's Farm. At the time we are speaking of, Pierfrancesco went to stay at Prato with his whole family, when (as was usual, on account of his well-known charity) all the poor of the neighbourhood soon took to making their appearance at the house. One day, amongst these, there appeared two humble Religious women, leading a donkey to carry the gifts in kind which were the usual alms they received. Alessandrina, having seen them at a distance, ran eagerly to meet them; and, enchanted with a modest, gentle and devoutly recollected manner in them, which she had not before come across in any Religious, she begged her father to let them stay at San Paolo's for a few days, to which he gladly agreed.

She found that they were two lay-sisters from San

Vincenzio—a convent, recently founded at Prato in the spirit of true monastic traditions, where the constantly increasing fervour practised by its inhabitants was most helpful and edifying to souls. The young saint, we are told, acting still with a prudence that one marvels at in one so young, observed the sisters most carefully and continuously whilst they were in her father's villa, to make sure that their daily conduct carried out the first impression they had given her. Finding all that she saw of their private life—the simplicity of their manners, their silence, recollection, fervour in prayer, and general religious deportment—such as to make her deeply respect them, she went further, and began to talk to them freely, opening out all her own ideals of the monastic state, and asking them innumerable questions about their own rule and community. She spoke to them, moreover, of her cherished devotions to the Passion of our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, and the Holy Eucharist, and expressed her longing for frequent communion, that she might find out *their* feelings. In short, she put these two lay-sisters, in her girlishly earnest way, through as close and careful an examination as if she had been a judge questioning witnesses. Little did the humble sisters guess, as they answered her many inquiries about their way of life, that on their answers was to depend the destiny of a saint and the future renown of their monastery!

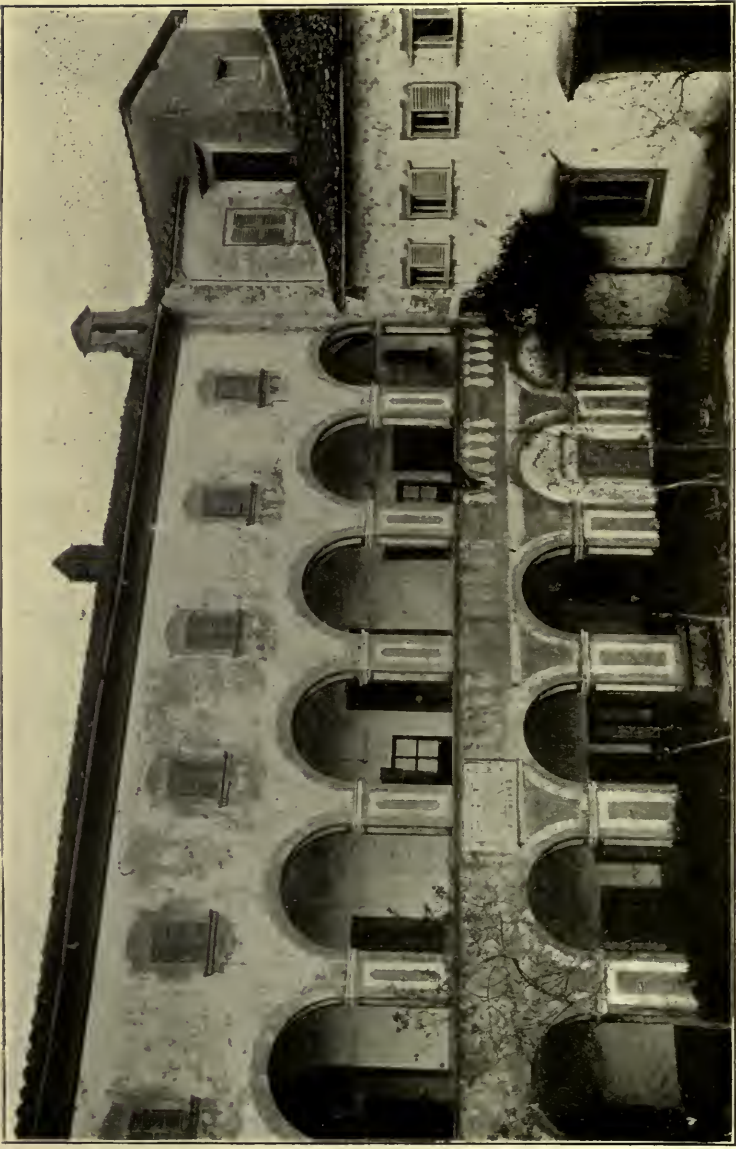
The result of their replies was so to rejoice Alessandra's heart, causing her to feel sure that here at last she had discovered the full realization of the perfect ideal of Religious life, as to make her (according to Sandrini) cry out one day in irrepressible thankfulness: "God be praised! here is the place He has prepared for me; here is the place where I shall fight to the end; here shall I find the altar of my sacrifice! It is at San Vincenzio's that I am to offer myself as a holocaust to my beloved Redeemer!"

The girl's mind being once made up upon this point, her own idea was to act at once on her new-found conviction, and to return with the lay-sisters to their convent in Prato. She knew, of course, that there might be some

difficulty in getting her father's consent to this course, and, before actually asking his leave to go, spoke enthusiastically to her brothers, her step-mother, and all other members of the household, about her delight in all she had heard of San Vincenzo's, and her certainty that God called her to consecrate her life to Him in that monastery. She hoped that hearing first of her wish indirectly might soften the matter somewhat to Pierfrancesco, and incline him to be lenient. Her innocent diplomacy, however, failed; for when at last she made up her mind to speak directly to him, and went to throw herself at his feet with her request that she might accompany the sisters, she found him immovable. He had made up his mind beforehand, and, for sole answer to her petition, formally declared that he would listen to no more proposals of the kind, and forbade his daughter ever again to open her lips on the subject. The poor child was completely crushed by this inexorable declaration; and, as might be expected, its final result was the hasty departure of the sisters from San Paolo. Left alone, Alessandrina could only rest all her hopes on God Himself, and on the fervent prayers that she knew they would offer at the convent.

Naturally, the first thing that the two lay-sisters did on getting home was to give an account of the treasure which they thought Providence had in store for them in the Ricci family. The nuns—full of fervour, and more interested in the prospect of so holy a postulant than in the question of what supplies their “begging sisters” might have brought them—bestirred themselves at once to see what they could do to promote the forwarding of Alessandrina's projects. Strangely enough, the spiritual director of their community for the time being was own brother to Pierfrancesco:—Fra Timoteo de' Ricci, a friar from the celebrated Dominican Monastery of San Marco in Florence, and a man highly commendable for his own virtues. To him the community naturally turned for help in this matter concerning his niece; but he was at first by no means very much inclined to move in it, out of consideration for his brother, whose intense affection for Alessandrina he well knew. However,

having paid some visits himself to the Villa San Paolo, he found out by personal intercourse with her what were the real feelings, and the truly wonderful dispositions, of the child; and this discovery seems to have given him scruples about keeping silence, lest he should be really opposing the will of God if he did not do his best to plead his niece's health with her father. He began pleading it, accordingly, with warmth; but his interference was not well received, and his brother ended by desiring "that he would cease meddling with his family affairs," and intimating that his visits were no longer welcome. Thus rebuffed, Fra Timoteo could only tell his spiritual daughters that they were not likely at present to overcome the objections of a father whose affections were so intensely set on his child, and that much time and unusual grace would be needed to bring about the desired end. The nuns, unwilling to be so easily defeated, bethought themselves of another ambassador in the person of their prioress, who appears to have been a woman equally distinguished by birth, virtues, and unusually charming and courtly manners, Margherita di Bardo by name. This lady they sent, as a delegate from the community, to call on Pierfrancesco at his villa, and to beg that he would grant them at least the pleasure of a *visit* from his beloved Alessandrina. There was nothing, it should be stated, inconsistent with their Religious spirit in this expedition of the prioress; for, though living in enclosure, the community, having only the Third Order Rule, were at this time at liberty to go outside the convent when necessary. Sister Margherita was received at San Paolo with all the honour and attention due to her; and when her host heard this dignified and gracious dame begging, as a personal favour, for the desired permission, he could not, if only out of mere courtesy to the prioress, well refuse it; besides which, there was the possibility that the result of a visit to San Vincenzo might be at least the postponement of the dreaded misfortune. He granted leave, therefore, with a good grace; but made it an express condition that his daughter's stay in the convent should not exceed ten days. She took this unhoped-for permission as a



CONVENT OF SAN VINCENZIO: FROM THE COURTYARD.

sign that Providence was about to grant the fulfilment of all her projects and, thanking God earnestly, went off rejoicing with the prioress.

According to the custom of the house, Alessandrina, on arriving, was received by the whole community assembled in choir, where all the nuns in turn gave her the kiss of peace. A story is told that as the little visitor crossed the threshold of the holy place, a nun who had for some time been suffering from an infirmity that affected her mind by weakening it, was suddenly aroused, filled with the spirit of God, and cried aloud: "Here comes our little superior! Here is the little mistress of our souls, and spiritual guide!" These words, coming from so unexpected a quarter, are said to have struck all present as uttered with prophetic inspiration; and as a matter of fact they did turn out to contain a true prophecy; for their young subject lived to become a teacher, an eminent guide to souls in the spiritual path, and an accomplished model of all monastic virtues, not to that convent only, but to many others, throughout Tuscany and all Italy.

However, there were to be hindrances yet to the fulfilment of her longings. She soon found herself so perfectly happy amongst the sisters of San Vincenzo, where her ideal of contemplation and Religious life seemed fulfilled in such a way as to satisfy all her aspirations, that she felt like a wanderer come home at last; and when, at the end of the appointed ten days, one of her brothers was sent to fetch her back, she found herself—as might have been expected—utterly unable to leave a place of which she already appeared to have become a part. To tear herself away from the community, at least with her own goodwill, had become practically an impossibility; and she told her brother that she *could* not return to family life, for she belonged henceforth to this cloister, where she felt sure that God Himself had led her. She entreated him to get her father's forgiveness if she disobeyed him on this one point, which concerned God's own choice for her. The brother reluctantly went home, and executed her commission; but Pierfrancesco was not to be so easily softened

He appears to have looked at the whole thing as a plot against him, and came in person to the convent, furiously angry and determined to enforce obedience to his orders, even by violent measures if necessary. But if the father was determined on his side, the daughter was equally so on hers, though in a calmer way; and, in the end, her gently obstinate resolve to keep to her decision of remaining at San Vincenzio, together with the spiritual reasons she put forward—child as she was—to support it, had their effect. Her father gave in to her, at least for the time being. He renounced all idea of carrying her home by force, and professed himself convinced by her arguments—only, he said, before being shut up for good in the cloister, she must just come back home with him for a few days, to see and bid farewell to the rest of the family. At first Alessandrina refused even this, but here she found her uncle Timoteo, the prioress, and all the community, against her; so, most unwillingly, she had to yield, and returned—though in tears—to San Paolo, having first made her father solemnly promise that he would not keep her there for more than ten days. This solemn promise, however, Pierfrancesco evidently did not consider binding. He appears to have had some idea that, seeing how very young she still was, her vocation might possibly after all be only a fancied one, and that he was justified in doing all he could to turn her away from the thought before finally giving her up. Accordingly, he first took the whole family back from the neighbourhood of Prato, to their palace in Florence, where Alessandrina found herself surrounded by numerous relations and friends who petted and made much of her, and in the midst of various diversions and changes of scene which it was hoped might drive San Vincenzio out of her head. Then, when she entreated him to keep his word and let her go back, he made one pretext after another—mostly founded on his own unconquerable grief at the thought of losing her—for delay. He treated her with the greatest possible love and tenderness, never professing an intention of breaking his word eventually, nor uttering a sylla-

ble of reproach or anger again, but simply "putting off" time after time.

This went on for so long (though exactly how long we are not told) that at last the state of things became too much for the poor child, who had at first struggled bravely against the disappointment and had kept up her usual brightness with all around her. She fell, first, into a state of most unnatural melancholy, and then into one of such bad health that all her friends were terribly frightened, and believed that she was dying of consumption. Everybody belonging to her, except the one person chiefly concerned, who was the actual cause of it, knew that the illness was nothing but a kind of *nostalgia*—a longing, like that of the exile who craves for his country, for the home of her soul, from which she was being kept by too strong a human love. Yet the father who was thus forcibly detaining his beloved daughter remained for some time—perhaps wilfully—blind to the cause of her illness.

Alessandrina herself, however, even though almost feeling on the point of death, and knowing that others thought her so, never in her heart quite despaired of recovery. She believed that our Lord would somehow give back her life and strength, on purpose for her to consecrate them to Him; and, whilst lying sometimes in what appeared to be states of utter collapse, she was inwardly pleading with her divine Spouse to hear and grant her desires. Her faith was rewarded by the granting of this prayer. She was miraculously cured; and the following is the account given of her cure:

She was lying in a deep lethargy:—bodily helpless, but with her soul active and alive, and earnestly praying, when she suddenly beheld a radiant vision. Jesus Christ Himself appeared to stand at her side, holding a ring of dazzling beauty; and with Him appeared His Mother, and the two glorious martyrs Thekla and Cecilia, who were her special patrons. Looking at her with unspeakable kindness, our Lord asked the sick girl why she was making herself so excessively miserable about entering the religious

state, since He Himself had undertaken to see that she succeeded in doing so? Alessandrina answered, with deep humility: "My dear Redeemer, who canst see to the bottom of my heart, Thou knowest well that what grieves me so is this putting off of my happiness in being consecrated to Thee, for I know not how long!" Then our Saviour said, "It is to hasten this moment that I have come to cure you," and blessed her; whereupon she was at once healed of her sickness. After this, He gave her many predictions as to her future. He warned her that she must look for many sufferings in the Religious life—for contradictions and all sorts of trials. He told her that she would be visited with cruel bodily infirmities, and with grief and anguish of soul, both because of distrust or persecutions from man, and through attacks from, and pitfalls set by, the devil; and that all the extraordinary favours—visions, ecstasies, whatever they might be—granted to her from on high, would bring about the worst troubles and the bitterest moments of her life. But He further encouraged her not to lose heart, promising that He would ever be with her, and that with His help she should triumph over every obstacle, to the great profit of her own soul and the honour of God. Then, smiling with marvellous graciousness upon her, and pointing to the brilliant ring in His hand, our Lord concluded by saying: "Here is the ring of those sacred espousals that I shall soon celebrate with you, that you may be My well-beloved bride." Thereupon the Blessed Virgin, and the two holy martyrs who were with her, approached the maiden and spoke encouraging words to her; after which the vision disappeared, leaving her in full health and filled with unutterable joy.*

The first thing Alessandrina did after this wonderful event was to hasten to her father and, throwing herself into his arms, tell him how it had all happened. He was deeply moved, not only at having his child thus miraculously restored, but by this proof that Christ Himself was on *her* side in the matter of her sacred call: for Pier-

* *Vita Anonima*, cap. iv, p. 17.

francesco was too religious a man not to know what a Religious vocation meant, or to imagine that this supernatural visitation could have been sent for no purpose beyond that of restoring his daughter to him. He was frightened at this sudden conviction, which pierced him, that he had been opposing God by his delay in keeping his promise; and still more did he feel penitent and ashamed over his conduct when he found nearly every member of the family, including his elder brother Federigo de' Ricci—who appears just now to have paid him a visit on purpose to give his opinion on the matter—strongly urging him to grant the request which Alessandrina now put forth afresh, and to let her go at once to San Vincenzo permanently. The poor man seems, indeed, to have suffered quite a verbal castigation from his relations, who all freely poured forth their views as to the selfishness, injustice, cruelty, and irreligiousness of his recent behaviour; and one cannot help admiring the meekness with which he appears to have taken it all, as well as the sincere repentance that he showed. Having once seen himself in the wrong he was clearly determined to acknowledge it publicly. Not satisfied with giving his beloved child immediate leave to go, he first (according to Sandrini) begged her pardon, with tears, for all the pain he had given her, promising at the same time that he would henceforth be to her “a father, not according to mere flesh and blood, but according to the grace and spirit of God”; and then he took her back himself to Prato, that he might with his own hands both restore her to the monastery whence he had taken her, and offer her as a holocaust to God.

Thus, at last, and after it had seemed almost hopeless, did Alessandrina Lucrezia Romola de' Ricci have her desires granted: thus did she finally cross the threshold of her future home on earth, conducted by the father who for a time had been the one great obstacle in her way, and who now voluntarily presented her himself to those who were to be henceforth her mother and sisters.

CHAPTER IV

Alessandrina receives the habit (1535), and with it the name of Catherine—
Her novitiate—Her trials in it—Her profession (1536)

IT is easy to imagine Alessandrina's joy when she found herself safely under the peaceful roof of San Vincenzo, after all her fears and troubles. Though, indeed, a mere neophyte—without any rank, or even a name, amongst the consecrated virgins of Christ—she was at least in the house of God, far from the world she had longed to leave, and in the atmosphere of prayer and solitude for which her soul craved; and this was enough to make her happiness and to fill her with ardent gratitude. Without waiting to be clothed she gave herself up as fully as possible to every spiritual exercise; and, above all, to everything she could find to do that was an act of humility towards those around her, feeling deeply her own distance from their sanctity and unworthiness to be amongst them. Her one longing was to deserve, as soon as possible, to receive the habit of St Dominic; and with this object she undertook the practice of every penance and austerity that was within her reach, finding nothing too hard or severe for her young ardour. Hidden and silent as her ways were in most respects, she made no secret of her ambition to put on the virtues of her "holy Father" at the same time with his livery, but spoke with the greatest *naïveté* of her aspirations to the nuns.

The latter, watching the little postulant's earnestness and genuine humility, and enchanted by her fervour, were unanimous in voting for her admission to the novitiate: in fact, they were only too thankful to obtain such a subject. She was therefore clothed after a short probation, receiving the Religious habit from her uncle, Fra Timoteo, who was also now her confessor. The clothing took place on Whit Monday, May 18, 1535, when Alessandrina was

only thirteen years old. She had her baptismal name changed for that of Catherine, after her dead mother—possibly, also, from some likeness observed in her to St Catherine of Siena when a child. A fellow-citizen of hers, Cesare Guasti, writing in our own day, chooses to look upon this choice of a name as a special ordination of Providence in favour of the city of Florence, which was not to be left behind Siena and Bologna in possessing a canonized Catherine! * At any rate, whatever the ground of her receiving the name, we now part company with “Alessandrina” once for all, to follow the history of “Sister Catherine.”

No sooner had the fervent postulant received the novice's veil than one of the supernatural favours, now to become so frequent in her life, was granted to her. She had to stand aside whilst another postulant—Maria Raffaella Buonamici of Prato—was clothed; and as she stood taper in hand during this second ceremony, she was rapt in an ecstasy wherein she appeared to be led, in spirit, into a lovely meadow, where Jesus Christ came, and His holy Mother with Him, to bring her the tenderest greetings. Then she was allowed, for the time being, to understand fully the abundance of sweetness that is granted to those who give up all earthly joys for the love of God. At the same time, an inward revelation was given to her of the spiritual condition of certain nuns then in the convent, whose souls she saw to be in such a high state of sanctity that they were like altars whereon a sacrifice of burning love was perpetually offered. Lastly, whilst still in this state, she was expressly charged by our Lord and the Blessed Virgin themselves to be obedient in all things to one particular nun—Sister Maddalena de' Strozzi—who would be set over her by her superiors, and whom she was to look upon as appointed by heaven for her special mistress and guardian. This sister was the daughter of Raffaello Strozzi, one of the chief persons in Florence, and she had been brought up entirely with a view to earthly greatness, for which she possessed every natural qualification; but just in the very bloom of her youth she had thrown up all her prospects to

* *Le Lettere spirituali*, etc., Proemio, p. 9.

consecrate herself to God in San Vincenzo. She had done this in 1514, and was approaching middle-age when thus chosen to be guide and mistress to Catherine. She is described by Razzi as a woman of absolutely angelic nature, and having even an angelic sort of beauty—"like," he says, "the blessed spirits of Fra Angelico, for grace, dignity and modesty, and, moreover, possessing a heavenly voice."* She is said, during many years throughout which she had charge of our saint—first as novice-mistress, and afterwards as being put over her in a special manner—to have been a true guardian-angel in zeal, tenderness, and unremitting attention to her welfare; whilst she also contributed largely to subsequent histories of her spiritual pupil by carefully writing down, from time to time, whatever was most notable or marvellous in her doings.

Coming back to herself, the newly-made Sister Catherine was filled to overflowing with joy at finding herself actually wearing the habit she had so longed for. Not only because of the vision just granted to her, but on account of all her previous unusual experience in the supernatural, she was necessarily in a very different position from any ordinary novice in her realization of the greatness of Religious life. To most lately-clothed postulants their reception of the habit is but the very first step of initiation into the mysteries of perfection; whilst in her case it was only an exterior sign of a high degree of interior virtue and communion with God, attained long before her entry into the monastery.

However, that prophecy made by her divine Spouse at the time of her miraculous cure was to be strictly fulfilled; and, as a beginning of the troubles foretold, she was destined, in spite of virtues and aspirations, to fail—according to all appearances—under the most ordinary trials of the novitiate. Indeed the holy girl's career, during this particular period of her life, is perhaps one of the most striking examples on record of what both *humiliations* and *humility* really mean. This history of her wonderful novice-ship and its conclusion, too, is interesting as an intimate picture of the Religious discipline and cloistered life of

* Seraf: Razzi, lib. I, cap. viii, p. 27.

her day, being taken as it chiefly is from the pages of Sandrini, a learned member of the Dominican Order.

It was the will of God, whilst Catherine was outwardly but a novice under her mistress, like any other, to take the direction of her soul, really, into His own divine hands; and whilst, for her own good, He allowed every single thing to conspire against her, so as to make her appear utterly unfit for profession, to support her under the cloud by His own strength, which should gradually conduct her to those solitary heights of virtue that are the dwellings of the perfect. The course of events, after the clothing and admission to novitiate, which brought about this purifying process, was as follows.

The Sisters of San Vincenzo, in receiving little Catherine amongst them, had of course been well aware of all those virtues in her that were apparent—of her angelic innocence, her wonderful piety and the ardent longings for perfection which had but recently shone forth in her struggles to get into the cloister. They, however, knew absolutely nothing of all those exceptional graces—of the visions, the ecstasies, and all the frequent and familiar supernatural communications—with which our Lord had favoured her from her earliest childhood. She, on her side, with that instinct of delicate reserve that belongs to all noble and highly-gifted natures, had never dreamt of talking about what went on within her soul, but had hidden all the wonderful graces of her interior life beneath a veil of humility, so impenetrable that not even her confessor had discovered anything of her extraordinary state. In the present stage of her history, Catherine seems to have been under the impression that she was intended to keep all these interior matters a complete secret between herself and her God, even to the end of her life; and hence arose all the misunderstandings, contradictions, and humiliations by which she was so terribly tried during her novitiate by mistresses and superiors.

To begin with, her states of supernatural prayer, in which she was rapt away from earthly things, clearly became more and more frequent after her clothing; and, when

in such states, it is easy to understand how very inconvenient it was for her to be subject to community obligations. She was constantly, as it were, in a most trying dilemma; being, on the one hand, perfectly submissive in desire to that discipline of a noviceship which allows no breathing-space for self-will, and, on the other, having her soul in the grasp of God Himself, who was forcibly—so to speak—bearing it away captive as an eagle bears its prey to the heights. She, who was by nature the very meekest lamb of the whole flock, was thus unwillingly constrained to appear actually rebellious. When the Rule called her to some special community exercise, she was often not even aware of the hour, being entirely lost in a heavenly vision. If they had given her an order, He who had stolen her heart proceeded to rob her yet further, not of the good-will but of the actual time and power, for fulfilling it; so that those around could literally see nothing in her but apparent faithlessness and disobedience. The only religious practices in which she showed herself to be quite incomparably assiduous and fervent were those that consisted in prayer and contemplation; but for these she got no credit at all, because of her seeming to neglect all the rest. They could not overlook her incapacity for manual work, and for learning the chant of the Office; nor what seemed to be her sleepiness and dulness of mind at recreation, and even in spiritual conversations. In the eyes of her mistresses, this exclusive taste for prayer was a sign of the spirit of private judgement and of self-will. As to her companions in the novitiate, they were chiefly taken up with external practices—rather Marthas than Marys at this early stage of their Religious career—and were possibly a little jealous at sight of their young fellow-novice's calm and absorbed habits of prayer; at any rate, they used to complain of her, and say that all her love of God did not make her loving to *them*, for that she scorned to take part in either their work or their recreations.

There was another trouble soon added to all the spiritual discredit that came upon poor Sister Catherine from these apparent breaches of Rule and from the public re-

primands of her superiors. This was a further discredit of a purely natural kind, and even more humiliating, though having the same origin. By dint of her constant habit of interior converse with her Lord and Master, her soul had become so concentrated within itself that all her faculties seemed drawn inwards, and she had the greatest difficulty in turning her attention to the external things around her. When superiors or companions questioned her on ordinary matters, she often answered like a person half asleep. The right words seemed only to come by a slow and painful effort, which gave an effect far from favourable to her intelligence. Again, sometimes when she had actually begun a conversation, or was on her way with a companion to choir or some community gathering, her soul would suddenly be rapt away by a visitation of the Holy Spirit, so that she entirely forgot what she was saying or where she was going. There being no key whatever to all such behaviour on her part, in possession of her Religious mothers and sisters, the result of it was naturally disastrous for her. Incidents of the kind began to be looked upon as either mere whims, or strange oddities of nature, only explicable by the existence of some unusual stupidity, or even deficiency, of mind in the poor little novice; and by degrees, as no improvement appeared, it came to pass that Catherine lost all the consideration she had enjoyed as a postulant and to be looked down upon by the whole community, even including her special mistress, Sister Maddalena Strozzi, who does not appear at this time to have had more light given her about her holy little charge than was possessed by others. Hence, the joy felt by the nuns on their first acquisition of Pierfrancesco's saintly child as a subject, was changed before long to a depressing conviction that they had acquired one who was less than *mediocre* in every way—if not even likely to be an actual burden to the community.

Catherine, meantime—being, as we know, the very opposite of dull or stupid—was fully aware of what was going on around her, and both saw clearly and felt keenly the change that was taking place in the general feeling to-

wards her. It was in her conduct throughout this trying time that the solidity and genuineness of her humility shone forth; for the reality of all those humble feelings that she had expressed on her first reception amongst the nuns, as to her unworthiness to be of their number and her deep reverence for their holiness, could not possibly have been put to a severer test than it now was. Openly as she had talked with the Religious of her ambition for Dominican perfection, and plainly as they had not hesitated to show the high expectations they had formed of her, what must she not have felt when she found herself no sooner a novice than compelled to fall in their estimation? To any ordinary girl of even high virtue—and to a very young and loving one most of all—it could have been nothing short of unendurably bitter to see that she was coming to be looked upon with misgiving, not only as to natural fitness for her high calling, but as to the actual sincerity of her spiritual aspirations, whilst all the time she knew the misgivings to be absolutely unfounded. Yet no bitterness of thought seems for a moment to have entered Catherine's heart; and perhaps there is nothing more touchingly attractive in the whole of this gentle saint's career, and nothing that brings stronger conviction of her early extraordinary sanctity than her attitude under this sharp humiliation. Clinging firmly to her own deeply-rooted belief that God intended her to keep unbroken silence as to what passed within, she never once opened her lips to defend herself from suspicion and reprimand, or to explain the apparent eccentricities of conduct and deficiencies of mind which she knew were puzzling mistresses and companions alike. She went quietly on her way, accepting everything without protest, and taking the whole state of things as sent by her divine Spouse Himself for the discipline of her soul, and as part of necessary religious training. She was unaffectedly convinced that it was infinitely less than her imperfections needed or deserved, and was in truth not merely willing but thankful to be allowed to suffer something that would bring her nearer to Christ; whilst her feelings of love and

eneration for those who were the immediate causes of her suffering only grew deeper.

Thus, in the midst of contempt, the heroic little novice remained actually happy for a long time, and would have asked for no better lot than to be the lowest and most despised of the community, had it not been for a terrible fear that suddenly arose to disturb her serenity. As the prescribed time for her profession approached, and she was conscious of becoming an object of careful observation, she began to pay more attention to what was said of her, and at last grasped the alarming fact that the judgments being pronounced upon her all tended to nothing less than her dismissal from the monastery on the ground of unsuitability. Such a result as this of her novitiate troubles appears to have been unexpected by Sister Catherine until its immediate probability suddenly burst upon her; and the painful impression was soon confirmed by a distressing incident in which her uncle, Fra Timoteo, played the chief part. This excellent man, after having done all he could to help on his niece's early vocation, was now more seriously troubled than any one else at her apparent alteration. He was both tender-hearted and strictly devoted to duty; and here he found himself in the grievous dilemma of having either to see his own brother's child imposed on the community as a useless burden, or to agree to her being torn away from the home that she had nearly died of longing for. His grief over the matter was so intense that, being of an emotional and demonstrative nature, he could not prevent its breaking forth on the first occasion that arose. One day, when he was fulfilling a duty which, according to the custom of those times, fell to him as spiritual director of the noviceship, and was addressing a few words of exhortation to each novice in turn according to her particular needs, the turn of his niece came. Whilst she was lying prostrate before him, Mother Madalena Strozzi entered the room, to make a request of the Father about the entry of a new postulant, for whom she wished him to act as mediator. Hearing this suggestion, Fra Timoteo let his sorrow break forth. "O Mother!"

he protested, "what a difficult and delicate task you are wanting to put upon me! How shall I ever have the courage to interfere, and expose myself again to the risk of bringing incapable subjects into the convent—like this poor niece of mine, whom I should be so thankful now never to have allowed to put her foot within it?"

Such are the words reported by Sandrini; and what poor Catherine felt on hearing them uttered, and in a tone of such deep sorrow, one may guess. Until now, whatever her troubles had been—even when stricken nearly to death in her father's house—she had never once really lost heart. But this time, seeing herself threatened with final expulsion from her beloved cloister, hope seemed to die within her, and she felt for the moment as if actually abandoned by God for her sins. All that passed in that fervent girlish heart at this terrible crisis of her life—what secret tears and prayers she poured forth—what penances she did—to disarm what she feared was the anger of God and win His ear to her entreaties, can of course never be fully known; but one may form some idea of her inward state and hidden actions from the outward course she pursued when this fear had laid hold of her. She clearly felt that her only chance lay in an appeal to the feelings of the nuns, and especially to the "ancients" of the monastery, upon whom she knew much would depend. Accordingly—putting aside all human respect—she now never met one of them anywhere in the house without falling on her knees before her, and begging for her vote as earnestly as if her own fate depended entirely on the favour of that one nun only. She went on doing this so constantly, with such deep humility, such burning anxiety, and such lamentable tears and sobs, that the Religious could not help becoming pitiful and tender over the poor novice's bitter grief. To induce them by every means she could think of to soften further towards her, and grant the grace she asked, Catherine then took to assuring them, in the most *naïve* manner, "that she fully expected to get from God, *for the whole time of her religious life*, all the strength and virtue that she had been *wanting in during the year of her probation.*"

Genuine humility bears a stamp that almost always commands both sympathy and confidence, for the reason that God seems to be present in a creature really empty of self; and in this case the sisters of San Vincenzo were at last completely won over by the humble novice. In spite of all appearances against her vocation, and of all the signs of general incapacity that she had given during her time of trial, they were so touched by her simplicity, and by the extreme attachment that she expressed in such lowly terms for the Religious life, that they voted for her solemn profession—trusting to God, “who giveth grace to the humble,” to make all right. Scarcely had they recorded their votes than their trust was strangely confirmed, for a strong feeling of consolation and satisfaction in what they had done came over the whole community: they felt as if they had performed one of the best actions in their lives. Then—fearing lest some fresh temptation on the subject should assail them—they desired Catherine to prepare for immediate profession, paying no heed to her own desire to be professed on the feast of the Assumption, which was then about six weeks off. She accordingly prepared at once, and pronounced her solemn vows on the feast of St John the Baptist, June 24, 1536. She made her profession in the hands of her step-mother’s brother, Fra Angelo da Diacetto, who was just then prior of St Dominic’s Friary in Prato, and who became afterwards Bishop of Fiesole; and her joy was now complete.

CHAPTER V

History of San Vincenzio at Prato and its foundresses—Fresh trials, illness, and miraculous recovery, of Catherine—Her restoration to favour with the Community—Second illness and second cure—Doubts as to her extraordinary states finally dispelled—Further trials and supernatural helps—Her victory over the devil's attacks

ST CATHERINE'S solemn Religious profession, which brings us to the real beginning of her long career in San Vincenzio's Convent, makes a good opportunity for giving a brief account of the origin of this Religious house and of its first founders. This is well worth doing, for the foundation has an interesting history in many respects, especially in being closely associated with no less celebrated a personage than Fra Girolamo Savonarola. Both because of his connection with their own origin, and because they shared in that universal enthusiasm for him amongst some of his countrymen, which broke forth again and again in different forms, under different leaders, for many years after his death, the great Dominican was ever looked upon by the nuns of this house as a saint and a prophet, besides being loved as practically their founder. The establishment of the house came about as follows :

Whilst Savonarola, as prior of San Marco in Florence, was labouring to bring about the regeneration of that city, which was torn in pieces by the ever-growing fervour of his supporters the *Piagnoni* and the violent conduct of his opponents the *Arrabbiati*, it is well known that from time to time the preacher gave his followers a little breathing-space by carrying the fiery torch of his eloquence into the neighbouring towns and hamlets. Now, on one of these expeditions, in 1495, just three years before his death, he came to Prato with a few of his friars, to work at reforming the monasteries and the morals of the population. Here, like all true and fervent apostles of Christ's Gospel, he was a "cause of the fall and the resurrection of many in

Israel” ;* but as a prophet sent by God, he announced beforehand what he was to do. He foretold “falls” that he might get people to escape them by wholesome fear; he foretold “resurrection” that they might be roused up to reform by joyful hopes.

One day, when he was in the garden of Antonio Sacromoro, opposite St Nicholas’s Church, and when somebody had informed him of irregularities in a certain convent of daughters of St Catherine, he began prophesying about them. He sent them word, as a message from God, that if they did not return to Christian habits, and a more regular mode of life, the day would come when they would be violently torn from their cloister by soldiers and carried off by them on horseback. Another time, standing with some of his friars before the Convent of St Dominic, “stretching his arms towards it, he pointed to a spot close by, saying that a fervent community of holy virgins would shortly be established there.”

Events very soon justified both these predictions. The first of the two prophecies fulfilled was that of the “resurrection.” The power of Fra Girolamo’s apostolic preaching, supported by the holiness of his own example, produced abundant fruits of grace and salvation in Prato during his stay there; and, amongst the souls touched by God, there were several maidens—members of highly-respected families in the town—who formed a plan amongst themselves for living a more perfect life. Savonarola, on leaving Prato himself, left behind him at St Dominic’s one of his Religious called Fra Silvestro de Marradi—a man of exceeding piety, and one of the most eloquent preachers produced by the training of San Marco. The life of this friar became no less celebrated for the holiness of his works than for the influence of his preaching, and he is placed in the ranks of the “Blessed” of the order in Tuscany. To Fra Silvestro these holy maids betook themselves, seeking at the disciple’s hands the help they needed for developing the germ planted in their hearts by the master. He did so well by the little flock, thus brought under his direction, that be-

* Luke ii, 34.

fore long its members both desired and prepared for the monastic life; and in the year 1503 they all appeared before Francesco Salviati, Vicar-General of San Marco's community, then just lately arrived in Prato, to beg for the Religious habit. Finding all satisfactory, on inquiring, he agreed at once to their request; and, on August 29 in that year, gave them the habit in St Dominic's Church, in presence of their fervent director Fra Silvestro, then prior. The young novices were nine in number; and, as the sisters of St Catherine's Monastery made difficulties about receiving them, it became needful to see about a new foundation, both for them and for a good many more who seemed anxious to follow their example. Pope Julius II was approached on the subject, and gave the required authority for founding the new convent, under the patronage of St Vincent Ferrer. Thus, eight years after Girolamo Savonarola's prediction in Prato, the Religious house of San Vincenzio sprang into being: foretold by his prophetic lights, created in germ by his apostolic word, and finally made fruitful by his death. It was, however, four years from the date of its foundation when the convent came to occupy the actual spot that he had pointed out, near the Gualdimari Gate, which opens on the road to Pistoja.

The second event which verified Savonarola's prophecy—that of the “fall” of the unfaithful nuns and their convent—was also the occasion of a special intervention of divine Providence for the protection of San Vincenzio, then still in its early days. This event happened in the year 1512. The pope and the emperor together had sent arms against Florence, to punish that city for having sided with the French, harboured schismatics, and refused to join the League of Cambrai by restoring the Medici. This army—commanded by the Viceroy of Naples, Raymond of Cordona—attacked the town of Prato, which is almost at the gates of Florence. Having taken it by assault they gave it up to all the horrors of pillage. It is terrible even to imagine what was done in the devoted town by an army of 12,000 men, amongst whom were nearly three hundred apostate monks of various orders, and four thou-

sand Moors:—the general destruction—the thefts—and the offences of all kinds in churches and monasteries. Then it was that St Catherine's Convent, which had despised Savonarola's warning, became the prey of an enemy, all the more terrible that it was at that moment the blind instrument of the anger and vengeance of the Most High, for crimes committed in the sanctuary and against monastic rule. "A great number of the nuns," says Serafino Razzi, "were actually snatched from their cloister and carried off by the soldiers on the cruppers of their horses."

The story told of the Sisters of San Vincenzo is as follows: They had all, it is said, assembled in the church, with a number of girls who had rushed in from the town to take shelter in the convent. Suddenly, whilst they were all praying, the doors of the house were noisily flung open, and threatening cries were heard, accompanied by the sound of men's footsteps coming rapidly up to the upper floor where the church was. Three Spanish captains, as fully bent as the lowest of their soldiers on murder, pillage, and even licence, had rushed in; but they were stopped, the tradition says, by a miracle. Having reached a sort of vestibule just outside the church-door, they saw facing them a statue of the glorious Virgin Mary which seemed to be living. With a gesture, and in a tone of authority, the Mother of God spoke and commanded them to respect this monastery and to watch over it, promising them the reward of paradise if they would faithfully obey her. The three men, suddenly changed from raging foes into ardent defenders, entered the church still carrying their naked swords, and thereby terrifying the crowd of Religious and girls into shrieking out to them to spare their lives. Great was the astonishment of the poor women when the officers reassured them by walking straight to the altar and swearing on its sacred stone, not only to do them no harm, but to take them under their protection and defend them from all attacks. The promise was faithfully kept; for the monastery remained uninjured and in perfect peace for the whole twenty-two days of the army's occupation, during which there was universal desolation outside.

This miraculous deliverance occurred on the feast of St John the Baptist, and in memory of the wonderful grace the grateful community instituted a solemn yearly celebration of the saint's day. In the morning, Mass of our Lady was sung with full choir, and there was a general Communion; in the evening, a brilliant procession traversed all the chief parts of the convent, in which our Lady's statue was carried in triumph, by torchlight and with singing of sacred canticles. There is a likeness in this incident to the wonderful security in which, by divine protection, the nuns of St Dominic's first foundation, at Prouille, lived through the devastations and outrages of the heretic army that invaded that town. Lacordaire remarks on this, that God seems to be specially touched by the first works of saints, which have a purity and sweetness all their own.*

The nine foundresses of this favoured Religious house, as well as some who entered the convent afterwards, and were Saint Catherine's companions for a time, have had their special characteristics gracefully traced by some of the early biographers and chroniclers of the convent. Amongst them were several women not far inferior, in holiness and beauty of character, to the saint herself. To give an account of each here, however, would take more space than can be afforded; and we must content ourselves with shortly reproducing the portrait of the most remarkable and important of all that company of holy virgins:— Sister Raffaella da Giovanni da Faenza.

This really great Dominican woman brought to the work of foundation not only conspicuous virtues, but all the mental qualification needed for making these of effect. There was no nun in the house more humble or more exact in observing every detail of rule and of community life. From the time of her entry into Religion she adopted a habit of saying the whole Psalter every day, and of spending the hour just before Matins in prayer. Much given to thought, she soon grasped the fact that, as nothing really great or high had ever been done for God, or for the per-

* *Vie de St Dominique*, chap. iv, p. 182.

fecting of souls in the Church, except by true sanctity, so her monastery could never be worthily established except by the help of a great saint.* From the moment that she clearly saw this the thought never left her; and she made the gift of a real saint to the community the chief object of her longest and most fervent prayers. The second object for which she most earnestly petitioned, and which she joined in her thoughts with the first as its necessary corollary, was the advantage of a more spacious and suitable church than the small and poor oratory they had begun with. Her idea was that a beautiful and well-arranged church should hold the same position, as regarded the material structure of the monastery, that a saint would hold in the spiritual fabric—namely, the furthering of perfection by helping souls to reach more easily to union with God.

Providence, which had its special designs on Sister Raffaella, soon afforded her the opportunity of carrying out her high aims as to the Religious life in her community. When Mother Maria d'Antonio Santo, the first prioress of San Vincenzio, knew herself about to die, she begged the sisters to vote for Raffaella as her successor, assuring them that her youth would be fully made up for by the help that she would get from God. This promise was fully justified, for the new prioress governed the convent with wisdom and prudence far beyond her age. She kept her office for twenty-two successive years, on account of the monastery's being still under process of formation; and for the whole of that time she gave perfect satisfaction both to her own sisters and to the Fathers of the Order who directed them, whilst her guidance was also of immense profit to the souls under her charge. Her government was a wonderful mixture of gentleness and severity. Cheerful and serene of heart, and in manner, she nevertheless always carried a discipline hung to her girdle, with which she punished on the spot every public fault or breach of rule that she saw committed.† At the same time her sweetness and kindness were perfect; and the love she

* Seraf. Razzi, lib. I, cap. viii, p. 18.

† Ibid.

bore to her sisters in Religion was so real that it overflowed even on their relations, to whom she gave the most affectionate proofs of it when they came on visits to the convent. One of the things she watched most strictly over in the house was silence, as being the greatest possible safeguard of fervent contemplation and prayer. Above all, she insisted on its observance in the dormitories, where she would not allow the very smallest noise. By such means did she pursue her sublime end: the desire that her monastery should produce a great saint, for whose appearance she thus prepared the soil, being herself the precursor of Saint Catherine—the angel “sent before her face to prepare her ways.”

The thread of Sister Catherine's own history may now be taken up again where we left it:—at the moment of her Religious profession. This irrevocable act, far from being the end of her trials, was only the beginning of more and greater ones. The Dominican theologian, John Tauler, says, speaking of those who are to be drawn into the closest union with God: “It is not our heavenly Father's custom to use half-measures in purifying a soul that He destines to such high favours. He bathes it—plunges it—throws it, so to speak, headlong—into a perfect ocean of bitterness, as He threw His prophet Jonas into the sea, and as He made His tempests to overwhelm the soul of David.” So did He now act with regard to Catherine; and in her case there was special reason for such purification, from the nature of the graces to be bestowed upon her. She was to be not only the spouse of Jesus Christ, but of Jesus Christ *crucified*, and hence it was with His *sufferings* that she would be particularly associated. In preparation for this, it was necessary that before being allowed to share the sufferings of God she should understand the full depths of human grief; and that, before putting her lips to the chalice of His Passion, she should have steeped them in the bitter cup of our pains and tribulations here below. Through these trials we have to follow her in the next five years of her life.

Her first trouble was a repetition, but increased, of

what she had already suffered from others. The return of sympathetic feeling, which had made Catherine's sisters in Religion receive her to the act of solemn Profession, hardly outlasted the time necessary for arranging and accomplishing that act; and it was she herself who put an end to the feeling, by the very increase of fervour brought about in her own heart through the gratitude that she felt for the favour she had received. Acting on this impulse, she plunged deeper than ever into the hidden life, and into her former habits of solitary intercourse with the supernatural world. As before, these habits betrayed themselves by what appeared to be fits of absent-mindedness* and eccentricities of conduct, which annoyed those around her and again alienated all her companions' affections and interest; only, this time, the states which caused her behaviour being intensified in degree, the effects were more noticeable than formerly. Consequently, a month had barely gone by when the poor girl found herself in a worse position of universal discredit with the community than during her novitiate, for she was not now the object of even the slight degree of consideration and attention that had attached to her position as a probationer. She had become simply a *fait accompli*—and an unwelcome and useless one, whom everybody soon began treating almost as if she were not there at all. Her biographer describes her as being “completely put on one side, and looked upon as nothing.” † They adopted the plan of not even caring whether she was present or absent at the regular community exercises, simply taking for granted that, if not there, she was hidden in some corner or other of the monastery, rapt in one of her states of abstraction—or, as they now took to often calling these, her *sleepy fits*. In short, they appear to have behaved to the saint, for the whole of this strange period of her career, much as they would have done to an actual idiot of inoffensive kind, in whom no strange doings could cause surprise, but whom

* On the subject of “raptures” such as close the senses to all outward things, see St Teresa's *Château Intérieur: Sixièmes Demeures*, chap. iv, v.

† Sandrini, lib. I, cap. viii, p. 28.

they felt at perfect liberty to treat with a sort of contemptuous pity, and even to ridicule in a good-natured way if they came across her. Thus, they are said sometimes, when she happened to be present at spiritual conferences, to have amused themselves by asking her questions; and by then laughing at the extraordinarily humble replies that she gave, as fresh proofs of mental incapacity and foolishness. Such conduct on the nuns' part does not impress one with their wisdom; but there can be no doubt that it was all expressly allowed by our Lord for Catherine's more utter humiliation. The higher were the graces He gave her, the lower did she sink in the opinion of her sisters and superiors; and when the sense-life was entirely suspended in her, by reason of the soul's being rapt away to a region of supernatural light and activity, the immovability of her body was taken for nothing but a prolonged fainting-fit arising from weak health.

Now, however great were the delights of her raptures and ecstasies, when she came back from them to the shadows of this life she certainly did not find her power of suffering any the less for having enjoyed them. Her sensitively tender heart was cruelly torn by the indifference and disdain of her companions; for though, in her humility, she would have willingly remained the lowest in the house, it was quite a different matter to find herself bereft of all affection; and she could by no means comfort herself, humanly speaking, under such a trial. Nevertheless, it was the one that God had decreed for her, and which He left her to bear without mitigation for two years. She had to learn in advance, by her own personal experience, the full meaning of that "Canticle of the Passion" which the Blessed Virgin was to reveal to her later on; and, especially, to be able with her own heart to sympathize truly in that complaint of Jesus Christ's Heart: "My friends and my neighbours have drawn near, and stood against Me. All they that saw Me have laughed Me to scorn: they have spoken with the lips, and wagged the head."*

But all this was only the beginning, and the least evi-

* Ps. xxxvii, 12; xxi, 8.

dent part, of Catherine's troubles. Two years after her profession—in the year 1538, when she was sixteen years old—she was suddenly seized with an illness that was as extraordinary in its complications as it was serious in kind. She is said to have suffered from four separate diseases with sufficient intensity in each to bring her to death's door; and yet she had to lie sick of their combined torture for two years uninterruptedly. The doctors, who had been puzzled from the beginning by the nature of this strange seizure, became fairly bewildered when they found that the complaint baffled all their efforts against it, as time went on. In fact, all their experiments on the patient, for either cure or alleviation, only seem to have resulted in making her worse; so that at last they had to give up all attempts at treating her and leave the disease to take its course. The poor young saint's condition from her sixteenth to her eighteenth year is described as heartrending; whilst the sweet, patient submission and courage of the sufferer are said to have been as wonderful and as touchingly impressive as the illness. Sandrini says: "All those who were witness of Catherine's state were continually moved even to tears; and they found it almost equally hard to understand how the good and just God could allow such innocence to suffer so terribly and unintermittingly, and how so feeble a being could be thus torn to pieces by incessant pains without uttering a single cry or complaint, such as might have been some slight relief to nature."* But, though man could not see it, God was in fact preparing this chosen soul by such severe treatment for His double design upon it—first, for its glorious participation in the mysterious sufferings of God the Son; and, secondly, for the necessary return of the community's sympathy and respect for the saint, through the spectacle of her supernaturally heroic virtue under trial.

For with the coming of this cross the former one disappeared, the sisters having, very soon after the strange illness began, become deeply interested in the once-despised Catherine and most earnestly anxious for her recovery.

* Sandrini, lib. III, cap. xvii, p. 206.

With this object they took to praying incessantly, and to hoping that a cure might be effected by some sort of miraculous help if it were impossible by human means. They had prayed thus perseveringly for nearly two years—besieging with entreaties, and making vows to, our Lady and all the special saints whose intercession they desired—without result; when the approach of a particular date, celebrated in the monastery, suggested to the community that they should make a vow to certain “Blessed” of the Order whose memory the date revived. It was the anniversary of the death of Savonarola and his companions.

As has been said above, the *cultus* of this great man, which—despite the tragic and humiliating circumstances of his death—had constantly been kept up by ardent followers and imitators in many parts of Italy, was nowhere so fervent as at San Vincenzo's. Besides cherishing his memory as a sacred thing, the Religious preserved with the greatest care some objects that had belonged to him, and also a few of his own ashes, saved by some generous hand from the decree which condemned them to be all thrown into the Arno. These relics the nuns boldly honoured as if authenticated for those of a martyr, which they held Savonarola, with his companions Domenico and Silvestro, to be. They venerated his pictures, invoked his intercession, and kept the day of his death as the feast of his entry into heaven. Catherine, though last of all the community in the knowledge of this *cultus*, surpassed everybody in her devotion to its object. Accordingly, when her sisters in Religion determined on making a special vow to “Fra Girolamo and his companions” for obtaining her cure (we are not told what the particular vow was), she joined fervently with them, three days before the feast in question. On the eve of this feast—which, that year, was also the eve of Trinity Sunday—the sick girl begged to be left quite alone in her cell, so that she might pray with more fervour. The Monastery Chronicle relates that, while thus left by herself, about four o'clock in the morning she managed to get up and crawl to the little altar on which the relics of Savonarola were placed; and that there, lean-

ing exhausted on this altar, she dropped her head on her arms and fell asleep. In her sleep she had a vision of three Dominican friars, resplendent in glory, of whom she believed the middle and most glorious of all to have been Fra Girolamo. The chronicler thus describes it: "Sister Catherine, addressing this middle one, said: 'Who are you?' 'What!' replied the friar, 'do you not know me?' 'No, Father,' said Catherine, 'I know you not.' 'But of whom have you begged your cure?' he answered. 'Of Fra Girolamo,' she instantly responded. 'Well! I *am* Fra Girolamo, and I am come to cure you. But you must first promise me always to obey your superiors and your confessor, and then you must go to confession this morning so as to receive Communion.' With that, he made a large sign of the cross over her, and she found herself perfectly cured. Frightened at first by so sudden and great a change, her fright soon gave way to joy, and to the liveliest gratitude to God."*

Such is the account given in the convent archives of this event, so memorable to the community as being believed by them to establish the blessedness of Savonarola and his companions. It had also the immediate effect of sensibly modifying the sisters' attitude towards Catherine in respect of her extraordinary states of mind, which they felt unable to judge so severely after such a proof as this of her being under the special protection of heaven, as well as after watching the heroic courage that she had shown throughout her long illness. They began now to wonder whether, under the appearance of what they had looked upon as mere common "faintings and sleepy fits," there had not been hidden something of a much higher nature. They tried to recall circumstances, and to remember exactly what had been Sister Catherine's appearance and proceedings when in these states. They recollected that, instead of having closed eyes and drooping head, as in ordinary heavy slumbers—or a pale, livid face, and nerveless body, as in common fainting fits—or convulsive and revolting movements with foaming at the mouth, as in epilepsy—she had

* *Le Lettere, etc.—Documenti, etc.*, p. 48.

had her eyes open, and sometimes a most brilliant colour in her cheeks; had remained firmly in whatever attitude she had been in when the seizure came upon her—whether kneeling, standing, or sitting—without any sign of weakness or relaxed muscles; and, however insensible to what was around her, had never made a sign or movement to inspire any feelings but those of piety in anybody near her. Recalling all this, and looking at the young sister now with very different personal feelings from those they had formerly entertained towards her, the nuns, and their spiritual director with them, came finally to the conclusion that they had been mistaken in their earlier judgement of Catherine's strange states, and that these had probably been signs of some supernatural intervention concerned with her soul. Consequently, after serious deliberation, it was decided that her interior spiritual state should be examined with all necessary prudence, so that its conformity with the Holy Spirit, and the absence of any possible delusions from the spirit of lies, should be fully tested.

