

# St. Catherine of Siena and the Reverence Due to Priests

[Maura Roan McKeegan](#)



**When I first read St. Catherine of Siena’s *The Dialogue* several years ago,** its contents impressed me in many ways. One message, though, etched itself on my memory more firmly than the others. To this day, when I think of this book, it is this message that I remember most: “The sins of the clergy should not lessen your reverence for them.” (*Dialogue* 116)

Like many Catholics, I have had wonderful encounters with saintly priests and tense encounters with their opposites. I have been tempted to share my stories of injustice, hoping for sympathy and understanding from listeners who know how dreadful it is to be slighted by a priest. Reading *The Dialogue* helped me to realize how important it is to pause in these times of temptation and resist any impulse to speak badly of a priest.

St. Catherine lived during a tumultuous time in the Church, when many priests were leading immoral lives and causing scandal for their flocks (although many

holy priests lived during that time, too). She wrote *The Dialogue* in the fourteenth century, after having a profound mystical experience. In the book, a soul (St. Catherine) has a conversation with God and asks Him several questions, which He answers in great depth. One of St. Catherine's requests is that God would reveal to her the sins of the clergy, so that she might intensify her "sorrow and compassion and restless longing for their salvation." (108)

Because St. Catherine's motive is love and not judgment—she wants only to be stirred to deeper prayers for the souls of the clergy—God grants her request and reveals to her the evil that His ministers are doing. First, though, He reminds St. Catherine of the sublime dignity of the priesthood, and the reverence due to priests, by virtue of the sacrament of the altar which they alone have received the power to celebrate. He says:

The reverence you pay to [priests] is not actually paid to them but to me, in virtue of the blood I have entrusted to their ministry. If this were not so, you should pay them as much reverence as to anyone else, and no more. It is this ministry of theirs that dictates that you should reverence them and come to them, not for what they are in themselves but for the power I have entrusted to them, if you would receive the sacraments of the Church....

So the reverence belongs not to the ministers, but to me and to this glorious blood made one thing with me because of the union of divinity with humanity. And just as the reverence is done to me, so also is the irreverence, for I have already told you that you must not reverence them for themselves, but for the authority I have entrusted to them. Therefore you must not sin against them, because if you do, you are really sinning not against them but against me. This I have forbidden, and I have said that it is my will that no one should touch them. (116)

Sadly, derision of priests is not something that ended in St. Catherine's time. It is still rampant today, and often, the criticism seems to come more from within the Church than without. The advent of social media has magnified the problem. Clergy from parish priests on up to the Vicar of Christ are publicly accused of being too traditional, not traditional enough, too weak, too heavy-handed, too

ecumenical, too doctrinal, too charismatic, or a host of other criticisms which the critics believe are justified.

But *The Dialogue* says such criticism is never justified:

For this reason no one has excuse to say, “I am doing no harm, nor am I rebelling against holy Church. I am simply acting against the sins of evil pastors.” Such persons are deluded, blinded as they are by their own selfishness.... It is me they assault, just as it was me they revered. To me redounds every assault they make on my ministers: derision, slander, disgrace, abuse. Whatever is done to them I count as done to me....

By not paying me reverence in the persons of my ministers, they have lost respect for the latter and persecuted them because of the many sins and faults they saw in them. If in truth the reverence they had for them had been for my sake, they would not have cut it off on account of any sin in them. For no sin can lessen the power of this sacrament, and therefore their reverence should not lessen either. When it does, it is against me they sin. (116)

### ***The Part of the Faithful: Tears and Prayers for Mercy***

This sin of persecuting priests and denying them due honor, God tells St. Catherine, is “more serious than any other,” because those who do this are persecuting and dishonoring the blood of Jesus.

If all the other sins these people have committed were put on one side and this one sin on the other, the one would weigh more in my sight than all the others. (116)

That does not mean God is letting priests off the hook. On the contrary, He tells St. Catherine that priests who do evil and lead their flocks astray are devils.

Their dignity in being my ministers will not save them from my punishment. Indeed, unless they change their ways, they will be punished more severely than all the others, because they have received more from my kindness. Having sinned so miserably, they are deserving of greater punishment. So you see how

they are devils, just as I told you that my chosen ones are angels on earth and do the work of the angels. (121)

Because “things can be better known by looking at their opposites” (110), God tells St. Catherine of His faithful ministers who serve His people in humility and virtue, extolling them as “precious stones” whom God has set with the “greatest honor in everlasting life,” and the sight of them makes Him “gloriously happy.” (119)

At the same time, He laments the many sins of faithless clergy, including promiscuity, lying with prostitutes, selling graces, usury, gluttony, avarice toward the poor, vanity in seeking high offices, greed for worldly riches, and, as He tells St. Catherine, many more sins far worse than what He describes. He tells her how abominable these sins are in His sight, and how deeply these ministers offend Him. Yet He makes it clear to St. Catherine that His people must give reverence to His priests no matter how sinful the priests may be, and leave the judgment to God.

Reverence neither is nor should be given them for what they are in themselves, but only for the authority I have entrusted to them. The sacramental mystery cannot be lessened or divided by their sinfulness. Therefore your reverence for them should never fail—not for their own sake, but because of the treasure of the blood. (118)

The virtuous must not lessen their reverence, even should these ministers fall short in virtue. And so far as the virtues of my ministers are concerned,...[they are] stewards of...my Son’s body and blood and of the other sacraments. This dignity belongs to all who are appointed as such stewards, to the bad as well as to the good. (120)

The part of the faithful, God tells St. Catherine, is to weep over the sins of clergy who do not follow God’s will, and to call upon His mercy for them.

You should hold [these sinful ministers] out to me with tears and great desire, so that I in my goodness may clothe them with the garment of charity... Indeed, I have appointed them and given them to you to be angels on earth... as I have told you. When they are less than that, you ought to pray for them. But you are

not to judge them. Leave the judging to me, and I, because of your prayers and my own desire, will be merciful to them. (120)

The more you offer me sorrowful and loving desires for them, the more you will prove your love for me. For the service neither you nor my other servants can do for me you ought to do for them instead. Then I will let myself be constrained by the longing and tears and prayers of my servants, and will be merciful to my bride by reforming her with good and holy shepherds. (129)

As the Year of Mercy comes to a close, may God grant us the grace to pray for the Church, especially for fallen clergy, in the words of St. Catherine:

You said, eternal Father, that because of your love for your creatures, and through the prayers and innocent sufferings of your servants, you would be merciful to the world and reform holy Church, and thus give us refreshment. Do not wait any longer, then, to turn the eye of your mercy. Because it is your will to answer us before we call, answer now with the voice of your mercy. (134)



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