The venerable Father Timoteo, accordingly, had the humble Catherine brought before him. He began by professing great surprise and displeasure at her having concealed from him, and only let him hear through others, things that he, as her confessor, ought to have heard straight from herself. He then went on to dilate on her imprudence in practising such entire want of openness with her superiors, by which conduct she had exposed her soul to the danger of becoming a victim of the devil's delusions and snares; and finally ordered her, in virtue of the authority he held from God, to give him then and there an account of everything that she saw and heard in her states of rapture. This was a sharp blow to the Saint's humility and habits of silence, but obedience prevented her from opposing such a direct command; so, falling on her knees at the feet of her spiritual father, she humbly begged his pardon for never having revealed her interior graces to him, and (says the author of the anonymous life) "confessed with great simplicity and frankness that it had never

entered her head that she might be deceived in such matters by the devil." * Then, amid tears and sobs, and with such confusion as might have been shown by a criminal from whom a confession was being wrung, she told him about all the apparitions she had had of our Lord, of the Blessed Virgin, and of the Saints; about the holy instructions that she had received in such visions on the great mysteries of religion; and about the injunctions that had been laid upon her. Lastly, she described the effect of all these visions—how, after at first having given her a certain sense of fear, they had always ended by filling her soul with deep peace, intense joy, and great love of God.

Father Timoteo, on hearing all this, was too wise to show the pleasure he inwardly felt at such an account, given by a soul so full of innocence and so truly dear to his own heart. He even pretended at first to think them all delusions, and told his niece that such visions were only traps laid by the infernal spirit to attract and mislead souls. Then, to put her on her guard in future, he ordered her positively to make the sign of the Cross over every spirit, or figure, that might appear to her; and to receive all such apparitions with marks of nothing but contempt. Catherine, we are told, exclaimed naïvely at this: "What! Father, do you tell me I am to show marks of contempt to Jesus Christ, and to His holy Mother and the Saints? Is it possible?" But she only got from her uncle in reply a severe reproof, and the observation that God and His saints love what springs from obedience before all things, so that a contemptuous sign ordered by this can be nothing in their eyes; whilst the devil, being the embodiment of pride and disobedience, cannot endure contempt. The holy man next appointed the very sister who, it may be remembered, she had long ago been told in a vision would one day be her special superior—Sister Maddalena Strozzi—to be her personal guardian and mistress, from whom she was to conceal nothing that happened to her interiorly; and he concluded the interview by strictly enjoining her to come every evening, before she went to bed, to give him an ac-

* *Vita Anonima*, ch. ix, p. 65.

count of whatever she had heard or seen by means of visions or ecstasies throughout the day.

Poor Catherine seems to have been greatly overwhelmed by this close examination into her state and these orders, and to have felt herself, though in a different form, once more the object of mistrust. The hitherto unknown fears, too, which had been aroused in her mind by Father Timoteo's words, and the idea that she might possibly be deceived by the devil, were naturally more terrible to such a soul than any of the trials she had had before. Indeed, she hardly knew how to bear a state of things which compelled her actually to dread the coming of heavenly favours, and to try even to repel the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and the familiar intercourse of the Divine Spouse. Meantime, she was not spared fresh sufferings and trials of exterior kind. About six months after her cure, towards the end of October in 1540, she was attacked with smallpox, which was just then raging in Prato in a peculiarly violent form. It exhausted the strength of its victims, so as to bring them to death's door, with extreme rapidity and the accompaniment of sharp pains. The whole monastery was in consternation when Catherine fell ill of this disease—not so much on account of the complaint itself and its mortal nature, as because it seemed so inexplicable that this pure soul should again have such severe treatment from Providence. The sisters even began to doubt whether the former cure had been a true miracle, and to frighten themselves with the thought that perhaps it had been a demoniacal work.

The Saint had been lying between life and death, in great agony, for nearly a month, when she was once more cured after much the same manner as before, only being this time, she believed, awakened from sleep by a sudden touch, and beholding again the same three friars who had appeared to her in her sleep on Savonarola's feast. The one whom she had formerly held to be Fra Girolamo himself again cured her by the sign of the Cross, after making her acknowledge that she wished to have her health restored if it was the will of God; but on this occasion he is

described as healing her gradually, by making the sacred sign over her several times, and as afterwards forbidding her to leave her cell (which she was on the point of doing at once) until she had leave from the infirmarian to do so—to which prohibition he added an exhortation to be always obedient in the smallest things, patient in trial, and humble before God.

This fresh miracle set the returning doubts of the Community entirely at rest, and increased the respect that they had begun to feel for God's great designs on Catherine's soul, after her first cure. The sisters appear to have been somewhat ashamed of their inclination to rash judgment, and anxious to second the Saint's gratitude to God for her restoration by joining most earnestly in the thanks that she offered to our Lord. In the fervour of her gratitude, Catherine wrote a *Lauda*, or song of praise and thanks, to the three holy friars, Girolamo, Domenico and Silvestro, in which she gave full vent to her feelings of love and veneration for her "Founder" and his companions.

But even now the end had not come of Catherine's troubles, physical or mental. From this latter part of 1540 to the end of 1541—being till just over five years from her Profession—she was constantly subjected to sharp sufferings, interior and exterior, of a kind clearly inflicted by God as the immediate means of that absolutely perfect purification necessary for her special calling. Innocent and holy as she might be, there was evidently still left some small remnant of self that must be pressed out, no matter at what cost, before peace could come.

As regards bodily sufferings during this year, three are particularly mentioned.

First, an extraordinary pain in the teeth, of which she is said to have been miraculously cured by the intervention of Fra Girolamo, and then, within a short interval, two strange illnesses, which took the form of sudden poisoning, with most violent internal pains, great swelling of the body, tremblings, and convulsions. Of these, also, she was miraculously cured: the first time, Razzi tells us, by a vision

of St Thomas Aquinas, who not only cured her, but filled her with consolation, exhorted her to go oftener to Communion, and told her that her prayers had delivered her mother's soul from Purgatory ; the second time, through the application by Maddalena Strozzi of Savonarola's relic.*

These two attacks appear both to have taken place towards the end of her five years' probation ; but before this time Catherine had been undergoing a course of terrible trials of a more directly spiritual kind than had yet been her lot. These came from the enemy of souls himself, without some attempts from whose jealousy and malice it was not likely that such a soul would long remain ; and of whose subtle deceits, moreover, it was doubtless as necessary that she should learn something as it was for her to experience purely human troubles. Satan, F. Filippo Guidi tells us, attacked Catherine in two different ways. First, he attempted to hinder her from praying, by those external means that one so often hears of his being allowed to employ against very holy people : by noises, horrible sights, disgusting odours, and even actual shaking of the place that she was praying in ; whilst she sometimes also heard him, as if full of bitter grief, entreating her to be satisfied with making him powerless against herself, and not to snatch the souls of others from his grasp.

But these open attacks, her biographer goes on to say, were nothing at all to the Saint compared to the spiritual snares and subtle illusions with which he next took to besieging her. He was allowed so to counterfeit the inward operations of grace as very nearly to draw her into all sorts of imprudent excesses in her devotions, and to produce appearances of heavenly visions so overpowering in their splendour that any less perfectly humble and watchful soul than Catherine might have been quite deceived. She, however, having light to see through the deception, felt only most intense grief and mistrust of self under these attacks, and redoubled the fervour of her entreaties to God. At last, we are told, the devil made a peculiarly bold attempt by appearing to her in the form of St Peter with his keys,

* Seraf: Razzi, lib. II, cap. vi, pp. 63, 64,

on the eve of the great Apostle's feast in 1541; when the glory and venerableness of his aspect were so great that she at first forgot her prescribed custom of making the sign of the cross and showing contempt as a test, and for a few minutes gazed trembling and awestruck at the vision. Satan took advantage of this to deliver, in the capacity of the saint, an exhortation so strange in conception that it is worth giving a full account of. He is described as having spoken in a tone of "gentle remonstrance and noble gravity," and as if filled with interest in the monastery. He reproached Catherine, and the other nuns too, for putting their trust so exclusively in the protectors that they had chosen for themselves in heaven, as this made them neglect seeking help from man. He said it was tempting God and the saints; and that it was exacting too much from the latter to try to draw them away from the enjoyment of their eternal happiness and glory, and get them to be always occupying themselves with the wretched, petty affairs of this world. It would be much wiser—and more according to the right order of Providence as well—for them to keep within their appointed earthly sphere, and to seek protectors and patrons amongst the rich and powerful here below, who were far better able to appreciate their needs, and to supply them.

By such language—coming apparently from one of the Blessed themselves—it is easy to understand that the evil one overshot his mark. Its impiety and blasphemy—her momentary delusion once over—struck Catherine's heart with a shock through all its disguise of holy-sounding accents; and, horrified, she made the sign of the Cross, calling for God's help with all her might, when the wolf in sheep's clothing speedily took to flight by disappearing with all his apparent glory.

Then followed—still according to Guidi—a reward of the young saint's faithfulness and humility. This false vision left her in a state of utter depression and sadness—not merely because of this particular attack itself, but because she felt so cast down and terrified at the thought of being constantly exposed to such temptation, and in danger

of falling. Unable to bear the prospect of future trials of the kind, she determined on one tremendous act of confidence in God whereby to call down His special mercy on her state of trouble. She flung herself then and there at the feet of her crucifix, resolved not to rise until she had received the grace of final delivery from her fears; and there she spent the whole night, in such trusting and fervent prayer that our Lord could not deny Himself to so much love. He not only appeared to her with the greatest and most comforting aspect and manner, but He crowned His favours by giving her a solemn promise that she should never be the victim of Satan's treacherous deceits.*

* Filippo Guidi, cap. xxxiv, pp. 78-80.



THE ORATORY AT SAN VINCENZIO—ONCE THE SAINT'S CELL.

CHAPTER VI

Some joys accompanying these trials—Our Lord changes Catherine's heart
—The beginning of her great ecstasy of the Passion

THE time of sharp trial, just recorded as having lasted with more or less severity for the five first years of Catherine's professed life, was not without its notable alleviations in the form of supernatural joys. Besides the wonderful Divine promise recounted at the end of the last chapter concerning her diabolical temptations, several most consoling visions, or other marvellous visitations, are narrated as having been sent to rejoice the Saint's heart in the midst of her sufferings; and these seem to have been especially frequent in the last year of the five. For instance—to take a few of the most notable mentioned by Razzi—when she was offering very earnest thanks, in the chapel, on Christmas Day, 1540, for the two miraculous cures that she believed due to Savonarola's intercession, a very beautiful appearance of Our Lady with the Sacred Infant in her arms, and seemingly accompanied by Fra Girolamo, is recorded, when Catherine was allowed to take the Holy Child into her arms.

Another vision of our Lady and the saints—but, this time, surrounding our Lord Himself in all the glory of His Resurrection—is said to have taken place on the Whit Tuesday following, in the dormitory corridor, and to have completely dazzled her by its brilliancy. This vision was the cause of a miraculous occurrence that immediately followed it—namely, of a gentle reproach, uttered next morning through the figure of our Lord which Catherine had detached from the cross of her cell crucifix, the better to contemplate and lovingly adore it. A voice, seeming to come from this figure, admonished the holy young nun that she had committed a fault of disobedience, in having decided that it was not necessary to go and tell her confessor

about the vision that had appeared to her the day before, because none of the saints had spoken to her. Catherine, we are told, melted into tears at such a reproach, with heartfelt entreaties for pardon; and we may safely conclude that she never again committed an act that could offend in the slightest degree against Religious obedience.

Again, in the early part of '41, the saint is recorded to have been miraculously confessed by a father sent from heaven, who took the form of her Uncle Timoteo, the community confessor, when the latter was really absent from Prato. A similar miracle is related of St Elizabeth of Hungary, who had St John the Baptist to hear her confession: only in Catherine's case it was not a canonized saint whom she believed to have been thus sent, but once more the "Holy Father and Founder" of her convent, Fra Girolamo.*

But, of all the visions related as having been granted to the holy maiden during this period, the one of most interest and importance, as being immediately related to the great purpose for which she was being prepared, is the following, which we give as verbally taken from Razzi:

"It was the Friday before Palm Sunday, in the beginning of April, 1541. Catherine had gone after dinner into a chapel in the garden, to gain a weekly plenary indulgence which Pope Paul III had attached to a large cross that was put up there. When she reached the threshold she raised her eyes, and saw before her three crosses instead of one; and on the middle one she beheld our Lord Jesus Christ in so torturing an attitude that, from the violent shock caused by her first sight of it, she all but fainted with grief. However, making a great effort, she went nearer to the cross, and there looked close at a lamentable sight indeed. Our divine Lord's head, as though almost severed from the neck, hung down on His breast in such a manner that His face rested upon it. The breast so protruded that all the ribs appeared to be dislocated. His hair—here and there in disorder—fell partly over His face, and streamed with blood, as did His beard also. From the large opening

* Razzi, lib. II, cap. iv and v.

in His side the blood gushed forth as from a fountain. All the rest of His body, torn and bruised, was covered with livid spots and clotted blood. His hands were stretched so far above His body that it seemed as if flesh and bone must soon break apart, whilst the body itself—weighed down towards earth—appeared on the point of falling. At the foot of the cross was a pool of blood, around which some women were moaning and wailing.

Poor Sister Catherine, finding herself in presence of such a heartrending spectacle, was torn with inward conflict: on one hand, she did not feel courage to endure the sight, and on the other she had not, at first, strength to leave the spot. At last, recommending herself to God, she tore herself away as best she could; and having, with great difficulty, got back to her cell, she was forced to take to her bed, utterly crushed with the force and anguish of the sensations she had undergone; and there she had to remain for ten days, suffering an actual illness from the compassion that had overwhelmed her for her crucified God.*

Catherine understood from this vision that the greatest sufferings of her life were to come—and that before long—from union with the Passion of her Divine Spouse; but (Razzi goes on to tell us) on rising from the sick-bed to which her grief had brought her she was almost immediately consoled and strengthened by a second apparition, typical of the joy that should follow her future sufferings. In this vision St Mary Magdalen appeared, and led the awe-struck maiden into the presence of Christ, standing in her own cell amid the dazzling light set forth by His glorified body. She was allowed to approach and kiss His sacred feet and the wounds in His side; and she offered humble petitions for her Religious Sisters, that they might be always protected from the snares of the devil. After this, our Lord dismissed her at sound of the office bell.†

We come next to one of the greatest events of the saint's early Religious life, which took place on June 6 in the same year—1541. This was no less than that marvellous mystical transformation that had also been formerly

* Razzi, lib. II, cap. v, pp. 59, 60.

† Ibid, p. 61.

worked in Catherine's namesake of Siena, and that took place during her own century in St Philip Neri—the mysterious event of a *change of heart*. Sister Catherine de' Ricci is said by Razzi to have prayed, like her predecessor and her contemporary, that God would give her “a new heart, all divine and heavenly”; and she received this signal favour on the feast of Corpus Christi.

The account given of the occurrence is that on the morning of that day, after receiving Holy Communion, she was rapt in spirit into heaven. There it seemed to her that the glorious Queen of Angels presented her to our Lord Jesus Christ, begging Him, with humble insistence, to be graciously pleased to change Catherine's heart, as she had so long desired. The Son of God heard and granted His august Mother's prayer without delay. Then did the Saint, in one of those transports of love such as the Blessed experience, feel something mysterious take place within her heart; and she was conscious at the same time of what felt like a flood of entirely new life coursing suddenly through her veins. The Divine Redeemer had in that moment taken away her heart and given her a new one, formed on the model of that of His most holy Mother, the Virgin Mary.*

An immense and unspeakable joy seized hold of Catherine when she thus found herself in possession of another life—of a fresh existence, in fact—far superior to her former one. This was no illusion caused by her miraculous presence in the home of the Blessed; for, when she had regained her senses and come back to earth, she saw clearly that it was a real blessing and gift of the Divine bounty. She felt her soul still so raised above earthly things and so illuminated as to the things of God, that she seemed to be living no longer in this dreary world, but in the abode of eternal light. Accustomed as she had already become, from the heights of contemplation to which her Divine Spouse had led her, to gazing on marvellous visions from the eternal regions, yet the summits whither this new heart seemed to carry her opened out of her spiritual sight such marvels as made her declare “that she did not know herself.” In

* Razzi, lib. II, cap. vi, p. 63.

short, she seems to have experienced something of the burning love and fervour bestowed by the Holy Ghost on the Apostles in the Cenacle. She never tired of declaring that she was now living in a climate and breathing an atmosphere not of this world, and that this heavenly air had become the food of her new life.* It was to her faithful guardian, Sister Maddalena, that she made (as in duty bound) these confidences; and, after talking about her wonderful state, Razzi says that she would protest to her devoted mistress: "No! you must no longer call my heart *Catherine's* heart—you must call it the heart of the glorious Virgin Mary!"

Now, however great may be the beauty and however sublime the perfection of those seraphic souls on whom Christ is pleased to bestow such extraordinary favours as these, they are not usually granted except to those whom God predestines for some public mission in the Church; and just in this way did our Lord act with regard to Saint Catherine de' Ricci. When He took away her heart, and gave her another like to that of the Blessed Virgin, He gave her also a public office corresponding to the grace. This office was to reproduce, in her own person, after the pattern of His Mother at the foot of the Cross, all the actions of Jesus Christ when He saved the world through the sufferings of His Passion. This great mystery of our redemption always has been, and always will be, the abiding object of contemplation for Christian souls. All saints in turn have in some form followed the bleeding path to Calvary, there to kiss His footsteps and to water them with their tears; and many amongst them have had the privilege of either receiving the sacred Stigmata, or of partially showing His pains by some other means, in their own bodies. But since the most holy Virgin herself felt every separate suffering of her Son by attending Him to the cross and the tomb, our historians declare that none of the saints—no matter how they might have suffered with and for Christ, nor even though they had been honoured with the Stigmata—had ever before reproduced the mystery of the *Compassion* to the

* Sandrini, lib. I, cap. xvii, p. 61.

same degree as Catherine de' Ricci was called to do: none had personally retraced, as she did, all its incidents.

It was on the first Thursday of February, 1542, that Catherine—then twenty years old—had, for the first time, this wonderful ecstasy which was destined to be renewed every week until the year 1554. Beginning always on a Thursday at noon, it went on till four o'clock on Friday evening, thus lasting twenty-eight hours.

The following was the regular order of this marvellous phenomenon :

It began with the touching scene of separation between Jesus and His Mother, which lasted four hours, during which Catherine heard the Son and Mother discourse on the great mystery about to be wrought.

At four o'clock, she followed Jesus as He set out from Bethany for Jerusalem; and, on the way, she listened to the wonderful words in which He described to His disciples, that He might strengthen them, all the details of the forthcoming events. On entering the city, she went towards Mount Sion, where the Cenacle was.

She entered this sacred room at five o'clock, and was present at the Last Supper, at the washing of feet, at the institution of the Holy Eucharist, and at that beautiful discourse which followed, up to the words : "*Arise! let us go.*" These different actions took up two hours.

At seven o'clock she left the Cenacle and wended her way to the Mount of Olives, preceding our Lord and His disciples.

Jesus waited a few minutes in the house close by the Garden of Gethsemane; and it was eight o'clock when Catherine followed Him as He entered the Garden. For three hours she watched, as all the phases of the Great Mystery of the Agony were gone through—Our Saviour's prayer, prostrate on the ground; His repugnance, and His resignation, before the chalice of His Passion; the angel's apparition, and the bloody sweat.

At eleven o'clock she beheld Jesus, feeling that His enemies were near, rise, and go to seek His disciples; and for half-an-hour she heard Him exhorting them to watch

and pray. Then Judas arrived with his band of soldiers ; she saw them felled to the earth by our Lord's word, and was then present at the flight of His disciples, at His arrest, and at all the insults heaped upon him up to the hour of midnight.

At that hour they started for Jerusalem, and reached the house of Annas at one o'clock in the morning. There she was witness of the questions put to Jesus—which lasted half-an-hour—and of the blow given to Him by the High Priest's servant.

Another half-hour was taken up in going to the tribunal of Caiphas, and waiting there for his hour of giving audience.

It was not until two in the morning that Jesus appeared before Caiphas. His interrogations and appeals, the testimony of the false witnesses, and the hypocritical indignation which caused the chief priest to tear his garments, lasted a little over an hour.

A little after three o'clock Catherine followed Jesus to Pilate's judgement seat, before which (having taken some little time in going and in waiting) they actually appeared only at about a quarter to four. This corresponded to St John's statement, when he says that it was "morning"—*erat autem mane*.

Pilate questioned our Blessed Lord for half-an-hour, and then sent Him back to Herod. The latter contemptuously sent Him back after another half-hour's examination, which—including the time of the walk—caused Him to reappear before Pilate at half-past five. This magistrate, knowing the wickedness and treachery of the Jews, interrogated Jesus yet once more for half-an-hour, trying to find some means of getting Him out of their hands without compromising himself. But he yielded at last like a coward to their threatening clamour, and condemned Him to be tied to the column, there to undergo the torture of scourging. This cruel punishment, begun at six o'clock, only came to an end at a quarter past seven.

The instant it was over the saint beheld the soldiers press round Jesus to crown Him with thorns. She said

that out of respect for this sacred crown, our Redeemer placed Himself reverently on His knees to receive it. The soldiers, however, soon compelled Him to sit down, that they might insult Him the more easily; when they put a reed in His hand, spit on Him, and did all those insulting acts described in holy Scripture.

At eight o'clock, she saw Pilate take Jesus from the soldiers' hands, and present Him to the people, saying, *Ecce Homo*. Then she witnessed all the fluctuations of that feeble soul, wavering between the innocence of the divine Prisoner and the furious demands of the mob which called for His blood.

She heard the sentence of death pronounced upon our Lord at half-past nine, and watched them spend half-an-hour in preparing the instrument of His execution. It was ten o'clock on Friday morning when they presented Him with His Cross; and she saw Him humbly bend His sacred shoulders to receive it, and carrying it painfully up the steep ascent of Calvary, not without falling several times under the weight. He reached the summit of the mountain at eleven, and an hour was spent in first making the needful preparations and in then stripping Him of His garments and nailing Him on His gibbet of shame.

At the second noon of her ecstasy, Catherine beheld the Cross raised upright, and gazed on Jesus hanging there alive, for three whole hours, between the anger of heaven and the outrages and blasphemies sent up to Him from earth.

He died at three o'clock; and at four His body was taken down from the Cross and placed in the arms of His forlorn mother.

At that moment the saint came out of her ecstasy, having not only beheld, but suffered in her own soul and body, every act of our Lord Jesus Christ throughout His most painful Passion—an agony that, as His faithful spouse, she was to experience, not once only, but every week for twelve years of her life.

In this ecstasy, as in all her others, Catherine's face wore a supernatural splendour and a majestic expression

proper to an angelic countenance alone,* which inspired those who looked upon her with both deep respect and a strong attraction for the things of God. But whilst, in her usual states of rapture, she remained motionless—her eyes fixed, and no sign visible of what she felt except changes from pallor to crimson in her face, according to the emotions she might be going through—in her ecstasy of the Passion her body moved in conformity with the gestures, attitudes and all the various motions of our Lord's own body throughout His sufferings. For instance, she held out her hands as if to be bound, at the hour of His capture; she stood majestically upright to represent His fastening to the pillar for the scourging; bent her head as though to receive the crown of thorns; and so with all other incidents of the Passion. She adopted all these attitudes and made all these movements with such gentle gravity and modesty as to call to mind that divine Lamb prophesied of by Isaias who should be "dumb before the shearers" and should "open not His mouth before the slaughterer."

When all outward action was suspended, the spectators knew by the words she used what part of the sacred drama she had reached. Thus, in the calm and solemn time of its beginning, she was evidently in the house at Bethany, because words fell from her lips such as Jesus might address to His Mother in bidding her farewell. Again, a shuddering of her form, with a cry to her Creator to spare her, betrayed the agony when the terrible sufferings were approaching; whilst soon afterwards she was heard to offer herself unreservedly to Jesus, that she might share His pains to the full extent of His holy will; and, later on still, she would call on her divine Spouse to help her in bearing the heavy weight of the cross, and wonder "how He could have borne it Himself, tender and delicate as He was!" †

Often she would take occasion from the various sufferings of Jesus Christ to address fervent exhortations to her sisters on the fulfilment of their Rule and the practise of monastic virtues, which she did with a knowledge, loftiness of thought and eloquence not to be expected from a

* *Compendio della Vita, etc.*, cap. iv, p. 21. † *Vita Anonima*, cap. viii, p. 57.

woman, and especially from a woman neither learned nor literary—so says one of her historians; and he adds that one would have thought that a consummate theologian or father of the Church was speaking. The same historian also says that she would speak during these ecstasies in different characters, i.e., sometimes in the person of Christ, sometimes in that of His Mother or of St Dominic, and sometimes again in her own name—and that she would vary her voice accordingly. Again, he tells us that at times she broke forth into ejaculations or invocations to her divine Spouse so full of burning love, or compassion for His sufferings, that her hearers could not but feel themselves extraordinarily inflamed with love of God; whilst sometimes she would speak directly to sinners, reproaching them with ingratitude, and moving any who might happen to be present to tears of tender compunction. She prayed also at intervals most fervently for her sisters in religion—both giving thanks for them and begging pardon for their faults; for the universal Church and all its needs; for the remission of all sin; and lastly for herself, that she might not become the victim of Satan by means of some secret fault existing beneath all these heavenly favours.*

Notwithstanding the saint's abstraction from whatever was passing round her during this ecstasy, if any one present thought of begging some particular grace from God, or merely of asking His blessing by the hand of His servant, her arm—while the rest of her body still remained motionless—immediately moved towards the person who had thus prayed, and she made the sign of the cross over the suppliant. This action, it is said, inspired all who saw it with a sense of mingled awe and fear, as at a divine apparition; for it was felt that God Himself had instantly answered a secret thought of the heart by His faithful handmaiden's agency.

This marvellous contemplation of Sister Catherine's always went on uninterrupted for its full course of twenty-eight hours, save for the one break of her receiving holy Communion. When this time arrived, her soul came down

* *Vita Anonima*, cap. viii, pp. 57-59.

from the heights of rapture, and she reassumed her senses to honour Jesus Christ in the sacrament of His body and blood; but after having received it, she was rapt again into her ecstasy at the point where she had quitted it. We are told that every time this hour of Communion recurred, it was announced to those in the house by a delightful perfume which seemed to exhale from her body, and which scented the whole quarter of the convent that she inhabited, thus making known her longing to receive her Lord, which was at once complied with.

When at last the great ecstasy was over, she came forth from it even as a brave soldier comes off the battle-field: her body covered with the wounds she had received in this glorious combat of love and suffering. The bleeding signs of likeness to her crucified Spouse were imprinted on her whole person, which bore visible marks of the scourging, of the thorn-crown, of the crucifixion, and even of the cords they had used to take Him down from the cross.*

* *Vita Anonima*, cap. viii, p. 59.

CHAPTER VII

The Ecstasy of the Passion is examined by the Provincial and by the General of the Order—Their favourable verdict—Other doubts set at rest—The "Canticle of the Passion" revealed to Catherine

So considerable a phenomenon as the ecstasy just described could not, of course, fail to produce an enormous sensation in San Vincenzo's Convent. From the first day that it occurred, in fact, the house may be described as having been literally turned upside down—not, however, as might perhaps be supposed, by any hasty, enthusiastic excitement, but rather by a general feeling of truly religious fear and mistrust. The holy women who formed the community were too really wise, and the marvel was too great a one, for them to adopt a blind belief in its divine authenticity. Accustomed to put into practice St John the Evangelist's advice with regard to supernatural gifts, which advice requires that they should be tested before acceptance, the nuns reserved their opinions all the more completely that they felt the grace to be so extremely wonderful if it were really authentic. Through humility, they dared not hope this; through love for their Sister Catherine, and for the honour of their monastery, they dreaded nothing so much as a deception. Never before had they felt so closely threatened by some appalling artifice of Satan's. Thus, throughout the community, there burst forth one great explosion, so to speak, of prayer against such a possible misfortune.

Apart from the general good, there was not a single Religious in the house who did not shudder at the very thought that so holy and humble a soul should become the sport of the devil; and nobody was so anxiously concerned about this as the saint herself. It was touching to see her, on coming out of her ecstasies, throw herself prostrate at the feet of her companions, and entreat them, with tears, to obtain for her by the fervour of their prayers

what she feared she could not get by her own. The superiors of the convent, on their part, did all they could by recommending the strictest discretion in speech to prevent any account of the wonder from getting prematurely known outside; but Providence, apparently intending the ecstasy to be made public, defeated their precautions, and allowed the matter—whether by means of pupils in the school who found it out and reported to their parents, or by seculars who came into the convent for employment and gossiped in the town, was not known—to get bruited so universally in Prato that it soon reached Florence, and came to the ears of the Father Provincial of the Roman Dominican province, to whom the chief jurisdiction of San Vincenzo belonged. This office was held just then by Padre Francesco Romeo di Castiglione, a worthy son of San Marco's in his piety, zeal for regular observance, and remarkable learning; all of which qualities caused him to be raised later on to the dignity of General of the whole Order, and to become one of the most noted theologians in the Council of Trent. Hearing all these rumours from Prato, which came to him accidentally and without any official notice from the convent, he felt disagreeably impressed, fearing that premature reports of such things might turn to the discredit of the monastery and the whole Order, should time reveal the reported ecstasies to be false. Accordingly, faithful to the duty of his office, and determined to see how the land lay, he straightway betook himself to the spot. He certainly lost no time; for Catherine's great ecstasies dated only from the beginning of February, 1542, and by the end of that month he was at Prato to judge them! His visit, with the severe punishments that might possibly come in its train, was officially announced beforehand; and the announcement is said by Razzi to have produced a striking instance both of the saint's lowliness and of the high place she held in the esteem of those who knew her intimately. He recounts that, when the news arrived, she went straight to her dear mistress and *confidante*, and, with humble and charming simplicity, said to her: "Mother, if somebody comes to punish me for my 'trances'

(as she called her ecstasies), and condemns me to prison, I am quite ready to go there, and to suffer everything for the love of Jesus. Only, I entreat you, do manage so that they may put me somewhere that will not frighten me too much! Let the cell be as narrow and wretched as you like—I shall not mind that, for I know I deserve nothing else; but I should love you more than ever if you would only be so good as to keep me company there, and not leave me all alone!" The *confidante* was well worthy of such a sweet and gentle soul; for she went to Catherine's uncle, Fra Timoteo, and thus expressed her feelings: "Father, I assure you that if they were to shut me up in a dark, narrow prison with your niece I should rejoice at it, and think myself happy; for, with her, the most horrible dungeon would be to me a garden of delights, knowing as I do how pleasing that soul is to God, and how dear to His Heart!"*

Arrived at San Vincenzo, then, this learned and austere provincial ordered the humble Catherine to be brought before him. Being thoroughly impregnated with the strictest principles of Catholic theology concerning raptures and ecstasies—knowing how easily the devil can simulate true ones for the purpose of instigating their subjects to pride and self-complacency—he at once began, with stern countenance and harsh voice, both to interrogate her severely and to heap reproaches on her as though she were a convicted criminal. He told her that she was disturbing the monastery by getting up extravagant scenes under pretence of visions and ecstasies; that she was nothing but a vain hypocrite, wanting to pose as a saint through contemptible means, that she might get credit; and that even if she did see anything in her pretended visions, this was merely a diabolical illusion, wrought by the enemy of her salvation that he might the more surely drag her to eternal death. He even accused the poor girl of having made a compact with the prince of this world and the father of lies. He went on to add, however, that—no matter how great her crimes—if she felt touched by repentance and

* Seraf. Razzi, lib. III, cap. iii, p. 107.

would promise to give up all these dangerous deceits, he would undertake to pardon her, to forget the past, and to give her his protection for the future. If she refused to submit, she must expect to be put under a ban in the monastery, and to be separated from her sisters—in short, to be subjected to whatever severe penalties might be necessary for the honour of God and the good of her own soul.

Catherine listened to all this in calm silence; and, when the provincial had finished, replied gently and modestly. She said she quite acknowledged herself worthy of severe chastisement for her own sins; but that, as to her “trances,” having no share of her own in bringing them about, having never sought them, and being indeed subject to them against her will, she could not promise to abstain from them even if she wished. She added that, so far from having intentionally anything to do with the evil one, God was her witness that, from the time when baptism had given her to Jesus Christ, she had had no wish at all except to please and belong to *Him*, as the spouse of her soul. She knew well that, in spite of all this, the extraordinary things that had happened to her *might* of course be diabolical snares and delusions, in which case she most earnestly begged of her Redeemer, by His own tears and groans, to deliver her from them; but that if they were in truth heavenly favours and gifts of His divine munificence, “then, she was not so entirely destitute of sense and intelligence as to wish to be deprived of graces which He Himself had thought well to bestow on her for her soul’s salvation.”*

The saint went on to say, further, that, whilst she besought God to continue and to increase His favours, she also entreated Him to take away their outward signs, and everything that could bring her into public notice, seeing that the gifts of God could not but suffer in the eyes of the world by appearing in such a wretched and contemptible creature as she was. She declared also that she had incessantly begged the holy souls amongst whom she lived

* *Vita Anonima*, cap. ix, p. 71.

to pray for her with this object ; but that in spite of their fervent and persistent intercession, coupled with the merits of their angelic lives, she had found her 'trances,' up to the present time, increase rather than diminish.

Such was Catherine's reply ; and it so filled the nuns (who appear to have been present at the examination) with wonder at its heavenly wisdom that a report spread through the monastery that St Thomas Aquinas had come to her help with his advice, as her special advocate. Nobody, however, was so well able to appreciate its full purport as Padre Francesco himself. His mind was, as it were, dazzled by such an answer, and his heart then and there won over to Catherine's side. He could absolutely find nothing to say except a few words of affectionate encouragement ; and was rising as if to conclude the interview without further delay, when the young saint herself pressed him, in the most humbly submissive terms, to pronounce a decision. Either because he did not wish to make a public pronouncement, or because he simply wished to postpone formal judgement, the provincial tried at first to avoid a definite answer, and merely said : "Enough upon this subject ! Let there be no further question about it." But Catherine, contrary to all her usual habits of timidity and respect, insisted. "Father," she said, "I am a little sheep of your flock, and you are the shepherd of my soul. Your duty is to enlighten and direct me, and mine is to obey you. I ask you to tell me whether I may be at peace in my conscience ?"

This deference, spontaneously shown by a soul, just returned from heavenly intercourse, to the visible hierarchy of the Church—this strong and clearly-marked subordination of private judgement to the verdict of Christ's representatives and successors in authority, even whilst that soul was flooded with supernatural light—caused the man of God to throw aside at once any hesitation he might still have left as a theologian, and to give the humble virgin the assurance she desired. "Take courage, my child," he said, "and be at peace. There is no delusion in your state. God Himself is guiding you, and all the things that

you see and experience are graces of His divine bounty. Be humble and obedient. Never fail to reveal whatever passes within you to your confessor; and I can safely assure you that not only will you be free from fault, but that you will be pleasing to God in all your works."

Having thus given his verdict on their reality, the Father Provincial wished to see, and be edified by, the actual form of the heavenly graces bestowed on Sister Catherine, and therefore waited to be present at the next occurrence of her ecstasy of the Passion. Having witnessed it, and been deeply moved and astonished by all its touching details, he—who had come to the convent armed with intended punishments and energetic measures of repression—went home, his heart overflowing with divine consolation, and his mind full of joy and wonder at the great things that God works in His elect. He did not stay at Florence, but went straight on to Rome to make his report to the general of the Order, who was at that time Padre Alberto de las Casas, a man of Spanish birth who became afterwards Legate of the Holy See. He was greatly struck by hearing such a man as Padre Francesco Romeo, with his high character and learning, assert such marvels of "the young saint of Prato," and decided at once to go there himself—not so much for the sake of subjecting the facts stated to his own scrutiny, as for that of gaining the spiritual joy, and profit to his soul, which he thought such a rare and wonderful sight must cause. He was not disappointed in his expectation. He saw the saint in her great ecstasy; and he was so powerfully moved by the vivid representation of Jesus Christ suffering placed before him by her whilst going through it, that he could do nothing the whole time but shed tears of compunction and of love for his holy Redeemer.* When it was over, he offered humble thanks to the Lord, and said to those who had accompanied him that "there was nothing to doubt about in this soul, but everything to revere." †

After her ecstasy he had an interview with Catherine, and was charmed by her simplicity and humility: the more

* Sandrini, lib. I, cap. xiv, p. 58.

† Ibid. p. 53.

so, that there was joined to these qualities a graceful playfulness of manner that was most lovable. But what he admired most of all was the holy attractiveness of her conversation, which—turning entirely on the things of God—so insensibly wove its invisible meshes round her listeners that no soul who heard her could escape being strongly drawn by sympathy to share her love of our Divine Lord. “No!” he exclaimed, as he left her, “this is no mere girl that we have heard—it is a true seraph.”*

The appearance of these two chief authorities of the Order at Prato, coming immediately after each other to give their sanction to the workings of grace in Sister Catherine, produced its natural effect within as well as without the monastery; and the general opinion decided at once in her favour. Nevertheless, certain individual protests of incredulous views were still to be made, and that for some time to come, amid the nearly universal faith of admiration.

One great example of these sceptical minds, convinced in spite of himself, was the immediate successor to Francesco di Castiglione—Padre Nicolo Michelozzi, the next provincial. Hardly had he taken in hand the government of the province than he took advantage of his position to go and judge for himself of these strange things, so that he might have the last word on the reported ecstasies of the wonderful sister. Arriving one Friday at San Vincenzo, he happened to meet Euphrasia Mascalonzi, a sister extremely devoted to the saint, and he asked her at once what “Sister Catherine” was doing at that moment. Euphrasia replied: “She is in her state of ecstasy, and is sitting with her hand over her face.”

Then the provincial, forming a secret wish in his heart, said to the young sister:

“Very well! Now do you go into her cell, and there place yourself on your knees right in front of her, with your hands beneath your scapular; notice carefully what she does, and then come and tell me.”

The sister obeyed. Hardly had she taken up her position in front of Catherine than the latter raised her right

* Ibid.

hand, and blessed Euphrasia three times by making three signs of the Cross on her forehead; then, having taken her in her arms and kissed her affectionately, she sent her away. When the sister came and repeated all this to Padre Michelozzi, he was compelled to give immediate homage to the Spirit of God dwelling within the saint—for she had exactly performed all the actions that he had privately wished her to do!

But the most wonderful fact recorded, of this kind, is the conversion from incredulity of the same Sister Euphrasia's own sister, Gabriella Mascalzoni. She was also devotedly fond of the saint, and suffered greatly at heart from feeling unable to believe in her ecstasies. One day Catherine, meeting Gabriella at the door of a little oratory in the convent, asked her the time; and when she replied that she did not know, begged her to go and look at the clock and bring back word. The saint then went into the Oratory, began to pray, and fell almost at once into an ecstasy. When Sister Gabriella came back and found her in this state—there being no one else present to notice—she fell on her knees before her holy companion, and fervently entreated our Lord to have pity on her, and to remove from her heart the hardness that made her always doubt about these raptures. Then, raising her eyes to Catherine's face, what did she behold but the Face of Jesus Christ Himself, with the long hair and the beard belonging to our representations of Him! Seized with fear, the sister would have fled at the sight; but the saint—without breaking through her ecstasy—placed both hands on Euphrasia's shoulders and held her back, looking straight into her eyes. Then she said: "Who do you think I am? Jesus, or Catherine?" The poor child, yet more frightened now, gave a cry that was heard by many of the community; and all who had heard came hastily running into the Oratory, whilst Euphrasia felt constrained to make answer: "*You are Jesus!*" Three times did she have to give the same reply to the same question asked by the *Estatica*; and then an immense joy suddenly flooded her heart, for she had in that moment gained the absolute certainty of Catherine's great sanctity and the reality of her

ecstasies. She afterwards told her companions that never in her whole life had she beheld any beauty to compare with the beauty of Christ's Face, as she saw it in the place of Catherine's.*

Benedict XIV, speaking from that seat which has the privilege of passing infallible judgements on the actions of the saints, expresses himself as follows concerning this marvellous phenomenon:

“Jesus Christ, wishing to show how far the union of thought and will between Himself and Catherine reached, placed a glorious sign of it on her face, by transforming it to a living image and perfect likeness of His own Face; so that those who saw Catherine thought they beheld the Son of God and the Son of Man.” †

The saint herself gave the same interpretation of the marvel, in her own *naïve* and graceful manner, to her fortunate *confidante* Maddalena Strozzi, who had—and, clearly, never failed to use—the right of questioning her upon the innermost secrets of her life. Sister Maddalena having asked how such a change of countenance as this could possibly be made, Catherine replied in the beautiful words of St John: “Do you not know that ‘he who dwells in charity dwells in God, and God in him’?”

We are told that the most Blessed Virgin herself chose to add her own high sanction to all these proofs of genuineness, by conferring a singular favour which should serve to promote the piety of the faithful, not at the time only but in ages to come. Immediately after the first ecstasy of the Passion she appeared to Catherine and gave her joy of being associated with herself in the mystery of the “*Compassion*,” where she stood at the foot of her Son's cross. She then taught her to honour the object of their mutual love in the form which always seems most apt to express the truly great feelings of the heart—that of a sacred canticle. This pathetic lament, composed entirely of the words of Holy Writ, is in two parts. In the first part, verses from the Prophets and Evangelists are put into the mouth of our Divine Redeemer Himself, who, in this inspired language, sets forth

* *Compendio della Vita, etc.*, cap. vi, p. 32.

† Bull of Canonization.

the chief circumstances of His Passion in a profoundly moving way. As one listens to His plaintive and loving cries, each act of the cruel drama seems to pass before one's inward sight, so that one can count His bleeding wounds one by one; whilst the hearer's heart is pierced with tender compunction, and filled with overwhelming gratitude and love for a God who has first so loved us.

This part of the Canticle ends with, first, the cry of the "Good Thief" from the cross—"Remember, O Lord, Thy servants, when Thou comest into Thy kingdom!"—here supposed to be addressed to the Saviour of the world by all the faithful as He is about to die; and then the last words of the account of His Passion—"And Jesus, with a loud cry, gave up the ghost."

The second part consists entirely of the reflections which the recital of this great mystery is supposed to suggest to the soul—still expressed in that language of Scripture which can say so much in so few words. It begins with an utterance of gratitude for the mercies of the Lord, followed by a most pathetic calling to mind of all that we have cost our meek Deliverer. Then, after a fervent call upon His goodness to awake and help us, and an act of especial confidence in Him under the title of *Saviour*, the Canticle ends with a humble prayer to Jesus Christ that the merits of His Blood may be applied to us.

Our Lady is said to have desired Catherine, when she revealed this Canticle to her, to spread it through the convent as a form of prayer and contemplation supremely pleasing to our Lord. The venerable confessor, Fra Timoteo, wrote it out in full at the saint's dictation and submitted it for the approval of the Order. Padre Francesco di Castiglione had then become general, and he was not satisfied with allowing its use in San Vincenzo. By a circular letter to all monasteries of the Province he ordered it to be placed amongst the regular devotions and forms of prayer peculiar to the Dominicans; and it has remained celebrated amongst us, under the title *Canticle of the Passion*, as a monument to the tender love of our great Dominican saint, Catherine de'

Ricci, for her crucified Jesus.* It is still the general custom in our churches to chant it publicly on certain occasions, and especially on the Fridays in Lent. It never fails to produce—chanted as it is, in many cases, to a peculiar and extraordinarily pathetic tone—a most deep sense of devotion in earnest souls.

* Fr Jacobus Echard, *De Script. Dominicanis*, t. II, p. 181. This "Canticle" of St Catherine's is to be found, with other special Dominican devotions for the Passion, in a Latin book of "Little Offices," brought out in Rome in 1884 by Father J. M. Larocca, called *Officium Parvum B.M.V. juxta ritum Sac. Ord. Fr. Prædicatorum*, p. 235.

CHAPTER VIII

Mystic espousals of the Saint with Jesus Christ—Jesus gives her the ring—Her sacred Stigmata—Her crown of thorns—Favours bestowed on her through a miraculous crucifix.

THUS, then, were Catherine's ecstasies—and especially that of the Passion—authentically acknowledged as of Divine origin, and in nowise a delusion. The moment had now come for her to receive the full accomplishment of God's promises. Eight years, or thereabouts, had gone by since Jesus Christ had appeared to her during that bad illness in her father's house, to tell her of her approaching recovery and to show her the splendid betrothal-ring with which He meant one day to espouse her.* This miraculous occurrence now actually took place; and the following account of it is handed down to us, in the graceful words of Serafino Razzi:

“On the 9th of April, 1542, being Easter Day, and the maiden Catherine being in her cell towards early dawn, our Lord Jesus Christ appeared to her covered with glory, bearing a brilliantly shining cross on His shoulder, and a magnificent crown on His head. He had with Him His glorious Virgin Mother, Mary; Saint Mary Magdalen; Saint Thomas of Aquin; and another Blessed of the Order. The saint's little cell became instantly full of dazzling light; and amidst the light was a multitude of angels gracefully clad, and ranged in due order, with divers musical instruments in their hands. Beholding such majesty, Catherine was struck with a great fear; and (having first, notwithstanding her awe, carried out what obedience prescribed as to all visions) she prostrated three times in adoration of Jesus. Then did the most holy Mother of God pray her Divine Son to be pleased to take Sister Catherine for His Spouse. He therewith gladly consented; and—whilst the Blessed Virgin held forth the hand of His humble servant

* See chap. iii, sup. Date c. 1535.

—hastened to draw from His own finger a brilliant ring, which He Himself placed on Catherine's left fore-finger; and, as He placed it, He said: 'My daughter, receive this ring as pledge and proof that thou dost now, and ever shalt, belong to Me.' And when the holy maid longed to tell her gratitude, but could find no words worthy of such a grace, then the angels suddenly began to draw from their instruments melody so sweet that her narrow cell seemed all at once to be Paradise.

"Jesus, after that, earnestly commended to His spouse the practice of humility, obedience, and all Christian virtues; filled her soul with some of that heavenly joy that is the portion of His well-beloved ones; and disappeared from sight, followed by all His train."

The ring given to Catherine was of pure gold, enamelled with red in symbol of the Blood of the Passion, and with a magnificent diamond set in the middle. It was said to have been always visible to her, but not equally so to others. It became visible, we are told, to different people from time to time, in different forms, according to the devotion of each and as God pleased. Sister Maddalena Strozzi saw it habitually, as a raised red circle round the finger, increasing, in the shape of a square stone, in the middle. Other sisters saw it now and then shining like a luminous circle. Others again, seeing it under one form or another, were at the same time conscious of a heavenly scent coming from it. Once, however, the whole community—having put the saint under obligation to beg the favour of God—saw the ring in its full real beauty and true form. Then every one of these consecrated virgins recognized in the mysterious pledge of betrothal a sacred gift, which the Divine Spouse gives, indeed, to whomsoever He pleases; but with which He specially loves to address one to whom He may say, in the joy of His Heart, *Una est columba mea, una est perfecta mea*.^{*} Soon, both in the Monastery and in all Tuscany, Catherine was named with one voice "the Bride of Christ" *par excellence*.

It is remarkable that at the very same period when our Lord was bestowing this strangely touching proof of Divine

^{*} *Le Lettere*, &c., p. 114.

condescension—which had been but rarely granted in the earlier ages of Christianity—on the subject of our present history, He was also granting the favour of Mystic Espousals to other saints. Saint M. Magdalen de' Pazzi, in Italy; St Theresa, in Spain; the Venerable Agnes of Langeac, in France: all received the marvellous grace somewhere about this time. It would seem as if, on the threshold of the great religious upheaval that was to weaken Faith and cool Charity later in the sixteenth century, God chose to be specially prodigal of such divine gifts as might strengthen the love and devotion of pure and generous souls.

But, after this short respite from suffering granted to her in the joys of her heavenly betrothal, Catherine was soon drawn back into the more hidden, though not less glorious, path of her appointed lot. God destined her for the enormous favour of the Sacred Stigmata, that she might thereby share the honour as well as the pains of His Passion; so He appears to have prepared her for this immediately after her reception of the mystical ring, by a special and intimate communication, in which He revealed to her how complete was to be that "baptism of suffering" which should inflict the pains of death on every part of her body, and all its anguish on her soul, without taking away her life.*

The holy maiden's heart was inflamed by this supernatural interview with Jesus Christ to more generous thoughts than ever, which laid firm hold of her. When, five days after her sacred espousals (being the Friday in Easter week), she was rapt into her usual ecstasy of the Passion, and reached the moment of contemplating the Crucifixion, she was seized with such extraordinarily keen sympathy at the sight that she offered herself with fervour to her Spouse, to *take His place on the Cross*. Instantly, as though she had been fastened by blow to His gibbet—as though a lance had struck her full in the breast—she felt pains so sharp and intense that it seemed to her as if she were dying with Jesus Himself. Then, her ecstasy over, she appeared with body all emaciated and livid, and face pale as a corpse: "so much so," says

* Sandrini, lib. I, cap. xx, p. 69.

an historian, "that for a few days afterwards her sisters hardly knew whether she was alive or dead, and could not look upon her without shedding tears of pity."* At the same time she herself, seeing her hands pierced right through, and feeling her left side opened by a large wound, "ceased not to thank her divine Spouse for having granted her His sacred wounds, with all His pains, as a means of meditating on his sorrowful Passion with a more loving and compassionate heart."†

This new favour of the stigmas also had the whole monastery as witness, but again with variations. Some of the sisters beheld the wounds in the hands with awe, even as the saint herself saw them—open right through and sometimes bleeding. Others—among whom was Maddalena Strozzi—saw them several times shining with so brilliant a light that they had to lower their eyes before it; whilst to the greater number they appeared under the form of healed-up wounds, red and swollen, with a black spot in the centre, round which blood seemed to circulate. It was thus that the sacred marks were visible to the whole community in the year following, on April 5, 1543, eve of St Vincent Ferrer's feast, when Catherine—being in ecstasy—held her hand outside her scapular, and each of the sisters in turn kissed it with deep devotion. The same favour was granted, under like conditions, to many seculars: amongst others to the saint's second mother, the devout Fiammetta, who escaped from Florence at intervals to come and admire the miracles worked by "her Alessandrina," the celebrated spouse of Jesus and the saint of Prato.

The wounds in the feet, naturally less observable, had a more restricted number of witnesses. Some of the nuns saw them, open on both sides and raw; whilst the flesh had the peculiarity of being swollen on the upper part of the wound and sunk in on the lower part: a state that could only have been produced by the impression of our Lord's body, whose weight had pressed on the nails that fastened His feet to the cross.

* Sandrini, *ibid.*

† *Vita Anonima*, cap. x, p. 84.

As to the wound in the side, the only person who beheld this during the saint's lifetime was her faithful guard and companion Maddalena, who had to nurse her charge from time to time in illness. She stated that this wound was larger than the others, and that she often saw it all streaming with light.

All the wounds—incurable as that divine love which caused them—were accompanied by great and continual pains; and, by the holy maiden's own confession, the pain of the wound in her side was so violent that she constantly felt as if on the point of fainting away, or even of dying, from it.

Other saints, as we know, have had these wonderful marks of our Lord's crucifixion imprinted on their bodies, and have offered themselves as generously as did Catherine de' Ricci for the sharing of His sufferings and the expiation of sin throughout the world; but the peculiarity of her case lies in the fact of her having received the sacred stigmata in early life, whereas they have usually been given as the final episode only of a saint's career. To name only two of the most celebrated instances, St Catherine of Siena received this honour five years before her death; whilst St Francis of Assisi lived but two years—as Dante notices:

Nel crudo sasso intra Tevere ed Arno
Da Christo prese l'ultimo sigillo
Che le sue membra due anni portarno.

—*Il Paradiso*, cant. xi.

—after the day when he found his calvary on that rocky height between the Tiber and the Arno. Here, however, we have a maiden of twenty years old mystically transfixed to the altar of sacrifice, and destined to be a victim in union with her crucified Spouse for forty-seven years: as she lived to the age of sixty-seven.

One thing only was now wanting to make our saint a perfect copy, externally as interiorly, of Christ in His Passion, namely, the crown of thorns. Sandrini tells of a vision of our Lady with the Infant Jesus, specially sent—at the Christmas following her stigmatization—to prepare her for this fresh honour, by awakening in her a yet more

ardent desire for suffering, and courage to bear it, than she had had before. None of her biographers mention the exact date of her receiving this final exterior mark of the Passion, but all are agreed that she did receive it, and that it was seen sometimes in the form of actual long thorns piercing the skull and temples, with blood flowing from them; whilst at other times only the bleeding wounds—as if made by thorns just extracted—were seen, encircling the head in the form of a crown. The lay-sisters of St Vincent's, who had to cut the nun's hair from time to time, testified that the marks were never effaced throughout the saint's life; and the whole community gazed at them with awe as she lay on her death-bed.

Yet one more symbol of her union with the Crucified was granted to Catherine, but one never visible except to the few who nursed her in her illnesses. This was a livid mark about three fingers wide, which went in a straight line from the top of her right shoulder, down her back to the waist; in which those privileged to behold it recognized, with deep reverence, the impression of the cross, as carried by our Saviour from the Pretorium to Calvary.*

During the whole of this year, 1542—so memorable in our saint's life, as the period within which she received most of these marvellous favours at different times—her heavenly Spouse was pleased both to help her in her mystical sufferings, and to show His own great love for her and His approval of her heroic virtue, by means of a large wooden crucifix in her cell, of which the figure was a special favourite with her and the constant object of her contemplation. Our blessed Lord chose, many times, to communicate with Catherine through this figure of Himself, by causing it to become animated and to speak to her as in His own person. Sometimes He made the figure stretch its arms towards her from the cross on which it hung, and address her in loving accents in answer to the prayers she

* The *Bull of Canonization* thus resumes all St Catherine de' Ricci's supernatural graces of this kind: "Ipsam in fide et charitate fulgida ornata, ac preciosissimis monilibus de thesauris suis decoravit. Ipsius enim latere ac manibus et pedibus sacra Clavorum suorum et Lanceæ stigmata, sanguine rubentia insculpsit, spineum diadema capiti imposuit, humeris vero vestigia crucis impressit."



THE SAINT'S MIRACULOUS CRUCIFIX.

was pouring forth at its feet. Again, when she lay on her bed, powerless from illness, the sacred image would smile at her with unspeakable kindness; whilst at other times it would eloquently exhort her, as she gazed at it nailed immovably to its cross, to patience in every suffering.

But on one, now celebrated, occasion God was pleased to work an even greater miracle than these by means of this crucifix. Coming into her cell one morning immediately after Communion, Catherine heard her name loudly called; and, looking towards her crucifix, saw the figure detach itself suddenly from the cross, bearing away with it the nails by which it was fastened, and dart through the air towards her. Instinctively, she stretched out her arms to receive it, placing one hand under its feet and reverently encircling it with the other. Then the miraculously animated figure leant towards the saint, and pressed her with its arms, saying these words in a clear voice: "Beloved spouse, I have come to seek shelter in your heart, and in the hearts of all my daughters, against the crimes of sinners which are weighing Me down. I require you to have three solemn processions, in expiation of their sins, and to disarm My justice."

Scarcely had Catherine received the figure in her hands and heard these words than she was ravished into an ecstasy, in which she remained—fixed in the same attitude—for a full hour. Sister Maddalena Strozzi, coming into the cell and seeing the miracle, was so moved by the beautiful sight that she fell on her knees before the image of Christ and entreated our Lord not to awaken His holy spouse from her rapture until her sisters had had the happiness of beholding the wonderful scene. All were accordingly fetched; and all—moved to tears of joy and tenderness—lovingly kissed the marvellous figure and the fortunate hand that supported it, inhaling as they did so a delightful fragrance of unearthly kind.

The Dominican artist, Père Hyacinthe Besson, made a drawing of this celebrated occurrence in the saint's life, in which he represents the Figure—just detached from its cross—coming down towards Catherine. He has wonderfully

caught, in this sketch, the mingling of deep respect which keeps the maiden on her knees with the fervent impulse of love which causes her to stretch her arms suddenly towards the Image of her Spouse; but, like many another of the modern Fra Angelico's works, it has remained only a sketch: he never had time to paint the picture.

On coming out of her ecstasy, Catherine straightway sent for the Prior of St Dominic's, and communicated to him the will of God concerning the three processions required for gaining His mercy towards sinners. The first of these took place that very day, which was the 24th of August—feast of St Bartholomew. The saint, filled with enthusiastic veneration for the miraculous crucifix, was burning to carry it herself at the head of the procession; but her modesty made her fear both that this might make her too conspicuous, and that it was perhaps wrong to covet an honour of which others were more worthy. She confided her doubts to her mistress, who soon set them at rest by the decisive remark that the office of cross-bearer in front of a procession belonged by right to the lay-sisters, and was therefore one quite consistent with humility. Catherine, therefore, marched joyfully—crucifix in hand—at the head of all; and a fresh marvel appeared as she did so. She was rapt in ecstasy the whole time of the procession, with eyes completely shut; and yet—unguided—she traversed all the main parts of the monastery, through which the procession was to pass, without a single mistake: going round every turn or winding—in and out of doors—up and down staircases—with perfect solemnity and exactness, as if she saw the way with her bodily sight: “Which could not possibly have happened,” wrote the Venerable Fra Timoteo, “if she had not been invisibly supported by the hands of angels.”

The miraculous crucifix, naturally becoming an object of special veneration, was placed—with the young saint's consent—in the general convent oratory, so that all the nuns might come freely to satisfy their devotion at its feet. But after Catherine's death, when her cell was made into a sanctuary, the crucifix was restored to its former place: and, of all the relics now there that bear witness to her virtue

and her love of God, none seem to speak of her in more touching and eloquent language than this one.

This miracle, so publicly manifested, was both preceded and followed by many divine communications to the holy maid, some of which were in the form of beautiful visions of the "imaginative" order, described by some of her biographers with extreme minuteness: notably by Razzi.* The great point of interest, however, in all the revelations or appearances granted to Catherine during this period, is that most of them were not for her own personal consolation—or even sanctification—alone; but were intended, whether by way of direct commands from our Lord Himself, or of allegorical interpretation of visions, for the good of the whole community. They were frequently either reprimands for some defects—such as breaches of silence, or slight carelessness in saying office, for example—which had to be remedied; or instructions as to fresh devotions, or as to an increase of fervour in general monastic virtues. When the saint received such communications as these, not all her natural timidity and modesty combined could prevent her from making them known to her sisters: so clear was her duty as simply the mouth-piece of her and their Lord; whilst the humble submission with which reproof or instruction, as the case might be, was heard and acted upon by the community proves how undoubting was the conviction of Catherine's sanctity and the reality of her intercourse with God, since the fact of her being one of the very youngest sisters in the convent clearly did not in any way affect the reverence which all spontaneously paid to her injunctions.

* See chap. xi, vol. I, of Père Bayonne's "Life."

CHAPTER IX

Catherine's love for her family—Her anxiety about their concerns—Beginning of her correspondence with them (1542)

WE are now to look at Catherine in a different aspect from that in which we have been considering her through the last few chapters: namely, in her relations with her own family. Whilst she had been living, amongst her religious sisters at Prato, this life of close interior intercourse with God, occupied exteriorly with all the *minutiæ* of cloister duties, she was very far from having forgotten the inhabitant of the Ricci Palace, left behind at Florence. Indeed, the saint's faithful and tender love for her family—and, as we shall find later on, for her friends too—is one of her most remarkable characteristics, lending a charm and humanness to her life which make it as attractive on the natural as on the supernatural side. Of this characteristic, happily, there is plenty of direct proof to lay before the reader, in St Catherine's own words.

It was, strangely enough, in the very year in which the wonderful heavenly favours just recorded were vouchsafed to her that "Sister Catherine" first opened a correspondence with her family—beginning with some letters to her father—of which several specimens have been handed down to us; and which, after her parents' death, she kept up with her brothers till the later part of her life. It seems as if, from this time forth, she was no longer satisfied to see them at intervals, when they came to talk to her through the *grille* at Prato, but felt impelled to pour forth some of her supernatural riches for their comfort and instruction, and to express her keen sympathy with their joys and sorrows, and their spiritual condition, more frequently and freely than hitherto.

Now, Pierfrancesco was undoubtedly a firmly believing Christian; but he was a man of the world, and deeply im-

mersed in both his public functions and his own private business affairs; consequently, like many another, he was at times carried away by such things to the danger of his soul. Catherine was only too well aware of this; and, becoming really uneasy as to her father's salvation, she took advantage of the Lenten season in this year 1542 to give expression to her wishes about him. On March 21 we find her writing to him as follows :

“Honoured and dearly-loved father, health and hearty greeting in the Lord !

“I cannot refrain from sending you a few lines, just to remind you not to put off your confession, now that Holy Week is close. Imitate our Lord in humility, for without this we cannot follow Him who said: ‘I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,’ in order that the life and habits of the Master might be the model of His servants; and also that we might choose that humility which He taught us when He said, ‘Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart.’ He who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted: shall be made glorious and blessed in heaven, where Jesus our model invites and expects us, that we may live there with Him for ever.

“I have received, as usual, your charitable gifts. May the Lord reward you for them!

“I have nothing more to say except that I have written to Federigo * as you desired. We send affectionate greetings to you and to our mother, and so do Mother Prioress and the other sisters. May Jesus Christ protect you from all evil and keep you in His grace!

“Your daughter, Sister Catherine, at San Vincenzo's.

“*From Prato, March 21, 1542.*”

That Pierfrancesco proved the genuine humility of his character by taking his holy daughter's exhortation in good part, and by at once following her advice, is clear from her

* Federigo was Catherine's uncle. The “we” in this letter probably refers to the saint herself and one of her younger half-sisters, Lucrezia, who later on took the veil at San Vincenzo's, and must at this time have been in the convent as a pupil. The prioress mentioned here was Sister Raffaella di Faenza.

next letter, thanking him for some "gifts in kind" that he had sent to the convent for Easter:

"My kind and most honoured father, health and greeting!

"I have received your letter, which was most pleasant to me; and with it the numerous things for which I greatly thank you. May the Lord reward you for me; and, above all, may He fill you with His grace at this holy Paschal time, paying you back in spiritual gifts the temporal ones that you bestow upon us! You really do too much for us! But I am very sure that God will reward you amply, for even the smallest thing, so long as you do it all for the love of Him. I entreat you, throughout this Easter season, to give yourself entirely to God. See how He suffered for us; and how He did it out of the great love He bears to all His creatures, so that we may have cause to love Him ourselves all the more! Therefore, my father, devote yourself to reflecting on such love as this, and pray for me, that I too may learn to understand it better. Exhort Giovanni,* from me, to do the same. Tell him not to approach this great Sacrament without thought, but to receive It after serious reflection, and with a firm purpose of avoiding all sin. If he does this, our Lord will help him. Greetings to my brother and all of them, and also to you and our mother. May Jesus Christ keep you in His grace and preserve you from harm!

"Your daughter, etc., etc.

"From Prato, April 2, 1542."

The following note—which carries us on to more than a year later in Catherine's life than the last one—needs some explanation as to the relations of her father with the convent. As far back as 1538 Pierfrancesco, having been named by the Grand-Duke "Commissary" at Prato, had the opportunity of seeing his daughter much more frequently than before, and of getting to know the chief sisters of the convent much better than he had done. He was so

* One of her own brothers, by the first wife, Caterina di Panzano. He died in 1544.

charmed by their conversation that he became devoted to them, and gave them a place in his affections of such a really paternal kind that he voluntarily bound himself to their daily interests by becoming their "Procurator," or manager of their temporal affairs. When he was specially wanted at the convent on business, Catherine herself was generally commissioned to write to him; and thus she had the opportunity of saying many little things to her father, of spiritual or temporal interest, on her own account. This state of things will explain the mingling of a certain degree of "corporate self-interest" with daughterly anxiety on the saint's part, when she writes of Pierfrancesco's illness:

"I have received your pleasant letter, and with it your usual little presents: we will beg our Lord Himself to reward you for them. We are much grieved to hear that you are ill; and we are offering, and will continue to offer, prayers, that God may soon restore you to health, and that you may be able to come here. The mothers are in great need of you for the business, and the numerous works going on at the convent. I therefore beg you, when you have recovered and can do so without inconvenience, to come without fail.

"Do not forget, my good father, to give yourself to God and the Blessed Virgin. Love Him with your whole heart and soul, and desire nothing save to please Him and do His holy will. I know that He will never fail you in all your needs. . . . Greet our dear mother for me, and tell her we are praying for her, and that she must be cheerful, and give herself completely to Jesus and His most holy Mother. . . . May the Lord be always with you, and quickly make you well!

"Your daughter, etc., etc.

"*From Prato, July 8, 1543.*"

We come next to a portion of St Catherine de' Ricci's family correspondence which is full of pathos as well as of interest, being once more the old story—though this time enacted from behind a *grille*—of a sister standing between an angry father and an erring brother.

But a fortnight after the note just quoted, we find the saint writing to her father in terms that can only be explained by her having had some supernatural revelation of serious trouble shortly to befall him, and of which she seems to be giving him solemn preparatory warning. Here is her letter (dated July 23):

“My good, honoured, and well-beloved father, health and innumerable greetings in our dear Jesus!—May He comfort your heart in all the needs that may arise at any moment; and may He enlighten you in all your works, so that you may walk according to His most holy will and never offend the Divine Majesty. I would make this request of you, my good father—to wish for nothing but His good pleasure, and to hold yourself in subjection to His law and commandments—as, indeed, I hope and believe you are sure to do. But I want to remind you to persevere in this, and to make yourself go forward from good to better; because, if you do this, I am certain that the mercy of God will never forsake you, as I have often told you. I, your daughter, shall never cease praying to my Jesus that He will not desert you, and that you too may never desert Him, whatever may happen to you. Do, I beseech you, dearest Father, give yourself entirely to Jesus, the Lover of our souls!

“I received your letter a day or two ago, and with it your many kind gifts. . . .

“Your daughter, etc.”*

The misfortune that Catherine evidently foresaw was not long in coming. At the beginning of September, 1543, her father wrote to tell her of the bitter sorrow into which he and the whole family had been plunged by the misconduct of his eldest son, Ridolfo, Catherine's brother. He was a young man of about twenty, of strong passions, who was already beginning a career of both private and public error which was to keep him in disgrace almost throughout his

* The beginnings and endings of all the saint's letters are so much alike, that in the future only one specimen of each, in the case of each fresh correspondent, will be given.

life, and to be a source of perpetual anxiety to his sister, whose untiring love and zeal followed him to the end in an incessant effort to bring him back to a sense of duty. In answer to the first news of his bad conduct sent to her by the aggrieved and disconsolate father, she writes as follows:

“I have read your letter, and also that of the poor boy. May God have as deep mercy for him as the misery into which He sees him plunged! I am praying—and the whole community is joining with me in doing the same—that this soul may not perish. It is perfectly clear that he means to do what he says; but prayer may disarm the anger of the Lord. May it please God to give the unhappy boy grace not to persist in the bad intention that he has now! And you, most honoured father—recommend him to God, as I am sure you are doing—and then bear the troubles with which N——* is overwhelming you patiently and in peace. Remember, my dear father, that our Lord will give you a great reward for this, and trust entirely to God.

“I have read the letters to our uncle (Fra Timoteo), and you may be sure that he feels as much pity for you as I do. Still, things being as they are, we are glad to have had news of N——, so as to be able to help him: which is our duty, as he is all the more in need of help. I beg you again not to be more troubled over this than God wills, but to let reason always keep the upper hand, for the love of Him from whom you incessantly receive so much good. If He allows such great sorrows, be sure that it will all count to you for merit, if you will have patience. . . .

“*From Prato, September 5, 1543.*”

The wording of this letter leaves it somewhat doubtful whether the youth had written himself straight to his sister, or whether Pierfrancesco had enclosed a letter from his son for Catherine to read. Also, we cannot be sure, from the saint's way of expressing herself, exactly what she means by the “help” which she and her uncle thought it

* Though this letter and the two following ones have the letter N in place of a name, it is held certain that they both refer to Ridolfo.

their duty to give to Ridolfo; but it certainly conveys an impression that they had been affording him some material help in a bad "scrape," besides assisting him with their prayers. However this may be, Sister Catherine apparently said no more on the subject to her father for some time: hoping, probably, that the first extreme irritation on both sides might cool a little if she waited. Whether she at last offered to intercede for her brother, to get him pardoned, or whether the culprit himself—penitent for the time—begged her to do so, does not appear; but, at any rate, she undertook the office of mediator, two months after this first offence, with the most ardent love and desire for peace, as we see from the two following letters: both written on the same day:

"May the Divine Majesty grant you patience and give peace to your troubled soul! May you have light which, amid all your trials, will enable you, for the love of God who suffered so much for you, to see what course will be best for you to take, and may you have grace to pursue it. I have received a letter from your son, wherein he begs me to commend him to you and to send you the letter which he has written to you. Full well do I understand your displeasure against him and the grave faults which he has committed; but, father, I entreat you to be patient and discreet, so that your magnanimity may be acknowledged by all. Your son has indeed acted very wrongly and disobeyed God, and you, his dear father, who have taken so much pains for him; but nevertheless I beseech you, for the love of God, to pardon him. If you have cursed him according to his deserts, restore your blessing to him now and commend him to God. I would further implore you to listen to his prayers and to grant him your favour and help as far as it may be in your power to do so. If you will act thus I shall indeed be happy, for sons are often helped in life for their fathers' sake rather than for their own. Encourage my mother and do your best to preserve your peace of mind. I would beg of you to send a line to your son in answer to this letter and to write as kindly as

you can; for, since the harm is done, there is nothing to be gained by making bad worse and driving him to despair. May Jesus strengthen you as I fervently pray of Him to do! May He be with you and guard you from all evil.

“November 15, 1543.”

“As N——* is returning to you with N——, I want to beg of you for the love of our good Jesus to lay aside all harshness and undue severity. Although justice may be on your side and the world may say that you ought to be firm in asserting your rights, it is my belief that you will please our Lord Jesus by showing mercy. At the time that his mother shall deem fitting your son will, I know, ask your forgiveness; and I implore of you to grant him pardon when he begs it of you. Tell him the truth gently, promising to help him if he behave well and threatening to withdraw your assistance should he misconduct himself. If you will act thus I think that you will do him a great deal of good, but as long as he is afraid to approach you or speak to you, medicine will avail him little. I know how much he suffers when I tell him that you will not see him. He fully acknowledges that you are in the right and is very humble and most anxious to atone, by his future conduct, for the displeasure he has caused you, and the sooner you will forgive him the more quickly he will recover from his illness and be restored by you to health of soul and body. I have another request to make to you. Will you allow this son of yours and the others to go to Confession henceforth to Fra Gabriello Totti, the master of novices at San Marco? When your son came here he told me that he meant to go to Confession on his return to you, and I advised him to leave his former confessor and go to Fra Gabriello. He declined to make this change without your consent; so I beg you to assign the priest whom I have named as confessor to all your sons; for, without wishing to asperse any one, I think he is a good father. It only remains for me to beg your pardon if I was too free in speaking with N—— in

* Ridolfo.

your presence: I did so, not out of disrespect, but from confidence; so pray forgive me. I have offered you entirely to Jesus, and I pray for you and for all.

“November 15, 1543.”

These two letters, however, did not have the desired effect. Pierfrancesco remained inflexible. He wrote to his daughter with redoubled affection for her and her convent, which he loaded with gifts; but he said not a word about her appeal for the culprit, whom he did not even condescend to mention. Then poor Catherine, overcome with grief at seeing her brother ostracized from his father's home, had recourse to the plan of putting her appeal in a different form: in that of entreaty for a personal favour to herself. She wrote as follows, a week after the two unsuccessful communications, having evidently had a bad account of her father's health in his letter, which gave an excuse for her writing again :

“ I have received from you a letter informing me of your illness which grieves me. I pray and will pray that God may, if it so please Him, restore you to health. May such be His will, for I can desire nothing save His good pleasure. I have not, as yet, heard that you have made peace with Ridolfo. This really distresses me, and I do beg of you, my good father, for the sake of the passion of Jesus and for the love of the Blessed Virgin, to be pleased to grant me this favour. I am so grieved that as yet you have not done so, that my sorrow is making me ill. Therefore, dear father, I implore you to deliver me from this anxiety and to forget the past and bury the whole matter in the sacred wounds of our good Jesus. Speak to your son again. Do not refuse me, father! If I am truly your daughter and you really love me as much as you profess, you will grant me this favour and will deliver me from this distress. I am certain that you let Ridolfo want for nothing and provide him with everything; but what good will medicine do him while he is in such trouble at your refusal to speak to him? I entreat you soon to let me hear that you have done as I ask

you. I thank you with all my heart for your affection: may the Lord reward you!

“23 *November*, 1543.”

This time, the saint succeeded in softening her father's severity, as the opening lines of her next letter (not otherwise interesting) show. “I have had your very welcome letter,” she writes, “and I see that by the grace of Jesus, you are now quite satisfied and peaceable—as I wished you should be, for your own happiness.”

Thus ended the first spell of trouble over Ridolfo. We have given Catherine's letters on the subject in this place, though it is a little ante-dating things to do so, because they form such an important part of the correspondence with her father beginning in 1542; which correspondence was destined to be so short that it seems best to put everything connected with it together, and so finish the subject.

The letter last quoted—whose date is December 19, 1543—goes on, after expressing the writer's pleasure in hearing of peace between father and son, to congratulate Pierfrancesco, piously, on being appointed to the office of “Maritime Consul” at Pisa which had just been bestowed on him by the grand-duke, and which he forthwith took up, and held until his death shortly afterwards. We can only conjecture that he saw, and bade good-bye to, his daughter and her community before leaving, as we are told nothing about this; but it is to be hoped that Catherine had at least one happy interview with her father just then, to console her for both past and future worrying intercourse: for the hot-tempered Florentine was to give trouble again to his holy child, by his implacable disposition when angered, before the end came. It happened in this wise.

Pierfrancesco de' Ricci, as we know, owned the hereditary family bank in common with his elder brother Federigo de' Ricci. They managed the business affairs of this property together, and shared the profits. Now, at a certain squaring of accounts, the saint's father considered that his own rights had been seriously infringed upon—went into a violent rage with his brother—and nursed the most bitter resentment

against him. Cathérine's grief over such a quarrel may be imagined, as well as her earnest determination not to rest till she had done all in her power to heal it. Clearly, she tried her best to bring about a personal interview between her father and Federigo at San Vincenzo, probably hoping that her kindly uncle Fra Timoteo might act as mediator and bring about a reconciliation between the other two; and one can picture her disappointment when all her plans failed by Pierfrancesco's hasty departure and refusal to meet the offender. She fell again, then, to writing her entreaties, as she had done in the case of Ridolfo; the two last letters we have of this correspondence concern the difference between these brothers: in which the saint clearly thought that her father had some right on his side as far as the business matter went, terribly in the wrong as she saw his state of mind about it to be.

The first of the two letters is taken up entirely with the quarrel:

“I, Sister Catherine, greet you in the love of Jesus Christ—longing that in you, my father, this holy charity should be perfect; for it is this that keeps us in union with God, and makes us dear and acceptable to Him, and which also guides us in all our conduct to our neighbours, whether superiors, equals, or subordinates. Yet, father, it does not seem to me that, in these holy Easter days, any signs of such divine charity are to be seen in you. I am most deeply distressed to find you so ill-disposed as to have kept away from meeting your dear brothers, so that you might interchange explanations and make peace with each other. What greater happiness could you have than to be with your brothers and your daughter? We should indeed have praised God, if we had seen in you the fruit of Holy Communion: that Victim of peace whom you received on Easter morning, and who produces holy charity in hearts that receive Him with due faith and humility, and unites them to God and their neighbour. You ought not, then, to have gone to this Holy Communion until you had been reconciled to your brother; and he, also, ought not to have

put off [reconciliation] till after Easter. But what you did not do before, I want to beg you to do now, by the mercy of Christ, who loved us so much that He did not refuse to humiliate Himself and do penance for our sakes, though we had so greatly offended Him. Ah! did not He say, when the Jews crucified Him so unjustly, 'Father, forgive my executioners, for they know not what they do'? I want you to do the same, even though all the right were on your side. I believe, and am indeed certain, that much of it is so, and I feel great compassion for you; but I do not want you to stop there: I want holy love and holy peace to show forth in you, as in a true Christian. Do not refuse what I ask.

"You must not think that because I have exchanged a few words with N——* I have turned against you, contrary to all reason. I know him, too, very well, and quite understand that his disposition is incompatible with yours. What I am now writing, I should have said [before] *vivâ voce*, had I known the terms on which you and he stood; and I think still as I did formerly, and feel very much for you. But, if I think rightly of your soul, my conscience tells me that I am not wrong in pointing out your proper course to you. Even if every reason you could urge [for displeasure] were a true one, nevertheless you ought to explain yourself, and come to an agreement, so as to be at peace. You ought to do this both for the honour of God and for the sake of a better example to the world and to your own sons, who will follow the precedents you set and walk in your footsteps. So, dear father, do not refuse what I ask, for the good of your soul and your body! If you do this, God will help you and make you prosper in all your concerns; if you do otherwise, you will not deserve that He should help you, but that everything should go from bad to worse. I am sure you will not fail me in this, but that you understand how important it is for you to be at peace with N——.

"It pains me to worry you with such a long letter, but I did not know what else to do. I would rather have said what I am now writing—and should have done so if you had not gone off in the morning, almost in anger, and without

* Federigo de' Ricci.

saying a word to us. This was a very great trouble to us all. I only want to beg you—hoping that you will want to please me—to tell me, in answer to this, when you will do what I ask, and take a day or two for looking over those accounts again, so as to put an end to the matter and make peace. With your permission, I should like to send the Padre, our uncle, to stay with you and listen to your views, as I know he wishes nothing but your good. So do not fail to let me know what you intend: the more quickly you settle it all the more you will honour God, and the better it will be for you, in every respect.

“Once again, I beg you to satisfy me by answering quickly, if you wish God to be with you. I must not forget to warn you, in certain states of anger or violence, not to let words escape you that might trouble or offend your neighbour, as you can judge that they would displease you if said by anyone whatever; for by thus offending your neighbour, you would offend God, and might do yourself great harm.

“From Prato, April 16, 1544.”

If this intense anxiety for both soul and body on the part of his daughter—even whilst she believed him in the right as to the grounds of complaint—gives a painfully vivid picture of what Pierfrancesco's temper must have been when strongly roused, an equally clear impression of the humility and faith that lay at the bottom of his passionate character is surely conveyed by her next letter to him, as well as a most touching proof of the deep love and confidence that must have existed between the two, to make such plain-speaking on her part and such ready acceptance on his, possible.

A week after the above earnest appeal the saint writes again thus:

“I am writing, my dearest father, in answer to your most welcome letter informing me that you have asked pardon from your heart. I could never tell you what joy this news has given me: it makes me happy on account both of your soul which I love dearly, and also of your

bodily welfare. I thank you for having sent me such joyful intelligence, the best indeed that I could possibly have received. Blessed be God who never forsakes, but rather lovingly assists, all them that trust in Him! As, by your letter, you have gladdened my heart, I likewise will send you some happy tidings. Know then that yesterday your dear daughter Lessandra, together with the others, was accepted by the sisters assembled in chapter. She obtained a large number of votes. Do you thank God then together with me for the many blessings which, despite our ingratitude, He never ceases to pour down upon us. May He also reward you for the charity and affection that you un-faillingly show me. Nothing further occurs to me to say except to commend myself to you and to my mother, praying God to enrich you with His grace. I should be very grateful if you would send me the dates of my birth and of my baptism. I know that they occurred during this month. The reverend Father Provincial received your and our Sandrina and offered her at the altar together with the others.

“April 24, 1544.”

Was Catherine's extreme desire to see her father spiritually at rest as quickly as possible in any way inspired by some private foreknowledge? It may be so, for the end of Pierfrancesco's life was very near when she wrote the above letter: the last we have of this correspondence. He died in September, 1544, having held his office at Pisa but ten months. Whether he and his saintly daughter met again upon earth we are not told.

We must now go back a little in time, to show by one or two other letters of this period the sort of separate intercourse that Sister Catherine was holding with her step-mother, whilst she was communicating on these thorny subjects with her father. Fiammetta—mother of seven children of her own, in addition to the step-children whom she had so completely taken to her heart—was a woman of many cares as well as of very warm affections; and she had no more keen sympathizer in all concerns than the step-daughter whom she had so generously helped to the desire

of her heart in former days. Just at the end of 1542, Fiammetta was in great anxiety about her own boy, Vincenzo, who was dangerously ill; and the saint writes thus about it:

“ My honoured and dearest mother,—Your troubles are mine, and I feel most deeply for your grief and anxiety on account of your little Vincenzo. I have begged Mother Prioress to make a vow with me, to him who, by the will of God, cured me, that if he will restore him to health between this time and the Purification of the Blessed Virgin, our uncle the Father shall say a mass in his honour, to which you shall send Vincenzo, wearing the habit of our order to show that it is our holy Father who has granted him the favour of health. I will not fail to commend him to my Lord in the manner and with the love that you desire: I have never forgotten to do so since I heard of his illness. But my dearest mother and my honoured father must be resigned to the will of their Creator, who allows us to suffer so many tribulations that we may not be attached to this world and may have reason to acknowledge our good God. I know that you love Him and confess Him and are wholly His; but He by means of trial would make you belong still more perfectly to Him. How clearly does not this very trouble prove to you that Jesus loves us and promises us all happiness in order that in the furnace of affliction we may become pure gold! Let us then, dearest mother, accept our sufferings willingly from the hands of such a Benefactor. I send you a little relic: put it on Vincenzo with prayer and faith, but do not let him lose it, for it is valuable. Keep up your heart, dear mother, and be of good cheer, for thus would Jesus have you be. Commend me to our father: may he be willing to endure with patience! Jesus be with you ever.

“Your daughter,

“SISTER CATHERINE.

“*December 30, 1542.*”*

* This child died; but a boy born afterwards was also named “Vincenzo,” and is he one whom we shall find referred to later on as having married a certain “Cassandra.”

The next letter from Catherine to her step-mother is interesting as a picture, not of family life only, but of the "educational" customs of the period. The girl-members of the many large Italian families were usually brought up within the cloister walls; and their parents sent them, by preference, to convents where an aunt or an elder sister was amongst the nuns and would be likely to give special motherly care to her young relations. Moreover, besides ensuring the immediate comfort and welfare of their children, the parents often found help towards the future "establishment" of their numerous daughters in adopting this plan; for, attracted by the ties of blood as well as by those of religion, and treated almost as affectionately as they would have been at home, the pupils very often became postulants for the novitiate at an extremely early age. If accepted, they were then—with the parents' consent—placed immediately under a system of education specially adapted for the Religious state, and lived in this manner till such time as they were old enough to receive the habit, which was never given till they were thirteen or fourteen years old.

St Catherine de' Ricci fulfilled this office of "elder sister or aunt" of the cloister, most thoroughly, towards her four half-sisters, who were in turn sent to be under her care from their earliest years. The first, Lucrezia, was clothed there in 1543, taking the name of *Maria Benigna*—under which title her aunt often speaks of her in family letters. Two others were accepted as postulants early in the next year, both of whom were professed in due time; and it is *à propos* of their acceptance that we have the following letter from the saint, showing equally her own joy at having her young sisters received by her own community, and her anxiety not to wound their mother's susceptibilities:

"I have done something which, such was my confidence in my dear mother, I believed that I might do without incurring her displeasure. I have, without your knowledge, procured the admission of Marietta and of Lena. The idea occurred to me and I felt sure that such was the will of God. I said to myself: I know that my mother will be satisfied

with what I am going to do; and then I asked the mothers of the convent about it, and they willingly complied with my desire this evening, feast of St Vincent, martyr. Both my sisters had a large number of votes and I am very happy that they are here with us. Thank our Lord that He has allowed them to be received into the dwelling of so many of His handmaids. Do not, I beg of you, be anxious about them, but give them gladly to Jesus, who wills to have them. You can send for them whenever you like, either now or when you go to Pisa. This is left to you, but you must not send them anywhere else for this is their abode. My sisters are more happy than I can say, and you likewise must be contented and happy that Jesus has chosen them for Himself and called them from the folly and vanity of the world. Oh, what great mercy has He shown to them! Even if your feelings rebel, it will suffice if your reason remains firm, and I think that such with you will be the case. For the love of God, and for my sake, you will take this step willingly and you will forgive me if I have presumed too far. I have no more to say save to commend myself to you, in conjunction with your daughter Sister Maria Benigna who is as happy in her vocation as she can be. She desires to be remembered to her sisters, and we both send our love to them and commend ourselves to our father and to the others. Mother Prioress and the other sisters send you greeting. May God keep you ever in His grace!

“ January 22, 1543.”

The reception of Fiammetta's fourth daughter, “*Lesandra*”—Catherine's own namesake—has been described above, in one of the saint's letters to Pierfrancesco, who thus had the satisfaction of seeing all the remaining girls of his second family (one, if not more, had died before this time) safely placed under their eldest sister's care.

About a month after her father's death, Catherine had the grief of losing her brother Giovanni—the one to whom she sent a message about his spiritual concerns in the Lent of 1542. Though only her step-son, Giovanni seems to have had as deep a place in Fiammetta's heart as if he had been

her own, judging from the tone in which the saint spontaneously writes her sympathy over their mutual loss:

“ I learn from your letter that it has pleased God to call to Himself the soul of my dearest brother Giovanni. This news cuts me to the heart because I loved him, but reason bids me be patient and endure all that God does or allows, because it is willed by Him without whose good pleasure not a leaf moves upon a tree. I entreat of you, my dear mother, to have patience likewise, and to commit yourself wholly to our Lord, remembering that whatsoever He does is for His glory and for our welfare and that He knows and sees far better than we. We, as far as we are able, will assist you with our prayers, imploring the Almighty to give you grace to endure your heavy trial. I do most truly sympathize with you and bear you ever in mind, and pray for you continually as my duty obliges me to do. It boots little to commend myself to you, seeing that you are ever in my thoughts. I would fain hear some details as to my brother's end: whether he was willing to depart, and whether he received the holy Sacraments. Will you then inform me about the matter, and also tell me where Ridolfo is and what he is doing? The Father our uncle sends you many remembrances: I believe that he is writing to you. I have given the news to Sister Maria Benigna: I have told her that you are not grieving more than you can help, and have bidden her assist you with her prayers. She begs to be remembered to you and so does Sister Maddalena who often prays for you. She feels for you very much, and makes our troubles her own. Nothing further remains for me to say except to commend myself to you. Let me know if there be anything that I can do for you; I will serve you in any possible way. The whole convent is praying for you. May the Lord keep you ever in His grace: remember me to all, especially to Giovambatista, and tell him that I think of him and bid him be good.

“ *October 16, 1544.*”

It may probably be safely conjectured that part of Catherine's intense sympathy with her step-mother, in this loss,

was called forth by her pity for the recent widow as well as for the bereaved mother: the latter sentences of the letter seem certainly to point to this. No other letters on the subject of Pierfrancesco's death are given in any of the collections.

Poor Fiammetta's troubles came thick upon her; for in the same year in which she had lost her husband and stepson by death, she had next to lose the eldest—and apparently the favourite—of her own sons by another way. The "Giovambatista" referred to in the above letter shortly afterwards announced his intention of becoming a Dominican friar at San Marco. How very keenly, notwithstanding her real holiness, the poor mother in her loneliness felt this blow, was fully realized and understood by Catherine; and in the two last letters that we give of this correspondence she seems to put forth all her powers of tender persuasion and sympathy, as well as of heavenly exhortation, with the object of comforting and supporting the stricken widow in this final and evidently unexpected bereavement.

The first letter is written immediately on receiving the news:

"Dearest and honoured mother, health and consolation in the Lord,—I do not doubt, from what I hear, that your son and my dearest brother, Giovambatista, will leave you and go into holy Religion. Sweetest mother, do me the pleasure to mitigate your grief, by thinking to whom he is going, while leaving you, his beloved mother. Consider that it is to none other than to his and our God, the Creator of heaven and earth. He is going into Religion to serve his most sacred Majesty with more security, with greater faith and stability; for you know what the world is for the young! If it be for your loss, as regards temporal necessities, which I know cause you some suffering, I am sorry for you. As regards higher reasons, I know that you have some cause, not having the Padre our uncle nor myself with you, but you must reflect that his only motive is the call from God. You must console yourself my dear mother, that it is the will of that God who gave him to you; for He might have

taken him some other way, with much more bitterness to you than the way he is being taken now. For you will be able to see him sometimes, and with untold satisfaction, in good health, as we may hope. Above all, if you feel troubled in a case of so much importance, keep firm and constant in the will of God, and commend yourself to Him who is the true Consoler of afflicted souls, as I know yours is, my dearest and most beloved mother in Christ Jesus. May He bless that heart which is His own, and relieve it of all its sorrow, and keep it calm in Himself and His will. Come and see us as soon as you can with the little sisters whom I desire greatly to see, if that be pleasing to God and His most holy Mother. Now be as little melancholy as you can, and we will not fail to pray for you and for all the others at home. Sister Maria Benigna does the same, and commends herself to you. May Jesus be ever in the midst of your heart, and inflame it with His holy love, which is the highest I can desire for you.

“December 30, 1544.”

Giovambatista entered San Marco on February 24, 1545; and Fiammetta evidently poured forth all her grief at the parting and her anxiety about her beloved son's own health under the rigours of Dominican rule in a letter to her unfailing refuge in trouble; for Catherine writes thus early in March:

“Honoured and dearest mother, health and greeting in Christ Jesus,—I have received your letter, by which I see how grieved you are at parting from your dear son. And, my dear mother, I believe you, indeed I am certain of it and have very great sympathy with you, more than I can tell you. But being the work of our Lord, who is the highest Wisdom, console yourself, dear mother, and do not make yourself unhappy; or rather I should say, as little as you can, placing yourself entirely in the will of our Lord, as I am sure you have already done and will do. And so I pray you do not grieve any more for him, lest you make yourself ill, which I should not like, indeed I should be

displeased on account of the other children. And do not fear, dear mother, that Religion can do him any harm, as you say in your letter; and think that He who has called him to Himself in holy Religion will preserve and keep him always, and will not let him come to harm in those things which seem to us might be bad for him. Besides that, I can tell you that the fathers will take diligent care, and not let him want for anything, for they know very well what his strength is. Believe that they will use discretion, especially on this head; I also have commended him to them, and I know that they will do it, because they love him. So you must be happy and thank God that He has given such great grace to your son as to call him into Religion, which is a holy and perfect state. Therefore be of good heart, for our Lord will not forsake him, having taken him for His own, and given Him such a holy vocation. I will say no more, except to commend myself to you, and to all. Mother Prioress and the others do the same. May our Lord be always with you.

“March 3, 154(5).”

CHAPTER X

Catherine's demeanour during her Ecstasies of the Passion—How the fame and proofs of them spread beyond the convent—People attracted by them to Prato from the court—The saint's personal virtues, penances, and humility in the midst of her fame—The pope's commissioners pronounce in her favour

WHILST CATHERINE was thus carrying on her simple, womanly intercourse with her family, the supernatural wonders of her daily life—and especially those connected with her marvellous ecstasy—were constantly rather increasing than diminishing. Her fellow-nuns, never tired of the wondrous sight, and moreover—like the “daughters of Jerusalem”—longing to show their sympathy by mourning, now with the saint herself, and now with the Saviour of whom she became such a perfect likeness at these times, made a practise of regularly relieving each other during the weekly twenty-eight hours for which the ecstasy lasted, so that she was never left alone.

Catherine's demeanour in these states was not only wonderful in itself, but was so wonderfully varied as to form a constantly fresh attraction to the onlookers. Her utterances, especially—which seem to have been almost continuous during her ecstasies—changed perpetually. Sometimes she would recite sacred Canticles, or Psalms of David that made plaintive echoes to the particular phase of the Passion that she might be going through—such as Psalm cxviii, *Beati immaculati in via*, etc., corresponding to the long torture of the scourging; or Psalm xxi, *Deus, Deus meus, respice in me*, etc., full of the agonies of the crucifixion. She appeared to hear these words fall from the very lips of Jesus Christ Himself; and when she repeated them with His own majestic accent, and rendings of soul and voice, it was impossible to listen without deep emotion and religious awe.

At other times the saint's utterances would consist of

colloquies, or burning discourses on the Sacred Victim—on His sufferings—on the ingratitude of sinners—or on her own sins, whose malice she never ceased to deplore, and whose consequences she believed would be fatal to the whole human race. Again, she would sometimes pour forth the most earnest exhortations to her nuns, to incite them to the love of God.

Some of these words, taken from the convent MSS., are given in full by Razzi, and may here be fitly quoted as an example of what the sisters, reverently following the great weekly ecstasy, were accustomed to listen to.

One Friday, towards half-past eleven, contemplating our Saviour carrying His cross up the steep heights of Calvary, she was heard to cry aloud:

“Oh, my divine Spouse, in what a state Thou art! Thy poor shoulders—they cannot go on bearing such a weight! Ah! if I am ready to fall at only the sight of it, what must it be to Thee, who art so tender and delicate! Who could ever imagine the state Thou art in, O my Jesus? Eternal Father, is that indeed Thy Son? Ungrateful, ungrateful sinners, acknowledge such love! I recommend them to Thee, my divine Spouse. Oh, let them reap the merit of the sufferings that Thou art this moment enduring for them, and for me who am the cause of all the evil that is being done in the world! O God, in what days I have to live!—alas, alas!—Thy honour is no longer desired: no one thinks of Thy glory: none are anxious to serve and love Thee! I beseech Thee, O Lord, change the nature of souls a little, and give the spirit of uprightness and fervour. I recommend to Thy mercy the holy Church, and the city of Florence, which is Thy Mother Mary's daughter; also all our benefactors, all Religious, and all my beloved sisters here.

“But—what do I see, O my Spouse?—savage dogs are setting upon Thee! Ah, how pitilessly they are dragging Thee down when Thy strength is so exhausted that it will not let Thee go on! Cruel—cruel!”

After other exclamations of the same kind she came to the moment when Jesus, crushed down by the weight of

His cross, meets His Mother coming round the mountain. She gave a heart-rending cry.

“Poor Mother! how could she endure such grief? If only our nuns were there to keep her company and strengthen her in her anguish!”

Then, after remaining in profound silence for a time, she thanked our Lord for all the blessings she had received from Him, and begged for fresh favours, particularly entreating Him graciously to address some words with His own lips to her dear sisters in Religion. And behold, after a few moments' pause, Jesus—making Catherine His mouthpiece—spoke thus to her companions:

“How long, my dear daughters, will you go on so negligently? When will you determine, once for all, to give your hearts perfectly to Me—to come and hide yourselves in this Wound in My side—and find pure joy and lasting happiness there? You say that to receive My gifts and graces the soul must be rightly disposed for them—and you speak truly. You say, again, that this disposition of soul is given by Me, and you are right. But, none the less, if you would obtain it you must have great zeal, and use your own efforts. Therefore, if you would have My grace and My gifts to take possession of your hearts, tear from them all earthly affections: remember that the things of this world pass quickly away, never to return; whilst I shall never be wanting to My faithful spouses! Practise holy humility; be grateful for the favours of God; obey your superiors; keep peace and mutual love amongst yourselves; and profit by the words of My well-beloved spouse Catherine, in whom I show you a living image of the sorrowful mysteries of My own Passion.”*

But it was not for the convent sisters only that this spectacle was destined: Jesus Christ intended it to be the means of reviving faith beyond the cloister walls, and of arousing a more Christian spirit amid the populations of Tuscany and a large portion of Italy. Rumour had already been everywhere busy with the marvels concerning “the Saint of Prato.” The wonderful phenomenon of her ecstasy,

* Seraf. Razzi, lib. II, cap. xvii, p. 91.

the veneration that she had inspired in her community, and the severe scrutiny to which the superiors of the Order had subjected her, were all reported and talked about, and to these reports was soon added the gift of miracles.

Four miracles, happening within a short time of each other, are related of the year 1542. The two first were physical miracles—one, the restoration, and subsequent increase, of a quantity of corn belonging to the nuns, which had gone quite bad in the granary, by the saint's walking over it bare-footed; the other, the miraculous extinguishing of a bad fire which broke out suddenly in the convent, by her making the sign of the cross over the flames.

Shortly after this last event, a strange and sad occurrence, of spiritual kind, showed forth strongly both the hatred of Satan for Sister Catherine and the wonderful power of her intercession for even the most desperately hopeless souls. A certain young lady—member of some great family, but whose name is not given—had let herself get into the power of the evil one; and he made her the instrument of a violent assault on the saint's credit, by inciting her to join the community of San Vincenzo, and there endowing her with diabolical powers which caused her for some time to appear as a rival in holiness to Catherine. To make her like the latter, he caused her, from the beginning of her career in the convent, to go through many and serious states of illness, which she bore with extraordinary patience—so much so that the sisters, knowing nothing of the spirit that guided her, were full of admiration and revered her as an actual prodigy of penance. Then, to complete the apparent similarity between her and the true Spouse of Christ, the devil made her keep her cell from Thursdays at mid-day till Friday evenings, so as to bring about the idea that she also had her ecstasy of the Passion. But this proceeding began before long to raise serious doubts in the minds of the Father Confessor and the "elders" of the convent, especially as this sister practised most mysterious reserve about herself towards everyone—never opening her conscience to either her superiors or her spiritual father, for advice or direction. Before long,

St Catherine discovered the enemy's *ruse*; and, in concert with the very holiest souls in the convent, began to pray earnestly for the defeat of all his projects. Then the devil, seeing clearly that he was unmasked, and fearing to see his prey snatched from him, made one final attempt at the damnation of this wretched girl, by insinuating the horrible suggestion that she should tread the cross of her Redeemer under foot. She consented; and, the crime accomplished, Satan was on the point of completing his work by dragging his victim—the measure of whose iniquity seemed now full—away with him to eternal flames. The victory, however, was not to be his, close as it seemed.

Catherine had been supernaturally warned of the poor soul's danger by her guardian angel, and went in haste to the sister's cell. She got in, in spite of actual resistance from the evil spirit; and, taking firm possession of the miserable, hardened creature, never left her till she had fully opened her eyes to her crime and her awful peril, and had further inspired her with absolute confidence in the infinite mercy of our Lord. She made a general confession of her life, with every sign of deep repentance; and had the happiness of dying a few days after she had been reconciled to her God, with the assurance of eternal salvation, as was revealed to the saint.

The last of the four wonders worked by Catherine at this time was as follows:

On September 17, 1542, a notorious thief was condemned to death in the town of Prato. The unfortunate man, who had not expected a capital sentence, gave himself up to despair; and sullenly rejected every attempt made to console or sympathize with him. The members of the *Miséricorde* confraternity—"brothers of a good death," as they were called in the middle ages,—part of whose work was to prepare criminals for a Christian end, appealed to St Catherine to beg the grace of conversion for him from God. Moved by the thought of his danger, Catherine began to pray for the poor soul; and she did this so efficaciously that the wretched man was quite miraculously transformed. He became so gentle and humble in view of his death, says

Razzi, that he prepared himself for it with the greatest devotion. He accepted it as the punishment and expiation of all his crimes, and a means of showing his love for his divine Saviour, who had voluntarily submitted to the shame of just such a death, though innocent and free from all sin.* The occurrence is referred to by Sister Maddalena Strozzi in words that clearly bring out the sympathy felt, in those monastic institutions often abused by the world as heartlessly "egoistic," for the outcasts of society who have none but God and His special servants to care for them:

"This morning," she writes, "when I heard the bell that announced the death of that unhappy man, I exhorted Catherine to pray for his soul. 'I have been doing so ever since morning,' she answered, 'and will go on doing it.' Then, I having asked her whether she had good hope of his salvation, she replied 'Yes'; and for a whole hour—that is, for the whole time that the proceedings of the execution lasted—she remained in prayer for him, completely absorbed in God—as, indeed, she had been the whole morning."

Accounts of these miracles getting wind in Florence, and adding to the credit that already attached to Sister Catherine's name, she became more and more the theme of conversation in "society" there. Prato was the place of *villegiatura* for the greatest Florentine families; the saint herself was daughter of an illustrious house; and it was well known that Pierfrancesco de' Ricci, her father, was thought no little of at the court of Cosmo de' Medici—all of which facts increased the interest felt about her by the inhabitants of the capital, which interest received its final touch by means of a miracle that occurred actually in their midst, through her intercession. This was the recovery from a hopeless illness of Maria Gualterotti, wife of Filippo Salviati, a cousin of the Grand Duke's. An aunt of Salviati's—Maria Guicciardini by name—advised him, when all human means had failed, and he was in despair of her life, to write and beg the prayers of Sister Catherine at Prato. He did this—also sending "an alms of ten crowns"

* Seraf. Razzi, lib. II, cap. xiv, p. 83.

to the convent—in a letter to Fra Timoteo de' Ricci, not liking to address Catherine herself, as a stranger. He had no sooner dispatched the letter than a marvellous thing happened to his sick wife. He had to disturb her from an apparently unconscious state to give her a little food; and she—appearing to wake suddenly as if from sleep—spoke, and complained that he had taken her away from one of the most delightful pleasures she had ever enjoyed! She then declared that she had been transported in spirit to Prato, where she had been in Sister Catherine's company, and been overwhelmed with tenderness and with spiritual consolation. It appeared afterwards that before she had received Salviati's letter the saint had known all about his wife; and that when Fra Timoteo brought her the request for prayers she not only told him that the lady would recover, but prophesied that she would have a child who was destined to become a nun in San Vincenzo—a prophecy that was eventually realized.

The story of this miracle is told by Razzi; and he further adds that, when her recovery was complete, Salviati's wife went to Prato to thank Sister Catherine, and recognized her at once amongst a number of sisters who came together to receive the visitor, though they had before her illness been entirely unknown to each other.

After this wonderful occurrence, the enthusiasm of the Florentine great people for their holy young fellow-citizen seems to have culminated in a kind of general "rush" to Prato, to make her personal acquaintance, or at least to hear more of the marvellous ecstasy which had been so much talked of, from her fellow-nuns. The movement was inaugurated by Cosmo de' Medici's mother, Maria Salviati, who was aunt to Filippo, and therefore specially touched by his wife's miraculous cure. The circumstances of her first sight of the saint are peculiarly interesting, as proving the coolness of head with which even these enthusiastic Italians chose to test the truth of popular reports as to the supernatural.

Maria came to Prato at the beginning of November, 1543—which was only a few days after the miracle in

Florence—and happened to reach the monastery on a Friday, when Catherine was in the midst of her usual ecstasy. The princess was a prudent woman of enlightened mind and great common-sense. Resisting the strong instantaneous attraction, which the mere sight of the young saint was wont to exercise over those who beheld her for the first time, Maria Salviati placed herself calmly in front of her, carefully examining her attitude and gestures—touching her with her own hands—gazing fixedly at her face, and at the varying expressions of countenance—and, in short, studying her condition in every possible way, so as to be personally convinced before believing. Her study, however, did not last very long: touched interiorly by the Holy Spirit with a grace that made her suddenly a better woman, and drew her wholly towards God, she soon gave herself up completely to the inexpressible charm of the saint's presence. She remained on the spot for a long time, deep in contemplation, shedding tears of love and compunction; and then declared over and over again that "it would be impossible to witness a holier or a more wonderful sight on earth."* She left the convent so overwhelmingly convinced of Catherine's high degree of sanctity that she could not help saying to the venerable nuns who escorted her on departure in honour of her high rank: "O sisters! make the most of the heavenly treasure you possess, and take great care of everything that such a holy creature uses; for a time will come when the least thing she has touched will work miracles!"†

On returning to Florence, Maria Salviati not only filled the court with minute reports of what she had seen and felt convinced of, but showed the reality of her impressions by the effect that they produced on her life. It was universally noticed that she had brought with her from Prato a soul far more detached than before from the things of earth, more absorbed in God, and ever rising higher towards Him by a more active and fervent piety than she had formerly shown. This holy influence was destined never to be weak-

* Sandrini, lib. I, cap. xxix, p. 92.

† Seraf. Razzi, lib. II, cap. xii, p. 77.

ened, for she died about a month after her return, with all her heavenly ardour undiminished.

For some time yet, however, the "pious pilgrimages" to Prato and the firm belief in Catherine's wonderful states were confined to the ladies of the court: the men—even though full of respect and veneration for the deceased princess and her convictions—refused to give in their adhesion at once, and appear to have held back all the more coldly when they saw the women so deeply and enthusiastically impressed. One woman—the wife of the Grand Duke, Eleonora of Toledo—was at first a little inclined to halt between the two views, and not to follow the rest of her sex lest she should be looked down upon; but at last she too determined to see for herself, and in the March of 1544 she went to Prato, taking in her suite, besides her ladies, some of the court gentlemen. She was at first admitted to the convent with only some maids of honour, and brought into the room where the saint was in ecstasy. She began gazing at her with the keenest curiosity; and, noticing her immobility, tried to rouse her from it by taking hold of her arms and neck and attempting with all her strength to drag her towards her. But the uselessness of her efforts soon showed Eleonora that she was struggling with a divine phenomenon. Moreover, she became overpowered by a religious feeling which mastered her, little by little, in spite of herself; and at last she, in turn, remained immovable in the presence of the holy sister, rapt in admiration and filled with tender love for our Lord. By and by she turned to her maids of honour—no less moved than herself—and said: "When we see, we must believe. If we were to tell my Lord the Duke what we have seen and felt in our hearts, he would say that it is all nothing but mere emotion and women's piety, not worth crediting: and yet we have these wonders before our eyes and can touch them with our own hands!"* Thereupon, feeling that at all costs she must take back some incontrovertible testimony to court, she entreated the prioress, for the honour of God and of Catherine His spouse, to let

* *Vita Anon.*, cap. viii, p. 48.

the court gentlemen whom she had brought in her train be admitted to the convent. Strict enclosure not being canonically enforced in houses of the Third Order, the prioress—having first consulted two Father Superiors—consented. The doors were then opened to three of the duchess's train—to Mgr Dom Pedro de Toledo, her own cousin and Bishop of Forli; to Dom Angelo Marsi, director of the Hospital of Santa Maria Novella; and to Signor Baccio Lanfredini, her excellence's major-domo. Ushered into Sister Catherine's presence, these illustrious personages were instantly affected in the same way that their mistress, and the duke's mother before her, had been; and there they remained for some time, chained to the spot by some indescribable splendour in the saint's face, and overmastered by feelings of sudden contrition for their sins and of irresistible love and tenderness. When they left, Dom Angelo Marsi said to the nuns that "God had given them in Catherine perhaps the most brilliant mirror of sanctity that was at the moment existing in the whole of Christendom." The Bishop of Forli—as a true Spaniard—after speaking of the interior grace he had just received, declared that "if he were half-way between St James's in Galicia and San Vincenzo's convent, he would make a second pilgrimage to the latter, rather than go to the former, for his soul's sake." As to the Signor Baccio Lanfredini, he had received on the spot one of those mighty strokes of grace from on high which produce immediate disgust for earthly things. Wounded, whilst at Catherine's feet, with the true love of God, he had then and there made the resolve to avoid even venial sin for the future, so as the better to consecrate his life; and, henceforth, no courtly dissipations, nor the public duties of offices in Pisa—where he was shortly afterwards appointed governor—ever distracted him from the work of inward perfection and union with his Creator, which he carried on unceasingly till his death.

The testimony of these men—all known to be very intelligent and of high character—produced in Florence the effect hoped for by the grand duchess, and Cathe-

rine's wonderful gifts were acknowledged to be not merely the fancy of enthusiastic women. The "pilgrimages" to Prato immensely increased, and not a week passed in which some gentleman or lady of the court, or member of a noble family, did not go there—at first, very often, secretly—to satisfy his or her curiosity. But, however privately they had gone, the results of all these visits were proclaimed on the house-tops; and soon all mystery about such journeys ceased, curiosity giving way to real devotion; and the Florentines made public expeditions in common to see the marvellous spectacle. From Florence the movement spread before long through Tuscany to other parts of Italy. In towns and private dwellings people told one another that the young daughter of Pierfrancesco de' Ricci had become "the spouse of Jesus Christ crucified"; and that every week she was seen to suffer with Him, in both body and soul, all the pains of the Passion. From all parts they flocked to San Vincenzo, to see for once in a lifetime—if only for an hour, or perhaps a moment—so great a marvel. Rome, Bologna, Milan, and many other places caught the pious contagion, and successively sent their most illustrious inhabitants to witness this extraordinary spectacle.

But whilst Sister Catherine was thus drawing crowds to the convent by the reports of her supernatural gifts, she was living—when out of her ecstatic state—a life of mortification and simple humility amongst her sisters, which was a clearer proof to them of the reality of her union with God than any of the marvels that He worked through her. Like all great saints, she was an intense lover of voluntary penance, and practised it to a degree and in a manner truly Dominican. From May of the year 1542 she had taken to perpetual abstinence, to which she seems to have been supernaturally inspired; and this abstinence she made to consist of living almost entirely on vegetable diet, hardly ever eating fish, and only taking a little broth when she was ill. On this point of entire abstinence—the Rule making it only partial—Catherine had to endure a good deal of opposition from her community, as Rose of Lima in the same case had to do from her parents; and it

was only after several times, both openly and secretly, testing the real supernatural inability to take meat which had been imparted to the saint, that the nuns gave in to her desires. Being left free in this matter, she next proceeded to drop by degrees every sort of seasoning, or delicacy of preparation, that could make her food more palatable; and then, further, she diminished its quantity, so as to live in a perpetual fast. When she possibly could, she ate only the coarsest bread brought to the convent by the sisters who begged for the community; and three times a week she condemned herself regularly to live entirely on bread and water, that she might be like the poorest of the poor. Her biographer, Serafino Razzi, breaks forth into an apostrophe to gluttons, as he describes these fasts. "And it was on this regimen," he writes, "that Catherine lived to the age of nearly sixty-six. So true is it that frugality and sobriety prolong life, and that good cheer and intemperance are the things that shorten it by disease and premature death!"

The saint's mastery over sleep was as complete as that over food: indeed, she is said to have attained to never sleeping for more than about an hour in a week, except under obedience, when she would go to sleep immediately, but be heard praying all the time. When Sister Maddalena, her ever-faithful guardian, remonstrated with her on the extreme pitch to which she had brought her habit of watching, she is reported to have replied: "Oh, never mind, dear mother. It is the will of Jesus that prayer should serve me for sleep."

As regards inflicting pain on her body, St Catherine was behind none of the great Dominican saints in fervour. She wore a rough hair-shirt, with a girdle of sharp iron points beneath, and imitated her "holy Father" in her disciplines, which she took nightly with an iron scourge, and offered, after his example, for a threefold intention: i.e., for the sins of the whole world, for the souls in purgatory, and for her own sins and those of her sisters in religion.

Beyond all these bodily mortifications, however, in

respect of making Catherine beloved and revered in her community, was her continued and increasing humility. The account of her early years of trial amongst the nuns has shown how remarkable was this virtue in her from the beginning; and neither the full acknowledgement of her supernatural gifts by superiors and companions, nor the visits paid to the convent which showed how she was becoming publicly known, made the slightest difference to her genuine, heartfelt conviction of her own personal worthlessness. The more she was favoured by God, the less did she think of herself and the more humble and lowly became her bearing towards others. As regarded the community, her attitude was that of simple servitude: she was always thanking God for having placed her amongst such holy people, and insisted on waiting upon all whenever it was possible, and on doing all the lowest and most disagreeable work that she could find. As regarded the outer world and the visitors who began coming in such numbers to see her, she had but one wish: to escape them. Sometimes, of course outsiders coming for this purpose were allowed merely to look at her whilst in a state of ecstasy, and then took their departure; but at other times her superiors ordered her to see people who wished to speak with her. If Catherine ever found out, indirectly, that this was likely to happen, she did her best to hide before any obedience could be laid upon her; and stories are told of all sorts of odd places in which she took refuge that nobody might find her: such as a thick bed of fennel in the garden, a cupboard in the *lingerie*, and even the pigeon-house! To this last place she mounted with the help of the kitchen sister, who—finding her in great distress at the prospect of being made a “show” of to a stranger on the occasion of a certain procession—gave her a ladder to climb up by, assuring her that she was perfectly safe *there*: as turned out to be the case, for Sister Maddalena only found her missing charge when the function was over, and the sister who had helped her made known the hiding place. Catherine is said to have been found on this occasion kneeling, surrounded by the pigeons, and with one little creature perched on her head,

whilst she herself was calmly rapt in ecstasy; and to have said quietly to her mistress, when she came to herself: "Did you see how familiarly those dear birds had come round me?"

That such humility as Catherine's was accompanied by perfect gentleness and sweetness of manner and speech, and by obedience wherein no flaw could be detected, need hardly be said. In fact, it is to her utter obedience that her biographers owe much of their knowledge of her supernatural gifts. As in her early days, she never voluntarily talked of her inner life; and nothing would have induced her, of her own accord, to make known any special favours or visions granted to her in private; so that nothing beyond the outward marvels of her life would have been discovered in the community had she been left to herself. When, however, her superiors put her under obedience to tell her special "mistress" everything of a supernatural kind that passed within her, it would no more have occurred to her to disobey in this matter than in any other; and she gave the account of her various states with the openness and simplicity of a child.

In intensity of devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, Catherine appears to have at least equalled any saint in the calendar; and many touching stories are told of visions beheld by her in the sacred Host, or on the altar, as rewards of her faith and love. Above all was she noted for the extreme care and fervour with which she always prepared for Communion, and for the earnestness with which she laboured to instil the same devotion and reverence which she herself felt and practised into her fellow-nuns. She was wont to beg of our Lord—breaking forth sometimes into burning words, heard by all—to inspire her with the needful powers for making them understand the great graces and benefits received in the holy Eucharist, which she felt that few people realize. At one time—according to the custom of the age—she had great difficulty in getting leave to communicate as often as she wished; and it was only in answer to her unwearying prayers and complaints to her di-

vine Spouse that the convent confessor was at last inspired to give her leave for daily Communion.

But the private virtues, and the desire for hiddenness, which made the young saint such an object of love and reverence within her convent home, could of course not be known to the outside world or to ecclesiastical superiors in high places living at a distance. The public fact was that a large concourse of people was being attracted to a convent in an obscure corner of Tuscany by the report of a young nun's great sanctity; and before long Rome—ever-watchful for abuses—took fright. Paul III, then pope, suspected the possibility of some blameworthy motive in the community for so attracting outsiders, and he privately ordered Cardinal Roberto de' Pucci, Bishop of Pistoja and "Diocesan" of San Vincenzo, to go himself to the spot, carefully study the facts of the case, and make an official report. Accordingly, professing to go as one of the ordinary pious people who were daily making pilgrimages to Prato, this eminent prelate, with two other bishops and several ecclesiastics, made his appearance unexpectedly at the convent. Taken thus by surprise, both Catherine herself and the community fully stood the test. The reality of the marvels reported, the saint's great gifts and solid virtues, and the conduct of her superiors in the matter, all made a deep impression on the pope's representative. They were unanimous in informing His Holiness that, so far from having done anything either to bring about or to encourage the influx of people to their house, the nuns and their immediate superiors of the Order had shown both their prudence and the noble simplicity of their character by doing their best to lessen it. They had been, as everybody acknowledged, inflexible in keeping the majority of visitors from holding intercourse with the saint, and had only admitted persons whom they could not refuse without rashness, or who had a right to demand admittance. They further formally stated that "in the grave state of things now prevalent in the Church, such a concourse to witness such a spectacle could not come together but to the great advantage of true Christians and

the confusion of heretics; for that the extraordinary graces, of which they themselves had just been witnesses, constituted a most striking demonstration of the truth of the Catholic faith."*

Thus, by the end of 1544—her own community, and then her fellow-countrymen, having been already convinced—we find the seal of the supreme spiritual authority placed on Catherine de' Ricci's sanctity, and on the reality and closeness of her union with God in her ecstatic states.

* Sandrini, lib. I, cap. xxix, p. 91.

CHAPTER XI

Catherine's mission to the sixteenth century—The great personages of Italy throng to Prato—The saint made sub-prioress (1547)—Death of Mother Raffaella da Faenza—Catherine's influence on souls—Her miraculous power of converting sinners, and expiatory offerings for them—Her devotion to the souls in purgatory

THE pope's commissioners might indeed well speak of the importance of such a testimony to the truth as was afforded by St Catherine's weekly ecstasies, just at the particular period when they attracted public attention. The middle and latter part of the sixteenth century was truly "the hour of the powers of darkness" in the form of Protestantism apparently triumphant throughout nearly all the countries in the north of Europe; whilst, in Italy, the morals of those in high—and what should have been holy—places were unhappily providing an object-lesson for the promotion of heresy in the name of "reform."

It is told of our saint that she had to share our Lord's sight of the sins of mankind during His agony in the Garden, by herself seeing, before the beginning of each weekly ecstasy, terrible visions of the iniquities going on at that time all over Europe, and especially in Italy.

One day (Sandrini relates) she was carried in spirit to Germany, where she saw that grand country devastated by Luther's heresy, under the appearance of vast tracts of land filled with enormous serpents, and with imaginary terrible beasts, all engaged in tearing the land into bits, which they separated from the mother-country, as limbs might be torn piecemeal from a body. Another time the Spirit of God caused her to go successively to all the spots in Europe that the great heresy had attacked *secretly*. When she reached the towns of Italy, and beheld the wide spread of contagion amongst them, she sent forth a cry of horror and surprise: "O my God, if all those who are heretics at heart were

to profess their errors publicly, the number of faithful would indeed be small!"*

The convent archives tell us that holy Church often appeared to her, covered symbolically with horrible, disfiguring wounds; and that she would then cry out, with sobs and tears: "Ah, my divine Spouse, I recommend Thy whole Church and Thy mercy! Oh, how many Judases are profaning and betraying her! Why—why—should we keep silence any longer? Why not tell the truth aloud? O Lord, Lord, renew this poor Church, which belongs to Thee, but in which Thou canst now behold no form of a Church!"—or words to the same effect.†

At other times, praying in ecstasy for the sins of the world, and seeing Rome in a mysterious vision, she would express her grief in some such utterance as: "Poor city of Rome! what sins are committed there—what lives are being led! Have pity on her, O Lord—come to her help! And help too, I beseech Thee, the whole of Italy, and all Christendom. Ah, what blindness! What ignorance!"‡

It was after such visions as these—forming her Gethsemane—that the saint followed her divine Master, in spirit, over the Brook Cedron by the Way of the Cross to Golgotha; and, from every quarter of Italy, people began crowding to Prato as to a second Jerusalem, there to gaze upon the sacred Victim on His altar of sacrifice. For, when

* Sandrini, lib. II, cap. ii, p. 156.

† *Le Lettere, Documenti, etc.*, p. 110.

‡ What the saint was thus mysteriously beholding from the depths of her convent, the fathers assembled from all parts of the world at the Council of Trent were at the very same time, and almost in the same words, publicly proclaiming. During the second session, the Bishop of St Mark's addressed the great assembly with a burning exhortation to provide a remedy for the "mortal wounds" of the Church; and, in pointing out the enemies to be combated, spoke first of "the *open* deserters who are upsetting everything, destroying the Sacraments, and attacking us with our own weapons—the Holy Scriptures—which they twist and mutilate"; and then went on to name the *secret* enemies, "who, pretending to belong to us, pervert not only individuals, but sometimes whole towns." Speaking further of the corruption of morals, he exclaimed: "Look at Rome—placed in the midst of nations to shine like a star! Look at Italy—France—Spain! You will see neither sex, nor age, nor condition of life that is not corrupt. Scythians—Africans—Thracians—live not more impure or criminal lives!"

Then, turning boldly from the effect to the cause, he went on: "O Pastors! O towers placed on a hill! We, who ought to shine more brightly than the sun—we it is who have led away the flock of the Lord by our example. They thought us the better the more highly we were placed; and it is by forming their lives on our pattern that they have been dragged down to that abyss, whence they can never rise except with us, when *we* shall climb again to the heights of virtue from which we have fallen!" (Rohrbacher, *Histoire de l'Eglise*, Vol. XXIV, Book lxxv, p. 18.)

once in Catherine's presence, the beholders of her seraphic union with Christ crucified immediately forgot the copy, to think only of the divine original; and, like the centurion at the foot of the cross, each new comer struck his breast and bewailed his sins, with heart softened by love for a God who has so loved us.

This strange spectacle—for it is here necessary to antedate matters a little—went on for twelve years; and during that time it never ceased to attract, for witnesses, the most illustrious and influential members of Roman and Tuscan society, princes, princesses, nobles, *sabants*, magistrates, bishops, eminent religious of different orders—in short, people from every class whence the leaders of religion and patriotism spring—constantly went and came around the humble Dominican convent, and carried back to their respective spheres full accounts of the impressions they had received. These impressions, moreover, continued throughout to be as deep as those made on the first witnesses of the ecstasy. We are told that it almost seemed as though the Son of God was pouring forth the effects of His Redemption in floods over the favoured spot, so marvellous were the conversions there worked—and, above all, the brilliant intellectual lights granted as to the truth. Nobody was allowed to assist at these mysteries of love without experiencing wonderful results in some degree—each according to his own state or capacity.

When we consider such a state of things as this, we cannot wonder that the long continuance of this great ecstasy was alone sufficient to revive faith in innumerable souls, and to secure its possession to the inhabitants of the country where the miracle was wrought; and that hence the clouds of error drifting over from Germany were quickly dispersed, on reaching Tuscan skies, by the sun of Catherine's holiness.

History has carefully preserved the names of many amongst the great personages who came in succession, both during these twelve years and afterwards, to admire the marvels of grace revealed in the saint of Prato and to profit by them. To begin with, princes of the Church—

besides Roberto de' Pucci, Cardinals Gaddi, Cafarelli, and Marcello Cervini—who afterwards became pope under the name of Marcellus II—are all named as having been witnesses of the ecstasy of the Passion, and all gave striking testimony to it, declaring that they considered it one of the greatest graces of their lives to have gained Catherine's powerful intercession with God. Fra Vincenzo Giustiniani—who was at first General of the Dominican Order, and afterwards a cardinal—confided most important and delicate matters of business to Catherine, and took her advice about them. It is reported of him, and also of Cardinal Aldobrandini, who mounted St Peter's Chair as Clement VIII, that nothing ever inspired either of them with a higher standard, or with more generous impulses in the service of God, than the few hours of intercourse that they obtained with her at San Vincenzio. When St Pius V was pope (which was after the public miracle of the weekly ecstasy had ceased, as will be seen) he ordered his nephew, Cardinal Michael Bonelli, to make a pilgrimage to Prato on the way to Spain—where he went as legate to negotiate the league against the Turks—in order to see the saint, and recommend his mission to her prayers. He found so much good result from the visit that he returned to the convent on his way back, to offer his thanks and to see Catherine again. Another important witness to her wonderful gifts was Alessandro de' Medici—afterwards Pope Leo XI—who could not help paying homage to her eminent sanctity, in spite of knowing her deep devotion to Savonarola, who was to him so antipathetic. Whilst living close to Prato, as Archbishop of Florence, he used to go from time to time to visit her, to beg for her prayers and to imbibe some of the wisdom of God that fell from her lips.

Amongst Tuscan "great ladies"—besides the Princess Maria Salviati and the Grand-Duchess Eleonora, already mentioned—the following connections of the reigning house are specially named as having visited and known the saint: The Arch-Duchess Joanna of Austria, wife of Francesco de' Medici; her two daughters, Eleonora and Maria, of whom

one became by marriage Duchess of Mantua, and the other Queen of France, as wife to Henri IV; Francesco de' Medici's two sisters, Duchesses of Ferrara and Braciano; Christina of Lorraine, wife of the Grand-Duke Fernando de' Medici; and Eleonora Orsini, wife of Duke Sforza of Milan.

Of foreign personages who went to Prato, the most remarkable were the Dukes of Mantua and Ferrara; the King of Bavaria's son; and Don Luis Belasio, the Spanish ambassador.

Thus, whilst in Germany, England, Denmark and Sweden, the ruling classes were seizing upon the property of Religious houses, and using the possession of riches by monastic orders as an argument against Catholic doctrine, one simple maiden, in her humble cell, was attracting all the power and royalty of Italy by the mere odour of her virtues; and she had but to let fall a few words from her lips—or even just to let herself be seen invested with the supernatural glory of her Lord—to draw forth from all who approached her a cry of faith and love for the Church; for what could a mother able to bring forth such children be, but the true spouse of Christ?

This incessant concourse of people to the convent—some wishing to see Catherine in ecstasy, but many also to have personal intercourse with her in her ordinary state, that they might interest her in their concerns, and beg for her prayers or her advice—began, in time, to make the saint's extreme unwillingness to appear somewhat of a difficulty to her superiors. Even at ordinary times of year, some visitor of note was pretty certain to appear more than once a day; but through the spring and summer, when Prato and its neighbourhood were the resorts of nearly the whole Florentine nobility, crowds daily invaded the convent. The fact that only a few privileged people were actually admitted to see the saint in no wise diminished the pressure or discouraged the visitors, who would endure hours of waiting for the mere chance of just looking at her from the parlour or the church; and when Sister Catherine had managed one of her "hidings" so

cleverly that she could not be found even for those who had been allowed entrance, and promised an interview with her, the superiors were at their wits' end as to how they should appease the disappointed devotees. If these happened, moreover, to be princes or princesses—or other people of importance in some way—the matter became even more serious, as injury might accrue to the community if influential visitors were offended, however unreasonably. Besides this, the nuns were really grieved, from a spiritual point of view, to find themselves so often compelled to refuse what might be a very great advantage to the souls of others, simply on account of their holy young sister's shrinking humility.

For all these reasons the community at last determined to consult their chief superior, the prior of St Dominic's monastery. This office was just then filled by Fra Tommaso Roffi de' San Miniato, a man of great learning and wisdom, who—after having once been strongly prejudiced against her—was a devoted admirer of Catherine, and humbly called himself her spiritual son. He at once gave very decided advice: that they should appoint her sub-prioress of the convent, which would satisfy the devotion of the faithful without in any way hurting her humility, since it was one of the regular duties of this office to accompany the prioress to the parlour whenever she went to see strangers. This answer seemed like a flash of light to Mother Raffaella da Faenza, who was then once again prioress. The intense devotion of this saintly woman to the convent, as one of its early foundresses, and the prophetic spirit with which she had greeted and believed in Catherine de' Ricci on her arrival there as a child, have been already described. She was now the only one left of those nine first Religious of San Vincenzio; and—with her old ardent longing to see “a saint” ruling her community—had for some time past been secretly wishing to associate her favourite in the government of the house, as her own sub-prioress.

A humble opinion of her own judgement, however, and zeal for the convent traditions, which had hitherto forbid-

den the raising of any but fully-matured subjects to this office, kept her from carrying out the desire on her own responsibility, in view of Catherine's youth. But when the initiative came from a man of such personal eminence and such unquestioned authority as this prior, she hesitated no longer, but accepted his decision as a voice from heaven; and thus the young saint, in spite of her strong resistance and actual tears of entreaty to be spared, was officially installed as sub-prioress on December 21, 1547, when she was not quite twenty-six years old. It is said of M. Raffaella on this occasion that her joy at seeing her longing fulfilled, and the "child of her desires" placed at her side in authority, was so great that she then and there raised her hands and eyes to heaven and took farewell of earth, begging God to let her soul quickly depart in peace from this world. It is certain, at any rate, that this appointment of Catherine was almost the last act of the holy prioress, for she fell ill a month afterwards, never to rise from her sick-bed again. Her last hour came, and found her smiling and joyful. She sent for, and gave wise counsel to all the nuns from the novices up to the "ancients" of the house—as the oldest professed mothers were called; and then, faithful to her character of "precursor" to St Catherine de' Ricci, she recommended to their votes, as the best person for the office of prioress after her own death, Sister Maddalena Strozzi. She felt that such an election, by keeping the personal guardian and mistress of the saint united to her in the government of the house, would, better than any other arrangement, ensure perfection for the community. This done, the last survivor of the foundresses blessed her children, and breathed forth her spirit in peace. She died on January 28, 1548, at midnight; and we are told that Catherine had revealed to her that this beautiful soul spent about five hours in purgatory, for its perfect purification, and then, with early dawn on earth, took flight to heaven.

Raffaella's work was finished: that of the "saint" for whom she had prayed, and for whose coming she had prepared the ground, was yet to be accomplished.

This saint, then, has now to be viewed in the altered position of being brought, by virtue of her office, into more immediate contact with souls outside her community than she had been before; and we have to see how, under these circumstances, she unconsciously came to exercise more and more widely that grandest of all Christ-like faculties—the power of touching sinners' hearts and winning the grace of conversion for them.

Catherine's biographers are unanimous in declaring that what helped, more than anything else, to draw souls by her means to holiness, was something peculiarly and extraordinarily attractive and impressive in her *face*: something which, whilst exceedingly gracious, modest and bright, was at the same time inexplicably grand and compelling. Now, if we may judge by prints of St Catherine de' Ricci taken from portraits that are said to be contemporary, her face was anything but beautiful, naturally; in fact, if some of these pictures are correct, her features were almost ugly when in repose. We may hope that such portraits as these were *not* quite faithful to nature; but, in any case, it is clear—from a certain general resemblance amongst all the Italian pictures—that there can have been nothing in her own personal appearance to account for this extraordinary attraction possessed by her mere *look*: none of that remarkable, commanding beauty of person, which does undoubtedly sometimes—even in the case of very holy people—first help to draw hearts towards them. Hence, we may safely conclude that this inexplicable “something” in our saint was a purely supernatural endowment; and, looking back to that occasion when Christ had been pleased to allow His own countenance to appear through hers, it were perhaps not too bold to suppose that there henceforth lingered on her features some remains of that divine light which had then so overpowered the beholders. Be this as it may, it is certain that there came from her face a power that appeared to spring straight from God, so firmly and suddenly did it seize hold of hearts and conquer them for Him. “No matter,” says Razzi, “how corrupt or perverted they might be, souls [at sight of her] passed suddenly from the most

unbridled love of the world to a deep and tender love of God.”

One of the earliest instances of this power recorded is that of the very sudden conversion of a bishop, who came to San Vincenzo to administer confirmation. This man was called Giovan-Maria Canigiani, and belonged to a well-known Florentine family. He is described as one of those miserable specimens of degenerate Religious, common at the period, who turned into the cloister as they would into a cross-road, as the quickest and most certain way of reaching ecclesiastical preferment. He had first been a Dominican friar; then, entering the Order of Vallombrosa, had become general; and had finally added to this dignity the title and office of bishop. But this was supposed not to be the end of his ambition; for public report accused him of having, more ardently than justly, coveted the cardinal's hat, and of having wasted the property of the Order on trying to obtain it. This accusation had been embodied by mischievous Italian wit in a caricature, wherein the general was represented strangling St John Gualbert, founder of his own Order. This prelate, then, came to the convent to confirm a few young ladies who were brought up there. He was brought into Catherine's presence—whether in her ecstasy or not does not appear—and, the moment that he gazed on her face, he was touched so hard by God that, having to go immediately to the altar to say his Mass, he did nothing the whole time he was celebrating but weep and deplore his sins, giving every sign of the deepest repentance. The sincerity of this instantaneous conversion, and the certainty of his having taken measures to reform and repair his former bad life, were proved; for he died not very long afterwards, and Catherine had it revealed to her that he had saved his soul.

Two instances of sudden reform, on merely beholding Catherine's face accidentally—one, of a peasant named Baccio, who saw her go by in a procession, and the other of a man who attended his blind master on a visit to the saint, and caught sight of her through the parlour *grille*—may be passed over with simple mention; but we may

give in full the story of a young man, whose name does not appear, but the details of whose conversion are interesting. He was brother to two nuns of San Vincenzio, and was well known for his dissolute life. He came one day to the convent on a visit to his sisters; and they—hoping that she would say a few words that might influence him for good—sent for Catherine, then sub-prioress, to the parlour. She came; and had hardly reached the *grille* than, raising her eyes to the young man's face and giving him a piercing look, she was seized with great sadness and a deep pity for his soul, by reason of the horrors with which she saw it stained. Then, after standing there for a few minutes full of melancholy, she went away without uttering a word. The young man's sisters, taken by surprise, and quite confused at such an abrupt and almost insulting departure, waited a little and then sent to ask Mother Catherine to come back. She obeyed the summons, but only to act again as she had done before: to fix her eyes, full of sadness, on the youth's countenance, and in a moment or two once more to depart, still in complete silence. The two young nuns, more and more astounded and ashamed, returned yet again to the charge by sending another message to the saint; but this time she sent down an excuse that she was ill. Then the young nuns, utterly disconcerted and puzzled at her conduct, began assuring their brother how unlike this was to the holy sub-prioress's usual behaviour, when he himself burst forth with the explanation of the mystery. He confessed that, the very moment his eyes met those of the saint, he had seen all the crimes and abominations of his life—all his acts of ingratitude to God—pass before his vision as though in a mirror; and that the sight had so pierced him with sharp contrition that he had then and there promised our Lord to serve him faithfully for his whole life. When the sisters reported this to Mother Catherine, she assured them that their brother would henceforth not only be a faithful Christian, but that, filled with the Spirit of God, he would become the instrument of salvation to

many souls. Such was the kind of incident that happened over and over again throughout Catherine's life.

There were times when the saint had the gift of prophecy for the benefit of her fellows; and one instance is specially recorded, at this period, of her having saved the son of a lady—an intimate friend—from the commission of a great and disastrous crime, by sending him, through his mother, a secret message, which showed that she had been supernaturally warned beforehand of his intention.

It must not be supposed, however, that it was only for the conversion of sinners that Catherine's marvellous gifts were employed. The just felt her influence, when brought into contact with her, as keenly as the wicked; and there was one particular effect which the sight of her, or a few minutes' conversation, is said sometimes to have produced, which calls for special notice. This consisted in the supernatural engraving, on the mind of the person concerned, of a marvellously vivid picture, sometimes of her own face and sometimes of the face of our Lord Himself on the cross. Whichever it might be, the supernatural impression had the same effect: that, namely, of so strengthening, raising, and enlightening the subject of it (who seems to have been able at will to recall and gaze upon this interior image, when once impressed) in that the things of earth became more and more indifferent and contemptible to him, and the depths of his soul remained at peace no matter how great the outward stress of trouble or temptation. Two people who are specially named as having been subjects of this miraculous effect—a young Florentine of great literary tastes, and an eminent lawyer renowned for his abilities—appear to have had peculiarly holy and happy deaths as the final result of it.

This almost universally converting effect of a visit to Mother Catherine at Prato, after her having been placed in office, became in time so widely recognized that the very strength of popular faith in her powers kept some people away from her. It was hardly safe for those whose deliberate attachment to some state of sin or of lukewarmness

made them dread a change to visit a person with such a dangerous faculty of mastering souls; and it is generally supposed that some such motive as this, some fear of being compulsorily moved to moral reform, kept the two chief personages of Florence, and the nearest neighbours to Prato of all the Tuscan princes, away from the saint. Throughout the whole time of Catherine's life—whilst members of all the reigning houses and the rest of the Italian nobility continued to resort in crowds to San Vincenzio—it was remarked that neither Cosmo de' Medici, nor his son and successor Francesco, ever entered its doors; and it was well known that their absence was not caused by unbelief or contempt for the saint, for they both did all they could to show their faith and their reverence, constantly sending alms to the convent and begging for prayers on all occasions. Only they would not trust themselves in her presence.

But besides this miraculous share in our Lord's redeeming power, granted to Catherine as a consequence of her share in His Passion, she possessed in high degree another and more ordinary faculty for the winning of souls: that of the most intense love for them. This love, in her, took the form—which, indeed, it has taken with more or less intensity in many saints—of a burning desire to suffer herself for the sins of others, and so to expiate them; and one of her biographers says that “like another Samuel” she incessantly groaned and wept over the sins of mankind, entreating the Lord to spare sinners and to let her suffer, in body and soul, all the punishments due to them. He adds, too, that God heard her, and that she appeared sometimes completely crushed under the weight of the responsibility she had accepted: that she might be seen breathless with fatigue, her body bent down, her steps tottering, her whole aspect that of one bearing a burden far beyond her strength. He tells how, the first time that her guardian, Maddalena, met her in this torturing attitude, she naturally ran to help her, and anxiously inquired what had caused such a state of weakness; and how Catherine answered, with a deep sigh: “Mother, it seems as if my Jesus had laid the weight of the whole world on my shoulders!”

Sometimes the visions that the saint had were so terrible as to make her fall fainting and rigid to the ground, where her sisters would find her; and then they would learn, on her recovery, the cause of her overwhelming grief.

Another form in which the saint made expiation for sin was that of taking upon herself the sufferings due to particular individuals, which were inflicted upon her directly from the hand of God for their redemption. Sometimes such pains were to benefit one of those exceptional public sinners, appearing from time to time in the world's history, who seem absolutely to require the sacrifice of some holy and innocent victim as co-operator in their salvation, to whom our Lord does not choose to give the fruit of redemption without the mediation of the saints. On other occasions she exercised this special ministry for people usually good or even holy, but likely to be overcome by some peculiarly strong temptation, as she did for a nun in her own community who was tempted on her death-bed to utter despair. Or, again, she would purchase by this means the conversion of some private friend whose spiritual state she knew to be very bad; as in the case of a certain gentleman who was an immense benefactor to the convent, and a man of uncommonly generous and upright character, but a complete unbeliever. His name is not given, but the story of his conversion throws some striking lights on Catherine's character. She was extremely grateful to this *signor* for his continuous and liberal help to the community, and for the respectful admiration which—despite his absence of faith—he always showed for the nuns, who appear to have had no claim at all on his generosity. Like her father, St Dominic, "she could not bear to reap temporal advantages without sowing spiritual ones"; and she set herself earnestly to win this soul to its Creator, constantly urging on her friend the claims of his God and of his own eternal destiny. She talked, however, in vain; he would not listen to such language, and always managed to turn the conversation when it took this line, or went *brusquely* out of the parlour. One day, when the saint was pressing him more closely than usual, he lost patience so far as to forget cour-

tesy, and said, in a haughty tone, that "he knew what he was about! He had no need to learn from a woman's sermons, and *her* business was to stick to her distaff and spin!" Catherine, miserable over his obstinacy, went straight to her cell to pray once more to her divine Spouse for his salvation. No one ever knew from herself what had passed in her secret heart on this occasion; but the result showed of what nature her prayer must have been. Their benefactor fell dangerously ill, suddenly recognized the hand that had struck him down, and humbly bowed beneath it. Become a Christian at the last moment of life, his really grand nature showed itself by the extraordinarily fervent acts of faith and love that he made: and the determined unbeliever died "the death of the saints." When a friend brought the detailed account of his last hours to Catherine, she said smilingly: "*Now* he must know whether Catherine went to her spinning, or did something else for his salvation!" She, however, was at the same time seized with most violent bodily pains, which she had to bear for a definite period.*

This intense love of suffering for others was, as we should expect to find, very often carried by the saint beyond the region of this world into that of the Church suffering. The supernatural visions of purgatory often granted to her were as vivid, and sometimes as overpoweringly touching to her heart—though in a different way—as her visions of sin and of the punishment that impenitent sinners would have to suffer. She is said to have been often mysteriously conducted through the place of purgation by different saints, but especially by her own guardian angel; and to have made, in consequence of what she saw, such intensely ardent supplications for the release of those she found there, that our Lord could not resist her prayers. She learnt also, by these visions, the deep importance in the sanctification of a Christian of many things that seemed small on earth; and especially did she learn this in the case of Religious, by once finding a nun from her own community, whose life had been noted for holiness, suffering much

* Razzi, lib. III, cap. viii, p. 182.

on account of some slight carelessness in administering the "temporalities," which had caused diminution in goods that should have benefited the poor. Souls that were enduring very severe punishment, too, were occasionally caused to appear to her on earth, revealing what were their torments, and urgently begging her help.

Over and over again, as the result of the knowledge thus mysteriously acquired, Catherine prayed to take upon herself the penance of others; and she was allowed by this means to deliver many—both strangers and friends—from purgatorial pains, either wholly, or after a much shorter time than was really due to their sins. God often rewarded her love and zeal by sending her revelations of the attainment of heaven by those for whom she had suffered; and, amongst others, our Lady once showed her a sister of her own whom she had thus delivered. Moreover, holy souls who had reached the Beatific Vision by her help were sometimes allowed to come themselves to announce their happiness and to thank her for it.

And, with all those wonders being worked by her influence or prayers—with the daily increase of visitors to the convent on her account—what was the attitude of the saint during her years as sub-prioress? It is described as only an intensified degree of her former self-doubting humility: a deeper and deeper conviction of her utter unworthiness to be amongst such holy companions as those over whom she had been set. The very concourse of strangers to the place, of which she knew so much more than she had done in her private capacity, was only a source of fear and trouble to her tender conscience. It made her fancy herself the cause of disturbance, and perhaps a spiritual injury, to the community by bringing incessant distraction into the retired and peaceful atmosphere of Religious life; and she used at times to accuse herself of this, covered with confusion as if at some tremendous crime. Once, when the sisters found her dissolved in tears, on a Friday night just after her ecstasy of the Passion, and asked her what was the matter, she declared most earnestly that she felt unworthy to wear the habit, and that "if she

had to be professed again, she was quite sure that they would never receive her because of the disorder, bad example, and scandals of her life!" Mother Maddalena, standing by, could not help exclaiming: "Sister Catherine! are you speaking seriously?" Then the saint, with sobs and tears redoubled, solemnly protested in answer: "God is my witness that I am! I am quite convinced that if the community could have foreseen all my disorderly conduct, and all the trouble and scandal that I should cause it, I should never have been admitted to profession!"

One little incident, proving the reality of Catherine's self-depreciation, may find appropriate place as conclusion to this chapter. A poor woman from the neighbourhood, suffering from dropsy, came and knocked at the convent door one day. The holy sub-prioress happened to be there, and opened the door herself. "I want to speak to *the saint*," said the simple peasant-woman. Catherine fired up in a moment, and answered quite sharply: "Who is the saint, and who is not? *All* the sisters here are good, but none of them are saints! The saints are in Paradise." And with that she shut the door in the poor woman's face. However, she meekly made up for her little ebullition; for the real portress, Sister Elena Nardi, who had come up meanwhile and heard what passed, reproached the saint with harshness towards the poor woman, and begged her not to send her away hurt. "At least," she begged, "make the sign of the cross and give her your blessing." So Mother Catherine, accepting the reproach, opened the door and called her visitor back. She knew that the poor creature wanted to be cured of her dropsy; and, signing a cross on her breast, she told her to "trust in God and San Vincenzo," and she would pray for her, and she would be cured. The woman went straight home, and on arriving found herself well, as the saint had promised; whereupon she immediately returned to thank her. It is a pleasant ending to the story to read that the gratitude of this poor peasant did not end in words. From that day forth she remained devoted to Catherine, and came constantly to see her and to bring presents of the very best fruit in season, which the saint on her side accepted in all grateful simplicity.

CHAPTER XII

Work as sub-prioress within the community—She is named prioress (1552)
—Death of her uncle, Fra Timoteo—St Catherine's spiritual teaching and conferences in chapter—She is delivered, at her own prayer, from the outward manifestations of her ecstasy of the Passion (1554)

WHILST CATHERINE was doing her best to persuade her companions that she was unfit to hold even the last place in the community, Providence was so ordering things that she might before long hold the first. This was what Mother Raffaella had had in view when she begged God for "a great saint" for the convent: she had looked not only to the individual, unobtrusive influence that such a one would exercise, but to the generous impulse towards greatness of combined action that is imparted to a community by saints; and for the bringing about of this end she knew that it would be necessary for the saint she desired to govern the house as prioress.

God seemed to have been preparing Catherine de' Ricci long beforehand for this important *rôle*, especially by the feelings with which He had inspired her for her sisters in religion. From the time of her first entry into San Vincenzo, her love for them all had been so great that she absolutely identified her own interests with theirs, especially in all matters of spiritual advancement; and she prayed as fervently and incessantly for all, and tried to make herself as completely whatever each one desired, as though she already had the charge of their souls. To this really maternal zeal and tenderness for her sisters she had long joined a correctness of judgement, a wisdom in discernment of spiritual things, and a prudence, gentleness, and moderation that were quite marvellous at her age; and all these qualities of course became more conspicuous now that they had fuller play as she filled the office of sub-prioress.

During the years that she occupied this post she gave,

as we have seen, much time each day to her apostolate for souls outside the community; but this did not prevent her keeping sufficient liberty to attend to the internal duties and responsibilities involved in her office, and God Himself helped her in this by so changing the times and seasons of His special visitations that they should not interfere with her public community duties, as they had hitherto often done. It will be remembered how, in the early days of her convent life, Sister Catherine's "slumbers" had caused her to be left to herself, and exempted her from many of the religious exercises practised in common. From the time when her great ecstasy of the Passion began, in the year 1542, this need for excusing her from assisting on certain occasions in the daily community functions—both secular and religious—had increased rather than diminished. She was often seized by raptures so suddenly—especially at times of holy Communion, at the evening *Salve*, and in the Refectory when others were eating and she was trying to conceal her own fasting—that her ecstatic states were a cause of distraction or disturbance; and her superiors had consequently withdrawn her from public appearance on these occasions. Now, however, that she was officially bound, as sub-prioress, to give an example of strict monastic regularity, all outward manifestations of her supernatural states which could in any way hinder this duty ceased. She was able to have meals with the community and take part in the *Salve*; and, though still at times ravished into ecstasy on receiving her Lord in the Holy Eucharist, it was only in such a manner as to attract no special attention and to cause no disorder in the choir.

Besides practising this perfect exactness in outward duties, Catherine also let no calls on her attention from seculars hinder her from finding time for the personal demands made upon her by the sisters. The latter, despite her youth, now came constantly to her for advice: either to get difficulties and doubts cleared up or to obtain greater lights on matters of the interior life. All who consulted her were enchanted to find how, under every circumstance

and upon all questions proposed to her, she was able to pronounce decisions and to give answers of such high wisdom that they could not doubt her being habitually taught by the Holy Spirit, and inspired with particular lights for the direction of souls. In short, she managed so to fill this subordinate office as to satisfy every one, and to produce in her community the triple effect of great peace in all souls, perfect union of heart and mind, and a strongly pronounced movement towards greater religious perfection.*

In addition to this general influence, however, there was a special one that Catherine had to exercise, in a department of convent life relegated to the sub-prioress as her particular work. At San Vincenzo—as in most large communities of that period—the nuns were separated into four distinct divisions, each of which had its own individual superior. These divisions consisted respectively of the novices proper; the “young professed”; the more mature, or “middle” professed; and the “ancients,” referred to before. The prioress was *ex-officio*, head of the ancients, and mother to the “middle professed” nuns; the novices were of course under the regular mistress; whilst the sub-prioress was placed over the “young professed,” or junior nuns. To St Catherine, therefore, fell the specially delicate and important task of training and guiding hearts and souls at just the most difficult crisis in Religious life: at the moment of transition from the absolute and complete dependence of the novitiate to the comparative liberty, and greater solitude of soul, that belong to the professed nun. Hers it was to teach these young sisters as they left their novice-mistress, to walk firmly on their feet, so to speak, in the way of Religious perfection, in which they had hitherto been led and supported by another’s hand. St Francis de Sales speaks of this office as that of “flying before the young doves, as they leave their mother’s nest, to teach them to use their wings”; it is clear to any one who thinks of it, how much watchfulness, holy tact, and tender care are needed in such a position to rouse the timid, strengthen the weak, and restrain the rash. So difficult is the task that,

* Sandrini, lib. I, cap. xxviii, xxxviii.

pursued even with the most zealous devotion, it not unfrequently issues in more or less of failure; and many a fervent novice, promising excellently, has become the permanent slave of lukewarmness after profession.

Catherine, whilst sub-prioress, was found so extraordinarily successful in accomplishing this work of training, that the nuns could never remember to have seen so few failings among the juniors. They seemed, under her guidance, able to keep all the fervour of their noviceship while they gained the self-possession, and the power of initiative, necessary for solid progress: imbibing from their saintly "mother" some of her own spiritual ardour, together with her remarkable modesty and gentleness. A letter addressed by her to these "young professed," during one of her terms of office as sub-prioress,* giving a picture both of her mode of dealing with them and of the interior life of the convent, is well worth reading; and though it was written rather later than the time we are just dealing with, its subject makes this the most appropriate place to insert it:

To the Young Nuns of the Monastery of San Vincenzio

"The reason of my present letter is, that having been requested by you to say something on the occasion of your feast of St Catherine,† I reply as follows: It is not usual for the sub-prioress to come forward, but to leave all in the hands of the superior. But I am not able to refrain, on account of my love for you (considering that you are all my daughters), from satisfying your desire, with the same charity that has been shown to me by all in the convent.

* The dates of St Catherine's various elections—which from the year 1547 onwards, became frequent events—to the offices of sub-prioress and prioress respectively, are a little confusing, as there appears sometimes to be a slight discrepancy between dates given in the narrative and those of the letters. For instance, P. Bayonne gives 1552 as the date of her first election as prioress; whereas there are letters dated 1554 in which she signs, or speaks of, herself as sub-prioress. This may, of course, merely mean that she was prioress for two years only the first time; but no definite explanation is given of any such apparent discrepancies. The best thing, therefore, for the reader to do as regards this point—which is, after all, not of much consequence—is to recollect simply that for about forty years from the time of her being first made sub-prioress she was kept almost constantly in office as *either* prioress or "sub." The elections (it may be observed for the benefit of readers not aware of this) had to be constantly repeated, because an election to life-long office—such, for instance, as that of a "consecrated" Benedictine abbot or abbess—is not allowed in the order.

† St Catherine of Alexandria, martyr, special patroness of the young nuns.

Therefore I send you with this a golden scudo. I am sorry I cannot give you more; but you must excuse me and accept my good will towards you. The superior will arrange all to your satisfaction; do not fear.

I exhort and pray you, my dear daughters, to imitate our glorious saint, and to practise virtue if you would be pleasing to Jesus, as she pleased Him, if not with the same degree of perfection, at least as much as your frailty allows. Remember that she was a woman, and young like yourselves; yet she did not excuse herself, and you are spouses of the same holy Spouse as she was. And if you would exercise yourselves in all the virtues, as she did, your Spouse will not fail to give you the graces and favours given to her. Be reverent and obedient to your superiors as she was. For, out of reverence and obedience to her mother she went to speak to that holy hermit, whom she believed and obeyed in all simplicity; she did not say, "These things which he has told me are childish, that I am to pray to such an image and I shall see the Spouse of whom he has spoken." And by her obedience and faith she merited to see Jesus. Likewise you, my daughters, give yourselves to holy obedience, and often frequent confession and holy Communion, if you wish to see Jesus; because no one can love or see Jesus better than by uniting oneself with Him in holy Communion. In short, we come to know His goodness and mercy, and our own vileness and misery; as did that saint, who in prayer was illuminated with truth, knew her own errors, and quickly departed from them, and followed with great fervour Jesus her Spouse. And you, my daughters, have been called by your Spouse to holy Religion, so that you may follow His footsteps, and the example of His holy Mother and the saints; fly, therefore, ever occasion of offending your Spouse, as did our saint. And as she had great zeal for the honour of her Spouse, and a desire to suffer for love of Him, so do you show zeal in the observance of our holy rule, first for yourselves and then for your neighbours; and desire to suffer for love of Him, and to render something to Him for what He has done for you, so far as is possible to your frailty. If you love your

Spouse with all your heart, as did our glorious saint, you will not weary of obeying your superiors, but will do it in all simplicity. And I am glad when you have confidence in them, as I told you the other day; and I would on no account that you should be wanting in reverence and obedience towards them, for you would thereby displease Jesus your Spouse, and would lose many graces and spiritual favours.

“My dear daughters, give yourselves joyfully to Jesus, as He willingly gave Himself wholly to you, and as did our glorious saint, who did not think it hard to go to martyrdom for love of Him. And do you joyfully and willingly bear the fatigues and observances of holy Religion, which are wearying to our senses, and are a kind of martyrdom; but to one who loves Jesus with his whole heart, everything is sweet and pleasant, as He said: “My yoke is sweet and My burden is light.” Therefore, my daughters, follow cheerfully your Spouse in the way of Religious life, and do not be discouraged if you find you are not all you would wish to be, but humbly ask pardon of Jesus with a firm resolve to correct yourselves; and have recourse to Him with great faith and hope, because He is your Father and your Spouse and is consumed, so to say, with the desire to bestow graces on you. But He wishes to be entreated; therefore go to Him with great confidence and doubt not that you will be heard, and take your saint as your mediator, to pray to your and her Spouse for the grace you desire. I beg you also to include me in your petitions, that Jesus may do to me as is pleasing to His Majesty. And I will continue, just as I am, to pray for all of you who are or have been my dear children; and I offer you all to Jesus, that He may make you His true spouses and fill you with His holy love. I have dictated all this to my secretary, for I am not able to write with my own hand, on account of the pain you know it gives me to write. May God bless you all.

“Your Mother in Christ,

“SISTER CATHERINE DE' RICCI.”

But it was not only to her spiritual children at San Vincenzio that the saint gave instructions on the Religious life. She had correspondence on the subject with members of other communities, both men and women; and the two following letters—given as good specimens of her style of writing and her tone of thought—belong without any doubt to this period of her first sub-prioress-ship.

The first is to one of two brothers, sons of a Bernardino Rucellai, both members of the Dominican house at Fiesole. To this house Fra Timoteo de' Ricci, Catherine's uncle, was sent as prior in 1547, which will account for the reference in the letter. We are told nothing about these two young men—very probably friends of Catherine's family—except the fact of their being at the Priory of Fiesole.

To Fra Damiano Rucellai, a novice at San Domenico of Fiesole

“Dear Son in Jesus Christ (✠c.),—I have your most welcome letter, to which I will make a brief reply. Firstly, I am glad to see you desirous of good, and fervent in seeking Jesus, who is the beloved of all good Christians, but still more so of Religious who give themselves wholly to Him, forsaking themselves, especially their own will, placing it in God's hands and in those of His prelate. Then again, not caring anything for the body, how it is provided for, but offering it a sacrifice to Jesus, who in His goodness will not fail to accept it, and in exchange for it will give Himself, who is the only good in heaven or on earth. The blessed are satisfied with gazing on the divine Majesty, and with continually thanking and praising His infinite goodness, who is always giving new joys and happiness, in heaven to the saints and on earth to the just, for this offering of soul and body which they have made. Now who would not willingly give to receive so much? So that, my dear son in Jesus, give yourself wholly to Him, soul, body, and will, and He will give Himself to you, as to a dear son. Imitate Him, then, in holy humility; as you may contemplate Him in the approaching solemnity of His holy Nativity, which shows forth His sacred humi-

lity. For He is the highest wisdom and of incomprehensible greatness, and yet of His goodness has deigned to come in such lowliness! Born in a stable, in the company of two lowest animals, without any provision for His wants; but with greatest humility He remained there with His gentle Mother. Therefore, little son of Jesus, go this night and day and visit that sweet Infant, praying His holy Mother to give Him to you for a little space. And she will be gracious to you and will not deny you; but you must be humble, or you will not see Him. And when you have Him, commend to Him my soul, and I will do the same for you. Commend me to your father superior, and many times to his prayers, and the same to our uncle the prior, and to all your companion novices. I hold you as my son in Christ, and am happy to accept you as such. So be of good will, and be as good as possible. *Assai, assai*. I desire nothing else, except to commend myself to you. And may the sweet infant Jesus be with you.

“Yours, &c.

“December 16, 1548.”

The second is simply headed

To a Nun

“Very dear daughter,—I have already sent you a letter to exhort you to the service of our Lord; and now I send you this one, in which I am going to give—first for myself, and then for you—an account of the true way of faithfully serving our Divine Spouse, and a *résumé* of the spiritual life; so that, by following it, we shall carry out the holy will of God. If, then, my daughter, you would be the true spouses of Jesus, you must do His holy will in all things; and you will do this if you entirely give up your own will on every occasion, and if you love the divine Spouse with your whole heart, your whole soul, and your whole strength. Then, you must carefully attend to the following points (but it is necessary to weigh all these words), as they contain the summary of Christian perfection:

“1. We must force ourselves to detach the heart and

the will from all earthly love; to love no fleeting things, except for the love of God; and, above all, not to love God for our own sakes for self-interest, but with a love as pure as His own goodness.

“2. We must direct all our thoughts, words and actions to His honour; and by prayer, counsel, and good example seek His glory solely, whether for ourselves or for others, so that through our means all may love and honour God. This second thing is more pleasing to Him than the first, as it better fulfils His will.

“3. We must aim more and more at the accomplishment of the divine will: not only desiring nothing special to happen to us, bad or even good, in this wretched life, and thus keeping ourselves always at God’s disposal, with heart and soul at peace; but also believing with a firm faith that Almighty God loves us more than we love ourselves, and takes more care of us than we could take of ourselves.

“The more we conform to this way of acting, the more we shall find God present to help us, and the more we shall experience His most gentle love. But no one can reach such perfection except by constant and courageous sacrifice of self-will; and, if we would learn to practise such abnegation, it is necessary to keep ourselves in a state of great and deep humility, so that by perfect knowledge of our own misery and weakness we may rise to learn the greatness and beauty of our God. Consider how just and necessary it is to serve Him unceasingly, with love and obedience. I say just, because God being Father and Master of all things, it is just that His son and servant should obey and love Him: I say necessary, because by acting otherwise we could not be saved. Let us always remember, never doubting, that it is the eternal, sovereign, all-powerful God who does, orders, or allows everything that happens, and that nothing comes to pass without His divine will. Let us remember that He is Himself that wisdom which, in the government of the universe—of heaven, earth, and every single creature—cannot be deceived (He would be neither God nor most wise, if it were otherwise). Let us look upon Him as supremely good, loving and beneficent. If, through His

mercy, this conviction becomes strongly impressed upon our wills, we shall easily take all things from His sacred hand with well-contented hearts, always thanking Him for fulfilling His most holy will in us; because, by acting thus (with the help of His holy grace) we shall unite ourselves to Him by true love in this life and by glory in eternity. May He grant it to us in His goodness! Of your charity pray for me, a wretched sinner, who commends herself to you all.

“Your sister in Christ.

“*November 18, 1549.*”

Such were the burning words of love for Jesus Christ and for souls, and such the truly angelic tone of thought, in which Catherine addressed young hearts consecrated to God. It is not to be wondered at that, when they had for some time watched the results of her first tenure of office in the community, and when they considered all that she had done, both inside and outside the convent, for the good of souls even before this, the nuns resolved to entrust her with full government on the first occasion that should arise. An opportunity for her election came in 1552, just ten years after the beginning of her miraculous ecstasies; and she was then unanimously chosen prioress, to the delight of all her fervent and zealous sisters.

We are told that the only sad heart in the community that day was Catherine's own. She felt struck down, as with a sudden blow, by this election. She found it impossible to believe that she, whose one desire in life was for ever to serve her dearly-beloved sisters in the humblest and most laborious capacity, could be of the least use to them in the one to which they had appointed her; and she was seized with a fear of being unfit to take spiritual charge of the simplest soul in the house. She poured forth her soul, with tears and sobs, in complaints to her divine Spouse; she remonstrated with her companions about the mistake they had made; she complained to the superiors of the Order, and tried to convince them of her incapacity and of the harm she should do in the convent: she made, in short,



THE NUNS' CHOIR AT SAN VINCENZIO.

the genuinely humble protests of a saint in the face of a dreaded honour. But such protests were not accepted. Catherine's election was confirmed; and the superiors of the Order formally intimated to her that she was to submit to the change imposed. She then obeyed; and the very humility that had made her fear the responsibility now came to help her in heartily accepting it. In both her unwillingness and her acceptance she was completely in accord with the doctrine of saints concerning perfect Religious obedience. This doctrine teaches, on the one hand, that there is as much pride in refusing any honour or dignity imposed by God, as there is in ambitiously desiring such when His voice either opposes or simply does not call to it; and, on the other hand, that whilst obscure, humiliating, or difficult posts in Religion are to be invariably accepted with readiness and joy, and even to be desired, the case is quite otherwise with posts that give *prestige* or honour of any sort. Where these are concerned, it is held that a certain repugnance and instinctive aversion to the consideration and homage that belong to such offices are not only legitimate but desirable, even while responsibility is accepted with hearty good-will under obedience.*

Without this repugnance, there could be neither disinterestedness nor humility; and hence it is that one of the most salient characteristics of the saints, when occupying honourable posts, is a certain melancholy spirit—that sadness of the true “pilgrim and stranger” on earth—which they keep so long as they are condemned to such positions. St Catherine, throughout the whole forty years during which she was kept in office as either prioress or sub-prioress, experienced this holy sadness in a high degree; never feeling the least complacency in her dignity, nor taking the slightest repose from the incessant labours that it brought with it. At each re-election, up to the one just before her death, she went through the same anguish of soul that had seized upon her the first time. When some of the nuns were once so imprudent as to congratulate themselves in

* To desire superiority for the cares of office, other things being equal, is praiseworthy; to desire it for its high position is criminal ambition; to desire it for the consideration it brings is disgraceful egotism” (St Thomas Aquinas, in cap. xiii, *Ad Roma*).

her presence on having voted for her, she spoke in a way that made them repent. "Sisters," she said, in a deeply sad tone, "if I had the choice, I would rather spend the two years of prioress-ship imposed upon me in a narrow, dark prison than in fulfilling its duties"—words which, as her pious historian adds, are well worth meditation by any inclined to forget the humility of their profession and to long for cloistral honours.*

Catherine, then, had entered upon her office as prioress in the early months of the year 1552. She was barely installed when she heard of the death of her uncle, the venerable Fra Timoteo de' Ricci, at Perugia. This man held a very large place in her heart, little given as it was to clinging to earthly affections; for in him she had found, when she left her parents' home, the tie of blood, the likeness to her own father, and the warmth of heart, which formed a natural bond in addition to the triple spiritual fatherhood that he came to exercise over her as man of God, priest of Jesus Christ, and first guide of her soul. He it was who had been, so to speak, her sponsor in the Religious life; and who had afterwards received all the confidences about her great spiritual favours, and witnessed her extraordinary states. He had been moreover, to her, what he was to every one in the convent—the devout and austere friar, formed in the school of Savonarola at Florence—the friar who, for more than twenty years, had kept alive his Master's spirit in the Convent of San Vincenzo, which was the honour of Tuscany and the consolation of the Church. Of most generous nature, Timoteo de' Ricci was a man who won pardon for his defects of character by his frank acknowledgement of them and his speedy reparation. If—as was sometimes the case—he happened to wound people's feelings by the sharpness of his zeal, he quickly regained their sympathy by the deep humility of his repentance. If, by misunderstanding for a time his niece's heavenly gifts, he had bitterly grieved her heart, he had afterwards still more bitterly lamented what he came to look upon as one of the gravest faults, and the greatest misfortune, of his life. For many years he had been humbly

* Razzi, lib. III, cap. iv, p. 108.

begging pardon of God for having offended Him in the person of His spouse, Catherine; and he could only console himself at all by actually becoming her disciple and spiritual son. As a man of more than sixty years old, we find him receiving, in the most docile spirit, even public lessons and corrections from her whose master he had been; and two touching instances of his submission, recorded by Razzi, may here be quoted as proofs both of what his natural character was and of the generous depths of humility to which repentance for his faults led him.

The first is assigned to April, 1542, on one day of which Catherine, coming forth from ecstasy, obtained an interview with her uncle. She then advised him to put more gentleness into the reproofs that he administered to the nuns, so as to fulfil our Lord's injunction: "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart." Fra Timoteo, having asked her how she knew (she, of course, never being subject to them) that his reproofs were too severe, as neither he nor the sisters had ever spoken to her of the matter: "Ah!" she replied at once, "and do you think that my Jesus draws me up above into His presence without clearly showing me everything that concerns the interests of my dear sisters? Don't deceive yourself: His goodness leaves me ignorant of nothing that has to do with my monastery." Then the good father promised to keep her instructions in mind, and to do his best to profit by them; and he further begged her to remember him in presence of her divine Spouse in her next ecstasy of the Passion, and to offer his heart to our Lord for him. "I will most willingly offer it," said the saint, "but *you* will take it back again almost directly, will you not?" Such marvelously frank language on the part of his meek and holy niece to her revered uncle and spiritual father shows indeed what clear knowledge she must have had of his extremely hasty temperament; and the doubt she here expressed of the immediate efficacy of her warning is justified by the second incident we are to quote.

This happened a year afterwards, in April, 1543, on the eve of St Vincent Ferrer's feast. The saint being rapt into ecstasy in the church, in presence of her uncle and the united

sisters, it was observed that one of her hands was outside her scapular.

Now, beholding the sacred stigma on this hand, the nuns—seized with tender devotion for the blessed wound—pressed forward, by a sudden spontaneous impulse, almost all together, to kiss it. Naturally, such an impetuous movement of a large number could not take place without causing confusion; and Fra Timoteo, seeing the disorder, and not stopping to reflect on the good-will that had caused it, gave way to his natural hastiness and began to reprimand the sisters severely and even intemperately. But when, in his own turn, he followed the nuns with the intention of devoutly kissing the sacred wound, the saint—notwithstanding her state of rapture—withdrew her hand and hid it under her scapular. Then the good friar remembered all her warnings about his harshness and hasty temper; and, going aside into a quiet corner, fell on his knees and wept so bitterly over his fault that his tender-hearted niece took pity on him, and offered him the hand she had withdrawn.*

This deep humility of Timoteo de' Ricci, however, in nowise lessened his real grandeur and nobility of soul. His fine character showed him truly akin to his niece in the supernatural as well as the natural order; and it was his delight to follow her to the sublimest heights of contemplation and reflection on the mysteries of God, and to pour forth his heart like her in ardent love. It was in this spiritual relationship of their souls that he most sharply felt the blow of separation, when, in 1547, he was sent to be prior at Fiesole; and he proved his regret by taking every possible opportunity of visiting Prato to refresh himself by spiritual conversations with Catherine. He is last heard of there in 1548, at the saint's feet, drinking in consolation from her heavenly words. Four years after this Fra Timoteo was prior of St Dominic's House at Perugia, when—on the feast of St Peter, martyr—Catherine was transported in spirit to his death-bed. Whether she actually appeared to the dying man, as she did to some people in the course of her life, or only supported him by the power of her prayers, at any rate she had the comfort of helping him in his last moments.

* Seraf. Razzi, lib. II, cap. x, pp. 72-73.

That same evening she assembled the sisters in chapter, to announce to them the decease of her uncle, "who had just died in the Priory of Perugia." In doing so, she freely poured forth her tender gratitude for all that he had done for her, and for the great services he had bestowed on their convent; and, after earnestly recommending his soul to their prayers, ordered the suffrages of the community for him to continue for several days. The nuns, surprised at these communications, for which they were quite unprepared, carefully noted down the day and hour when they were made. Some days afterwards, when the official news of the Father's death arrived from Perugia, they were able to testify that the moment at which their young prioress had called them to chapter was the very same at which her uncle had breathed his last.

On the 15th of the following May, Catherine fulfilled the office of prioress towards another member of her family, on a happier occasion. She gave the habit to her youngest half-sister, in presence of Fra Angelo da Diacceto, the girl's maternal uncle. Of the saint's four half-sisters who were nuns with her at San Vincenzo, this one—Lessandra—was the only one to receive the habit from her hands, with the name of Sister Lodovica. The three others had been clothed in her presence, but before she was prioress: the first, as we have already seen, in 1543, taking the name of Maria Benigna; the second—Marietta—in 1547, as Maria Clemente; and the third—Maddalena—as Filippa. All these young sisters of the saint, with one exception, were fragile, delicate creatures, destined not to finish their career on earth: called to the cloister only, as it seemed, that they might die ignorant of the world's evil. Filippa, Maria Clemente, and Lodovica, fell victims to the same fatal disease—consumption—one after the other, and all between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. By the year 1555, their holy sister had seen their three souls gently depart, herself receiving the last breath of each, and, it is said, accompanying the liberated spirits to heaven whilst she was in ecstasy. The convent chroniclers sum up the sweet, peaceful lives of all these three young nuns in the same words: *Buona e quieta sorora!* Sister Maria Benigna,

the first to join Catherine at San Vincenzo, was the last whose eyes she closed, under circumstances to be mentioned later.

As prioress, Catherine naturally became the light and the counsellor of all the sisters in everything concerning the final end of life in the cloister—that is, Religious perfection. Though she was barely thirty years old, the oldest as well as the youngest came and opened their hearts to her, as to a mother, giving her their confidence fully and lovingly, as her high sanctity inspired them to do. They well knew that the “science of perfection” belongs less to the head than to the heart, and that a holy soul who *practises* its generous maxims understands its deepest mysteries better than a learned man who has merely studied its principles intellectually. They felt, in short, what St Thomas explicitly teaches: that love surpasses knowledge, and is more perfect than intellect; for we love more than we know; love entering into man, while knowledge remains outside.*

Something of Catherine's manner of instructing her nuns may be seen in a little collection of her “Maxims” made by her nuns. All show, like the letters given above, how entirely her doctrine of Christian perfection was based on the one great principle: God *is*: the creature *is not*. These maxims are culled from such of her sayings to individual sisters as were preserved by them, after having gone to her for advice on various points, and are most practical; but the form of teaching in which the saint specially shone was in that of “conferences,” or addresses, which she gave to her daughters in chapter on the eves of great feasts. She is described, on these occasions, as appearing at first shy and confused, as if ashamed of what she had to do; for nothing was so painful to her as speaking in public, being persuaded of her own ignorance and incapacity. Then, she would inwardly submit to the Will of God, and begin her exhortation. After a few words, spoken with her natural grace and simplicity, to introduce her subject, suddenly she would be rapt into ecstasy; and from that moment voice and words were purely supernatural. She spoke in the name of Jesus

* D. Thomas, in 4, dist. xlix, 9, 1; a. ex Hug., a. S. Vict. in 7, De Celest. Hierarch.

Christ Himself; or else in that of the Blessed Virgin or some other saint; and—as in the case, already described, of her great ecstasy—her language and voice took so completely the tone and accent of those whom she was representing, that the sisters, marvelling, seemed to hear the very persons themselves speaking. The effect on their souls may be imagined.

But, whilst thus winning admiration and confidence from all around her, Catherine herself, in these first years of her authority, was greatly troubled. The constant stir and tumult, in and around the convent, produced by the concourse of people—ever increasing—drawn thither by the fame of her ecstasy of the Passion, filled her with holy sadness. It was not, now, her personal humility only that was alarmed: her conscience as prioress was roused by a dread that all this external agitation and excitement might end in seriously compromising the interior peace of the community. She saw that amongst her nuns minds and souls were being disturbed, and that silence and recollection were no longer protecting, as they should, the spirit of prayer. If, even as a private Religious, she had formerly taken fright at the pilgrimages to Prato on her account, how far keener was her anxiety now that they bid fair to become a real disorder, and that all the responsibility for them rested on her own shoulders, as prioress! Her distress was deep, and she incessantly mourned and sighed over it before God. Even amid her ecstasies she was heard complaining of her trouble: “O my Jesus!” she would cry, “deliver me from all this renown—from all these outward appearances that Thou hast given to the heavenly favours Thou bestowest on me! Let my poor convent get back a little of its hiddenness and quiet!” Then, thinking her own prayers not worthy to be heard, she at last begged her nuns, with tears, to come to her help with their merits and fervour, so as to supply her deficiencies in the sight of God.

Moved by her trouble, and also by the real inconveniences that caused them, her superiors—the prior of St Dominic’s and the convent confessor—ordered the sisters to fulfil Catherine’s desire by sending up fervent prayers to God

until He deigned to hear them. From the day of this order, for several months, that holy community perseveringly raised supplicating arms to heaven that they might be delivered, as though from a public calamity, from the marvellous ecstasy which was in truth the honour of Catherine, the salvation of many souls, the light of faith to Italy, the admiration of the world. Surely no holier or purer prayers ever mounted to the throne of God, for never can there have been more humble or disinterested ones; and they were at last answered, for Jesus Christ was pleased to veil His own glory and that of His spouse, in order to deliver the virgins consecrated to Him from the crowds that invaded their dwelling-place, and to grant them once more the solitude and peace wherein they had lived with Him in old days.

In the year 1554 all external signs of Catherine's ecstasy of the Passion disappeared, though its substance remained in the form of her close and tender inward union with her Beloved. The worship of Jesus crucified remained the worship *par excellence* of her life, and was her special object of contemplation every Thursday and Friday; but the drama itself—the living scenes reproduced by her ecstasy, which had so revived the faith of others—had done their work, and never reappeared. People continued coming to Catherine, as to an inexhaustible source of grace, light, and consolation: she never ceased to be a means of edification and a mirror of holiness to individual souls, but was no longer a sight for crowds or a hindrance to the peace and quiet of her convent: and the peace was needed, to leave her free for the cares of government that she was to support for so many years.

CHAPTER XIII

St Catherine's internal government of her community—Her character as prioress—Her standard of Religious life

A MONASTERY or convent is a small state, which attains its true end only through the wisdom of whoever presides over and guides its course. Let the laws and constitutions of a nation be even ideally beautiful and high-minded, their success must depend on the perfection of their practical working; and we all know that the attainment of this perfection lies in the hands of those placed at the helm. The pagan held that divinity was concerned in the making of laws only; but the Christian knows that God's intervention and help are just as necessary in their application, and that the statesman who would rule aright must daily bend the knee before his Maker and ask Him, with Solomon, for the gift of that same wisdom that presides over the counsels of the Most High "to stay with him and work with him."*

What is true of a state is still truer of a Religious community. Though the people forming the latter are transformed by a special grace not given to all men, they are none the less human; and as the laws under which they live aim at nothing less than at guiding them to advancement in the superhuman ways of evangelical perfection, it is not to be wondered at if opposition to such laws is found to be as strong and as persistent in their hearts as in those of other men and women. Hence it is that, if saints are needed to found Religious orders, they are also needed for governing them. Souls are required for this work to whom God might say, as He did to Josue, "I will be with thee as I was with Moses"; souls at once brave, tender and utterly devoted; knowing how to draw the sword for the good of their subjects with one hand, and with the other to shield them

* *Mitte illam de cœlis sanctis tuis . . . ut mecum sit et mecum laboret*" (Sap. cap. ix, 10.

against their enemies—especially against themselves—and so to secure their entrance into the promised land.

The sisters of San Vincenzo of Prato were happy enough to be thus governed; and if it is true that communities—like peoples—always get the kind of government they deserve, nothing could be more to their honour than to have deserved that of Catherine de' Ricci for more than forty years.

The fundamental condition of rightly governing a convent is for the superior to realize in her own person the ultimate end of its government, which is simply the perfection of Religious life. Besides the fact that she cannot bestow what she does not possess, it would be both unbecoming and rash for her to have the honour of headship in her community without also having the merits and virtues of the position. Moreover, ordinary virtues will not suffice her. She must have eminent and extraordinary ones, corresponding to her dignity; for human nature will never keep itself at even a moderately high level, unless a constant impulse is given to it by the sight of a standard of generously high perfection set by its rulers. A holy writer, Père Dupont, S.J., has said that a well-ordered Religious house ought to be like the statue of Nabuchodonosor with the head of gold, even though the rest of the body be made of commoner material.

This was what St Catherine felt so profoundly when the unanimous voice of her sisters called her to be their prioress; and this feeling it was which caused her that ever-recurring distress, already referred to, at each re-election to office. However, she unhesitatingly took up the burden of the highest perfection in every requirement of rule and constitutions; and she so lived that one might have believed that she incessantly heard echoing in her ears that saying of the canon law: "The rule thou hast given to others, take for yourself"*—so faithful was she to that principle. She would have been ashamed of her title of prioress, had she not been always and everywhere first in exactness and fervour. Hence she was never seen deliberately to fail in the

* *In Decret.* lib. I, lit. ii, "Cum Omnes."

smallest matter; “and if, from weakness or inadvertence, she ever happened accidentally to do so in some point of slight importance—such as momentarily breaking silence, or being late for an exercise—she regretted it so deeply that she instantly gave public testimony of her repentance, even to the shedding of abundant tears.”* Not that she forgot the fact that her rule and constitutions bound only under pain of making satisfaction by corresponding penance, and not under pain of sin; but that—besides her very high esteem for perfection in itself—she felt so strongly about the disastrous effect on the spirit of a community that might result from the slightest transgressions of its prioress, one infraction of rule on her part, perhaps, giving countenance to a hundred committed by others.

As we might suppose, however, the saint’s zeal for regular observance did not end with the setting of a perfect example. She held herself just as strictly bound to prevent negligence in her subjects as to avoid it herself; and she went so far as to tell her nuns that “the slightest liberty she was to allow them against the Rule would be in her eyes an attempt against God Himself, that might provoke His anger, compromise their salvation, and even bring about the ruin of the convent as a final punishment.” This was a sound principle; for, in fact, apart from the chastisement that impunity in offending deserves from God, it contains in itself the elements of inevitable decay. A community cannot possibly subsist unless correction incessantly keeps it alive, by holding it back from the abyss into which daily faults are perpetually tending to plunge it.†

From these motives, our holy prioress had made a rule for herself never to let any fault, however small, pass unpunished. She always imposed a penance proportionate to the offence: keeping here, as in all things, the due measure prescribed by her kindness as well as her justice. In the same equitable spirit, too, she always gave her reproofs in the

* Sandrini, lib. II, cap. xxii, p. 222.

† Cf. Bossuet. “La peine rectifie le désordre; qu’on pèche, c’est un désordre. Mais qu’on soit puni quand on pèche, c’est la règle. Vous revenez donc, par la peine, dans l’ordre que vous éloigniez par la faute. Mais qu’on pèche impunément, c’est le comble du désordre. C’est le désordre non de celui qui pèche, mais (du supérieur) qui ne punit pas.”—*Méditations sur l’Evangile.*

gentlest and most affectionate form possible, never losing her serenity of manner, or letting words or voice betray the least personal emotion. Both in reproving and in giving necessary official commands, where an authoritative tone was sometimes called for, she made it evident that no mere human feelings influenced her, and that all her hatred of faults and imperfections in nowise lessened her tenderness and respect for those she had to correct. In fact, she really never gave reproofs or penances without first asking and waiting for light from the Holy Ghost, that she might see things only as God willed, and use the words with which He should inspire her. The consequence of all this was that the sisters used to say among themselves that "They found this difference between Mother Catherine's corrections and those of other superiors—that hers remained permanently fixed in their minds, whilst other people's merely passed through them."

The saint used, further, to impress upon her subjects the great benefit that doing penance for their faults would be to them in the next world as well as in this, as she was sure that it would spare them much purgatory, besides greatly increasing their merits: so that, by insisting on the fulfilling of penalties, she was doing them a great personal kindness.

In spite, however, of her strictness and her high views of the matter, Catherine was delicately alive to the sensibilities of her children, and extremely sensitive about not inflicting any lasting hurt by humiliations. Hence, Razzi says, she never allowed any sister on whom she had inflicted a penance to go to bed without having first shown her, by some specially affectionate word or deed, how truly she loved and felt for her.

The two special points of rule as to which St Catherine was most strict in her government were the Divine Office, and the common community life in both spiritual or ascetical matters and outward customs. With regard to the first of these, a community in choir was in her eyes a portion of the heavenly court assembled round the throne of the Most High; and—never so happy herself as in this little heaven on earth—she could not bear to see a single empty place

there. That perfect exactness on this point was not always customary in Religious communities of the day is clear from the saint's being described as glancing round the choir at the beginning of each "Hour" of the office, to see who were absent, and then either going to fetch these herself or sending for them in her name. Then, when all were assembled, "she would exhort them to recollection and devotion during this holy exercise, and forbid them to go out from it without express leave."*

Neither was it of public prayer only that the saint made a great point with her nuns. She counted it as part of their vocation to cultivate the spirit of prayer generally, and this practice of as much private prayer as possible, so diligently that no other occupations should be allowed to hinder it; and, as far as might be, she even lessened the common manual labour of the community so as to give more time for this: so fearful was she lest, by slight practice of actual mental prayer, the inward spirit of the hidden life of union with God should be lost. This diminishing of active work at San Vincenzo was a rather serious matter to undertake, for the community there had always depended to a great extent on the labour of their hands for their livelihood. It will be remembered that one of Catherine's great attractions to the convent, in her early days, had been the spirit of laborious poverty that she found in the sisters; and, though the nuns of Prato had nearly all come from rich and powerful Florentine houses, in which work of any sort was practically unknown to the women of the families, they had sedulously kept up this spirit, sometimes even working so hard for their bread as to carry their hours of labour far on into the night. When Catherine became prioress, she saw that such excessive work and anxiety for their livelihood as this could not fail to injure the contemplative spirit, and she looked round to see what means she could find of reducing it to more just proportions. First, as usual, she turned to God Himself, with earnest prayer that He would by some means so provide for the bodily needs of her children that they might be freed from all undue attention to temporal matters,

* Razzi, lib. III, cap. v, p. 112.

so as to turn their thoughts fully—as became His faithful servants and spouses—to things of the soul. Then, by humble requests to her own relations (well-to-do in the world) and to various rich people who—as we shall shortly see—had by this time become her “spiritual children,” she succeeded in obtaining means enough for the community to exist in decent comfort without any undue exertions for earning. The only person in the house—so Sandrini says—whose condition was not the least improved by any outward help was the prioress herself. She remained in such utter destitution of almost necessities, as to the furniture of her wretched cell and as to all things allowed for her use, that the sisters were often moved to tears of compunction when they left her presence, as they reflected on the extreme poverty that their mother insisted on practising herself, whilst so anxiously providing for her subjects every convenience consistent with the spirit of their Rule.

On the point of common community life, the saint was almost as strong as on that of prayer; and by “common” life is not here meant only work or recreation in common, or a spirit of common fraternal charity, but the following in all things of the general Rule and spirit of the Order, as opposed to the setting up of a particular one in any matter, and of desiring private permissions or dispensations. Her strictness in this matter approached to sternness, and was exercised in two opposite directions. On the one hand, she was stern even to severity in refusing to dispense from fasting and abstinence, or any other penance prescribed by Rule, on the ground of slight ailments or mere general delicacy of health. She held that there was no more certain way for the evil spirit of relaxation to creep into a whole community than for a prioress to be the least lax with individuals upon this point; and she even went so far as to allow no one who was not ill enough to be actually in the infirmary to eat meat oftener than was prescribed by the Rule. Even if a few suffered to some extent from this strictness, she considered it better than for any risk of general laxity to be run: and the same as to absence from choir, for which she would never give leave on slight grounds.

On the other hand, the holy young prioress guarded her nuns with equal care from an opposite danger: that of those restive and usually proud spirits, to be found in almost all communities, who wish to make rules of exceptional severity for themselves, and to do extra and peculiar penances, or to have special and unusual times of prayer, so as to be different from others. She made ceaseless war on this abuse of invading the domain of common usage by the intrusion of private practices. Both in public addresses and private interviews she most earnestly advised her daughters to beware of entering on this course. "She exhorted them, speaking as for God Himself, to do everything to avoid what she called a fall and a misfortune, and would threaten with divine chastisement any who should follow this way of their own accord." She did not understand, she said, "how, between people who had taken the same vows and who professed the same Rule, there could be two ways of keeping it; nor how, in a convent where there was no union in exterior life, there could be harmony in the service of God."* No matter under how specious an appearance of good—how strong a wish for a higher standard—this desire for peculiarity might show itself, she always vigorously denounced it as "an odious, intolerable, and even diabolical vice." There is a story told of her one night pursuing the devil in the form of a creature that looked like a fox, holding a written paper in his mouth, through the convent dormitories, until she compelled him to give up to the paper to her. She could not read it herself, but ordered him in God's name to tell her the meaning of the words written on it; and the evil one, before disappearing, told her it meant "to produce, under the appearance of good, nothing but disorder and scandals." This story is told by Razzi; and, whether literally true or not, is in any case symbolic of the extreme horror in which Catherine was known by her contemporaries to hold this spirit of restless innovation on the common Rule.

It was not, however, only general light on the government of the house that Catherine received from God, but also particular and often very wonderful knowledge about

* Sandrini, lib. I, cap. xxxv, p. 116.

each of her nuns. It will be remembered that she had already had the gift of reading hearts and learning their secrets; and a story, belonging to this period, of how she exercised the gift in the case of a young sister called Eufrasia Mascalzone, is worth telling here for the *naïve* picture it gives of the daily interior of San Vincenzio and its community, as well as for the supernatural side of it which throws special light on the nature of Catherine's ecstasies. The young nun in question was tenderly and devotedly attached to the saint, and lived on terms of special familiarity with her; but for some time she was slightly incredulous as to the fullness of her miraculous powers. Now, one Friday morning (it was, of course, before the cessation of the weekly great ecstasy), walking in the garden, Sister Eufrasia thought she would weave a beautiful wreath of flowers for Sister Catherine, and thereupon gathered jasmine, stocks, and other such flowers, which she then took with her into the cell of a Sister Prudenzia Ginoni, who was lying in bed ill and whom she was taking care of. Chatting to the latter of her plan, she said that she meant to place her crown on the saint's head whilst she was in ecstasy, but that she wished her not to know by whose hand it was done. Sister Prudenzia reminded her that Sister Catherine, being most closely united to our Lord in her ecstasy, would know whatever happened by revelation from her Divine Spouse without any need for another to tell her. This was just a matter on which Sister Eufrasia was doubtful, so she shook her head and made answer: "I do not believe that when she is in a state of rapture, she takes notice of the least thing we do in her presence."

At that very moment, Catherine, who was in her cell, and in the midst of her ecstasy, suddenly interrupted it to say to Sister Elizabeth Ferrini, who was there: "Go and tell Sister Eufrasia, from me, to come here; for, as she has had a fall, I will help her up." The sister took the message; and Eufrasia, greatly surprised, declared that she could remember no fall she had had, and knew not what the saint meant. However, she finished her crown, in which were five beautiful red stocks, in honour of the Saviour's five

wounds, on a groundwork of white jasmine flowers which signified the purity which she ardently longed for. She took this to Sister Maddalena Strozzi, who put it on Catherine's head in memory of the Crown of Thorns. Next day, Eufrosia went to see the holy sister—now not in ecstasy—who greeted her by saying pleasantly: "It was not of a bodily fall, but of a spiritual one, that I wanted to speak to you yesterday"; and then, smiling, began exhorting her to be more believing in future about the gifts of God.

After the public ecstasy of the Passion had ceased, this gift of reading hearts still remained with her, and one may well understand what a marvellous help it was to her in the guidance of souls. She constantly made use of it for helping her nuns to correct interior faults of thought, or of desires contrary to duty, about which she felt quite as anxious as about exterior offences. Thus, during office, or any time of general prayer in choir, if a sister happened to let her mind dwell upon irrelevant subjects, the holy prioress would leave her own place, go gently up to her, and whisper into her ear—but always most kindly—that this was not the time for thinking of such and such an object (which she named), and that before God one should entertain none but holy thoughts. The delinquents themselves used to tell the community these things: quite indifferent to their own credit if they could add to the glory of their beloved mother; and the saint's biographers have recorded the names of some of the nuns to whom such incidents happened. One of these, Sister Domenica Poccetti, tells how Mother Catherine came to her one day in church—she being then only one of the *pensionnaires* educated in the convent—and said to her: "Cornelia, my child, think about the prayers you are saying with your companions, and not about the new dress that your father has promised you. Don't wish for these things that trouble the soul—desire instead to put on Jesus Christ." Then, taking her by the hand, the saint made her kneel down before a crucifix, and in a moment her soul got back its recollection and devotion.

At other times than those of prayer, also, the nuns would be warned by their ever-watchful mother of any thoughts

that were the least contrary to the law of God, and entreated to reject them: for there was no place or occasion in which she counted strict interior control to be unimportant. There are many anecdotes of her exercise of this gift, but the two just given will suffice as instances of her mode of dealing with the definite faulty thoughts of her subjects. Besides these, she often had light given her as to their feelings and dispositions, and especially as to the greater or less love and fervour with which they respectively received the Holy Eucharist. Our Lord is said sometimes to have shown her this, by appearing to her in the Sacred Host held by the priest under the form of an Infant, whose divine face changed its expression as the sisters went up to communion—varying from a look of intense joy as some approached, to one of even deep sadness for others. She would use the knowledge thus gained for their spiritual profit.

Two other details of Catherine de' Ricci's government are dwelt upon by her biographers. One is the extreme dislike that she had to the slightest affectation or worldly conventionality in outward behaviour—whether in manners, speech, or personal habits of any kind, including over-nicety about clothes, which seems to have been a weakness not uncommonly brought into Religious life amongst her contemporaries. She could not endure her nuns to keep anything approaching "society" ways in their intercourse with one another, and made relentless war against everything that was not perfectly simple, straightforward, and sensible in conversation, having a horror—Sandrini tells us—of all feminine affectations, which might pass for pretty manners in the world, but which she thought utterly unsuitable to their state and contrary to real humility.

The other point specially noted is that—to set against her strictness as to conduct—Catherine's readiness to give up her time, and her own personal convenience, to her nuns, was almost without bounds. They might come to her whenever they liked, and talk—reasonably or unreasonably—about themselves and their difficulties or desires, as long as they liked. She never rebuffed them; and never got

either impatient or disgusted by any want of sense, or good breeding, or consideration that they might show. Hers was a large community, and like others in not lacking difficult and trying subjects amongst its members; but difficulties did not discourage the saint or cool her affection for those who caused them. She acted in everything on the principle set forth by St Francis of Assisi when he said to the superiors of his communities: "Where your brothers are concerned, be so easy of access and so obliging that they can act and speak as if they were your masters and you their slave; for to be the father minister (the superior) is indeed to be the slave of one's brothers." The "slave" of her sisters Mother Catherine truly was, meeting all their demands so sweetly, brightly and lovingly, that it never even occurred to them that they might be inconveniencing her by the way they took up her time at all hours; and always sending them away so truly sympathized with and so marvellously well advised, that whatever griefs were oppressing them had disappeared, and their hearts had grown calm and happy, when they left her.

In temporal matters, too, St Catherine was as much at her children's service as in their spiritual or mental needs, taking such trouble to get them any little things they might want, or to give any little pleasure they might wish for, that each sister felt as if *she* were the only person her superior had to think about. In fact, says Sandrini, she really did "love each of her sisters in particular as if she had been her true mother": so that her sympathy and desire for the nuns' welfare was in no wise feigned, or merely *ex officio*.

Knowing all this, we are not surprised at the account given of the saint's care of her subjects when illness was in question. Directly she knew that any one was really ailing, she went and found out for herself exactly what was the matter and took the right measures for the case. She visited the sick sister day and night, even if only to comfort her by kind and affectionate words; and if there was any service she could do for her was only too rejoiced to perform it, for her own satisfaction as well as for helping the patient. When the case was one that required watching at night, she

never failed to come two or three hours before Matins to the sick-room, to send away whatever sister had been sitting up, and take her place. She helped the sick, too, in other ways than by her tender care for their bodies, sometimes exercising actual miraculous gifts for their benefit. More than once, we are told, when a member of the community was stricken by some incurable complaint which would keep her lingering on in terrible pain, the sisters begged their prioress to ask of God that the sufferer's time on earth might be shortened, lest she should be tempted to offend Him by impatience or despondency. They knew that Catherine had both granted their request and herself been heard, when they saw her redoubling her attentions to the patient. Indeed, in all cases of grave illness, the nuns were wont to say amongst themselves: "Our sister has not long to live, for the mother's visits are getting so frequent." When death was actually approaching, the saint never left her daughter's side at all; and now was the time when her most wonderful help of all was given to their souls. As soon as a dying sister was in her agony, Catherine entered into ecstasy, the better to protect her departing spirit in its passage from this world to the next by being herself the more closely united to her Divine Spouse. Then, we are told, after having accompanied the holy soul "to heaven or to purgatory," she came out of her ecstasy, leant lovingly over the departed, and piously closed her eyes; after which she helped the sisters in preparing the body for burial and clothing it in the habit—always making it her own special office to adorn the head (doubtless, with the profession wreath) and to place it gently on the pillow.

So invariably was this order of things carried out that the sisters would never venture to believe that a dying person had actually gone, so long as their prioress remained in ecstasy; and in that fortunate community the ordinary ways of describing death—"She is no more," "She is dead"—were unknown. They would beautifully say instead: "Our sister has certainly gone to her heavenly Spouse; for here is our mother, who went with her, come back from the journey."

It will be seen from this account that, whilst delivered by God from all supernatural states which could in any way hinder the duties of office or prove injurious to the convent's welfare, Catherine, as prioress, was still subject to being publicly rapt into ecstasy whenever her being so would profit or edify others; and we find that, no matter how completely her time seemed taken up, and her faculties absorbed, in the work of practical business—of which she transacted a large amount for the community in the course of her government—these raptures never ceased to occur at intervals throughout her life, so that she appeared sometimes to be living the life of two saints in one; for she worked with such untiring energy and burning charity for the good of her neighbour, and with such success in her undertakings, that one might have thought her called only to the active life; whilst, in the midst of it all, her soul would be caught up at a moment's notice into such complete separation from all around her, and such close union with God, as showed her to be a most perfect contemplative. Amongst the occasions on which she continued to appear in ecstasy one of the most frequent was that of a clothing. This was a ceremony—commonly spoken of in her time as the *spiritual bridal*—for which she had a particular affection, and which she always did her utmost to make as bright and cheerful as possible, inviting the friends of the novices, providing the best fare she could for a feast, and in every way entering into the celebration of the day as a mother enters into that of her daughter's wedding; but showing how purely spiritual was her joy by the rapture into which it rarely failed to send her. A story is related of one of these clothings (date not given) which well illustrates both their natural and supernatural characters. It is thus told by Razzi:

One day, when they had given the habit to two young sisters, both daughters of Antonio Neroni, a Florentine gentleman, they had, according to custom, invited the parents to eat a modest repast with the nuns. Towards the end of this, the saint went herself round the tables, distributing preserved fruits to the illustrious guests, when

she suddenly found that the bowl containing them was so nearly empty that there would be nothing left for half the community. Then, turning in her heart to one of her greatest advocates with God, she begged Him to come to her help; and thereupon the fruits were miraculously multiplied under her hand, so that all the sisters were abundantly provided, to the great wonder of all present who saw the prodigy. Many of the guests, indeed, kept some of the miraculous fruits and took them to Florence. But what charmed and impressed them most of all was to see the saint finish doing the honours of her table in a state of ecstasy; for "the presence of that angel on earth made them taste such pure joy and delight that they forgot the pleasures of earthly feasts."

As most people know, the superior of a Religious community washes the feet of his or her subjects on Maundy Thursday. This was, again, an occasion which usually threw St Catherine into a rapture. She would fall into this state immediately on entering the refectory where the ceremony was to be; would say a *Pater noster*, with crossed arms and bent body, after which she signed a cross on the floor with her thumb and respectfully kissed it; and would then proceed to wash the feet of the nuns—the eldest first—being all the while in ecstasy. It is said that the sight of their holy prioress, thus humbly kneeling at their feet whilst in a state of supernatural union with her Divine Spouse, so forcibly represented our Lord Himself to the sisters as always to produce tears of deep love and compunction, and at the same time to fill them with spiritual joy—the reason, doubtless, that the yearly manifestation was granted.

Catherine, however, was very far from relying on purely supernatural means for promoting evangelical perfection amongst her children. None knew better than she did that the gift of true contemplation is but to the few; and that even those few cannot remain always on the heights, but must come down at intervals to take breath, as it were, on a more earthly level; and she was not above employing simple and common means of satisfying ordinary human needs, by taking the greatest pains to provide sensible

objects of piety for her community, in the form of pictures, statues, and small altars and shrines in every part of the convent. She held that even the most highly contemplative souls needed at times to use such objects of devotion, both as a temporary rest from mental effort, and as helps towards making fresh starts in supernatural prayer; whilst to many they were the chief means of keeping alive holy thoughts and suggesting heavenly images, such as should strengthen and encourage them in their high vocation. She is said, moreover, not merely to have covered the convent walls at every turn with painted or sculptured portraits of saints and martyrs, but to have taken great trouble to get *good* ones; holding, she said, the best to be the most devotional, "because they were *the truest*."* As to the little chapels and shrines that she raised—which were not in the house only, but in the garden and grounds—she liked the sisters to make up for being prevented, through their enclosure, from going on real pilgrimages, by treating these as places of pilgrimage and visiting them with great devotion to obtain special graces. Amongst all these shrines, the one that she most liked to see used in this way—and which was the object of her own chief devotion—was the "chapel of the holy relics." Catherine's love for relics was so great, that all her friends well knew they could give her no present so pleasing as a fresh one of some great saint, and well-authenticated; and it became in time a sort of emulation amongst her friends outside, both lay and clerical, who should get her the most and the best. They had them also beautifully set—often in jewelled reliquaries—for her; so that the chapel given up to them became really magnificent in time, and the saint named it the "little Rome." Towards the end of her life she is said to have collected nearly three hundred relics.

Another shrine that Catherine greatly loved was an exact imitation of the "Holy House" of Loreto, built against a high wall in the convent garden. She got the model and plan of this from a Monsignor Rossetti de' Ferrara—abbé of a church in Orleans—who brought them with him on

* Sandrini, lib. II, cap. xxii, p. 224.

his way back from Loreto, when he came to pay a visit to Prato a few years after she was first prioress. He not only gave the plans, but paid for the building of the little sanctuary, whose walls Catherine had painted with the history of the translation of the *Santa Casa* and the miracles connected with it.

Next to the direct duties to her community, the holy prioress's chief interest and delight was the care of the poor, towards whom she insisted on the practice of the most generous monastic hospitality. Her first act, after each fresh election, was to give special orders to the portress sisters on this point; she required that every poor person who came to the door should be pleasantly received, and sent away "satisfied in some manner": i.e., if not with material help—which might happen to be impossible—at least with the assurance of sympathy and desire to help. She had such a deep and genuine love and reverence for the poor and for their condition that she liked, when possible, to make the bread to be used for them with her own hands; and there is a story told of how she once went into an ecstasy whilst doing this, and how the whole batch of bread that she thus made had a wonderfully delicious flavour.

Amongst the many cases of distress that Mother Catherine liked to relieve, none interested her more than those of girls who could neither marry, nor enter convents if they wished, for lack of the necessary *dot*. Throughout her life she took the greatest trouble, by looking into their cases and representing them to the rich, to settle such young women in life; and she succeeded in making a great number happy, for both her relations and her numerous wealthy friends, finding what an excellent use the saint made of all alms bestowed upon her, seldom let her want means for her charities. She received considerable sums from her uncle Federigo de' Ricci, and from Giuliano and Alessandro Capponi, amongst others; and a devout follower of hers, Tommaso Ginori, presented an important landed estate to the convent, on condition that the income derived from it should be entirely given up to the free disposal of Mother Catherine during her lifetime.

We have now pretty clearly before us the salient features of our saint's government, with its combination of strictness, tenderness, practical sense, and use of supernatural gifts in her daughters' service; and we do not wonder when her biographer tells us that the effect of such a rule was not only the attainment of high sanctity by this large community of nearly a hundred and sixty souls, but the bringing about of a deep peace, and a warm and tender union of hearts amongst the sisters, that were most remarkable. Some great lady, who knew San Vincenzo well, is said to have declared that it "was not merely a cloister full of holy maidens, but an assemblage of angels in human form, and a living image of the heavenly Jerusalem."

One more trait only shall be given here, to complete the picture of this favoured community, which seems to have added to its real strength in holiness a certain quality of natural grace and womanly charm peculiar to itself—may be, in part, inseparable from the gracious country to which it belonged.

The friendship that united these sisters, we are told by Razzi, was so strong that it bound them together even at the very portals of death. Some of them could not make up their minds to depart to their divine Spouse until they had bid farewell to their beloved sisters all together; and they would have themselves carried on a small bed, when nearly dying, into the community room, "that they might kiss them all, one after the other." The actual names of two who did this have been handed down—Sister Tecla d'Antonio Neroni, an old nun confirmed in virtue; and Sister Pacifica de' Guadagni, a novice of fifteen summers, dying in her first innocence.

But beyond the momentary pang of parting, these holy virgins had only joy for their own or their sisters' departure, which they treated almost as a *fête*. Just as St Francis of Assisi, dying, asked his sons to sing the canticle of his brother the sun and his sister death, so, at San Vincenzo, did the sisters gather round their companions' death-bed to sing a devout *lauda* which they had themselves composed as the canticle of their flight to heaven. The

words of the first verse of this *lauda* only are given to us, and are as follows:

Diletta Soror mia, si appressa l'ora
Che dei andare allo Sposo immortale:
Metteti in punto, O Vergine decora,
E fa avere la vesta nuzziale;
Acciò che possi comparir presente
Al convito del Re celestiale.

In short, such were the fervour and spiritual joy which reigned in that strictly observant house in St Catherine's day that two well-known Florentine ladies, who were allowed to live there in retirement when they became widows, were never tired of thanking God for having called them to share in its holy pleasures. They used constantly to say that "if people in the world could only know the blissful life and the heavenly delights that those sainted maidens enjoyed in their enclosure, there would be such a rush to get in that the doors would not be large enough for the crowd—they would have to get over the walls!"

Perhaps there are some who could vouch that similar joys are not altogether unknown to fervent Religious communities, even in the twentieth century.

CHAPTER XIV

Filippo Salviati and his Services to San Vincenzo—St Catherine's Influence on and Correspondence with him

It will be remembered that when Mother Rafaella da Faenza wished for a great saint for her community, she also wished for a large church. This last wish was not granted in her lifetime, its fulfilment being left to the saint given to her prayers. Catherine, we have seen, had not scrupled to beg for her convent where real necessities, and the freedom from wearing and distracting anxieties, were concerned; but with regard to matters beyond this, such as better buildings, more space, or anything that could come merely under the head of convenience or improvements, she never came forward herself. She waited, for all such things, on Providence, trusting to God to raise up friends able to provide them without her asking when He saw good—a hope in which the saints rarely find themselves disappointed, and which was amply fulfilled in Catherine's case. The convent, when she came to govern it, was both in great need of repair from its age, and extremely inconvenient from the small size and bad arrangement of its buildings; and, amongst other needs, the "large church" was a great one. It was, however, to be provided before long; and the history of its building is associated with that of a family whose connection with Catherine is to form the subject of this chapter.

Readers will not have forgotten the miracle worked by the saint's prayers in the year 1543, on Maria, wife of Filippo Salviati, a first cousin of Cosmo de' Medici, whose mother—Princess Maria Salviati—was Filippo's aunt. The Salviati family, though so closely related to the reigning house, were by no means great upholders of the Medici supremacy; and they had even lived—in the days of Filippo's father, Averardo—for some time as exiles from Florence, at Bologna, sharing with other exiles the fallacious hope of

freedom for their city by means of the French. When Filippo became head of the house, he returned to Florence, but kept out of politics, and lived chiefly on an estate of his called Valdimarina, half-way between the city and Prato. When the miracle in question took place, he went with his wife Maria to San Vincenzo, to return thanks for her recovery; and it is noted, as a little instance of his unwillingness in those days to spend money on anything but his own comfort or happiness, that whereas he sent ten crowns to the convent when he asked Sister Catherine to pray for his wife's cure, there is no record of his having given one *scudo* as a thanksgiving—even though his visit to Prato must have made him an eye-witness of its extreme need.

Filippo Salviati is described as a man who, without being the least actively bad in any way, was, for all the earlier part of his life useless in his generation and anything but a brilliant example to his neighbours, from being so entirely wrapped up in his own concerns that he never looked beyond personal interests. He was extremely rich, and extremely fond of all the conveniences and refined pleasures that riches bring; and to the cultivation of this kind of happiness he devoted himself, counting it quite a sufficient sacrifice to virtue that he refrained from injuring any one. In short, he seems to have been a kind of Divè, but with the merit of warm family affections, as was shown by his passionate grief when his wife's life was in danger. He was not, however, destined to the end of Dives—he was to be the subject of miracles of grace.

The visit to Prato in 1543 seems to have had no effect on Filippo beyond rousing a superficial feeling of admiration and devotion for the saint whom he there saw for a short time through the *grille*. He talked a great deal about her, and expressed much curiosity as to the various marvels that were reported in connection with her ecstasies. His faith, however, is said to have stopped short at the account that was by-and-by brought from Prato of Catherine's mystic espousals, he declaring it impossible to believe that a human being, however holy, could receive an actual ring in pledge from Jesus Christ, no matter how close might be her spiri-

tual union with Him. Of this doubt, we are told, he was cured by a miraculous vision. Catherine appeared to him in his sleep, all radiant with light, and smilingly showed him on her finger the brilliant ring of her mystic betrothal, which she held out for him to kiss. Then she said, "To show you to-morrow that this was no mere dream, I am going to make you feel its truth by pricking your lip," and forthwith pressed the ring on his mouth, when Filippo felt a sharp sensation like a diamond piercing his lip. The pain of it lasted for several months, and he used to say that "it would have been better for him to have believed at once than to have been convinced in this way, but that still he was rather glad than sorry for what had happened." *

This supernatural visitation, however, by no means completed Filippo's conversion to a less selfish life. He remained for a long time still indifferent to the needs of the poor, and unwilling to part with his wealth, and did not even think of helping the community containing the saintly virgin who had thus been sent to strengthen his weak faith. It does not appear to be known when Filippo was first so strongly touched by grace as to have his conscience roused to his many sins of omission in respect of charity to his neighbour, though it is conjectured that this must have happened not very long after his vision; and that a kind of fear, lest more spiritual demands should be made upon him than he felt prepared to meet, was the cause of his breaking altogether with San Vincenzio, personally, for more than ten years from the time of his first visit there. However this may be, it is certain that he is heard of no more in connection with the convent till the year 1553, when a fresh miracle was vouchsafed to prepare him for the work he was destined to do for it, during which interval he lived in the same comfortable retirement as before, changing his place of abode, as the fancy took him, from one to another of several magnificent villas that he possessed.

In 1553, France declared war against the Republic of Siena. This outbreak threatened Florence and its neigh-

* Père Bayonne gives this story without referring, as he usually does, to one of the Italian biographers, and mentions no source for it. We therefore do not know on what authority it rests, but have retained it for its own beauty.

bourhood with great disturbance, from the passage of the French army with its various attendant circumstances; so Filippo—true to his principle of avoiding all upsets of his own peace and comfort—decided to go off to Bologna, where he could live quietly and remain neutral. His wife appears to have remained at home with some of the children (they had two sons and some daughters), as we are told only of his taking with him his youngest son Averardo—quite a child—two friends, a chaplain, and some servants. They started from Valdimarina, taking a route over the Apennines, on a December day which was quite clear and fine when they set out. But they had hardly got into the mountains when the weather changed, and they were so hindered by snow that they could hardly get on; and when at last they reached the little inn which was to be their stopping-place, they were kept there four days by stress of weather. Then it cleared, and they started again; but suddenly the sky was overcast, the snow began to fall afresh, thick and heavy, and there arose such a hurricane of wind as was said hardly ever before to have been known in the spot they had reached—a precipitous peak of the mountains called Giogo. The tempest was so violent that the little party of people got separated, and lost sight of each other in the darkness and blinding snow; and Filippo was in terror lest he should lose his child. Then, in his fright, he called earnestly upon God, and made a vow on the spot that he would do whatsoever his Maker asked of him, if only they might all get safely out of this danger; and he afterwards declared that he had heard, through the din of the storm, a voice distinctly say: “A church at San Vincenzo—a church at San Vincenzo!” Immediately afterwards he found his child and all his friends near him, safe and sound; and very soon, the sky clearing a little, they saw a shepherd’s hut within reach, where they were able to shelter and rest till the wind subsided and let them go on their way. They reached Bologna that night, and offered fervent thanks for their safety.

Filippo’s heart appears to have been finally touched and changed by this occurrence; but he was detained at Bologna

for two or three years, and in other ways hindered; and it was not until three years after Catherine's first election as prioress, 1557, that he appeared once more before the convent grille, to renew his acquaintance with her, to tell her himself the history of his full conversion, and to consult her on the immediate carrying out of his project.* He made his plans and preparations so quickly that the foundation stone was laid on April 5, 1558, the feast of St Vincent Ferrer, patron of the convent.

The sisters, who had known, in common with other people, the former character of Salviati for parsimony with regard to his neighbour, had convincing proof of his thorough change in the magnificent scale on which he provided materials of every kind for the building of their church, and the large size that he determined to make it. The whole community, with characteristic simplicity and affectionateness, took him straight to their hearts, and looked upon him henceforth as a real father to whom they could never show gratitude enough. Catherine, however, whilst sharing this filial attitude towards Filippo, was not satisfied to stop short at grateful affection: she must carry on the conversion of heart in which God had already made her an instrument to the highest possible degree of perfection, and must have her benefactor for a spiritual son as well as for the father of her community. How she fulfilled this task is shown in what remains of her correspondence with Filippo, which consists of twenty-four letters written within a period of little more than a year—from the latter half of 1560, throughout 1561, whilst the church was in progress.

The small selection from these letters, to follow here, will speak for themselves; but, before giving them, it will be convenient to say something shortly about the chief people often mentioned in them by name.

The *Mona Maria* so often referred to is, of course, *Maria Salviati*, Filippo's wife; who, though only messages and not letters were sent to her, was a great friend, and did many

* It seems clear that, though absenting himself for so long from Prato, Filippo had laid no restriction on intercourse between his family and the nuns: as will be seen, one of his daughters was actually a novice in the convent before his own return there.

kindnesses to the convent: amongst others, entertaining the lay-sisters and the young lady *alumnae* at the Villa Valdimirina in the holidays. Sisters Maria Filippa and Fede Vittoria were Filippo's daughters, "in the world" Nannina and Cassandra. The former had been clothed in 1556: the history of the latter's reception is given in the first letter below. Of Sister Maddalena Strozzi enough has already been said; but special mention must be made of the Sister Bernarda, so often named in Catherine's letters to other people as well as to Salviati. Her secular name was Selvaggia Giachinotti, daughter of a Bernardo Giachinotti of Florence, and she was professed in 1544. She was a very holy nun, and a very great favourite with the people outside the convent; but what causes her to play so large a part in the saint's correspondence, and to be so closely associated with her work as superior, is that she was "Syndica"* of the convent for more than thirty years, and hence had everything to do with money matters, alms-giving, and all external business. This will explain the kind of allusions, whether playful or serious, so often made by her.

Sister Maria Jacopa, also spoken of in the letters, was a Lucrezia Cini, who had belonged to the community since 1538. She was specially intimate with Catherine, who greatly esteemed her, and is noted in the history of Salviati for having been the person to whom he confided (in a letter) the account of his mysterious "call" during the storm in the Appenines, as well as other graces that he received through the saint in the course of his life. Some of Filippo's letters to Jacopa Cini are largely quoted in Razzi's "Life" (Book I, chap. ix).

These are the people to whom reference in the following letters is frequent enough to make special mention of them desirable; for less important names the reader may be referred to notes. The only thing remaining to say about the letters now to follow—and which applies to all future correspondence as well as to that with Salviati—is to remind readers that whenever Catherine speaks of somebody else as "Mother Prioress" this means that she herself is, for the

* This office is called in English communities by different names, as well as by that of Syndica : e.g., Procuratrix, Econome, Dispenser : according to the custom of the order ; but in all cases it practically means "housekeeper."

time being, *sub-prioress*, for the reasons given in a former chapter.*

“Most honoured and dearly-loved Father, greeting! †

“Two days ago, I wrote you what was necessary about Cassandra: that is, that she had rather you would leave her here until she sends you notice; so that, in talking to her yesterday evening, I said: ‘Cassandra, I am afraid that, as your father has been asked to leave you here, if we say nothing more to him he will suspect something, and come to fetch you as soon as possible.’ She replied: ‘I would on no account have him come for me yet. As to becoming a nun, I wish to do so; but I don’t wish to speak about it to the sisters without having told him first.’ Then I said: ‘I don’t think he will let you do it.’ ‘And I,’ she answered, ‘believe that he will let me do what I please; but I would rather not go home so soon, so as to have too many struggles there, especially with Lucrezia.’ She also told Sister Maria Pia ‡ that she has determined to be a nun, but one can see that she wants to stay here just a little longer, so as to strengthen her soul, and also that she wants you to be told first of her resolution. Therefore, if you can leave her to us for another eight or ten days, I should think it a great advantage.

“Be sure, my dear Father, that nobody here has ever said one word to influence her: she has been allowed to see everything connected with the Order, and with our observances, and we have noticed that she has paid great attention to it all; but the fact of her desire comes from Jesus Himself; He would have that soul entirely. I want, then, to encourage you not to take it from Him; for certainly you will have more real satisfaction in giving your daughter to our Lord for His own, than you would in refusing her to Him only to give her to a mortal spouse, subject to all the miseries of this life. Even if some fuss should be made about the matter, you ought not for that reason to act against

* Chap. xix.

† This is Catherine’s mode of beginning all her letters to Filippo Salviati. She likewise always signs herself as his “daughter.”

‡ Sister Maria Pia was the daughter of a Giovanni Salviati, and appears to have been a niece of Filippo’s. Lucrezia—mentioned more than once in the letters—must have been Cassandra’s sister, though we are not told so.

your duty; for as you know, the things of God must always meet with opposition, especially when they clash with earthly plans. I think it would be well, when you come here, not to let Cassandra see that you know anything, but to let her be the first to speak, so as to give you her confidence spontaneously. Moreover, I think myself that you had better not discuss the matter with any one: but this I must leave to your own judgement. We do not forget, here, to pray that all may be ordered by our Lord for both your daughter's salvation and your satisfaction.

"Mother Maria Maddalena (Strozzi), from fear of you, sent you word yesterday that I had an attack of fever; but do not think I am ill, as, to judge by present symptoms, the fit has passed and I do not think it will return.

"My best greetings to you, to Mona Maria, and to all. May God keep you!

"Mother Prioress* commends herself to you,

"Your daughter,

"SISTER CATHERINE DE' RICCI.

"Prato, July 4, 1560."

"I have received your most welcome letter. . . .

"You tell me you do not feel well, and I quite believe it although I do not see what can be done. I would however remind you that we shall, hereafter, have to give an account for our indiscretion as well as for our superfluous care of ourselves. I wish that you would not do things beyond your strength: you will injure yourself irreparably. For instance you ought not to have gone from here. You were told so often enough, but you only answered: 'Whether it snow, or whether it hail, go I will.' It is useless to argue with a man who has made up his mind, and you were determined to go, come what might . . . although I was very sorry to hear it and would, had I been able, have kept every drop from falling on your dear head. But you would not obey me who

* "Mother Prioress," then, was Sister Margherita di Bardo, a nun who filled that office many times at San Vincenzo. There is no more correspondence on the subject of this letter, so doubtless Salviati came over and settled it all in person. Cassandra was clothed five months later—on November 11, 1560—"in Margherita di Bardo's fifth Priorate," taking the name of Fede Vittoria. She lived till 1624.

am so full of good wishes towards you. Then came your carriage accident and your difficulty in getting home. Surely it would have been more pleasing to Jesus had you remained at home instead of going whither you went. I do not mean that He is displeased if we suffer in doing right for love of Him: on the contrary, this is most acceptable to Him as long as we keep within the limits of prudence and reason. We shall nevertheless be judged for indiscretion, but on this point I will say no more.

“Here we are at nine o'clock on Tuesday evening, and I think you must have ended your day and gone to rest. I assure you that this weather is most unfavourable to your health, so I beg of you to be content to take some care of yourself at least until the middle of April. Do this for the love of Jesus and for the sake of your daughters and in order to gain time during which you may work for God, for this indeed ought to be our aim.

“The jubilee has passed and we thank Lorenzo for it: I am very glad to have had it.

“I do not know how to express myself more clearly about the cell than I have done in my other letter. Sister Fede Vittoria prefers it small and does not think of the objection which I pointed out to you, viz., that in stormy weather she is frightened and must have a sister with her, and it would not be agreeable for two to remain for some days in a small cell until she be reassured But if you will make it as you think best, all difficulties will be at an end.

“I have received the wine and some of it was given me at collation last night after I had read your letter, for my throat had swollen very much on hearing of your troubles. But your news was so bitter that I could not taste the sweetness of the wine. However this morning I found it sweet, and I thank you for it.

“Last night and this morning I remembered you and offered to Jesus your body, soul and heart, your memory, understanding and will. They are like six water pots and I implored Him to change their water into wine. I prayed that, as wine purifies and preserves, so your mind may be

purified from all that disturbs it and your good will preserved by means of good works. I beg of you to be likewise mindful of me and to pray for me.

"I commend myself to you, and so does Mother Prioress. Mother Margherita and Sister Maddalena also wish to be remembered to you, and the latter sends a greeting likewise to her Toto.*

"I think I will send Niccolino to see you, for I shall not be happy until I hear that you are well after your misadventures.

"Prato, Jan. 6, 1561."

A propos of this conviction that "we shall be judged for for our indiscretions," Catherine tries to restrain Salviati from what was clearly an exaggerated tendency to austerities, in other passages of her letters. She says once, for instance, "Religious, who live separated from the world, having neither business nor family obligations, are bound to lead a much more mortified and rigorous life than others. But you, who, being the head of a great house, have the care of a family upon you, ought to be very prudent about preserving your life and health: not for the sake of enjoying the pleasures of this world, but that you may properly support your family and train up your children as true Christians."

And, again, she writes: "Now that you are at Florence, I fear nobody will think of giving you broth and biscuit for supper; and therefore I send you a basket of chestnuts, so that you may eat at least four every evening. I would remind you that Jesus wishes us to keep the mean, not the extreme, in our lives; and to use reasonable human methods of preserving health. . . . We are not to aim at dying but at living to do good, and so to honour and glorify God in ourselves.

"I understand that you go to hear sermons and like them. I wish that instead of going for them to St Peter's

* We are not told in the correspondence who "Toto" is, but he doubtless must have been Salviati's son Antonio, then a boy. He and his brother, Averardo, inherited their parents' intimacy with Catherine, and some of her letters to them, after Filippo's death, are preserved.

you would come here. But I should not like the distance to be a trouble to you, only an additional merit. If you came here we might meet when it was convenient. I look forward to the day when we shall see each other, not at St Peter's, nor here, nor at Florence nor Prato, but in heaven, in the fruition of Jesus and His holy Mother and the whole celestial court.

"Feb. 12, 1561."

"I have received your most welcome letter, or rather, your two most welcome letters. It gave me great pleasure to hear of your well-being and to know that one of my desires had been accomplished, which Sister Bernarda had also thought of. Yesterday when at table the gospel of St Matthew was being read, we came to the passage in which a poor woman puts a mite into the treasury of the Temple wherein all the rich people had some days before placed contributions, according to their means, either as alms or as tribute money. Our Lord, turning to the crowd tells them that the poor woman alone shall have a reward because she has given of her necessity and parted with her all, whereas the rest have contributed out of their abundance. When I heard this sentence I at once thought of my father, and wondered how our Saviour's praise might be bestowed also on him. And now, to my great joy, I see by your letters that my desire has been actually fulfilled, for the supply of wood has been such an expense to you as to put you to great inconvenience. O my dear little widow! how delighted was I to see that Jesus had not suffered my father, like the rest, to place his superfluities in the treasury, but, in order that his work should not be vain, had allowed him, with the widow, to give of his necessity! Thus, my dear little widow, you will share the reward of the widow in the gospel, and this, had you given of your abundance, you could not have done. See, dear father, how God allows all things for the best: He has permitted you to find this wood, and knowing that you would willingly make an offering to His treasury, He has suffered you to feel this inconvenience in order that you may have greater merit. These, my father, are mysteries at

which you ought to rejoice. God will not fail to repay you an hundredfold in heaven, and even here, and I beg of Him to allow you to gain in some other way that so it may be evident that He intends you to do this work and to build for Him this house wherein He will, in the most Blessed Sacrament, abide for ever, and be honoured by unceasing prayer. I do not think you could do anything more pleasing to Him, especially as, in addition to this work, you have made so many improvements in the whole house.

“When you say that God would not allow David to finish His temple, you must remember that those were matters wherein Holy Scripture had to be fulfilled. I hope that David will not trouble you, but that my dear little widow will be of good cheer, and that we may always be able to give to Jesus, not out of our abundance, but with our whole heart. Who would ever have thought that my beloved father and son would have had this example? You believed yourself to be a shepherd, and lo, you are likewise a widow. Jesus does all things for your good, and, because He desires you to be wholly His own, and gives you opportunities of doing His work for His sake, in order, at last, to give to you in return that beautiful palace in heaven which the apostle Thomas promised to a certain king. I rejoice and have rejoiced at all that has happened, not because I wish you to be put to inconvenience, but because in this matter I recognize, in a manner that fills me with gladness, the goodness of God, for which I thank Him. I will conclude, as it is six o'clock in the evening and the sun is excessively hot Sister Bernarda desires, together with Sister Madalena, to be remembered to you; and the latter also thanks you for your advice and sympathy, and sends a greeting.

“June 10, 1561.”

Written to Valdimarina, where the sisters and girls from San Vincenzio were then staying

“I have received your welcome letter, but did I not think that there was some of your sister Bernarda's mischief in it I should be vexed at it. To tell you the truth I do not be-

lieve that you mean what you say when you tell me of such grievances, for I know that I never more heartily wished you well than I do now and I have never had a moment's disturbance on account of you. It seems to me that you have done more for our brethren than their own father would have done. Now as I know that my feeling towards you has not changed, but is as undoubted as when I impressed upon you the duty of desiring to please our Lord and to be wholly His, I would fain think that in what you say you are speaking not in earnest but in jest. . . . But, my father, if you should indeed have such an idea in your head, I beg of you to dismiss it, for it is utterly groundless. God knows how heartily I wish you well and how constantly I pray to the holy angels and to your guardian angel to give you a place in heaven. But if you have any doubt on the subject they will make all clear to you during this festival. When my dear father was alive I do not think that I ever forgot him or ever thought of him without wishing him this same happiness. Jesus has given you to me to be to me both father and son, could I be so mistaken as to esteem lightly that which it has taken me so many years to obtain from God? Would such be your conduct? I think not; and, even were you to act so, I most certainly should not. Never will I let go of your soul; be sure of that, my naughty friend. This must suffice without an oath, for I must not be long as I have taken Sister Bernarda away from the washing,* and she says that the sun is very hot, for it is late, ten o'clock already.

"I am happy to hear that the sisters and the children are well, for I love them as long as they are good. I am still more glad that you are sending them back to-morrow or the next day. I shall regret it very much if, as I fear, they have given you trouble. You have an opportunity of sending them to me and you will see how gladly I shall make the exchange. Say this to Mona Maria, and make my excuses to her for sending her such a number at a time, as if she had not children enough already. I thank both you and her for the very great enjoyment which you have given them. . . .

* i.e., to write for her: Sister Bernarda acted sometimes as the saint's secretary.

Mother Prioress and Mother M. Maddalena desire to be remembered to you: they say that Toto must not be left behind.

"I would have sent Salvadore with the mule for the children, but as you forbid me to do so I will obey you. I will expect them at the hour you mention. . . . Farewell.

"September 24, 1561."

In reply to some spiritual troubles, and doubts about his salvation, communicated to her by Filippo. . . .

"I would remind you, my dear Father, that when the man who owned 10,000 talents asked his Master to forgive his debt, he did not beg the favour for 9,000 only, but for the wholesum. If this debtor had not acted afresh with hardness and cruelty he would have had nothing to fear about the past debt, as it had been fully and freely remitted; and his Lord would have been actually offended if the servant had not believed simply in the pardon granted to him. . . . Hence I conclude that, although it be a great error to count presumptuously on oneself, we nevertheless greatly offend the mercy and goodness of God by distrust. We know that He is very generous: that He became man and suffered a painful passion and death to deliver us from all anxiety as to our salvation; and that, by these acts, He has opened heaven to us, provided we do not ourselves turn in the opposite direction. In the latter case, there can be no uncertainty, as most assuredly he who does not act according to the law of Jesus cannot reach heaven, any more than a man who takes the road to Pistoja when he wants to go to Florence can expect to arrive at Florence! But, so long as he takes *one* of the three roads that lead to Florence—even though he may find he has taken the worst one, with a good many bad bits that will hinder him—if he gives his horse the rein and goes on steadily, he may expect certainly to get there at last. So one may find in the right way to heaven many hindrances that are serious obstacles; but for these there is the remedy given by Jesus: namely, to walk by the light that will lead us safely, and that light is holy faith. If we will only walk with our eyes fixed on this, we shall see before us a road, clear, level, beautiful, and very pleasant to

walk upon; shaded, too, by the green leaves of hope, planted with the flowers of holy longings, and abounding in the fruits of good works. By following this road, we shall go straight to our true home. Hence, whoever yields to fear or dread on this way insults his Lord and Master, or that Master's representative who acts as His guarantee. Of course, when you say that you have kept back something to tell me *viva voce*, I am writing partly in the dark; but I can safely assure you that, when we have once plunged thoroughly into that fiery furnace [of sorrow and penance] all our spots and stains are consumed. . . . What use is it then, dear Father, to be afraid? Of what use, I repeat, except to make us lose time on the way, and walk with but little fervour towards Jerusalem. So let us drive away fear, and put in its stead holy hope: but a hope without presumption, and founded on the goodness of God, not on our own merits.

“October 2, 1561.”

Written to Valdimarina

“I know that Sister Maria Maddalena has written fully to you about me in the letter which she sent you this morning by a labourer. She has told you that my fever came on last evening with great intensity, accompanied by headache and violent sweating. It lasted all night until past seven this morning, but to-day I seem to be better than I was on Friday morning. Now however it is nearly nine o'clock in the evening and I am beginning to have the same inflammation that I had last night. I do not know whether it is a symptom of the return of my fever. But it is a slight thing, and I am in good hopes that by the help of Jesus I shall soon be well, especially if you will come to see me when you can. One good sign of my improvement is that whereas hitherto I have not been able to think of anything connected with my work, I am to-day building little castles in the air about flax spinning. Sister Maddalena laughs and tells me that a doctor told her in another illness of mine that when I began to think about certain things it was a sign that nature was beginning to be freed from sickness and to return to its normal state. I tell you this for your satisfac-

tion, and because I do not wish you to be any longer uneasy about me.

"I am glad that Antonio * gave you so much satisfaction. As you have been sitting up so late (and I guessed as much) I was wise to send to you this morning to bid you go to bed early to-night.

"I, my dear father, am kept under such strict obedience that sometimes I lift up my head a little to see whether I be alive at all. I could get up and go about but I cannot succeed in doing it. I assure you that if the Bolognese honey changed its flavour as much as my mother has changed, apothecaries would no longer sell it as sweet or even as half sweet. If I am ever dispensed from this rigorous obedience I shall think myself fortunate. For pity's sake do not make my mother more despotic with me than she already is, for she is very masterful and I can no longer send her to supper nor to bed. She will have nothing of the sort, and merely answers: 'You must obey your father,' and thus shuts my mouth so that I can say no more. For my further comfort she has even induced the doctor to say that I am not to be in my cell. Now if you will help me with your prayers, I hope that soon I shall do as much as you tell me, to be avenged if not on the doctor at least on my mother.

"Sister Valeria and the other nuns thank you for the chick-peas. There are plenty of them because they mix well with other vegetables: they furnish a dessert.

"To-morrow at Mass (for I hear it from my bed) I shall not fail to remember you and to commend you to Jesus and to those two holy apostles † who will, I hope, be with you when you go to the coming fair. My greetings to you and to Mona Maria. . . .

"Thank you for the pears, and the honey, and the grapes: you do too much for me. Sister Bernarda does not think it worth while to write. She never leaves me save to write to you; she bids me remember her to you.

"October 27, 1561."

* Antonio Gondi, of whom an account will be found in a later chapter.

† SS. Simon and Jude, whose feast is October 28. The saint seems to use the word "fair" here in spiritual sense, for a religious *fiesta*.

“ I could not tell you with what great pleasure I received your most welcome letter ! Never fear the gifts and graces that Jesus bestows on you, but accept them all with joy. They are a foretaste of what is prepared in heaven for men of good will, amongst whom my dear son must be. So do not be troubled: go on, with your heart given simply to God, in all humility and uprightness. As for me, unworthy: I thank God, who has shown you the need of overcoming that enemy who always lingers about us, and who would have disturbed this happy state of things if he could ; but, thanks to our Lord who chose to confirm your progress in good, he has not had the strength to do so !

“ It gives me the deepest satisfaction to know that during that night you were inspired with the right thing to do, and that you will carry out the thought; for it is an exceedingly great merit to obey God in His good inspirations; and, by this act, you may have gained more than the whole finite world is worth, in one treasure of the infinite world to come. We cannot gain these by our own power, but only by a grace from God. . . . He has made us out of nothing, has redeemed us by the gift of Himself, and unceasingly redeems us over again from our daily sins. And this should not frighten us, but fill us with supreme joy and make us praise His name more and more Oh, my dear father, be joyful ! Make yourself, by means of these gifts, a freeman of the heavenly city, whose inhabitants will honour, help and defend you: even as a beggar may buy himself a citizenship, and an honourable position, with the money gratuitously bestowed on him by a king. Ah, how happy I feel about you to-day !

“ *November 7, 1561.* ”

The church of San Vincenzo was finished in October, 1563, and solemnly consecrated on the 23rd of that month. Filippo then added other buildings to the convent—including a small room in the out-portion for himself—which carried on the work for two years more. When all these grand constructions were seen in their completeness, the public became curious as to how much they had cost, and

his wondering fellow-citizens tried in every way to entrap him into telling their price. All that they could get out of him, however, was that "he did not care for such things to be known to man: it was enough if they were clear to Him who would reward them." Cosmo de' Medici—well acquainted of old with his Cousin Salviati's stinginess—is reported to have said *à propos* of these buildings, "that one of the greatest miracles which made him believe in the high sanctity of Mother Catherine, was her having been able to get Filippo to be so liberal to her convent."

But of the far greater miracle of Salviati's inward conversion, and rapid attainment of spiritual perfection under the saint's guidance, the world could of course have but very little knowledge or appreciation; though it was to some extent made outwardly apparent by his ever-increasing indifference to all the splendours and luxuries of his former life, and love of spending all the time he could in the little cell attached to the convent, where he had barely common comforts. Here he would go whenever he could get the leisure, rather than to any of his country villas, for change and refreshment; and here, as his life drew to a close, he would hold higher and higher intercourse on the things of God with the saint and her holy companions. He came at last to have so great a longing for the sight of God, that he used to speak of the rapid failure of his health as a traveller towards home speaks of the favourable conditions of his voyage, and of the loved ones that he is expecting to see on landing. Shortly before he died, he wrote to Sister Jacopa Cini: "I am departing post-haste; and I am trusting, by the grace of Jesus Christ, and with the help of the most blessed Virgin and the saints of Paradise, to make a holy death. I hope at last to be well received by Him who was shown to me in vision at Mayano, with the promise that He would one day be my reward."*

Filippo Salviati died in 1572; and he and his wife (the date of whose death is not forthcoming) were both buried under the high altar of the church at San Vincenzio, as he had requested in his lifetime.

* Seraf. Razzi, lib. I, cap. x, p. 36. Mayano was a place where Salviati had made a stay shortly before he went to Prato in 1557, and where he is said to have had a vision of our Lord to encourage him in his resolution of helping the community.

CHAPTER XV

St Catherine and her Brothers—Correspondence with Ridolfo and Vincenzo—Visit of the Bavarian Prince to Prato—Prophecy of the miraculous Escape of St Charles Borromeo.

It is time now to show how Catherine, amidst her many labours—natural and supernatural—for her community and the general public, was regularly keeping up close intercourse with such members of her own family as were left to her. These became very few in number long before her own death. We have seen how she lost the most valued of her relations by the death of her holy uncle, Timoteo, just as she became prioress; and by 1555 she had closed the eyes of the last of those three young sisters whose early deaths as Religious have been already recorded. The only sister then left to her was Maria Benigna, often referred to in her letters, for whom she appears to have had a special affection, and of whom it is said that besides being an extremely holy young nun of great promise to the Order, she showed in a high degree St Catherine's peculiar power of comforting people in trouble. However, she was no more destined than her younger sisters to complete her career: she sickened and died in the year 1562, while the new church was in progress; and the story of her death is also that of a miraculous occurrence, exemplifying a power exercised by the saint at times over her dying children for some special purpose. Catherine happened, that year, to be sub-prioress, and was exceedingly anxious that a double clothing, to take place on April 12, should go off with all the cheerfulness that she loved on such occasions. Sister M. Benigna was so near death on that morning that the shadow of her departure seemed likely to be cast over the day, when her holy sister and superior came to her bedside and commanded her, in the name of our Lord, not to die until the ceremony was over. The dying young nun humbly promised obedience, and

was actually enabled supernaturally to keep her soul from departing till the clothing was over. Then the saint, freed from other duties, hastened back to her sister, gave her leave to die, and, entering into ecstasy as was her wont beside her dying children, accompanied the beloved soul on its last journey.

After thus losing her last sister, Catherine had only left out of her large family (for other brothers and sisters had died as children or young people) an uncle and four brothers. The uncle was Federigo de' Ricci, of whom we have heard so much in the saint's correspondence with her father. He was a man of importance in Florence, frequently holding public offices; and his niece Catherine was specially dear to him, so that he was always glad both to help her community, and to give her his support in family matters. He was self-willed, however, and somewhat hot-tempered—rather like her own father in character—which made things at times no easier between him and Ridolfo than they had been in earlier days between the latter and old Pierfrancesco.

Besides Ridolfo there remained Fiammetta's three sons: Giovanbatista, now the holy friar Fra Timoteo, who was ever the saint's great stay, and who lived till within a few years of her own death; Roberto the banker, of whom not much seems to be known, though a few important letters to him remain; and lastly Vincenzo, youngest of the whole family. This half-brother was the darling of Catherine's heart and the child of her adoption. Born only a few months before his father's death, he was but four years old when he lost his mother; and his eldest sister did her best to replace both parents by undertaking the entire charge of his keep and education. Before giving more of his history, however, we must go back some years, to give that of the turbulent Ridolfo, whose former escapades will not have been forgotten.

For ten years after his father's death this hot-headed youth went on in much the same way that he had begun—always more or less in trouble, and giving endless anxiety and scandal to his relations. Then he became a Knight of Malta, which they hoped would steady him. He had no lack of personal courage; and in his first engagement with the

Turks he gained his spurs by some desperate fighting, at the same time being severely wounded. This feat delighted his uncle, who wrote the news to Catherine; and here is her letter on the subject:

To Fra Ridolfo de' Ricci: Cavaliere di Malta

“ My dearest brother, greeting! It is some months since I wrote to you. I have received no reply, so I suppose that either your letter or mine has miscarried. And to-day I heard from our honoured Federigo of the injury which you have sustained from the two arquebuses. I am, as you may imagine, exceedingly grieved at it, because it sounds very serious, and must have caused, and perhaps still causes you, severe pain. I try to think that God has permitted it for some good end; and, now that you have become a soldier, wills to purify you for His service and chooses that by means of some penance, such as this, you should cancel the debt which in time past you have contracted against His divine goodness. Perhaps as you have to defend His holy Faith, God may will you to fight so much the more manfully for having done this penance, and will be the better pleased with your service in proportion as you are more completely purified. Perhaps, too, He has allowed you to be wounded in order that you may be moré fully conformed to Him, your Captain, who goes before you to prepare a place which shall be yours if you follow Him courageously. Do not, then, let it seem to you too great a hardship to travel along the strait path which He has traced out. And, should it please His goodness to deprive you of bodily strength to fight, fight so much the more bravely with your spiritual powers which is none the less acceptable than our bodily activities, provided that it be not our fault that we do not do exterior work. Strengthen your soul, dear brother, with these considerations which are all of them true; and remember that I constantly think of you with sympathy, and never fail to pray and to obtain prayers for you, and that I desire extremely to hear how you are at present. If you do not come here on your way to Padua (whither you tell me your doctors wish you to go) write me two lines; and, above all,

my dear brother, resign yourself entirely to God in all things. Let Him be your only hope, your only good; offer yourself to Him in every circumstance, for I desire that you should be wholly His. Indeed you must be His, and so must all others who desire to possess eternal life, to which may He in His mercy lead us! Our sisters are well. Sister Philippa, who was Lena in the world, only went to heaven at the beginning of last October. They all pray for you and desire to be remembered to you. May the Lord keep you in His grace and preserve you from all evil!

“Your most affectionate sister,

“SISTER CATHERINE DE' RICCI.

“*January 13, 1552.*”

However, though it sobered him at first, Ridolfo's new profession did not for a long time make much alteration in his way of life, and he continued a constant source of worry and sisterly care to the saint. The great supernatural gifts that made her often so powerful in converting others were absolutely ineffectual where her brothers were concerned—for them she could but pray, weep and tenderly exhort, like any ordinary woman, for the most part in vain! When the spell of fighting which had roused him was over, and peace threw him into the fatal idleness of garrison life, the Cavaliere de' Ricci became as much noted as before for wild adventures that were not to his credit, so that poor Federigo began to long for war to break out again. In vain Ridolfo's holysister wrote him the most affectionate letters: he hardly ever answered them; and, when passing near Prato in going from place to place, did not even condescend to stop and pay her a visit. When, after a year or two of indifference, he would write her a few lines, it would only be to beg her intervention between him and his terrible uncle, who—now bitterly displeased with him—shut up his purse as well as his heart from the ill-conditioned nephew. Catherine, forgiving as ever, would undertake the mission, and write her brother word of the result, usually unfavourable, as appears in the following letter:

“On the whole it seems reasonable that I should com-

plain of you, since neither by letter nor by visits have I had any news of you; yet I excuse you, for I suppose that visiting or writing to nuns, especially your own sisters, must seem to you unnecessary, and waste of time. Still I do not cease to think of you always, praying God that it may please Him to keep you in the right and true way, and in that of His commandments; and in this holy journey to Loretto may you have had so much grace from the Blessed Virgin that she may have taken you for her own, and may keep you safe for ever. This she will do, if you are well-disposed and take pains to live a good and regular life in your profession, and work for the honour and glory of God. And I do not doubt, if you do this, that you will have all that you desire.

“As for what you ask from Federigo, as I have already written to Roberto, he is much displeased with you, and he thinks this departure of yours very strange, and is very angry, so that you will not obtain anything from him. But, as Antonio has already told you, in a short time he will become calmer, especially if he sees that you go on well; for, loving uncle as he is, he will not fail in anything, the more so if you do not ask him; but you must have patience. In the meantime, go on your journey, and follow the advice of Antonio, which is the same as that of Fra Timoteo and of Marcello, and be cheerful, for in the end you will be satisfied. But you must have a little patience and compassion with the old man, who loves you well, though he has conceived great displeasure with you, as has been said, because you and Roberto remained here to finish your affairs (about whose success I know nothing). But let this be as God pleases, and I have good hope that our Lord will help you, if you are good. I commend myself to you always, as does also Sister Maria Benigna. May God preserve you in good health, and may His grace go with you.

“*July 17, 1559.*”

Thus warned, Ridolfo would keep out of his uncle's way for a time and make no requests; but he soon got tired of waiting passively and would again worry his sister to intercede for him: sometimes under the pretext that he was

anxious for news of her, to which Catherine on one occasion naïvely replies: "You surprise me, for since you left I have written to you every month!" Sometimes he would try to make her believe in him by excuses that touched her heart; but she always really knew his motives in keeping up with her, and all her letters contain reference to it. Thus, she writes one day: "Every time I get the opportunity I recommend you to Uncle Federigo. I am sure he will do what he has promised some day, but you know he has so many things to think of that he cannot do everything at once." Again: "Uncle Federigo came to see me the other day, and I did not fail to speak to him about you. He is always well-disposed to help you: but you know him even better than I do. Wait, and don't lose courage!"

However, a time came when Ridolfo lost all patience, and wrote word to his sister that he intended to come from the place where he was stationed to Florence, and there to come face to face with his uncle—out of whom he had not got a word or a penny for two years—and call him to account for not keeping his promises. Now, such a proceeding would finally ruin him with the authorities, as one of the gravest complaints against him was that of his constantly coming privately to the capital to amuse himself with his boon companions instead of attending to his duties: and this, though he was now forty years old, and expected to maintain the honour and dignity of his military order as a mature man. It was partly the knowledge of this low public estimation in which his nephew was coming to be held that so inflamed Federigo's anger and hardened his heart; and Catherine's alarm was extreme when she heard of this rash intention of her brother's to come and openly put himself into collision with their uncle and with others of weight. She therefore gave him her mind freely on the subject:

"As it is so long since I have had news of you, I tell you truly, that when this evening I had your letter of the 19th ultimo in my hand, I felt quite happy in reading it. I do not wish to complain of you in anything, for that would give me pain also; yet though I was pleased with the

beginning, at the end I felt displeased when you say: 'I shall see you again soon.' If you are coming to ask for help and a gratuity from my uncle and others, do not take this step, because I can tell you that it will have the contrary effect, and be against your good, in many ways. I am sorry he has not performed what he promised; but I tell you that your presence will only inflame the wound, and what you think will be quite otherwise. And I tell you plainly, that if you take this step, you must take care not to appear before Federigo, nor the others; this for certain; and, my brother, consider and ponder well all these things. Act according to the light of reason, for I know that if you make use of this light you will find that you must not resolve upon that step; and this I tell you plainly and absolutely, because I know what I am saying. And I know you to have sense enough to consider well what you are doing. It is not right in things of importance to be guided by your will only, but to act with prudence, and always to think of the consequences of our acts for ourselves and for others. And perhaps you do not know all; but I, who know very well, tell you that you must put this journey out of your head, and not undertake it; and I repeat that if any one had the wish to do you any good, this would be the very thing to prevent it. Think, dear brother, that I am your sister, and love you, our Lord knows how much, and to Him I commend you whenever I can. I will never fail to help you when I can; but be wise, and live in the fear of God, for if you do so, I am sure that He will never forsake you; on the contrary, I have a firm hope in His most holy aid, if you will be what a Christian ought to be. And please, when you write, do not speak of things so openly, for it will not help us. May God be with you always.

"January 28, 1560."

Her arguments for his own benefit prevailed. Ridolfo did not come to Florence; and from this time forth seems to have begun doing more honour to his profession by keeping out of any very serious scrapes. In 1566, when war again broke out with the Turks, and he could once

more take part in active military duties, the rough life, the fighting, and the suffering from further wounds that he got, worked by degrees a complete change in his character; and Catherine's faithful love and care were at last rewarded by her brother's true conversion. In 1569 he evidently wrote her some account of his good resolutions, to which the following is an answer:

"A few days ago I received by the hand of Fabbruzzi your most welcome letter of September 7, which reminds me that I had another from you still earlier from Palermo. I replied to it at length, and sent again some fine cord by means of Vincenzo, which I think you must have had. This letter of yours gave me great pleasure to see that you are so well disposed to do the will of God, and take pains not to offend Him. I thank Him for giving you such good dispositions, and pray earnestly that He will give you help and perseverance in well-doing. And believe me, dearest brother, that you are always in my thoughts more than any one else in this world, as you ought to be; for are we not alone, you and I? I desire that we may meet again in paradise, and I pray God earnestly that it may be so, and do you pray the same for me, as I have said before. I have always had your love and affection, for which may our Lord reward you, and may He give us grace to be His good servants, so that in another life we may be near Him and enjoy eternal good. I commend myself to you. May God keep you in His holy grace, and deliver you from all evil.

"December 22, 1569."

At the beginning of the next year she writes:

"I have your very kind letter of Jan. 27, from which I am happy to learn that you are well, peaceful and contented, with the hope of better things, and that you may return one day to your native land. I pray that God may grant us this grace, if it be for the good of our souls. I am grieved that your leg still causes you inconvenience, besides other indispositions; it is in these ways our Lord teaches us that in this life we can never be free from trials. I pray continually that of

His infinite goodness it may please Him to give you health to do always His holy will. I thank you for the alms sent in your name, for which I pray that God may reward you for us, for it is very kind and loving of you. Yesterday Vincenzo came here and gave me the said alms; he told me that he was very happy in hoping soon to be married. I am glad that you have warned him, and certainly he seems inclined to do what is right. He let me read the letter you wrote to him, and by this I learned your troubles. Be patient and place everything in the hands of our Lord. I am delighted that your Prince is pleased to do you the benefit of repairing the church under your guardianship; it is a great grace and very useful with all it has cost you this year, which you say is a sum of fifty *scudi* (crowns). With this you will do much good in honour of our Lord, and I pray that all you have to spend may be given you at once, for the expenses will be very great. I think you have a great deal to thank God for, from whom proceed all good things, and for the good will, as I am sure you have, to be a good Christian. May His goodness grant you this grace for which I pray earnestly, bearing you always in mind, and whenever I can praying for you. I commend myself to you, and again I thank you. May our Lord make you all His own.

“*March 5, 1570.*”

A word must now be said of Vincenzo—the “Benjamin” of the de’ Ricci family—whose engagement comes out in the above letter. Whilst he remained a child, Catherine placed him to be brought up with people over whom she herself could exercise surveillance, and found no difficulty in keeping him under control. But, growing up, she naturally felt that he must have a stronger hand over him than hers, and she put him under the charge of her friend and “spiritual son,” the Antonio Gondi of whom we have heard in her letters to Salviati. Vincenzo got on quietly at first with his guardian; but, when he was about sixteen, got for a time into a rebellious stage, showing signs of an inclination to follow his elder half-brother’s example; and his motherly sister found it necessary to bring all the weight of her love and authority combined to bear upon the delinquent. Her

own letters to him give the simplest history of this little episode:

To her Brother Vincenzio de' Ricci

“Dearest brother, greeting,—The affection I bear you, and the hope I have in you, has caused me great displeasure on account of what Antonio (Gondi) has told me of your behaviour. He came here to tell me deliberately that he can no longer take care of you, for he has not the heart to suffer your conduct, and begs me to excuse him. Considering your best interests, I begged him so hard that he has promised me to have patience a little longer, to see whether you amend your ways. This has caused me no little grief, assuring me, as he did, that he could suffer it no longer. Really, my dear brother, I did not expect this of you, for I had earnestly entreated the master to take you, and Antonio to look after you, and teach you every virtue. He has taken much trouble that you should learn something, and now you do so little honour to him and to me. The consequence will be the harm you will do yourself, for if you lose this opportunity, consider in what condition you will be, and where you will go. Poor boy! it seems to me that you are greatly wanting in judgement. And if you will not pay attention to Antonio nor to me, at least you will have to think of yourself. But not living in the fear of God, as you ought to do, I think will be the cause of every evil. I hope in any case you will correct yourself; and first, that you will live as a good Christian and leave aside these follies that you seem inclined to indulge in. And now that we are in Lent, I wish that you should get up early and hear holy Mass and a sermon, then attend to the duties imposed on you, and do them willingly, and not as by force; and do not fail in obedience to Antonio. And when you wish for leave of absence, ask it of him and not of the master. For although the latter may give it you, do not take it against his will (Antonio’s), for he does it for your good, though you do not know it, for you are inclined to certain boyish tricks which will be your ruin. And your wearing certain vanities, I should like you to tell me if they belong to you, who have nothing in the

world! For God's sake, my brother, do not run into such errors, for I know you will soon repent of them. Force yourself to live as a good youth in the sight of Jesus. Regulate all according to Christian rules, and to the promises you have made; doing this, you will be a pleasure to us and of use to yourself. Be careful also not to say one thing for another, nor to make excuses for yourself, for if you do your duty you will not seek to shield yourself with lies, but will go on doing everything in sincerity and truth, for God sees all things. And if you do as Antonio tells you, it will be good for him and for you. Do so that when he returns here, he will speak well of you, otherwise I can see that your affairs will have a bad ending. And do not take it ill that I write thus to you; the affection I have for you induces me to give you the necessary warning. May God move your heart to do your duty. I commend myself to you, as does also Sister Benigna. May God preserve you in His grace.

"Feb. 24, 1560."

"I have received your welcome letter, by which I learn that you and all at home are well. I have also received your kind gifts of charity; may our Lord reward you, and we all thank you. With all my heart I pray that you may be good, and may fear God; for if you do this all things else will go well. And I beg of you to be obedient to Antonio, who only wishes to be kind to you, more than you think. And if it appears tiresome to you that he does not wish you to go into the country on feast-days, when you think you have nothing to do, I may tell you that he is not wrong in this, many things falling to him, which makes it necessary that one person should remain in case of need that might arise; the more so that, the master being ill, you might have to visit him three or four times in the day. Besides, you should not neglect vespers and prayers, or to read some good book; and if you did this the time would pass without your perceiving it. And I should like you to keep in your study some book of devotion; read it frequently; and if you practise these things, Jesus will be always with you and will help you, and will make all your affairs prosper. Also I wish that

you should take care of that Spanish boy and conduct him to the places mentioned by Antonio. Obey him, as I have said, in all things, and he will do well by you; if you separate from him, you may be sure you will do wrong and will not find any one else to care for you. Therefore, my dear brother, do me the pleasure to behave well, that I may have good accounts of you; otherwise you will displease me greatly, more than I can tell you. However, I have good hope that you will be a comfort to me, seeing that I desire only your good. I never fail to pray for you, and for all those at home. May our Lord preserve you in His grace and keep you from all harm. I commend myself to you. Your sister, etc.

“June 3, 1561.”

Vincenzio rewarded the saint's care by growing into a good man, and a most useful and prominent citizen. He married the “Cassandra” above referred to—a cousin of the family—in 1571; and both he and his wife are frequently mentioned in Catherine's further letters to Ridolfo. These letters, however, are not of special interest: they show the Cavaliere to have remained faithful to his promises of a reformed life, to have kept up intercourse with both his half-brothers and their families (as it is mentioned once that he goes to stay in the country with Roberto and his wife), and to have suffered more or less from bad health to the end of his days. He died twelve years before Catherine: at what place is not mentioned; but, from the last two letters that we give of the family correspondence, it was clearly somewhere close to whichever Dominican Priory his younger brother, the friar, then happened to be inhabiting: so that poor Ridolfo had every loving, as well as spiritual, care on his death-bed.

To Vincenzio de' Ricci

“Your letter, informing me of the illness of the Cavaliere, is a great sorrow to me. I fear that an affection of the chest in his bad state of health must be very serious, and I grieve both on his account and for your sake. If the doctor should pronounce him to be in danger I beg of you with all my heart to prepare him for all the holy sacraments, so that,

when his hour shall come, he may depart in due dispositions. Tell Fra Timoteo from me to use the utmost care about this matter and not to put it off till the end, for it will do the sick man no harm but rather good. I conjure you to attend to these two points. Remember me to Fra Timoteo. I am not writing to him now as I want to despatch this letter. I know that you will not fail to do anything that may restore the Cavaliere to health if such be the will of God. All the nuns and I are praying for him. Remember me to him : bid him be of good heart and commit himself wholly to God, who will assist him. Let him cheerfully resign himself to his Lord and patiently take the little suffering with which He is feasting him. I commend myself to you, and to Cassandra. May God preserve you in His grace.

“*January 4, 1578.*”

To the Same

“Beloved brother : greeting. I have received your most agreeable letter, but it is with sorrow that I learn the condition of our dearest brother, for from what you tell me and what I hear from the steward I think he must have already passed to another life. God grant that he may have done so in such a manner as we all desire, for I wish for nothing but his salvation, for which I entreat the Lord as earnestly as I can. He was our brother, we cannot but grieve to lose him. But we all have to look forward to the journey which he has made, and nothing remains for us but to be patient and resigned to the divine will. To this patience I exhort you, and I counsel you likewise to put all your affairs in good order. I will not grieve you further but will conclude. I commend myself to you and to Cassandra : may God keep you in His grace.

“*February 24, 1578.*”

Strangely enough, during the years when St Catherine was thus humbly doing her best, with ordinary human means and slow success, to help her own family, she was twice brought strikingly into public notice by miraculous acts. The first time was in 1565, when the King of Bavaria sent his son to Prato, expressly to ascertain from personal

observation the facts about the renowned "saint," and to recommend him and his kingdom to her prayers. Catherine had a great esteem for this king, who had kept faithful to the Catholic Church amidst so many German deserters; and, when she heard of his son's intended visit, prepared with much joy so to entertain him as to encourage and confirm his faith and his love of the Church, little guessing how she was destined to fulfil her intention. The young prince arrived at the convent on the feast of the Epiphany, and Mother Catherine came to the door to meet him. She was filled, at the moment, with thoughts of the great mystery they were celebrating; and, beholding her royal visitor surrounded by a brilliant *cortège* of attendants and friends, she was suddenly rapt in spirit to Bethlehem, into the company of the Magi and their suite. When the prince came forward—according to German custom—to take her hand into his, the saint thought that one of the holy kings was receiving her amongst them, to take her with them to the crib. Thus, led by him—and outwardly appearing to be doing the honours of her convent to the illustrious guest—she went back into the house and conducted the company through it, with all eyes upon her; walking, in heart, amongst the Magi, etc., into the presence of the Infant Jesus. Her face was radiant, and her whole appearance showed an angelic modesty and beauty that commanded awe in her visitors; whilst her soul was filled with holy exaltation, and she uttered, in praise of the Divine Child, words of inexpressible tenderness and grace. The young prince was enraptured: never before had human voice spoken with such accents before him: never had his heart felt such deep and burning love for God. But he did not fully understand what he had seen and heard, until they told him afterwards that Mother Catherine had been in an ecstasy the whole time of his visit, and explained what invisible scene she had been inwardly contemplating whilst she had spoken these marvellous words. When he returned to his father's court, he was thus able to bear witness that the wonders of Prato surpassed anything reported of them, and to affirm that he had seen with his own eyes, and

beyond any doubt, how God shows forth His presence and power in the saints of the one true Church.*

The second of these miraculous incidents happened four years later, and is associated with no less a person than St Charles Borromeo. A certain priest attached to the great cardinal-archbishop's court at Milan, named Agostino Guizelmi, and a native of Prato, never came there without giving himself the pleasure of a visit to the saint. He enjoyed talking to her, not only because of the spiritual good that it brought him, but because each time he saw her he was able to make fresh observations on the marvellous virtues and the prodigies of grace that shone forth in her; and it delighted him, on his return to Milan, to rejoice the cardinal's heart by reporting it all to him. Mother Catherine, in her turn, loved to hear of St Charles's extraordinary austerities, and of the wonderful works that he was then doing for the reform of his diocese, to the great edification of the whole Church. Hence there resulted a reciprocal affection and esteem between the two saints which the devout Guizelmi took keen pleasure in fostering. Now, one day in the year 1569, as he was taking leave of Catherine on starting for Milan, she gave him a picture of the *Ecce Homo* to take to the cardinal, asking him to tell the latter not to pay much attention to the picture itself, which was badly done, but to Him whom it represented. She then added, prophetically, that this picture would deliver him a few days hence from a great peril, in the form of an attempt on his life, made out of hatred for his zeal in reforming abuses. St Charles received the picture with respect, and kept it carefully as Mother Catherine advised. A few days later, as he was saying night-prayers with his household in the archiepiscopal palace chapel, the well-known attempt on his life took place. The wretched assassin, who had been secretly let in, fired a gun straight at him, and he escaped death by a miracle; for the bullets, as though having lost their force on touching him, were found at his feet, and he remained unhurt.

Three days afterwards the holy cardinal sent for Guizel-

* Seraf. Razzi, lib. III, cap. ix, p. 125.

mi, and made him say over again exactly what Catherine had said on giving him the picture. Seeing that every word of hers had come strictly true, he conceived a higher admiration for her than ever; and he had the precious picture finely framed and hung in his study, much to the surprise of some *habitués* of the palace, who could not imagine why a place of honour was given to so poor a work of art.*

* *Compendio, etc., Avvertimento al Lettore, p. 25.*

CHAPTER XVI

Some Correspondence of St Catherine with Superiors of her Order—The affair of Convent Enclosure

AMONGST CATHERINE DE' RICCI'S correspondence there are a few letters to ecclesiastical superiors which must here find a place *in extenso*, as bringing out with striking vividness a side of her character which nothing could so well emphasize as her own words: namely, the strong moral courage that made her say what she thought, without fear or favour, when she felt it her duty to withstand even those of whom she might naturally be somewhat afraid; and that enabled her to carry out what she believed to be right in face of opposition which might cause her severe pain.

This little group of letters—to the general and provincial of the Order, and the prior of the "Minerva" in Rome—need a few preliminary words of explanation.

The decrees of the Council of Trent for Church reform were just at this time being actively carried into execution. St Pius V, in his Apostolic Constitutions of 1566 and 1569, had laid down that there should be no more convents of nuns except on condition of absolute enclosure. All monasteries of women making only "simple" vows and having only semi-enclosure—like most of the Third Order communities—were henceforth forbidden; and to members of those actually existing the bishops were ordered to give the choice of accepting complete enclosure, or of being released from their vows and returning to the world. Such was the law. The mode of its application in each case was left to the wisdom of prelates and superiors of the respective communities. As the great object of the ordinance was simply the reform of abuses, it stood to reason that in the case of many fervent and regular communities too rigorous or hasty an application of it would have been very undesirable, as likely to upset and perhaps disband bodies which it was

better for public edification to keep undisturbed. This was eminently the case with San Vincenzio at Prato; others—the superiors of the Dominican Order, who were its ultimate governors—had thought it prudent not to formally promulgate the pontifical decree there, but to get its requirements gradually and quietly accepted, by way of persuasion rather than of authority.

However, in the year 1576, when it so happened that Mother Catherine had just begun a fresh term of office as prioress, St Pius V's successor, Gregory XIII, appointed apostolic commissioners to visit the Tuscan convents expressly to inquire into their observance of enclosure. At Prato, the sole thing contrary to the completeness of this rule was a door of communication between the sanctuary of the public church and the nuns' choir. In view of the canonical visitation, the superiors of the Order thought best to have this door done away with, though without speaking to the nuns of "enclosure"—merely putting it upon the ground that "it was not a suitable place" for an entrance. Now, it so happened that this could not be done without infringing the rights of a third party: namely, the sons of Salviati, to whom their father had bequeathed all his rights as "founder" of the church and new convent buildings. Catherine, therefore, before taking any action, wrote as follows to the Father General of the Order,* from whom the command to wall up the door had come whilst she was so ill that the nuns were afraid to worry her with the full contents of his letter till some time after its arrival:

To the Father General Serafino Cavalli

"Very Reverend Father-General, my dear father in Christ, greeting. Not until to-day, that we are at the thirtieth of May, has the news reached me of the contents of your Reverence's letter of the thirteenth of April last, which arrived on the twenty-sixth; it was given to me that evening

* Padre Serafino Cavalli, a noted member of his Order. As "Master in Theology" he had taken part in the Council of Trent, and as a man of exemplary life was much respected. He was elected General of the whole Order in 1571, and held office for seven years, during which he visited the Priors of Spain, France and Flanders as well as of Italy. He died at Seville, in 1578, at 56 years old, in high repute for sanctity.

enclosed within another from Florence, where just then fever was raging, and I was very ill; and having at that time near me some of our mothers, I gave them the letters. I told them to read your Reverence's inside theirs, and to inform me of the contents; then they related to me the first part only. And I, who was seriously ill, believed that they had answered it, and thought no more about it; and they would say nothing, so that I should not be troubled. Now I am greatly displeased about the matter, and because the wishes of your Reverence have not been carried out, which has come as a crown to many other troubles at this time. But our Lord be praised, all this is little compared with my sins; with strange times are we oppressed! They, that is, these mothers, told me that they had immediately written to Florence to Antonio Gondi, that he should ask leave of the Salviati. But now that I know, I will not neglect the wish of your Reverence; but I cannot carry it out at once, for I am still so weak that I cannot move myself nor leave my room, on account of the great weakness after the fever I have had from Easter day until now, although it is not so bad at present. It seems to me necessary to speak to the Salviati, sons of Messer Filippo of happy memory, who gave the wall bearing his arms, and to tell them that I would not do anything to his building without letting them know of it. If we did otherwise, we should lose many benefits and conveniences which he was pleased to have done for our monastery, which is going to pieces, and all the old part of the wall is in a ruinous state. It would be a great loss if it were left to fall down, and a great disadvantage to us, for the wall is ninety-four feet long and more than sixteen feet high; it was on account of this that the Salviati sent architects and builders here, and concluded in short that it should not go to pieces. So that they gave us to understand only yesterday by a message that they were coming to put the thing in hand at once. And we received this as from God in the first place as a great gift of His immense providence and of their charity. By reason of all this I am in great trouble and anxiety; for I feel bound in every sense and am equally desirous to fulfil your command, most reverend father; and on the other

hand, if I do anything to offend the sons of Messer Filippo, they may be displeased and withdraw their hand from an undertaking of such great importance to this house. And I am so ill that I cannot go to the *grille*; or I would send for them and would impress upon them *viya voce* (with God's help), before anything was touched, whatever may be your wishes, most reverend father; and I believe that they would easily surrender to the truth. And perhaps they would even put in order the confessionals, now so inconvenient; as well as the rooms which Messer Filippo inhabited. But they are of that sort that it is necessary to manage them a little, and to make use of a little persuasion to obtain from them what we want. And if I were able to speak to them, I should take pains to bring it about so that your Reverence should be obeyed, which I care for more than my own life. But I entreat you, so long as God shall afflict me, that you will deign to have patience, till I can go to the parlour grating, and do the business with these Salviati. And then your Reverence's wishes shall be immediately carried out. And our mothers pray you humbly also for the same. And if you wish anything different, and that nothing should be said on these matters to the Salviati, will your Reverence deign to tell us, that we may obey you. And if they should be angry, and should withdraw their promised benefits, and a great part of the monastery should be ruined besides causing great mortality amongst us, we would rather choose this, than not follow the wishes of your Reverence, who is our father and master. And I pray you with all my heart to have compassion on us, your poor daughters, and to commend us to God in your holy prayers.

“*Prato, May 30, 1576.*”

“Very Rev. Father General, greeting,—I have received your Reverence's infinitely kind letter, and I thank you for your patience for bearing with me with regard to our holy cause of the doorway. When I wrote last I thought the Salviati would have come; but as they did not, and I desired to obey your paternal commands, I wrote to them with all the consideration I could, and they replied, according to

the copy I send you. After that I went to the reverend father prior, and the reverend father confessor, who advised me what I ought to do; and while I was in suspense, the letter arrived from your Reverence, and the reverend fathers then wrote to them again about the state of the monastery. I remain at the feet of your Reverence and of the fathers waiting to know how I may obey you in all things. And I pray you to pardon and to help me, and remember us in your prayers, as I always do for you. And from my heart I crave your holy benediction.

“Your Reverence’s most unworthy daughter.

“*Prato, July 9, 1576.*”

In answer to this letter, the General wrote giving leave for the delay until Catherine could see the Salviati. However they did not come to Prato as soon as she had expected, and she therefore wrote to them on the subject of the superior’s desire that the door should be closed as soon as possible. The Salviati sent a reply in which they accepted the measure for ultimate execution, but begged for postponement to enable them to carry out the repairs, etc., for which this door of communication was needed. Catherine forwarded their letter to Rome, and, to her great surprise, received in return a peremptory order to have the opening walled up at once without further question. Nothing then remained for her but to obey. She had made her protest as to the Salviati’s rights, and could not now go against the declared will of the chief authorities. The door was walled up; and this act was the first formal intimation to the community of the new rules about enclosure. Some of the nuns got into a fright, apparently quite unreasonable—seeing that the sacraments could of course be brought to the sick, and a doctor or any necessary visitor admitted, through the ordinary convent door—and fancied all sorts of deprivations as likely to arise from such a new state of things; whilst the Salviati, as soon as they discovered what had happened, simply took the law into their own hands and knocked down the wall. Hence troubles, from within and without, fell thick on the saint’s devoted head for some time to come. In her distress she

wrote very fully to another superior—the head of the Roman “Province”; and her letter gives so graphic an account of the whole matter that no further description is needed to bring it all before us. Nobody seems able to explain why the superiors, both in Rome and in Prato, acted with the sudden, and apparently even tyrannical haste that they did in the business, making the poor nuns suffer for what was not their fault. We can only conjecture that it was one of those cases in which misunderstanding on the part of one body of holy people is needed for the sanctification of another. Père Bayonne considers the action of Rome, in ordering the door to be thus suddenly done away with after Catherine had set forth the Salviati's rights, quite inexplicable.

To the Father Provincial of the Roman Province

“Reverend and very dear Father, greeting,—If the Lord by His goodness had not sustained me, a sinner, I do not know but that I should have died from the pain your letter caused me; and do not be surprised at it. And I do not know whether I told you that I desire it, for I fear, nay I am certain that my sins deserve this punishment, that this poor monastery should be so troubled by the *prelates*.* I can find no other cause. I wrote to you of what followed; I do not know whether you received it. The Salviati, wishing to have a painting over the altar of the inner church, which they undertook as a labour of love,† ordered a man of their own to design how it was to be placed. He came here into the church, and saw how it all stood. He then said: ‘Take me through that door that I may see the effect.’‡ He was answered that it was closed. He said, ‘Very well,’

* This word is wanting in the MS., and can only be inserted conjecturally.—*Guasti*.

† Filippo Salviati, in his will dated June 6, 1572, laid an obligation on his sons to have an altar-piece painted for the church at San Vincenzo, at a price of between two and three hundred florins. Vasari relates that he painted a panel at the desire of Filippo Salviati for the Sisters of San Vincenzo, with a Madonna crowned as if received into heaven, and below the Apostles round the sepulchre. But the picture which is preserved near the altar, and represents the Virgin assumed and crowned, is known to be by the hand of Master Michele Tosino, called delle Colombe; and Razzi tells us in the manuscript chronicles of the monastery, that it was ordered and paid for by the sons of Filippo Salviati. See the work entitled, *A Picture by Filippino Lippi in Prato*, and *Historical Sketches of two Pratesian Painters*: Prato, 1840, p. 27; also *Pratesian Calendar*, year III, p. 137.

‡ The outer church, which had its principal door on to the Piazza of San Domenico, and was in front of the inner church, used by the nuns. In 1732 it was rebuilt on a larger scale. See *Pratesian Calendar*, years I and III.

and went away. In four or five days he returned, and said that he had to take down that door in order to get off certain coats-of-arms from the front of it. As soon as I heard this, I went to tell the father confessor, and I found the father prior, and told him of it. He was very angry and desired me to tell that gentleman not to do it, or he would be excommunicated. This order I immediately carried out. Then he stopped, and did not return the next morning. I believed that everything would be let alone; because it is the custom of the Salviati, if they are not allowed to do as they like, to leave the whole thing alone. The morning after he returned, and said that he had to take down the door, there being no other way to pass in and out (and he showed an order from the same Salviati) and to adjust certain work. And 'If anybody said anything,' he added, 'reply that Messer Averardo and Antonio have ordered it to be done.' And he had his own doors of woodwork with strong locks put back, as his masters had ordered. The father prior, seeing this, was indignant, and would not have Mass said for two mornings; and both churches, the inner and the outer, are full of scaffolding and broken plaster, and there is no room to stand when the masons are there. You may believe that the nuns resent this, and complain greatly, not wishing to be deprived of their Mass. And you may also believe that I suffer doubly on their account (alas, that my sins should be the cause of it all!) letting them appear more afflicted than they ought to be, seeing that they are not to blame in the matter. And they know that at Pistoia, in Santa Lucia, on account of the builders, the confessor has been for six months saying Mass in the inner chapel; and they are professed nuns of an enclosed order, whereas we are tertiaries without enclosure. But they obey readily, as is becoming to Religious, but not in the matter of enclosure. This picture has been such a great and delightful interest, and improves the church, through which one has to pass to and fro. But to have to lose Mass on this account is rather too hard, and seculars make remarks about it. Reverend and dear father in the Lord, I think you may remember that when it was a question of fastening up this

door, you wrote to the Salviati. They replied, that if we had a little patience, they would restore the confessionals and other things; and do besides what might be wanted. After that you wished it closed up, and they were told nothing else, and I proceeded to obey, wishing never to fail in this, for the love of God. When the master had told them this, you would think that they would have considered the matter, and would have gone to the bishop to learn whether it was his order or yours. For now the seculars know everything and talk about it, and complain of you, to my great displeasure, for my Order is the apple of my eye. And I hear murmurings, and what is said by those who have the care of your monasteries. And what is worse is that my nuns are quite weary and overdone with these troubles, so that I fear, and not without some foundation, that they may do something which would displease you. My heart is ready to break, and my weak health will not bear so much trouble.

“Pray for me, father, to Jesus; for I can no longer endure this quarrelling, and all this discontent both within and without, which I see and feel is offensive to God. To think that my sins, I say again, are the cause of it all! Alas for me! May God preserve me to see the end of this. And again I assure you that my strength is not sufficient for it. Pray absolve me from my office (she was then prioress for the fifth time) so that I may hide myself and not see my Lord so greatly offended. And I am the more afraid, fearing that my infirmity does not give them enough spiritual support; they are so frightened, that if any violence should be done to them, they will not be able to hold out. And every time that I try to persuade and quiet them, they begin to doubt me, and almost stifle me with their discussions: still I believe that force is not pleasing to God, or that so many poor souls should be tried and afflicted, and they seem to have reason on their side. And there are not wanting those who open their eyes and tell them whence it all comes. Therefore, dear father, I pray you by the wounds of Jesus, that you will mitigate and smooth down this affair as far as you can.

“Then I know nothing about the door, though you may hardly believe me, what it has cost me, in my mind: but I only wish whatever my Lord wills, for whose sake I beg you to bring this building to an end, and to see what these Salviati are doing; for I cannot think they are such foolish persons as to begin a thing they cannot carry through; and they are cousins of the Grand Duke, and are much attached to His Serene Highness. And they have two sisters as you know; and the grandmother of their uncle gave the first site for this monastery.*

“I desire nothing else but to please my reverend fathers, and especially your paternity (may God be praised for the affection I bear you in Him); I desire that you may have this monastery at heart and that it may not suffer violence; for the nuns will submit, though not on the ground of enclosure; for our constitutions permit us to go out. We do not however avail ourselves of this except for begging alms, which the licence of the vicar and of our father prior allows.

I have written at length; but it seemed that I could not do otherwise. My heart is between two mill-stones, the one being you, my fathers, the other my nuns, whom, prostrate at your feet, I commend to you. I quite understand that you could not do otherwise; but you have done your duty in letting me feel this cross: blessed be our Lord! And you will forgive me this tediousness, although I have not spoken with all the reverence I could desire; for, feeling the grief of my nuns, it was necessary to make it known to you. I have always had great confidence in you, and have never thought that you would change towards us. I pray you that I may not be disappointed; nor that disorder may be allowed in your time. And this I say for security and from necessity, and with all the submission and humility that are due to you. And I say again that I find no one knows what the Salviati have done; therefore what can I do about rebuilding? I should certainly cause some disorder; there are already signs of it, and I think you understand me. They are power-

* Razzi, in the Life of Sister Catherine (lib. I, cap. ii), narrates how Father Francesco Salviati, Vicar-General of the Congregation of San Marco, procured the foundation of the Monastery of San Vincenzo in 1503; but there is no mention of the grandmother who gave the first site:—*il primo sito*.

ful and nobles; and what they have done appears reasonable. And this is true, that they cannot remove these coats-of-arms without making the passage; so it would appear best to let them finish and then see what they do; but not vex me with rebuilding this wall, for I cannot do it. I did it the first time with much displeasure to the nuns, and I did not consult any one: I thought only of obeying. . . . However, I leave all to God, and place in His arms this poor and afflicted house; and you also, that you may be enlightened as to what is best. . . . I thank you for your very kind letter; as for me, I did not deserve so much, rather the contrary, being but an abyss of misery. . . . Of your charity give us your blessing.

“*Prato, March 6, 1576.*”

The next difficulty was about who should *shut up* the door again; for the Dominican authorities did not carry out their threats of excommunicating the Salviati, and took no further steps; leaving things as they were, so as to throw the whole brunt of the trouble on Catherine. Her refusal, expressed in the above letter, to rebuild the wall, on account of the Salviati's rights, had roused the anger of some over-zealous and indiscriminating spirits who hastily concluded that her sanctity was more than doubtful when they saw her, and the community she ruled, in opposition to the prior and other superiors. Whether these were members of the Order, or laymen in official authority, is not mentioned; but in either case they were people of importance enough to be listened to, for they sent to Rome a “memorial,” denouncing Catherine's action in this matter, which raised a real storm against her and her convent. Some cardinals and other eminent personages, tried hard to get San Vincenzio condemned by the Holy See; whilst the side of the nuns was hotly taken in Florence by the grand duke, who sent a minister of State to Prato expressly to enquire into the affair, that he might have a right foundation for undertaking their defence as his subjects. He wrote many letters to Mother Catherine, encouraging her and promising his protection; and Joanna of Austria, his wife, constantly

urged him to keep up his interest, and often went herself to see the saint and show her sympathy. The prior of the *Minerva* in Rome wrote to Catherine whilst this state of affairs existed, and the following letter from her, in reply, shows her own calm and courageous attitude under all the calumnies that were abroad about her.

To the Prior of the Minerva, at Rome

“Reverend and dear Father in Christ, greeting.—I have received your very kind letter. I thank you for the prayers you have offered for me and for the monastery. You tell me that my honour and that of the monastery are in the greatest peril, and that a complaint has been lodged against us. I believe that on that day or during the past week it was made known by some person of importance who knew that some of the cardinals (or one cardinal) are against us, and that those who are acting are actuated by some noble personage. And I know that the grand duke sent to us Signor Concino to hear about the case; also I know that the grand duchess came in person. And the grand duke wrote to me, and replied more than once that he held and would hold this place under his particular and affectionate protection; and I know that he has written to me even this morning, and I know with what respect and affection I have spoken to my fathers. If therefore anything has been said against me, may our Lord be praised who holds me worthy to be His follower in being evil spoken of. As for myself, I will make no excuses; not that it appears at all strange that I should be spoken ill of, the same having been done to my Lord without cause; for I am guilty of all, by reason of my imperfection. But concerning that which you tell me, I am not guilty—it is a mistake; but, for the love of Him, I am willing to bear everything. If the father prior wishes to know who has written it, I know no one who could have done so. But when Satan is bent on ruining a place, he sets to work to get in the small end of the wedge, and causes people to imagine or dream of things upside down, taking a pleasure in disturbing and afflicting one, and interrupting devotions and observances,

and causing danger for his own satisfaction. And although I am ignorant and foolish, I know the stairs by which the traitor enters to upset holy places, and therefore I have commended myself to your prayers. I have had and still have cause; and I would not have you feel surprised that I commend myself to you. I know you are a servant of God, and His priest and minister; therefore it is fitting for me to do so. And I have not judged, nor will I judge any one, except myself, who am full of evil; but I throw everything upon my Lord, that He may be my judge and my defender in all that is said against me. In these contradictions I will glory; not for any virtue that is in me, but for the love of Jesus Christ, who deigns to let me suffer. And I pray that I may be His, and may never abandon Him, and I give myself up to Him, to follow what pleases Him. Again I ask you to pray for me, that I may become wholly His. Your blessing.

“Your daughter and sister in our Lord.

“*Prato, August 29, 1577.*”

The matter finally ended by the truth's becoming known at Rome, and by the disarming of the Dominican superiors' anger in face of the saint's quiet and prudent conduct. No reprimand at all was given; and the community triumphed, for the authorities after all had to do just what Catherine had begged them to do at first. They had to leave the door open as long as the Salviati wanted it for their work; while the sisters were left unmolested, and became gradually used to the idea that it would one day be walled up again without causing them any material inconvenience as they had feared. This came to pass when the works were at last finished; and the convent was once more quiet and at peace.

CHAPTER XVII

The Saint's "Spiritual Sons," Religious and Laymen—Her Letters to some of them

LIKE the great saint of Siena, whose group of holy disciples included men as well as women, Catherine de' Ricci numbered amongst her friends some specially known as her "spiritual sons," without some short account of whom her history would be incomplete. Many of these were men who—like Salviati—had been converted by her means, whether from sin or from lukewarmness, to a better life. Others, already holy, being incited by her example to strive for a yet higher degree of sanctity, had earnestly begged to be taken for her children. To all alike she gave a large place in her heart, and a share in her prayers, penances, and other good works; whilst she was unsparing in warnings and exhortations for their good, her sole desire in their regard being to see them serving God joyfully and "singing praises to the Lord."

Amongst these "sons" the members of her own Order form an important group, out of which we must here content ourselves with choosing, for special mention, one whose life is most closely linked of them all with the saint's fame. Passing over many more or less noted Dominican names, whose owners were spiritual children of St Catherine (including her own step-uncle, Fra Angelo da Diacceto, afterwards Bishop of Fiesole, and a great friend of St Philip Neri), we come to that of her chronicler, Serafino Razzi, whose family name was de' Marradi. He tells us how, whilst still a novice at San Marco in Florence, he was sent to Prato for the feast of St Vincent Ferrer, patron of the convent; and how, on that occasion, he was so happy as to converse with the saint and to be received as her spiritual son. It was perhaps to this happy and impressive incident of his young life—for he was but twenty years old—that Serafino

owed that taste for legends and lives of saints that have made him so dear to the Church and the Dominican Order. In his maturer manhood, when he was given up to the laborious teaching of theology, as master of studies, whether at Perugia or Ragusa, his refreshment in hard work was to keep alive piety in his soul by writing the lives of Tuscan saints. At sixty years old, being named confessor to San Vincenzo, where the saint had quite lately died, he began to write her history in the very atmosphere, so to speak, of the heavenly odour rising from her grave, and amidst the immediate recollections and impressions of her fellow nuns. Ten years later, we find him still there, writing those celebrated chronicles of the convent that are sought after by cultivated men as well as by pious souls, in which he shows himself—according to the verdict of a correct judge—“that charming Tuscan writer, whom one might say had been created expressly to describe a world, or rather a paradise, of earthly angels.”

Outside her own Order, a great favourite of Catherine's was Fra Domenico, a wandering hermit, who travelled about, visiting shrines, and carrying his shelter with him. His inward spiritual history, as one of the saint's specially-loved children, is of much interest. Domenico, we are told by Sandrini, was a simple and unlearned man, but with such an upright soul that he made immense progress in the science of prayer and the love of God, and gained large profit from paying yearly visits to his “mother” at Prato. One year Catherine had given him as a particular “practice” never to lose sight, in any actions, of heaven, and of the joy and glory that he hoped for there as his reward. The holy man took his staff and wallet, and started afresh on his peregrinations from town to town and shrine to shrine; and at every step he took, at every alms he asked and every prayer he said, in all his annoyances and all his penances, he thought, as he had been told, of heaven with its joys and glories; and, behold! this sweet thought lessened his burdens, scattered his cares, and soothed his weariness. Then, comparing the little that he did for God with the great things that God was preparing for him, he blushed to be such a cowardly

servant, so niggardly of his services to such a great and munificent Lord. Thereupon, he redoubled his prayers, fasts, penances, good works, and patience in trial; in short, his fervour in everything. But, do as he would, the vision of heaven constantly grew before his mind's eye, bringing with it a perfect torrent of inward joy; so that as he increased his labours he did but increase his happiness, and there were times when he even fell by the way as he journeyed, actually overcome by the greatness of his delight. Had any one, at such moments, met the poor begging hermit, covered with sweat and dust, gasping for breath beneath some tree or hedge, he must have been filled with pity for his apparently wretched state of want and fatigue. Yet this man was just then happier than a king on his throne, inwardly revelling in joys unknown to the ordinary mortal. So, when the year had run out, and the disciple went back for his teacher's fresh lesson, he begged her to give him no new practice, but to let him keep always to the same, no other having been so sweet and fruitful. It used to be said in the convent that, when this holy mother and son discoursed of the future life and its mysteries, wonderful things passed between them. Like two seraphs, their souls encouraged each other to mount incessantly higher and higher in the ways of divine contemplation; and the favours that they received were in proportion to their love. They are said to have been rapt sometimes, when together, into extraordinary ecstasies.

But Fra Domenico, like his saintly teacher, was not without his humorous side when he came down from the heights; and an amusing story is told by Razzi of a bit of mischief that he practised one day on the nuns at Prato. Taking it into his head that he should like to test the charity of the sisters who managed the convent hospitalities and alms-giving, he presented himself at the door without saying who he was (the portress, of course, being a stranger to him) and asked for a loaf, which the sisters hastened to bring him. Keeping it in his hand, he then said that he should like a little wine. This they said he was very welcome to, and they fetched him some of the

red wine that the community used. Next, he asked if they could not find him something to eat with his bread, which they again made no difficulty about. When, however, he finally went on to say that he "hoped they would excuse him, but that he did not drink red wine and would be very grateful if they could bring him a little white," the ministering sisters felt that they could not quite take this upon themselves—the white wine being somewhat of a luxury—and went to get Mother Catherine's leave, telling her what had passed. The prioress gave her consent; but she came down to the hospice to see who this strange *frate* might be, who had asked for so many things; and recognizing Domenico at a glance, was delighted to see him. Then the holy man thanked her cordially for all that the sisters had supplied him with; but added, with a sly smile, that it was well for them that they had satisfied all his demands, "Because," he pleasantly said, "if it had happened to be our Lord in person who had asked them for all this, they would have been greatly grieved and troubled at heart not to have contented Him." "Yes," replied the saint, archly; "but then possibly our Lord in person would not have asked for quite so much!"

Turning now to Catherine's "sons" amongst laymen, who were many, we can find space here for mention of only two or three specially bound up with her community by devotion to its interests. The nuns' poverty, as we have seen, was great—sometimes extreme—and Catherine often depended entirely on the good-will and exertions of her secular friends for the transaction of business which she could not pay professional agents to do. Many of her spiritual children proved the solidity of their attachment to her, and of their esteem for the Prato community, by perseveringly doing really hard work for their benefit; and amongst these, Buonaccorso Buonaccorsi, Lorenzo Strozzi, Ludovico Capponi, and Antonio Gondi, shall here be chosen for particular notice, as specially interesting in different ways. Buonaccorso Buonaccorsi was born in October, 1506. He was a man of religious mind from the beginning; and, quite early in his career as public notary,

went and offered his services in looking after the business of San Vincenzo on the sole condition that Catherine would charge herself with the guidance of his soul. She readily consented, and rejoiced in him as a son who made great spiritual progress throughout his life. His great claim on our interest is that many of the saint's letters are addressed to him. Amongst some papers belonging to the Prato convent—now preserved in the State Archives at Florence—there is a small note-book containing an entry of some interest in connection with Buonaccorso, which runs thus: "In the name of God, Amen. This journal is called by me, Master Buonaccorso, son of Leonardo Buonaccorsi, Florentine notary, *Holy Journal A*, in which I shall put down everything that I may happen to pay or to receive every day on account of the convent of San Vincenzo at Prato, and on account of others, for the benefit of the nuns and the use of the said convent." The entries concerning San Vincenzo, however, are not many.

Amongst St Catherine's letters to Buonaccorso, are one or two notes addressed in common to him and Antonio Gondi, and to him and Lorenzo Taddei.* Some of her letters to the notary are of course on temporal business: the few chosen for giving here are spiritual ones.

Buonaccorso died in June, 1592, two years after the saint. He was buried at San Lorenzo.

To Buonaccorso Buonaccorsi

"I received your welcome letter of the 20th a few days since, and hasten to reply. In yours you ask me about two things, for neither of which I know sufficient; nevertheless it appears to me that those who wish to be pleasing to God,

* Lorenzo Taddei, above-named, was a man associated for a time with Buonaccorso in his work for the Prato nuns, having acted for a time as procurator-general for them after Pierfrancesco de' Ricci's death. He was devoted to the saint, who had a great admiration for his character and, though he was a comparatively young man, called him father. He died not very long after her elevation to high office, in March, 1555; and the following passage about him in a letter to Buonaccorso (not otherwise interesting) is worth quoting. After expressing her grief at his loss, she goes on: "It is well for him: he reminds me of a rose gathered in the early morning, fully blown, but still covered with dew and unburnt by the sun. To lose such a person is necessarily an affliction; but to be able to hope that he has passed only from one life to another gives one a contented feeling that overpowers and soothes all one's grief; and this is what has happened to our father."

must despoil the old man, which is the affection for all earthly things and the pleasures of sense; and put on the new man, which is the love of all heavenly things, the observance of the holy commandments, with zeal for the honour of God. Take an example: If any one in this world wishes to make friends with a nobleman so as to obtain from him some benefit or temporal dignity, he goes about to ascertain the will of that person, and does whatever he can to please him, never resting day or night. Now, how much greater care and diligence ought we not to show to do things pleasing to almighty God, who does not reward His elect with temporal goods that soon pass away, but with those eternal benefits that we inherit for all time!

“Now as to your second demand. Having granted so many others, I now grant to you, to place you where you desire in our Lord (i.e., as a spiritual son); and so I accept you, and offer you to Jesus and make mention of you in all my prayers—in the same way the one dearest to you, to whom pray commend me. And inasmuch as it would be agreeable to me to know her, let that be at her and your convenience. And I thank you for your kind offers, which I greatly appreciate. It may happen some day that our honoured Lorenzo Taddei, or Giovanni Colucci, our procurators, may require your help and advice for our lawsuits. I have told them they may consult you, for I see well your kindly disposition towards us, which enables me to place confidence in you, as I hope you will feel the same towards us whenever we can help you. May God preserve you.

“Prato, December 28, 1552.”

To the same

“I have received your very kind reply to our two last, also that of Lorenzo; I have little to say now, except that it seems each one is vying with the other to help me, and if there is any good in it, it is from our Lord. And it is a great thing to try to outdo one another in good, provided it be not in the spirit of envy, not withholding our neighbour from good, because we are not foremost in it; but with a holy eagerness and thirst for the celestial spring, to run vehe-

mently, and without placing impediments in the way of others. Oh! if such envy as this were to-day in the hearts of Christians, how many there are who would reach the wished-for goal which is in our time desired by so few! Let us take pains then, my dear son, to run quickly and to win. And in this race you will not be deemed presumptuous, no more than that poor but happy thief who was crucified with Jesus. Does it not seem to you that he competed wisely with that multitude of holy fathers in Limbo, who had been waiting thousands of years for the redemption? For he took so swift a course in a moment that he outran them all, and deserved to be first at the goal, yet without detracting from any one who had the right to participate. I advise you to go and run your course in like manner; to this I invite you once more. For this is, my son, our day for the contest; and we must keep more firm than usual, as this year the beginning and end of our redemption both occur together.* And with regard to holding firm, we see, for example, how when a man thinks of some great thing, turning it over in his mind, he stops all his work, and many times seems to remain motionless; so should we, considering how profound is the matter we reflect on, remain firm and motionless; first, because Mercy, having overcome Justice and placed itself before the eternal Father, has moved Him to take flesh for the salvation of our ungrateful souls. It has drawn down God from on high to lowest earth; enclosed Him whom the heavens cannot contain in the womb of a virgin; made the mighty Lord become an infant, enduring all the misery that others feel. From true God He became true man; from immortal and impassible, mortal and passible; from divine, human; from highest wisdom He made Himself in the likeness of ignorant man; from a master whom angels serve, into the servant of men. What intellect, considering this, would not be amazed, and become astonished and speechless, knowing that all this was done to pay the great debt that human nature owed to the Divine Being? And because human nature could not of itself pay this debt, nor open that heavenly door which its disobedience had closed, there came the Saviour, the power-

* i.e., Good Friday must have fallen on March 25 that year.

ful One armed with such great treasure and ready to pay every debt for us, and restore to us the heritage of our celestial country. . . . We see Him toiling for three-and-thirty years, teaching and exhorting the people, and working so many signs and miracles; nevertheless, He was called a seducer, and many times calumniated; driven out and had stones raised against Him; finally He was betrayed by one who well knew whom he was betraying; yet He humbled Himself and washed his feet, and communicated to him His most holy body and blood. And with great love He showed him that it was he who should betray Him, so as to give him time to repent; by which He showed how great is the goodness of God, who until a man has taken the last plunge is always urging him to be converted. . . . We see Him bowed down in the agony of death, humbling His humanity before the heavenly Father, that the cup of His bitter Passion might pass from Him; but the love of our salvation was so kindled in His imprisoned soul that He subjected Himself to the will of the eternal Father, and went to meet His enemies, to whom He gave Himself up as their prey. And being bound, the heavenly Judge was led before earthly judges, standing as a meek lamb while those dogs vituperated Him. And they blindfolded Him from whom nothing can be hidden, crowned with thorns Him who is the giver of the highest crowns to all His elect, led as a malefactor to the place of death, with the heavy cross upon His back, and ill-treated, Him who knew no sin. And He, being arrived at the place, made His prayer to the Father, not because He had need of it, but for an example to us. If we were to try to sound the least part of the secrets hidden in all the acts of Jesus, especially in the Passion, time would not suffice. I will leave you to contemplate this, in whatever manner it shall please His goodness to inspire you; and let us pass to where, having taken off His vesture and being stretched upon the cross, He seemed to say to those cruel tormentors: 'Do it quickly, delay not; open these veins, so that there may be made a new fountain, and be ye washed and cleansed, all ye that shall enter it.' And this, my son, is the course we have to take, to throw ourselves eagerly into this great sea, and

be washed and cleansed, for it has been all done for us. Let us sign our foreheads with this sacred blood, that with this sign we may go to the eternal Father and tell Him that His only Son has paid for us; that we have run and found the goal all red and glowing, for it is Jesus on His cross, bleeding and dying for love.

“I am sorry that your and our Mona Lessandra is ill. Tell her to take care of herself and bear this cross for the love of Jesus, who gives it her; greet her and commend me to her, and may she be happy. I commend myself to Lorenzo, and to yourself, and so does Mother Syndica. Adieu.

“*Prato, March 18, 1553.*”

To the same

“I have received your very kind letter, and I understand what you say. But either you have not understood my last, or I did not know how to express what I wanted, since I have given you displeasure in saying that the service of God must not be forced. The service of God may be said to be forced in two ways. First, when we serve Him from fear of His judgements, or from being obliged to do so, on account of human respect. This I believe, indeed I am certain, is not your case. The second occurs when a man is much occupied in various kinds of business; and yet with all this he wishes to undertake a certain secret service of God, which is beyond human strength, and thus he always wants repose in his heart, and he cannot have that tranquillity of soul which makes us happy. This is what I fear happens to my dear son, whom I would remind that God has placed our souls in this miserable flesh so that one should serve the other, and thus give us the opportunity of gaining merit. It is necessary, when the senses try to get the upper hand, that the spirit should rise up and conquer by means of virtue; and when the spirit becomes too stringent, that reason should step in and prevent the soul from drawing too much to itself, so that the body is prostrated; and this again is hurtful to herself, since we cannot merit anything, unfortunately, apart from our body. Therefore, my dear son, when you find that you have much

temporal business, you cannot undertake spiritual exercises, for you would perform them in such fashion that your body would not serve your soul. Therefore such exercises as you find you can do, see that you direct them to the honour of God, who in His mercy will accept them, as if you were in continual contemplation; and then when you can, make your prayer and some reasonable penances, giving proper rest to the body; for the better and longer it can serve the soul, the greater merit it will have, and your heart will be both more tranquil and more joyful. It was this I wished to point out to you in my letter about forced service. I meant it in this manner. The thought came to me at times that you do too many penances, too many vigils and austerities, as I believe did also my other dear son, Antonio Gondi. Remember both of you that you are not [a professed] Religious; that our Lord asks of you one thing, of us another; therefore you must both temper severity with right discretion, and offer all your works to our Lord, who will graciously accept them. This is my present to you for this feast that, like dear sons, you may be happy, and find yourselves in the cave in that holy night, in which, just as you are, I will present you to Jesus; and you must offer me to Him, and the poor sister (Bernarda Giachianotti) who is writing to you.

“We expect you for this feast, although we did not give you leave for the two last; so I hope you may have more satisfaction than you would have had otherwise. And tell Antonio that to-morrow is his feast, as well as that of a novice called Sister Ilaria; he may be glad of this, for he will be greatly helped by all these young angels.

“Your daughter is very well, and on the Epiphany she will sing the lesson at Mass. She wishes me to tell you that she will learn it well, and you will be pleased with her. May God keep you in His holy grace.

“*Prato, December 21, 1555.*”

To the same

“I have spoken at length with Vincenzio. He said he knew he had done a great wrong, and had greatly offended

you; he desires to be pardoned, but this being an old affair, he did not tell you then so as not to cause you trouble. But now, being constrained, he has done so, and he knows he has not considered, what is worse and more displeasing and reprehensible, that he owes two hundred scudi; but the man, for the sake of getting the money, will take one hundred and fifty. And from this time forward, if you will forgive him and make peace together, he will never do such a thing again, nor get embroiled with Quirino. Like a good son, he asks your pardon, as did the prodigal, and he has made me his mediator. If I merit to receive this grace, and if you can with one hundred and fifty scudi relieve him of this debt, I shall be very pleased. But do not be angry, for I do not wish to force you; but I believe that your son has spoken the truth. That being so, all will be well.

“It grieves me to hear that you are not well, and that it is from these troubles; but if you make a good resolution you will be better in body and soul. And I will tell you, my dear son, what just now occurs to me: that this son of yours is the talent that Jesus has given you, with which you are to gain eternal life. So, like a good trader, go and traffic with this talent, so that you will hear those much-desired words: ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’

“Prato, February 4, 1581.”

To the same

“Yesterday I wrote to you at length; and now I will add that however it may not be seemly to come between father and son, nevertheless I judge it well to do so, that if he should humble himself again and ask your pardon, you may forgive him; for in forgiving, you will be doing that which is pleasing to God. So I trust you will hear me this time, and so give pleasure to me and to our poor sisters, who are greatly grieved about it. He has promised me to do nothing in future against your wish; therefore return to your better self, like the loving father you have always been. I commend myself to you. May God protect you. . . .

“He assures me that he has no other debts, and that he

never will incur any; this he has promised me faithfully. . . .
Adieu.

“Prato, February 5, 1581.”

To the same

“I thank you for having yielded to my request to forgive Vincenzio, which I believe will be the right thing. As to the payment of his debt, I trust to you, who know much better than I what to do, and what is most to your advantage. As I have told you, he has promised faithfully never to fall again into the like difficulty, and never to have dealings again with Quirino. And after all I have said to him—I have been able to speak the truth plainly, and told him he must keep to it—if he follows my advice, it will be more for his good than any one else’s. And I wish you to tell him that I will go bail with you for him, with this understanding, that if he fail in anything, I will never speak for him again, nor stop to listen to him. This I will promise you; but only under these conditions will I submit to go bail, and not otherwise.

“He and your ladies went away yesterday. I shall be glad to hear of their arrival. To you and to them I commend myself.

“Prato, February 6, 1581.”

Lorenzo Strozzi, son of Filippo, grandson of Matteo Strozzi, was born in July, 1482. He was elder brother to the Giovanbattista—afterwards called Filippo—so celebrated in Florentine history. Lorenzo cultivated letters, and was a friend of the eminent literary men of his day; he held honourable office under the Republic, and in different times always took the side of the upright and loyal citizens. Varchi calls him “a noble man and a great soul”; and Machiavelli declares that “in nobility and fortune Lorenzo had few equals; in intellect, hardly any; and in magnificence, none.” He did not always approve the political proceedings of his brother, yet was suspected of joining in them. He retired at last to his villa at Santuccio, and there wrote two treatises, on

AUTOGRAPH LETTER OF THE SAINT
(Addressed to LORENZO STOZZI, one of her "Spiritual Sons").

Dall'Autografo esistente nella Biblioteca Ronciomana di Prato

yh̄s

do
Hony et in xpo iesu Amat^{mo} salute i quello ch̄ tanto mi ama et
per ubbidire achi mi ha acomadare et nō punto iracicho p̄ la compassi
onē porto alla grauissima ffirmica v̄ra mi scrivo cō fatica questi
pochi uersi così male come Jo so scriuere p̄ ch̄ scendonj raccomandato alle
mia debole oratione et mediante la lettera alla R^{da} m̄re priora n̄ra
et ancora mediante una lettera dello amico di iesu Dom^{co} marcasti
no mi possiate cercificare ch̄ Jo nō mi abbandorevo cō que prighi
agiesu et alla sua s^{ma} madre ch̄ Jo posso et debbo p̄ la charita del
la quale esso uūole siamo uestre) se uogliamo essergli acciej et graj
et ancor a p̄ lo obbligo grāde p̄ticulare habbo degli aiuej al n̄ro poue
ro monasterio i piu tempo hauete facej Dio nō guardi amia peccatj
ma Risponda alla fede v̄ra buona quanto expediente et alla salute
della anima v̄ra et uoltj uerso di uoj le uicere della sua s^{ma} mise
ricordia et mi risguardi cō lochio della sua pietra p̄ ch̄ i uno momē
to puo concederuj. Tutte le gratie desiderate et mi prometo tene
domj sepre sua bonta le mande i capo come nō gia p̄ mia meritej
i glla spero no mi lasero mai separato da quel pocho di aiuto
ch̄ Jo potero daruj cofidateuj i dio el quale se di qua mi puote
nō lascia p̄ cosa lanima redempta del suo pretioso sangue et sap
ete ch̄ el pastore riduce la pecorella a casa cō minacij et p̄cosse qual
ch̄ uolta et pure nō fa p̄ alero ch̄ p̄ ridurla nel sicuro et per liberarla
da chi la deuorebbe et ridurrebbe anulla dolghongli le p̄cosse
et godesi poi el bene et la quiete p̄curata allej da quel ch̄ lha ma
tato ch̄ mi intendete bene et cō tutto questo uorej uoj fussy pau
dite cō la medesima salute ditta anima (io ch̄ almācho alleggerissi
ino tanto excessiuj dolorj epenē In ~~la~~ laude et gloria del sig^{no} et
cōforco uostro et di chi mi ama i lui) Recribiscanij el signore di
quanto mediante lo amico ūro ci hauete madato ch̄ uene ringraua
mo tutte queste madre cose la madre priora ch̄ mi fa scriuere
p̄gratiaruj della charita auete alle figte di iesu Jo nō esso
loro esua maestà mi accresca nel suo s^{to} amore et mi facej sempre
cognosceret ch̄ tutto alluj per manifeste ch̄ uoj patite et di tutto mi

vole ristorar se cō patientia sopporterete come spero ch
voj vogliate fare e p dir meglio penso ch voj lo facciate e
datevi tutto all'ujie, lui sedava auoj dicendo fadime
quello ch ti piace o' fermo / o' sano pure ch Jo ti piaccia
nō uoglio seno la tua uolta santissima fare Auoj si
racc^a la m^{re} priora et sopp^{ra} et uel Adi 23 daghosto 1543

Nra quato i degna figta f
charina i san vicentio di
prato de riccj

In Firenze

Al Molto hono^{re} lo^{re}
20.11.1543.1543.1543.1543

“Patience” and on “Almsgiving,” which remain in manuscript; and the “Lives of Illustrious Men” of the Strozzi family, of which some fragments were published by Bigazzi and by Canon Giuseppe Bradi, of the Accademia della Crusca. The date of his death is not given, but it was probably about 1549.

The three letters from Mother Catherine to Lorenzo that here follow—models of practical spirituality in their brief form—speak for themselves as to her keen sympathy with the trouble of ill-health and failing powers.

The first of them, it will be seen, is the letter given in this book as an example of the saint’s hand-writing.

To Lorenzo Strozzi

“IHS. Honoured and most beloved in Christ Jesus, greeting in Him who so much loves you! Both in obedience to one who has a right to command me, and no less on account of the sympathy that I feel for your very great illness, I write you these few words with difficulty, and as badly as I can write; so that, as you have recommended yourself to my prayers in a letter addressed to our Reverend Mother Prioress, and in another to Domenico Marcassino,* the friend of Jesus, you may be sure that I will not abandon you as regards the prayers that I can and ought to [offer] to Jesus, or to His most holy Mother, in whose love He would fain see us clothed if we wish to be agreeable and pleasing to Himself; and also because of the great and particular obligation that we are under to you, for the help given at various times to our poor monastery.

“May God not consider my sins, but may He answer your great faith, as far as this may profit for the salvation of your soul; may He have bowels of compassion for you, and look upon you with merciful eyes, because in one moment He may grant you all the graces you desire. I promise you (God watching over me, not because of my

* Called by Razzi “a man looked upon in Florence as highly versed in spirituality.” He is mentioned in the “Note on the iron necklace of Girolamo Savonarola,” referred to in the preface to Guasti’s edition of the “Letters.”

merits, but through His goodness as I hope) that I will never let you want what little help I can give you. Trust in God: if He strikes you here below, He will not desert your soul redeemed by His precious blood. You know that sometimes the shepherd uses threats and blows to bring a sheep back to the fold; and yet he only does this to have it in safety, and to deliver it from the devourer and destroyer. It suffers the blows, and afterwards enjoys the peace and comfort obtained for it by the one who has loved it so much. I know that you understand me well. Notwithstanding all this I should still like you to be heard for your soul's health; that is, that such excessive pains and sufferings should be at least diminished, for the honour and the glory of the Lord, and for your encouragement and that of those who love you in God. May the Lord reward you for all that you have sent to us through our friend. All our mothers thank you, as well as Mother Prioress, who desires me to write our thanks to you for your charity to the daughters of Jesus; and I also join with her. May His Majesty grant you increase in His holy love, and make you understand that all you suffer is known to Him, and that He will compensate you for all if you bear it with patience, as I hope you mean to do; or, rather, as I believe you are doing.

“Give yourself entirely to Him and He will give Himself to you; say: ‘Do with me what Thou pleasest, give me either sickness or health, so long as I am pleasing to Thee; I wish for nothing but to do Thy holy will.’ Mother Prioress, Mother Sub-Prioress, and all, recommend themselves to you.

“Your very unworthy daughter, etc , etc.

“*August 23, 1543.*”

To Lorenzo Strozzi

“How greatly Antonio Cioni recommended you to me I could not express; but he has asked me to write with my own hand, which I do for the love of God with some fatigue, but willing for His sake and yours. Would that I were such as to be able to give you comfort, but I am not used to writing such things, so you must excuse me as to this,

though I can tell you truly that I pray a great deal for you. And if you are not blessed with bodily health, and you suffer this with great patience, your seeming to feel your soul in danger may not be a reality before Jesus, who perhaps leaves you in bodily pain in order to purify you from many past sins, and to purify you here instead of there where the pain is greater beyond all comparison. And if your mind seems weakened, it is sufficient that your will remain fixed on our Lord, who sees how much you desire not to offend Him. And if you feel as if you offend Him, there is pain in this, but not guilt, for our Lord sees your inmost heart, which you must continually offer up to Him. Try to make as little trouble of it as possible, and be as cheerful as you can. And I shall always be pleased to hear of you from your Antonio Cioni. May Jesus and the Virgin defend you from all evil now and always, until your last end. Hope in God, for He will in justice give you consolation.

“Prato, March 26, 1544.”

To the same

“I replied to your last letter of a few days since, being very sorry for your affliction, and that you feel old and not very well, and that you have now to be under the charge of your sons, whereas up to the present you have been father and master. We feel sure that these things are very hard to bear. Yet it is necessary for peace’ sake to make the best of it. We are very pleased at your good will towards our monastery, and know that your humanity* would be desirous if you were able of helping us, your poor daughters in Christ; for you understand our need, which is always increasing, and how temporal matters press upon us all round.

“But we are writing to you now again, since we have received your alms of five golden scudi; they arrived just in time, as only He knows who inspired you to do this act of charity. Therefore we are the more bound to pray for your humanity, both for this benefit and for the compassion we feel for you. I have commended your charity to the

* Meaning one learned in the Humanities.

Mother Sub-Prioress and to all the sisters, who will not fail to pray to our Lord that, if it please Him, He will deign to grant your desire and will repay you for this charity, which may have been some inconvenience to you, and for others you have done for us in times past. And we shall remember you not only now, but always, and especially at this holy season, as our own father. Again we commend to you our monastery, and may we always be grateful for all our Lord sends us, whether great things or little, and not forget our obligations to the instruments of His bounty. I commend myself to your humanity, as does also Mother Sub-Prioress,* who joins me in thanking you.

“Your daughters in Christ,

“SISTER MARIA MADDALENA DELLI STROZZI

“and SISTER CATHERINE DE' RICCI.

“Prato, December 17, 1548.”

Of all this group of friends, however, the most interesting, after Filippo Salviati, were Antonio Gondi and Ludovico Capponi—men of most opposite character, but almost equally dear in their different ways to Catherine. Capponi, born in March, 1533, and described as “handsome, young, and of noble carriage,” when the saint first knew him, was of the best and most accomplished society in his native city. Educated at the celebrated school of Ludovico Buonaccorsi di San Gemignano, whence flocked the *élite* of the Florentine youths, Ludovico was not only attracted by the charms of literature, but vividly impressed by the heroic deeds of warlike Rome. The master of this school let his pupils form imaginary plots and conspiracies, and practised them in oratorical disputes, wishing to give them the habit of speaking boldly in public before both princes and people, in which he did but carry on the traditions of the old republic. Some of Buonaccorsi's disciples joined in political disturbances, and either died in party-fights or were executed; others gave themselves up to study, or filled public civil offices; but Capponi, by the course of

* Sister Maddalena was just then prioress, and St Catherine sub-prioress. Whether Maddalena Strozzi and Lorenzo were in any way related does not appear.

events in his own life, was equally turned from the pursuit of arms and from that of *belles-lettres* on going forth into the world. The rapacity and dishonourable conduct of a brother engendered in Ludovico's heart a deadly hatred, which for many years took complete possession of him, and involved him also in long lawsuits, petitions to authorities, and various proceedings of a disturbing kind, all having the object of getting justice done to him, and even of revenging himself on the offending parties in what seems to have been a very complicated family dispute. Added to this trouble was the opposition of both relations and powerful rival suitors to Capponi's marriage with Maddalena Vettori, a maiden with whom he was deeply in love and who fully returned his affection. Her father was dead, and she was in the joint guardianship of a legal court which opposed the union, and of her mother, who favoured Ludovico's suit.

The whole story of this young couple is striking, especially because of the determined and independent attitude of Maddalena herself—refreshing to read of in a state of society where hardly a girl dared refuse any man she was told to marry; but it is too long to give in detail here,* and it must suffice to say that Ludovico finally triumphed over the other suitors—partly through influence of the grand duchess, whom Catherine interested in her *protégé's* cause—and they were married in 1558. Throughout all his stormy life Ludovico, if passionate and resentful, was always upright and honourable to a high degree: so much so, in fact, that he was not always acceptable in a corrupt court; and was the object of much dislike and many calumnies from the partisans of the Medici. The date of his making St Catherine's acquaintance is not given; but it must have been pretty early in his career, as we are told that being almost miraculously overcome with a desire for holiness, like so many others, on his first visit to her, she helped him by her prayers and instructions for about thirty years. Violent, determined and pug-

* The full particulars of Ludovico's and Maddalena's love-story, and also of his family and political troubles, may be found in the French edition of the "Letters," beginning on p. 365.

nacious in character as he was, Ludovico found it very hard to acquire the gentleness demanded by the saint from her "sons"; but he valiantly kept up the fight with his faults, and at the end of that time, mainly thanks to the singular grace gained for him by his "mother's" prayers, he had attained something very near to perfection in self-control. The following letters are chosen from a number written to him, with a few to his wife (a great favourite with her) by Catherine, who kept up constant communication with them through all these years. It must be remembered, in reading these letters, that the "case" referred to several times means one of Ludovico's petitions to authority concerning some of his numerous wrongs, in trying to rectify which his devoted wife frequently helped him: in one case, particularly, going herself to present a memorial to the grand duke on her knees.

These specimens of the Capponi correspondence have been chosen so as to cover a considerable space of time; and it is amusing to find, when her "son's" children became marriageable, how completely Catherine, who in early days had strongly upheld Maddalena in her independence, adopts the entirely conventional tone of her contemporaries about the submission of daughters where matrimony is concerned.

To Ludovico Capponi

"Much honoured and dear to me as a father, greeting,— Being certain that you, as a good Christian, both cherish and endeavour with all your strength to bring up and accustom your children to love the things of God; and considering that our Lord in this impending festival deigned for love of us to take on our flesh, and to become a little child, an abject to human eyes, but in the eyes of faith the highest Son of God and our Redeemer; in order that your children may have the opportunity in their tender years of honouring in childlike manner this mystery, I send you a simple *crèche* with the holy Virgin and Jesus, so that you may tell them in a way they can understand, how at this holy festival they can stand round the holy Mother and Jesus, and how they can say Ave Marias for me and all of us, and be good

children. And I feel sure that she would be pleased with the mystery represented, and with their love. And I beg you to remember me in all your prayers at this holy season, and say the same to our honoured Mona Maddalena, and for all of us. To you and her I commend myself; we will not fail to remember you in all our community and private prayers at this most holy festival, and your special intention. Farewell in our Lord.

“December 18, 1573.”

To the same

“By Salvestro, our serving-man, I send you back the report of your case, which I shall be glad to hear you have received safely. Besides this I must tell you that I have read and considered it; it appears to me to be very well done, and that it will show to whoever reads it with an open mind that you are in the right. But for all this, as I said when speaking to you, and as I now tell you again, I pray that you will in everything leave your cause in the hands of Divine Providence, who will not fail to find means, perhaps when you least expect it, to give you full satisfaction and to justify you to every sort of person. And if it should not so please Him, leave it all to Him, for He will perhaps wish to try you in this way, and give you the chance of merit, and of atoning for past errors; for we are all sinners. Remember all the calumnies heaped upon our innocent and blessed Lord Jesus. And His most holy Majesty is powerful to justify you here; and if this should not please Him, He will not fail to do it there, if you are patient. That is the only thing that matters; things here pass away and life here is very short, but there it is eternal. Therefore I pray you, dear Ludovico, calm yourself and let this cause sleep awhile, because you have done what is honourable and reasonable. Also we know that you are right and have not erred, and honours and favours have not been wanting to you. Besides, you must await the Divine Wisdom, who knows best how and when it will please Him to hear both you and me. For this I pray always on your behalf, and as

I tell you, I shall not cease to help you with continual supplications.

“It remains only to say that I am well and that I much wish to hear how you and your consort are, and whether your coming caused any inconvenience. I commend myself to you and to her, and greet all the children for me. *Valete in Domino.*”

“August 26, 1574.”

To the same

“I have received yours and have read it very carefully, and in truth I feel the greatest compassion for your case. There are a thousand good reasons on your side, and important ones too; and as you have not had justice, all the more one must feel compassion for you, as I do. But believing that in the hands of our God are the hearts of princes and of those who govern, we know, the eye of reason being fortified and enlightened by our holy faith, that our Lord permits all things for our salvation and for our greater good. Even if we suffer evil and things against our honour, nevertheless, my dear Ludovico, neither our own judgement, nor devils, nor the world of men, can separate us from His most holy Majesty. Therefore I pray you, Ludovico, dear to me as a father, *in visceribus Jesu Christi*, be comforted; time is short, God is for us all, and He will judge all, and justice will then take its proper place. And think that if it should not please Him to give it you here at once, wait, wait; rest, rest your soul and keep your holy faith, and say: ‘God is all-powerful, wise and good; He sees and loves my salvation and will procure it; my wants are known to Him; above all, I desire with all my mind to wish what He wishes.’ Do not doubt, bear all this hard warfare with patience and tranquillity towards your enemies. Wait in hope; for if not here, in that other life He will not fail to do you justice.

“Afterwards I read your letter, and learned what Maddalena has done; also I read the memorial, which is very well drawn up. I see by the report that His Highness does not wish to make any revision. Well, Ludovico, the

saw works according to the one who uses it, thus it pleases God. Now, do me this pleasure; take off your thoughts from doing anything more in defence of this case, because you see there is nothing to be done. I pray you to embrace this cross with all the patience you can, and I will not fail to help you with my prayers, and such as I am, I will do all I can for you and your family. To you and Maddalena I commend myself a thousand times. And I say once more, make an offering to God of this chalice, and say with Jesus in the garden: *Fiat voluntas tua*. I send you back the memorial with this, and shall be glad to know that you have received it. *Valete in Domino*.

“September 24, 1574.”

To the same

“I had your very kind letter of the 15th inst., and as you told me you were going into the country, I have delayed my answer until I feel quite in your debt. I must tell you first that as I am the lowest servant of Jesus, I do not wish you to give me the title of ‘signora,’ because I am not one; neither must you speak of holy feet and hands, because I am but miserable flesh, a mere sack of vermin and a useless creature; therefore please do not use those expressions to me, but keep them for those who deserve them. And I pray you not to be angry when I say this, because out of the affection that I bear to you in our Lord, I do not like you to use superfluous terms, which towards me are a mistake. But be assured that I always do and shall pray for you and your house, as I would for my own. I pray you to commend me to Mona Maddalena, and to yourself. May our Lord preserve you.

“Prato, May 27, 1578.”

To the same

“I have received your very kind letter, which I have read twice, and have considered at the end what the thing is that your own daughter has spoken to you about. I wish that for once you would follow my plan, which is that, as soon as you receive this, you will go and confirm the

engagement with Girolamo Albizzi before you dine. When you have done this, you will see how disburdened you will feel. Especially when you have had the certainty that you are not displeasing the relations of the deceased nephew, and that Girolamo Albizzi is not in fault, and that he is not concerned with the one who committed homicide. All these things will console you, especially if the engagement be accepted voluntarily; the more so as your own daughter is asking it, though it is scarcely a thing that a girl ought to do. But as we are in such a troublesome world, we have to act cautiously and consent at times to things we should not do at others, so as not to make them worse than they might be. Ease your heart of every difficulty, and do at once cheerfully what I have told you, for it will bring great peace to all your house, and God will help you. So do it cheerfully and heartily, so that, whatever may happen to your daughter, she will not have to complain of you. And let me know, if possible by supper-time, that you are all good friends together. And then, in your own time, follow the counsel, and profit by the help of His Serene Highness for the second, with de' Botti, since you have the possibility of settling them also. May God give you grace that all may turn out honourably; meantime I hope to hear that it is done, and I give you my good wishes for your happiness.

“Prato, April 12, 1589.”

To the same

“I have received your letter, and understand the danger, and then the great grace received (for which I thank God and the most holy Virgin); also the little satisfaction you have in the younger girls, who ought not to dare to lift their eyes in your presence, much less to speak. By this one can see how the world has deteriorated. And in their position they should speak differently; and whoever puts them up to these things, will have to give a serious account. May God forgive them all; and may you overcome all by patience.

“I suppose Antonio has returned you the bundle of

your letters which I had, and which I value. To-day I send you back Maddalena's; I also thank you for the white wine and the red. I commend myself to you; may God keep you.

“PS. [by Sister Giachinotti.] Our Reverend Mother can no longer drink the red wine, so highly coloured as the last; she likes it light and mild, but do not let her know I told you. I commend myself to you.

“*Prato, June 27, 1589.*”

Ludovico Capponi religiously preserved Mother Catherine's letters to him; and below the last he ever received from her (a little note, dated January, 1590,* when the illness which ended in her death had already attacked her) he wrote this memorandum:

“This letter was the last written by the most holy Sister Catherine to me, so great a sinner, but her devoted son and servant, although quite unworthy of so many favours and such high grace. I shall always glory in having been honoured—I, a wretch—by the last letter she wrote upon earth. I entreat her, now that she is living in heaven, to pray for me, for my whole family, and for the soul of my sweet son Giulio, that God may have mercy on him, as she strongly encouraged me to hope.”

The Capponi letters number altogether, including many small notes, over ninety. But before Capponi—even before their cherished Filippo Salviati—stood Antonio Gondi in the affections of Catherine and her nuns; and from the account of his character, quoted from Razzi, he seems well to have deserved his high place amongst the saint's spiritual children. She is said, indeed, to have looked upon him from their first acquaintance as one from whom she could learn, rather than as a pupil in things divine, and to have depended upon him for the keeping together and encouraging of her other “sons,” who appear to have been constantly seeing or re-

* In both French and Italian editions this letter is dated 1589; yet the editors speak quite correctly as if it had been written immediately before her death, which was in February, 1590. There is therefore clearly a mistake, which has been overlooked, in the date. It is corrected above.

ferring to him. Gondi, the date of whose birth we are not told, was a member of an illustrious family of that name. He lived, whilst his brothers and relations led the usual lives of luxurious Florentines, rather the life of a poor Religious than that of a rich and noble secular; especially, he always wore most humble clothing, keeping to the cut and fashion of his own youth without alteration as he grew old. Remaining unmarried, he adopted for his children the shame-faced poor, and—actually living with his brothers—made the churches and holy shrines his chief places of resort. He always attended Divine Office at San Marco, would stand during all the sermons, and never neglected daily spiritual reading even in the midst of pressing business. In all things he was humble and poor in spirit, and mortified to the last degree. Hence, whilst Catherine would spur on Ludovico to constantly-increasing exertions towards self-mastery by means of penance and fervour, she had rather to do her best to pull Antonio back in his practices, by reminding him that cloistral austerity might be injurious in his state of life. It is not, however, through direct communication with him that we can study her attitude towards Gondi, as there are no letters to him extant except two perfectly uninteresting ones on pure business. It is in her incessant references to Antonio—often by familiar pet names, such as “Toto,” “Tonino,” “babbo Toto,” etc.—in letters to others, both from herself and some of her nuns, and in the frequent messages sent to him, that the really tender and filial affection felt for him by them all, and the close intimacy to which he was admitted owing to the deep respect they had for him, comes out. In all probability there was very little need for letters, as Antonio acted for thirty-seven years of his life as “Procurator-General” to the nuns, superintending other workers in their practical affairs, and being in every way of so much consequence to them that he was doubtless constantly at Prato, settling business as well as discoursing on spiritual things, *viva voce*. We know from the history of Vincenzo de' Ricci how he helped Catherine in her family matters, and what thorough confidence she had in him as guardian of her “boy.” He was in full sympathy, also, with

her and her community in their favourite devotion to Savonarola, whose memory was most sacred to him. He studied the great preacher's works, and devoutly kept relics of him—as also did Ludovico Capponi, when once Catherine had acquainted him with the life and writings of one whom she so deeply venerated.*

Antonio Gondi only survived our saint one year, dying in 1591, and being buried—as he had desired—under the pavement of San Marco, where he had spent so many hours of his life in prayer. He did not forget the needs of the convent for which he had worked so hard, but left the community 6,000 crowns by his will.

* About 1572 St Catherine began deliberately employing many of her "sons" in the work of trying to revive, especially in the city of Florence, the then almost extinct devotion to Savonarola. They succeeded so well that by 1583 the old confraternity of his followers—the Piagnoni—seemed come to life again; and Cardinal Alessandro de' Medici bitterly complained of its revival, accusing the fathers of San Marco and the nuns of San Vincenzo of bringing it about—the latter especially, by painting and disseminating pictures of the great friar. But the men of influence in Florence whom Catherine had set to work amongst the townspeople, and especially amongst youths of the better class, had probably done more towards it than any one else. (See, for full details of this matter, Chap. XII of *Pere Bayonne*, Vol. II.)

CHAPTER XVIII

Later years of St Catherine's Life—Her relations with St M. Magdalen de' Pazzi—With St Philip Neri—Her friendly intercourse with Seculars—Her spirit of Religious Poverty in sickness—Her increasing humility and desire of self-effacement shown by a final act

CONTEMPORARY with Catherine de' Ricci in Florence, though much younger, was one of those seraphic souls that appear to pass through this life only to be consumed by the love of God: Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, commonly known in England as St Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, the Carmelite. Like Catherine, she was of patrician race; and, also like her, she had left her father's home with all its splendour and attractions, whilst quite a girl, that she might possess the one and only Beloved of her heart in the "desert" of the cloister. Having entered Carmel, at the convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli, when sixteen years old, she had flown towards the things of God with such extraordinary rapidity that even before the end of her novitiate she had become the wonder of her companions for her angelic virtues, her raptures, and the many supernatural favours that it pleased heaven to grant her. Mother Catherine was at this time nearly sixty-four; and one can imagine her joy at all she would hear of the dawning of a sanctity like this so close to her. History tells us that these two holy souls held personal intercourse by some miraculous means, but it gives us no details of the manner in which this happened, or of which went first to greet the other saint. The only authentic account left of their relations with each other enables us merely to *conjecture* two things: that it was Mary Magdalen who first supernaturally visited Catherine, as the already illustrious spouse of Christ, whose glory was then filling all Italy; and

that the ecstasies to which both were subject plays no small part in their holy intimacy.*

At this same epoch, St Philip Neri was reaching the summit of his renown, and filling the capital of the Christian world with the good odour of his virtues and his apostolic zeal. As is well known, having been born in Florence and brought up under the influence of the San Marco friars, he had the greatest esteem and affection for the Dominican Order; and hence, in Rome, kept up a close intercourse with the *Minerva*. It was through this priory, and the constant visiting between the Roman fathers and their brethren in both Florence and Prato, and especially through Fra Angelo da Diaceto, a friend of both, that St Philip and St Catherine had early learnt to know and to appreciate one another. To all his wonderful virtues and holy deeds, St Philip Neri added a further title to her respect and affection, in Catherine's eyes, by his ardent devotion to Fra Girolamo Savonarola. From his childhood he had religiously preserved the memory of this great servant of God. He venerated his relics, kept his picture in his cell, and invoked him with affection as a father and a powerful protector in heaven. Benedict XIV reports a vision of St Philip's in connection with this devotion of his, which seemed to give it divine sanction. He says that when a great assembly of theologians, under Pope Paul IV, was debating the question of condemning certain doctrines of Savonarola, Philip—being in ecstasy before the blessed Sacrament at the *Minerva* surrounded by Dominican fathers—saw and heard the conclusion of the debate and the announcement of victory for Fra Girolamo's friends; which was confirmed shortly afterwards by an official message from the Vatican.†

It is not difficult to believe that two holy souls, with such similar inclinations, became intimate by means of letters as soon as report and messages made them known to each other; and it is believed by biographers of both saints that they held a correspondence for many years. There is,

* For a passage on this point, see *Vita di Santa Maria Mad. de' Pazzi*, by Vincenzo Puccini, chap. lxvi, p. 150, which describes how this saint, when in ecstasy, saw her letter delivered to St Catherine, and the latter writing an answer to it.

† *Opera Bened. XIV, de Servorum Dei Beatificatione, etc.*, lib. III, cap. xxv.

however, no letter from St Philip to Catherine left, and only one from her to St Philip, which is as follows:

To St Philip Neri

"I am mortified when I think of you, so continually occupied in such great things for the glory of God, that you should write to me, who am a poor vile woman and a miserable sinner. May God reward you for your great charity to me. I have asked our Lord to let me serve Him in health of body this Lent. He has granted me this grace; for in a moment all my malady left me; but I do not seem to have deserved it, for I have done nothing. I have, however, applied to yourself a part of all my works; and I have prayed the divine Majesty to make and keep you well, because our holy Church has great need of you. And be you pleased to pray to Jesus for me, that all the graces He gives me every hour may not be thrown away by my fault. Live ever in joy of your end; for to such a faithful servant as you have been all through your life, God, who is most just, cannot deny the reward of paradise. Prostrate on the ground, I ask your blessing.

"Your unworthy daughter, SISTER CATHERINE,

"A sinner at the feet of Jesus.

"San Vincenzio" (undated).

A niece of St Philip Neri's, named Lisabetta, and married to a certain Cioni, appears both to have known and to have had some disagreement with the nuns of Prato; for amongst her uncle's letters there is one, dated October 29, 1574, addressed to some anonymous person whom he begs to be kind to his niece "who is at law with the sisters of San Vincenzio." He asks his correspondent to see whether she is in the right or not: if she is, to help her, and if not to dissuade her from pleading.

But communication by letter was not enough for these ardent souls, who would fain inspire each other *viva voce* to higher flights of divine love; and they both expressed a strong desire that God would enable them to meet some day, even here below. Humanly, however, this seemed

impossible; for though St Philip was not, like Catherine, bound by vow of enclosure, he was completely chained to Rome by his work there, which nothing ever induced him to leave. Nevertheless, God, with whom nothing is impossible, brought about the meeting; and the following is the account given of the matter in Bacci's "Life of St Philip":*

"Giovanni Animuccia—a penitent of Philip's, living in Rome, but a native of Tuscany—having gone to Prato, and visiting Sister Catherine de' Ricci, of the Dominican Order (now commonly called the Blessed Catherine of Prato), asked her if she knew Father Philip Neri; the servant of God replied that she knew him by reputation but not by sight, though she had a great desire to see and speak to him. The following year, Giovanni returned to Prato, and went to visit her again, when she told him she had seen Father Philip and spoken to him. Philip had never left Rome, and Catherine had remained in Prato. Giovanni, arrived once more in Rome, went and told the holy Father Philip what had happened at Prato between him and Sister Catherine de' Ricci; and Philip confirmed the truth of all that the servant of God had told him.

Furthermore, in presence of several persons, the same venerable father, speaking of Catherine after her death in 1590, said openly that he had seen her in her lifetime, and described her features in detail; although (as has been said) Philip had never been to Prato and Catherine had never come to Rome. The portrait of the servant of God having been printed, Philip exclaimed on seeing it: "That picture is not like! Sister Catherine had different features!"†

There is a well-painted picture in Florence representing, from imagination, this mysterious meeting of the two saints, into which the artist has introduced Savonarola—as if descending in glory from heaven—as the common object of their special devotion.

* Lib. III, cap. xi, no. 11.

† In the Bull of St Philip Neri's canonization, Urban VIII thus expresses himself: "Iterumque cum in Urbe maneret, tunc in humanis agentem Catharinam Ricciam, sub regula Sancti Augustini monialem, Pratis in Etruria commorantem, longo temporis spatio est allocutus." In case the mention of "St Augustine's" Rule should puzzle any reader, it may be well to state that the Dominican Rule is founded on the Augustinian.

But whilst Catherine thus earnestly sought after intercourse with the saints, she grew none the less affectionate, as time went on, towards her many ordinary friends and associates in the world, conspicuous amongst whom was the ill-used wife of the grand duke Francesco, Joanna of Austria. The latter, ever since the year 1567—two years after her marriage—had made a *confidante* and adviser of the saint, and their intimate friendship continued until Joanna's death in 1577. After her friend's decease, Catherine loyally devoted a large portion of her prayers and penances, in fulfilment of a promise made to the duchess, to obtaining the salvation of Francesco, who died only three years before the saint herself.*

To the last years of her life she kept up gracious and cordial relations with all the seculars that she had to do with, showing her interest in and esteem for her friends by every delicate thought and attention that her state allowed. Thus, she specially loved to send presents of fruit, confectionery, etc., such as the convent could produce, on occasion of feasts or fasts† that made the gift appropriate; and this because kind feeling towards her fellows made her glad to seize on any opportunity that she might legitimately take for fulfilling customary social obligations. When age came upon this saint, necessarily drawing her soul closer and closer to her God as the time approached for going to join Him, everything one reads of her shows how her heart went out more, rather than less, to all with whom she had human ties, and what pleasure it gave her to contribute to their innocent earthly enjoyments as well as to their spiritual perfection.

* Many interesting details of this friendship between Catherine and Joanna, and a few of the letters connected with it, are extant; but, as space fails for giving them in the present volume, readers interested are referred to Père Bayonne's *Life*, and to Guasti's introductory notes to his *Letters*.

† The sending of sweetmeats, etc., in Lent, to friends or acquaintance, was a frequent practice of the time, and is referred to in several letters of the saint. It was done, not for the sake of treating people to extra luxuries in the penitential season, but in order to help them through the severe fast by providing them with things allowed by the Church at "collation," or supper, which should act as condiments to their frugal fare, and so encourage them not to break the Lenten rule. San Vincenzio seems to have been rather famed for the making of sweet things of various kinds; and Catherine was fond of treating people, in whose spiritual state she was interested, like babies in this particular.

Joined to this lenient spirit towards others, however, was an ever-increasing sternness and severity towards herself. Even where some absolutely necessary care for her health was concerned she never for a moment forgot what was demanded by her state of life, and allowed not the slightest relaxation of those monastic virtues, which she had undertaken to observe till death, to creep in under the excuse of needful dispensations. Never would she beg, from even the richest and most intimate of her friends, for anything that would be a comfort or relief to herself, until positively compelled to make such a request by really extreme need. Thus, in the case of wine—the common drink, when of a common sort, of an Italian community—Catherine's constant illnesses so weakened her stomach that, whilst she could actually not do without it, as she would doubtless have liked, by the time she was fifty she was unable to take the coarse, rough kind that was used in the convent. One day, therefore, Bernarda Giachinotti, the syndica, when acting as the saint's secretary, contrived to put a private postscript to a letter to Ludovico Capponi, telling him what was the only quality of wine that suited their mother's weak digestion. Ludovico was only too glad to know this, and to provide what was wanted; and he wrote to Catherine herself, saying that as he had heard of her being ill he had got a few small barrels of *Chianti* for her special use, which were now at her disposal. The answer that she sent him exactly shows forth her ideal of Religious perfection in such a matter: her objection to accepting, even for health, a gift for herself so valuable as to infringe in the least degree upon the rules of common life and poverty; but her readiness, both from delicate feeling towards the giver and from the "spirit of the poor" which begs and takes alms in the name of Christ, to accept one small enough to be merely a personal charity:

"*Molto onorando e Fratello carissimo,*" she writes, "I am very grateful to you for your benevolent thought and your affectionate kindness to me. But as it does not belong to the rules of common life that a nun can have anything

of her own and for her particular use, I may not and cannot allow a small barrel of wine to be set aside from community use to be exclusively reserved for me. Do me, then, the pleasure of keeping this provision for yourself; and when I need any, I promise you that I will ask for it from you just as freely as I should from my own brother. For if people only send me a bottle or two of this wine, as you have sometimes done, our sisters are pleased for me to accept it from the kind hand that offers it; and then I express my gratitude as I have always done to you."

This was written about 1573. Not till many years later, after terrible sufferings which had reduced her almost to extremity, did she keep her promise, and write (1587) as follows: "*Fratello carissimo*, as I have now been ill for several days, I should like to have a little of your *vino vermiglio*, but of very soft quality, for this illness has so irritated my tongue that I can bear nothing strong or sharp; and even soft things hurt me. Have patience with me! You see I am treating you with real confidence. One bottle of this wine will be enough."

As Catherine drew near the end of her earthly course, that humility which had always been her strong characteristic, and which was at the root of her simple and straightforward interpretation of duty in every department, so continually deepened that every day seemed to increase her utter contempt of self. She took every opportunity that offered of either escaping or repudiating any expression of respect or admiration from others; and did this in such a matter-of-course and natural way as to prove her genuineness. We have seen in one of her letters to Capponi how distressed, and even displeased, she was at his calling her by any titles of dignity or using terms towards her which implied a belief in her sanctity. Another Florentine gentleman, the Cavaliere Ricasoli, whose life we are told she had once saved by a miracle, was deeply impressed by an interview he had with her in after years, which strikingly brought out the low opinion she had of herself. In 1588, two years before her death, being on a pilgrimage to Lucca with his wife and children, Ricasoli stopped at Prato simply to pay

his respects to Mother Catherine. As soon as he was in her presence at the parlour *grille* he began, in graceful and courtly terms, to reproach the saint with not having given him any commands to serve her for a long time, and having thus prevented him from proving his gratitude for the signal service that she had rendered him. He was about to recall the incidents of the wonderful event, when Catherine dexterously turned the conversation to another subject; and she continued to make this subject so interesting, and to fix her visitors' attention on it so completely for the remainder of her interview, that they forgot everything else until they left. They took their leave quite charmed with her sanctity and attractiveness; but when once outside the convent, the single thing that remained in their memories was the extraordinary humility that she had shown, about which they were afterwards never tired of talking to their friends.*

In the last year of her life St Catherine crowned her numerous acts of humility by a peculiarly great and solemn one. She had been gradually discovering, for some time past, the habit that her daughters had of keeping written records of her own extraordinary supernatural favours: especially, she learnt, Sister Maddalena Strozzi did this. It was a real grief to her to know it, truly believing as she did in her own worthlessness, and having a real horror of being handed down to posterity—either within or without the convent—in what she looked upon as an entirely false light. It would appear, however, that she either did not like to make much of the matter by discussing it with the sisters, or that she doubted their strict obedience on this one point if she were to forbid the preservation of such records; for she merely awaited an opportunity of getting hold of the objectionable manuscripts, that she might destroy them herself. This she found one day in the year 1589, when all the choir nuns happened to be in the chapel together for some time. Then, using her right as prioress to enter the cells, Catherine went round to every one that she had reason to suspect of containing written notes on her doings, hastily

* Seraf. Razzi, lib. III, cap. i, p. 102.

collected all papers that she could lay hands on, which she thrust into a bag, and, going to the bake-house, where an old lay-sister was just then heating the oven, said anxiously: "Sister, make haste to burn these papers, for woe to us if they should be found in the house!" The old sister, who was specially devoted to the saint, suspected nothing but that here, as her mother told her, were bad writings, and threw them into the fire instantly as she was bidden. A few minutes burnt up all these really precious records, and Catherine went away rejoicing;* but what her daughters said on discovering her act we are not told! The memory of it was, however, perpetuated amongst her townsmen; and as late as about 1843, when they were keeping in Prato the centenary of her canonization, a certain Tuscan poet—Pietro Odaldi, of Pistoja—celebrated the saint's humility, as shown by this act, in verse. His view was that, great as were the wonders, whether of prayer, ecstasy, or penance, that the cells of San Vincenzio's convent had witnessed during the saint's life, nothing equalled the grandeur of the moment when the holy prioress had deliberately given to the flames, as she believed, all written record of her virtues and glories.†

Thus did Catherine de' Ricci, by nearly her last deed, unconsciously impress on her own life a lasting mark of that virtue which she had ever declared to be the fundamental one of all true sanctity. Sister Maddalena Strozzi, in reference to her strong feeling on this point, related how she herself had one day recommended to the saint's notice a person with great reputation of holiness; and how she had then asked in confidence whether she believed this person to be

* Seraf. Razzi, lib. III, cap. i, p. 104.

† Though the papers thus destroyed were of incalculable value to future biographers, there were happily one or two of her nuns' manuscripts which did not perish after all, either because they had been more carefully hidden than others within the convent, or because they had been already given into the charge of the prior or confessor who had taken them away. Two specially mentioned as having been thus preserved, and made use of afterwards, are: (1) A manuscript written by Sister Maddalena Ridolfi (one of the widows spoken of in a former chapter, who died in the convent after St Catherine), which was used in the process of beatification; and (2) a manuscript compiled, between May and September, 1583, by Sister Tommasa Martelli, which contains many incidents of the saint's life, and in which are copies of one of her letters and of two "chapters" to to her nuns. (See Guasti's *Lettere, etc.*, page cvi of Italian edition; page 70* of French translation.)

as holy as was reported. Catherine had replied without hesitation: "Yes—if she is humble; for whenever I see a soul established on this foundation, I believe it capable of every good thing. But if I should see a person working miracles, and did not find the virtue of humility in his soul, I should refuse him my esteem and think nothing of him."*

* *Le Lettere, etc., Documenti*, p. 110.

CHAPTER XIX

The Saint's interior life during her latter years—Her last illness—Death (1590) and funeral—Posthumous Apparitions and Miracles—Opening of the Cause of her Beatification—It is postponed—Celebrated Incident in the Process—She is beatified (1732)—Her Relics translated—She is Canonized (1746)

SUCH, then, were Catherine's relations with her kind—such the outward manifestations of her virtue—as the end came near; and just as these exterior, spontaneous acts and words often betrayed the largeness of her charity and the depth of her humility to friends outside, so, we are told, did many things in her demeanour unconsciously betray to those within the convent something of her almost hourly increasing union with the Beloved of her soul. Age and suffering made no difference to her fulfilment of all possible active community duties, nor was her high supernatural state shown by any deliberate change in her outward life. She daily talked, worked, gave orders, dictated letters, remaining always calm, peaceful and affectionate, to nearly the very end, as usual. Only, as she did all this, it was more and more clear to all around how no exterior things at all—neither the being surrounded by her nuns, nor visits of friends, nor public ceremonies, nor any concourse of people—could draw her thoughts for a moment away from God. They saw how, on the contrary, every person or thing that she had to do with had come to serve as a means of ever-stronger attraction towards Him, to such a degree that she could not regard a creature of any kind save as a reminder of her Creator. Numerous beautiful stories are told by the old biographers of the supernatural atmosphere that appeared to surround the holy prioress during the last stage of her earthly life—stories of how a flower, a stream, even a thing connected with the prosaic daily work of the house—would throw her, as of old, into an ecstasy; of how a glory often shone round her, visible to all, as she knelt in a state of rapture after Com-

munion; and of how her angelic purity of body and soul was from time to time made manifest to her sisters by a sweet and delicate fragrance—like to no earthly perfume—that accompanied her presence or remained where she had been. They tell, too, of heavenly visitants—of the Blessed Mother of God, of saints and of angels, who came to give her a foretaste of the joys to which she was hastening, by their company.

But no spiritual joys or heavenly visions altered the saint's desire to suffer to the end with her Lord. It has been shown in the last chapter how stern she was to herself, as her illnesses increased with age, in the matter of any sort of relief from better food or whatever might be called a luxury. In addition to this unyielding negative self-denial, she went on unceasingly with the positive severities of exterior bodily penances, which nothing would induce her to give up unless when actually incapacitated. Besides continuing to wear her painful hair-shirts and girdles, and keeping up her constant fasts and abstinences, she never relented in her practice of three severe nightly disciplines, which she seems even to have increased in degree as time went on.

The sufferings, throughout which Catherine thus heroically acted, were in themselves enough to have served as penance for many ordinary lives. We have seen, by the numerous references to it in her letters, how frequently she was laid up with attacks of fever all through her life. These attacks never appear to have decreased, and often reduced her to such weakness that she was in bed for weeks together, whilst they were frequently accompanied by great pains. Besides these natural illnesses, the saint suffered severely from the permanent, sharp pangs produced by the sacred stigmata, which never left her; and the excessive strain upon her natural faculties caused by her frequent raptures, when the spiritual powers were exercised to a degree that unavoidably disturbed and weakened the corporal ones, kept her in a chronic state of excessive delicacy. Hence, bodily comfort became a thing unknown to her, and the very thought of rest impossible in connection with this world: and here came in perhaps the most heroic of all her acts; for, through

all this, not only was she full of supernatural courage and readiness to suffer cheerfully with her crucified Spouse, but she kept up her bright, serene and sympathetic intercourse with all around her, unaltered, in the midst of her worst illnesses, and as all her sufferings increased with age. Thus, to the very end, she was not only the spiritual head and mother—the supernatural guide and publicly acknowledged glory—of her community, but their daily joy and delight, from the freshness and grace of her nature, as completely as she had been in her earliest days of office when almost a girl. To her outside friends, too, there had been no observable difference, all having been accustomed to hearing of her sufferings and to seeing her bravely overcome them, when the time came for her departure.

It was on January 23, 1590, that her last illness came on. Several members of her family had come that day from Florence to see her, and Catherine had let them take up her attention so entirely as to neglect necessary care of herself. Towards evening, when they left, though extremely tired and having barely broken her fast, she insisted on going to Compline, for which it was just the hour; and this proved to be the last time that the saint was to be present in the choir with her daughters. At seven o'clock she ate her modest repast; and at nine she was seized with violent pains in her side, which tormented her without ceasing for four days. On the last of these days, the 27th, grave complications appeared; and as no care in nursing, and no treatment of the doctors who were sent for, seemed able to hinder rapid aggravation of the bad symptoms, Mother Catherine's devoted children began to add the dread of losing her to their grief at seeing her terrible pain. In the midst of it all, however, she still retained her calm gentleness and sweet smile. Only when they told her that she must submit to a very severe remedy that had been administered in a former illness, she said quietly: "I know that when Jesus wishes to mortify us, He always finds the means." The said remedy had before almost stifled her; so, fearing the same result, she prepared for speedy death, and began by humbly begging pardon of all the sisters present for "not having been all that she ought have been, but a great sinner and a bur-

den to the convent." Then, comforting them with gentle words, she exhorted them to persevere in holy observance and community life, promising to be their protectress before God; and afterwards she got them to support her with their arms, so that she might creep round her cell to two little altars she had there: one with a crucifix and the other with a statue of our Lady holding the Divine Infant. At each of them she made a long prayer, asking our Lord and His Mother that she might live a little longer if God willed, "Not for myself, but for my poor daughters." Then, surrendering herself utterly to the *fat* of Divine Providence, she entreated the Blessed Trinity, by that love which had created her in His own image and likeness, to forgive all her sins and grant her salvation. She further begged the Blessed Virgin, as refuge of sinners, not to desert her in the last moment, and all the holy angels and saints to be with her in her need, and conduct her to her eternal home.

On January 31 she asked for the appointed remedy, which consisted in five small globules of terebinth, and took them with eyes fixed on the crucifix, and in honour of the Five Sacred Wounds. That same evening, as her illness increased, her loving daughters thought that the crucifix which had formerly been the medium of such wonderful miracles in her cell might be a comfort to her, and fetched it from the church, not without a hope that her cure might be miraculously worked by its means. Catherine, when she saw it brought in, stretched forth her arms with joy to receive it, and—pressing it against her breast—poured forth many tender ejaculations to her crucified Spouse, thanking Him fervently for His sufferings on her behalf, lamenting her own ingratitude, and humbly begging again for her own salvation, for which she said she confidently hoped, "not through presumption, but from love of Him." She further protested that she had always wished to die on the cross with Jesus, and offered herself once more as a victim to the Divine Majesty. She finished with an earnest prayer that our Lord would free her from all fear of death, so that she might go full of hope to meet Him; and as she uttered this last request, it is said that a terrible noise was heard outside her cell,

accompanied by a shaking of the whole house that felt like an earthquake. The nuns were convinced that this disturbance was one final effort of the enemy of souls, venting his impotent rage against the holy woman whose life had snatched so many from his grasp.

On February 1 they asked Catherine if she would like to receive Viaticum, which she said was her most earnest wish. She immediately prepared for it by sacramental confession, and afterwards remained for an hour in prayer, which seemed like an ecstasy. As she came to herself they heard her murmur softly, "We must submit to the will of God," and hence concluded that she had had her approaching end positively revealed to her. The Holy Eucharist was then brought in solemn procession to her cell; and as she heard the little bell announcing its arrival, she cried, "Here is my Jesus—let us go to meet Him!" and insisted on being helped off her bed (where she lay fully dressed) and supported, kneeling on a little stool, by two sisters. Her face, we are told, was so radiantly beautiful at this moment that no one would have guessed her to be close to death. When the Blessed Sacrament entered the room, she adored it by a deep prostration; and, gazing at it with a look full of confidence, once more thanked her Saviour aloud for all He had done for her. Once more, also, before receiving the sacred elements for the last time, she turned and begged pardon of her weeping children "for not having always helped and comforted them as well as she could have wished"; and then she made her oral profession of faith in the Real Presence and in all the truths of the Holy Catholic Church: after which she devoutly received her Lord's body and blood, and knelt on between her two supporters for some little time in fervent petition and thanksgiving.

Two hours later, Catherine saw individually a great many of the community who came to give her their last confidences and to receive her advice, and for each one she had some special "words of life" to comfort her and some special light to give. After these interviews were over, she still had the strength and clearness of mind necessary to spend a few hours in giving minute directions about the

administration of the temporal and spiritual affairs of the convent. But time pressed. They administered the sacrament of Extreme Unction; and she received it with fervour, answering the appointed prayers with her sisters, and even singing with them—again kissing the miraculous crucifix and uttering more loving ejaculations. This solemn ceremony over, she sent for the whole community to her bedside, in divisions, taking in turns the separate groups or classes of which the sisterhood was made up—the postulants, the lay-sisters, the novices, the “juniors,” and the “ancients”—and to each little flock gave, with her dying lips, such particular instructions as were exactly suited to its own condition. One only of these final exhortations shall be here cited, showing the spirit of them all, i.e., her last words to the “mothers” of the community. She recommended specially to them peace and union amongst themselves; zeal for the honour of God, for regular observance, and for the perfect fulfilment of their vows. She told them that their part was to watch most carefully that the question of “mine and thine” was never introduced into their convent, but that everybody there persevered in the common life after the manner that she had established; and she concluded by this solemn declaration: “That the spirit of possession in a monastery was poison to the love of God, and the source of innumerable disputes and great disquiet of conscience, for any one who was bound by a vow of poverty.”

Then, her last duty to her children accomplished, Catherine turned away finally from everything but her God, quietly dividing her attention between thoughts of our Lord in His Passion, and the saying of her usual *Paters*, *Aves*, and psalms. On the very threshold of eternity, as her strength gradually ebbed, she was as calm and collected as she had been on ordinary days—everything about her simple and unexaggerated—her death, in short, merely the act for which every moment of her life had prepared: the going to be happy for ever with her Maker. The last prayer whose sound the watchers caught on her lips was an “Our Father.”

The end came at about two o'clock in the morning of the Purification, on a Friday. A little while before this

hour, the nuns kneeling round the saint's bed thought they heard some peculiarly sweet singing in the distant novitiate, and a few of them stole out of the cell to listen to it. Then they found that it was not within the house at all, but that the sounds, of entrancing beauty, seemed to come from above; and they felt convinced that nothing less than a choir of angels was making this divine harmony. For more than a quarter of an hour the exquisite sounds lasted, bringing deep consolation to their hearts. Moreover, they seemed by-and-by to hear distinctly sung the *Veni, sponsa Christi!* and just as they believed these words to be uttered by angels' voices, Catherine murmured the request, "Might she die soon, because her poor children were so tired out with watching?" Then, as if knowing that she was heard, she suddenly raised her right hand and closed her own eyes, just as she had been used to do for her sisters, stretched out her feet and arms in the form of a cross, and without any outward sign or movement gave up her soul to God.

At the moment of her death, one of those revelations, so often granted to holy people when saints are called away, came to a nun in a convent at Prato. She was spending the night in vigil, when she suddenly saw in vision a magnificent procession of saints, followed by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who was bearing a glorified soul to heaven. Whilst gazing in delight on this apparition, she heard the passing-bell at San Vincenzio toll for Mother Catherine, and immediately realized what the splendid vision had meant. The same sight was also seen, at the same moment, by a man in Prato named Baccio Verzoni, one of the saint's spiritual sons, who instantly recognized her in the soul led by Christ to glory. He roused his household to tell them of the vision, but they tried to persuade him that it was a fancy, caused by his having thought so much about Catherine's illness; when the passing-bell suddenly proved to them also that it was really a revelation of her death and of her eternal happiness at the same time.

Later on in the same day two or three apparitions of the saint herself, as if in bodily form, announced the certainty of that salvation that she had so confidently hoped for, to

different people. A little niece of hers, Fiammetta de' Ricci, who was being brought up at San Vincenzio, saw her aunt, as she thought, kneeling in prayer in the sanctuary, her nun's habit all shining with radiant beauty, some time after they had told her that she was dead. The child thought she must be after all alive, and was trying to get out of her own place to run to her, when she saw her suddenly disappear as the nuns brought in the dead body on a bier, and laid it where her aunt seemed to have been kneeling; and Fiammetta understood that she had come from heaven to visit her. Catherine also appeared in great glory to some nuns of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence; whilst St Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi was granted a marvellous vision of her happiness amongst the blessed, during an ecstasy.

Notwithstanding their absolute assurance of their holy mother's happiness, however, the nuns of her convent are described as having given way just at first, when the news of her actual death spread through the whole community, to such violent grief that they even neglected to do the required services to her body, and left it for a time untended just as it lay, crosswise, on the bed where she had died. Razzi, and the *Compendium*, are both quoted as affirming that God Himself then took care of the holy mortal remains, and invested them with such beauty and splendour that when the sisters controlled themselves sufficiently to return to the cell to do the last offices for their prioress, they could hardly gaze on the face for the dazzling rays that from time to time came forth from it. All the supernatural favours that Catherine had received in the corporal marks of our Lord's Passion were moreover now made clear that all might see: the stigmata of the five sacred wounds and the marks of the thorny crown; whilst the mysterious "ring of espousals" was made visibly resplendent to some of the nuns. The heavenly fragrance, too, that had so often come from her when living was emitted by the virginal corpse.

Such a sight comforted and cheered the desolate nuns, and they prepared the saint's body for its last resting-place with loving care, laying it—apparently embalmed, and of

course clothed in full Religious dress—on a bier adorned with flowers. From the cell they then reverently carried it through the whole convent, as though wishing every part of the house to be blessed by its presence, and especially the galleries and cloisters which Catherine had so loved during life. Lastly, having laid down the bier for a short time in their own choir—that their mother might, as it were, bid farewell in person to that place of her chief delight on earth—they bore it into the public church, where it was placed on a raised platform that all might see it. For it need hardly be said that neither Florence nor Prato, after the many years of their intense love and veneration for the saint, would have consented quietly to being deprived of a last sight of her whom they counted a glory to her native city. Her body was left in the church for two days, so that the crowds who came might freely visit it: and numbers, not content with looking, pressed up to the bier to touch the holy corpse with some sort of object, entreating Catherine's intercession with the fullest confidence in her sanctity.

It is a pleasure to know that the saint's care for her young brother Vincenzo was returned at the time of her death by his care to do what he could to transmit her likeness to posterity. He was still devotedly fond of her; and at the first news of her dangerous illness had come and established himself in the convent guest-parlour, between which and the sick-room the portress sister constantly went and came, bringing Vincenzo information as to every incident of the illness. After her death, whilst the body was still on the bier, he had a plaster mould taken of his sister's face; and, from this, the sisters afterwards commissioned an artist—name unknown—to paint a picture of their mother as she lay in her coffin surrounded and crowned with flowers.

Vincenzio kept watch in the church for the two days of his beloved sister's "lying-in-state" there; and with him, also for the whole time, her faithful "son," Ludovico Capponi, kept guard. Both men were much and sympathetically noticed, it is said, by the crowds assembled, for

the noble gravity and recollection of their demeanour, and also for the deep grief—the tears and sobs—which they could not control when the body was finally carried away out of sight for its burial.

This was done on the Saturday night, the bier being then taken inside the convent, for the nuns themselves to perform the last funeral rites. But, to give the people of Prato one more opportunity of seeing the remains of their adored Mother Catherine, instead of being taken straight out of the church it was carried through the assembled throng across the piazza of St Dominic, down the great avenue that leads to the chief door of San Vincenzio, and so back into that home where “Alessandra Lucrezia Romola de’ Ricci” had presented herself as a humble postulant fifty-five years ago.

The sisters, now in full possession of their mother’s body, spent that night, and the greater part of Sunday, in prayers and vigils. On Sunday evening they chanted solemn office; and then—each sister separately having reverently kissed the saint’s hands in final farewell—they placed her in a leaden coffin, enclosed in a wooden chest. This was placed within a deep niche in the vestibule of their own interior chapel, underneath the miraculous image of the Blessed Virgin, through which the convent had been so wonderfully protected at the sacking of Prato. This niche was then walled-up, and on it was graven in Latin the following simple inscription:

Born the 23rd of April, A.D. 1522

Died the 2nd of February, 1590

—
To the Memory

of

the Reverend Mother

SISTER CATHERINE

of Pierfrancesco de’ Ricci of Florence

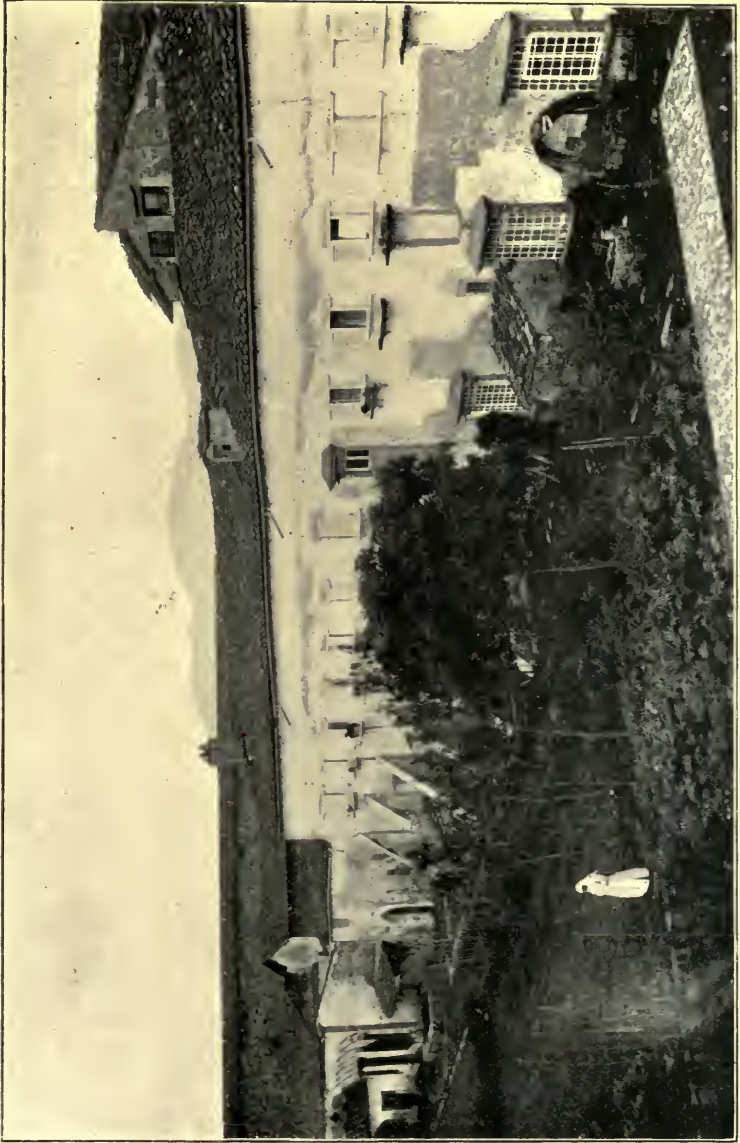
Who, favoured by the grace of the Almighty,
Magnificently increased and endowed this Monastery.

From her devoted Daughters in Christ
as having deserved well of them

—
She lived 67 years, 9 months and 9 days.

So lived, and so died, the "Saint of Prato." It only remains now to give, as shortly as may be, some account of such posthumous incidents—natural and supernatural—as were of importance with regard to her after-fame.

The community of San Vincenzo, after burying her who had been for over forty years the head and centre of their daily lives, fell for a time—very naturally—into a kind of melancholy calm: a state of passive mourning, from which they found it difficult to rouse themselves to real interest in anything. The very earliest supernatural events recorded as having happened in the convent after Catherine's death are certain appearances of their beloved prioress to the nuns, which caused the first break in their gloom. Old Taddea—the lay-sister who had burnt the manuscript for her—was the first person consoled by a vision; and next to her the sister who perhaps felt more completely "lost" without the saint than any other member of the community—Sister Bernarda Giachianotti, of whom so much has been heard as Catherine's devoted "secretary." Her departed mother seemed to take pity on her forlorn condition and determine to put an end to her loneliness. After suffering for a short time from an oppressive sense of void in her existence, Sister Bernarda suddenly began to feel as if Catherine was close by her side, just as she used to be when dictating her letters; and thenceforward she heard the voice she so loved whisper in her ear every day: "My child, make haste to put your affairs in order, for you have no time to lose." Moreover, every morning at Mass, when the time came for Communion, she distinctly felt her mother's hand gently pushing her towards the holy table, as she used to do in lifetime to any of the sisters whom she expected to receive some extraordinary grace. Bernarda confided these things to one or two of the sisters who were her special intimates, and all were unanimous in assuring her that it could mean nothing else but that the saint was calling her and bidding her prepare to die well, of which she was easily persuaded. She accordingly did her very utmost to prepare; and two or three months afterwards, still hearing her mother's voice in her ear, she died as if answering to her call by a last *Adsum!*



CONVENT OF SAN VINCENZIO: FROM THE GARDEN.

After these first appearances, Razzi says that for nearly two years after her death Catherine continued to live in spirit amongst her children, so that she almost seemed to be still their true prioress. First to one and then to another would she either actually appear or make her voice heard, and for every sort of purpose—now to decide a point of conscience; now to set a scruple at rest; now simply to cheer and console in sadness, or to encourage those who had to take office to face the responsibility bravely: and then, again, to help her children in temporal difficulties by working miracles in their favour.

Simultaneously with these supernatural occurrences within the convent, and for long afterwards, many miracles were wrought outside; and these, not only in Prato itself, or in Florence, but all through Tuscany and in other parts of Italy. From the time of her death onwards—so great and so wide-spread was the belief in her sanctity—Catherine was universally invoked, in illness or trouble, by people of every class; and numbers of those who asked her prayers obtained their requests either at home, or on visiting her tomb.* Many brought pictures, statues, or symbolic objects, as *ex votos* after receiving favours, to the convent; and on this point Père Bayonne blames the nuns for not having taken sufficient trouble to preserve such offerings in honour of their saint, by keeping them apart from other decorations of the church or convent as special records of the miracles worked through her intercession.

Still, though their modesty might make them a little backward to accept public homage for their deceased mother, the nuns did all they could themselves to get her memory perpetuated. They had several portraits of her both painted and engraved; and at different periods in succession her tomb, and the walls around it, were decorated with pictures of sacred subjects by artists of various schools. The first definite impulse towards moving for Catherine's beatification came,

* These references to visits to Catherine's "tomb" are somewhat puzzling, as the tomb at this time was merely the walled-in place inside the enclosure. We can only suppose that the "vestibule" described above, as containing the niche under the miraculous image, was at the end of the nuns' choir, next to the public church; and that therefore it was visible, probably through a *grille*, to the faithful in general.

only twelve years after her decease, to Mgr Caccia, then lately made Bishop of Pistoja and Prato. He made his first pastoral visitation to San Vincenzo in 1602, on which occasion there was a fresh apparition of the saint, when she appeared amongst some of the oldest nuns who were accompanying the bishop round the convent, looking just as she used to look when on earth. Both he and the sisters took this as a special intimation that an official enquiry into her sanctity should be obtained; and Caccia—having himself enquired whilst at Prato into every incident of a supernatural kind connected with visits to her tomb, cures obtained by invoking her, etc.—got the matter discussed in Rome, and succeeded, just twenty-four years after Catherine's death, in introducing the cause of her beatification, in the year 1614.

The cause was approved and placed in the hands of the judges in 1624, by Urban VIII. All was found satisfactory, and the commission had actually pronounced that beatification might safely be proceeded with, when fresh decrees made by Urban himself suddenly transformed the whole mode of procedure for the canonization of saints, and everything had to be begun afresh on entirely new methods. There were many other causes which the Congregation of Rites had now to take in earlier order than Catherine's; and the consequence was that her beatification was postponed for nearly a century. The last examination, under the new rules, took place in 1716; and on this occasion an important incident happened, of special interest to the Dominican Order.

There was question of the devotion and *cultus* that Catherine had professed for Girolamo Savonarola. The *Promotor Fidei*,* Prosper Lambertini (afterwards the celebrated Benedict XIV) opposed her on this point, affirming that in this matter she had sinned. He said that, however eloquently Pico de la Mirandola, Marsilio Ficini, and others might have defended the great friar, there were two incontestable facts most damaging to his memory. First, he and his companions had been officially handed over to the secular arm to be executed, and to have their bodies afterwards

* Popularly known as "The Devil's Advocate."

publicly burnt at the stake. Secondly, there were undeniable proofs, confirmed by Savonarola's own confession, that he had been guilty of disobedience to the pope, and that in his preaching he had tried to rouse his hearers to rebel against the vices of the Roman Court, declaring himself to be a prophet sent from God.

Catherine's defenders replied to these alleged facts by others no less incontestable, but favourable to the friar's memory. They showed that Girolamo Savonarola had legitimately enjoyed a great reputation for holiness during his life, and that this reputation had survived him; that at his death he was in communion with the Church of Rome; that he had approached the sacrament of penance to purify his soul by humble confession; that he had received the Holy Eucharist with devotion; and had been grateful for the Plenary Indulgence which the Sovereign Pontiff had given him. From all these facts they drew the conclusion that Catherine could have addressed private prayers to him without sin; for, they maintained with Suarez, the only thing necessary to justify the faithful in privately offering homage and prayers to the soul of one whom they regard as their advocate with God, is that they should have a "highly probable opinion" that such a soul is in possession of eternal salvation.

By a large majority, almost unanimously, the Congregation of Rites, recognizing the force of this answer, gave their decision on the point in favour of Catherine's defenders. But as the latter, somewhat over jealous for Savonarola's honour, tried to make this decision the excuse for a proclamation of the injustice of his death, and as a fiery controversy seemed likely to arise over this further question which would in nowise profit Catherine's cause, it was thought better to refer the matter to the pope, then Benedict XIII. He, wishing very wisely to avoid reviving the long-silenced question of the justice or injustice of Savonarola's sentence, published a decree by which he commanded that, in future, *silence* should be observed as to the *cutlus* of Fra Girolamo by the servant of God. Thus, nothing could henceforth be concluded from this, for or against her cause; and, putting the point on one side, they proceeded to other questions.*

* *Opera Bened. XIV, De Servorum Dei Beat: etc.*, lib. III, cap. xxv, No. 17-20.

The first decree, in favour of the venerable Catherine's heroic virtues, was published by Benedict XIII on March 7, 1727; the second, in favour of the authenticity of her miracles, on April 30, 1732, under Clement XII; and finally, her solemn beatification was celebrated in St Peter's, by the same pontiff, on November 23 in the same year, being made the occasion of tremendous rejoicings in Florence on the part of the populace, as well as of the Ricci family and the Dominican Order.

Nearly a year later, on September 26, 1733, the tomb of the *Beata* was opened, in the presence of Mgr Federigo Alamanni, then Bishop of Pistoja and Prato, of two great-nephews of Catherine's, the Prior of St Dominic's, and several other important ecclesiastical and lay functionaries. The sacred remains were reverently exposed, after a hundred and forty-two years of interment, to the gaze of a generation that knew her only by fame; and they beheld with awe that certain parts of her body had the flesh remaining on it whilst all the rest was a skeleton: those parts, namely, that had been mysteriously honoured in life by the marks of Christ's Passion. On the left side, the flesh extended from the shoulder (which bore a purple mark where the cross had rested) down to the breast, which showed clearly the wound made by the lance. Moreover, whilst her clothing, and everything else that had been buried with her, had fallen to dust, the little wooden cross usually placed in the hands of a nun on burial remained intact, and so firmly fixed between her fingers that they could not take it away.

After gazing with wonder at these glorious signs of her sanctity, and offering thanks to God, the bishop and priests lifted Catherine's body most respectfully from its coffin, and placed it in a large gilt reliquary, with glass sides, having first had it clothed again in the Religious habit, so arranged as to show the mysteriously-preserved marks on her side and shoulder, and the small wooden cross clasped in her hand. This casket was carried into the public church and placed, for the veneration of the people, high up over the altar, whilst a series of solemn ecclesiastical festivities was held. An enormous throng assembled to take part in this

celebration; and the joy of the populace at actually beholding the body of the saintly virgin of whose wonderful life they had heard so much, whose memory was so dearly cherished in Prato, was overwhelming; and doubly so when the miraculous preservation of the sacredly-marked flesh was perceived.

The public celebration lasted three days, during which Sandrini says that very many hearts were moved to true repentance for sin, and went on the spot to make humble and contrite confessions, so that all the local priests scarcely sufficed to hear the numbers that flocked to their feet throughout this memorable *triduo*.

The festivities over, Catherine's body was brought down from its high position and placed permanently underneath the high altar, cased in a beautiful silver shrine, presented by the Ricci family. Here it still remains, behind a gilt iron *grille* through which it is clearly visible.

Some fresh miracles signaled the beatification, and the further process for canonization was immediately started. Ten years, however, passed before the examination of these last miracles was finished, by which time Benedict XIV was on the papal throne. He gave his formal approbation to the favourable decision of the judges in 1744, choosing for this purpose the feast of St Philip Neri, in memory of the friendship between him and Catherine. On this day, the great pontiff first said Mass on St Philip's altar, and prayed for a long time before his relics; after which he solemnly declared the authenticity of the miracles brought forward for her canonization.

Two years later, on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, 1746, he enrolled the name of the Blessed Catherine de' Ricci amongst the canonized, and proclaimed her "saint" before the Universal Church.

This event was celebrated, like the Beatification, by a grand religious *fiesta* in Prato, at which Benedict XIV gave leave to the nuns of San Vincenzo to come forth from their cloister and walk in procession round the Piazza of St Dominic with their mother's shrine, which was carried aloft over the same road that her coffin had taken. The sisters,

on this occasion, are described as having given such immense edification to the crowds—formed of every rank in life, both lay and clerical—through which they walked, by the modesty, humility and devotion of their behaviour, as to have touched some onlookers to tears. Nothing could have been a truer homage to the saint than the tender admiration thus roused by her children, of whom Sandrini says that “there was not one who on that day did not present a true image of her whose body they were accompanying in the triumph of her sanctity”; and loud acclamations of joy and gratitude from the populace fitly crowned the honours offered to her on that great day.

St Catherine de' Ricci's home has happily not lost its love and veneration for her. The quiet town of Prato keeps up her memory, indeed, by having almost forgotten the name of San Vincenzio for her former abode, and calling it the convent of “Santa Catarina.” The community, happily, still exists, having succeeded by the help of friends (notably by relations of M. Cesare Guasti, the editor of her “Letters”) in buying back their house from the Italian government, so as to be safely established there. This community, it will interest readers to hear, is lineally descended from the original one, though woefully diminished in size—numbering about thirty nuns, where there used to be between one and two hundred. But their loyal devotion to their saintly “mother” is undiminished; and they carefully cherish a pear-tree in the grounds planted by the saint's hands, which still bears fruit. Many changes, it would appear from descriptions, have taken place in decorations and arrangements of church and house, and some of the monastic buildings are possibly gone, and others restored; but the main part of the convent—far too large, of course, for its present inhabitants—remains, and its substantial form and materials are those of the original construction raised by Filippo Salviati.

APPENDIX

List of Original Sources for the Life of St Catherine de' Ricci

- I. *Vita della Venerabile Madre Suor Caterina de' Ricci, vergine, nobil fiorentina, monaca nel monastero di San-Vincenzio di Prato, scritta del Padre Serafino Razzi de' Predicatori.* (In Lucca, Busdraghi, 1594, in 4to.)

For this *Vita*, Razzi—besides his own personal recollections of the Saint, and the verbal accounts of her contemporaries in the convent—made use of Sister Maddalena Strozzi's MS. notes, and of four contemporary memoirs compiled by St Catherine's confessors, and other ecclesiastics who had known her.

- II. *Vita della Venerabile Madre Suor Caterina de' Ricci, etc. —scritta del Padre Fra Filippo Guidi, Fiorentino.* (Firenze, Sermatelli, 1617.)

Guidi was a learned Dominican who was confessor at San Vincenzo during a part of the Saint's own life. He made use of several contemporary MS. "Lives," Latin and Italian (of which full accounts may be found in Père Bayonne's work); and also of a *Vita Anonyma di Santa Caterina de' Ricci* from which readers of the present Life will have found several quotations.

The two Lives by Razzi and Guidi, with the various documents used by them as authorities, form the primitive monuments of St Catherine, commonly called her "Leggenda maravigliosa."

After them, come some seventeenth century memoirs, printed and in MS., Italian and French, chiefly short, and mostly mere compilations. Next, with the "Processes" for the Beatification and Canonization, come:

- III. (1) *Compendio della Vita della beata Caterina de' Ricci, monaca ee., estratto da processi fatti per la sua beatificazione, autore Virginio Vassechi, Cassinese, Bresciano.* (In Firenze, Paperini, 1733, in 4to.)

(2) *Vita di Santa Caterina de' Ricci, cavata dai sommari dei processi fatti per la sua beatificazione e canonizzazione, proposti ed esaminati nella sagra congregazione de' Riti.* (In Roma, per Girolamo Mainardi. 1746, in 4to.)

Then we have the most often quoted Life of the Saint, next to the two "primitive" ones.

IV. *Vita di Santa Caterina de' Ricci . . . delle Ordine di San-Domenico, descritta del Padre Fra Domenico Maria Sandrini, del' istesso Ordine.* (In Firenze, Francesco Moücke, 1747, in 4to.)

Lastly, that very important source of information as to the Saint's inner life and influence on souls :

V. *Le Lettere spirituali è familiari di Santa Caterina de' Ricci, Fiorentina, raccolte e illustrate da Cesare Guasti.* (In Prato, per Ranieri Guasti, 1861.)

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