

“How Few Mad People There Are”

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“How Few Mad People There Are Now”: Thoughts of Teresa and Catherine

IN THE THIRD CHAPTER of Saint Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is particularly busy. He performs many healings, and the crowds gather around him to the point that precautions are taken so he is not crushed. In response to his many works, demons shriek in recognition of him and proclaim, “You are the Son of God” (3:11). Jesus selects twelve associates to be his apostles, “to be with him, to be sent out to preach” (3:14), and to share in the work yet before him. Then Jesus returns to his home and “once again such a large crowd gathered that there was no chance even to eat” (3:20).

If Jesus intended this trip home to provide a break from the demands of his ministry by sharing some quiet time with his family and friends, then his intention could not have been further from becoming a reality. Beside the constant press of the crowd to deal with, Jesus faces the curious response from his loved ones: “When Jesus’ family heard what he was doing, they thought he was mad and went out to get him under control” (3:21). They thought he was “mad,” that he needed to be gotten “under control”—not exactly the kind of press an itinerant preacher wants to accompany his movements among the public, especially when it originates with his own family.

The tenth chapter of Saint John’s Gospel presents Jesus in a situation where he is characterized in much the same way. Jesus speaks of himself and his ministry using the pastoral image of the Good Shepherd and in doing so sharply contrasts his approach and method to that of the religious leaders of the day. In fact, he does not shy away from saying,

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“Everyone who came before me was a thief or a robber” (10:8). Then he speaks of giving his life and receiving it back again. Not surprisingly, “Many people said, ‘He has a demon in him! He is mad! Why listen to him?’” (10:20). Indeed, why listen to a madman?

Of all the qualities we might hope to emulate from the life and example of Jesus of Nazareth, madness is probably not very high among them, if it appears on our list at all. We would not relish the experiences of misunderstanding and isolation that would inevitably accompany such an label, especially in its related meanings of anger or insanity. Even the contemporary meaning—of feeling or showing a strong liking for something (“madly in love”)—is less than satisfying since the strength of that attachment is often interpreted as transitory, even quite fleeting.

The mystical tradition of the Church, however, presents a different perspective. Mystics of no less caliber than Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Catherine of Siena view this madness as a quality that speaks more of God’s transforming love than of any condition to be feared. Indeed, it should be nurtured. What, then, is this madness that can be desirable for our growth and development in the spiritual life?

Etymological Roots

The evolution of the term madness is intriguing. Its primary sense can be traced to the Goths of the early Middle Ages among whom its meaning was “to cripple.” Given that physical disabilities were often seen to be the result of a divine curse, which compounded them with psychological or mental impairment, its development toward a contemporary meaning of “insanity” is easy to understand. By the fourteenth century, the term expanded to mean “extreme folly, infatuation, wild excitement,” none of which necessarily signaled any mental weakness as much as intense emotional attachment to something. This dual etymology, with slight nuances, endures even today. However, this direct etymology does not easily lend itself to explore the mystical significance of the madness that bespeaks God’s

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love.

Even more intriguing is the indirect etymology, that is, words with which madness shares its most primitive root but which developed along a different linguistic line. Three sets of words are within this indirect line. The first set includes those words whose meaning is “to change,” such as transmute, mutate, commute; and even more specifically, “to change one’s dwelling place,” such as migrate, emigrate. A second set of words includes those whose meaning is “to hold in common,” such as communion, communication. The third set includes words that mean “to serve for the people,” such as municipal, remunerate. This other etymology, though indirect, can serve as a framework for understanding the mystical meaning of madness.

“Enkindled With a Love”

The first shared meaning that distinguishes madness is the changing of one’s dwelling place. This communicates a sense of journey, of movement into new surroundings and unfamiliar territory. What are those surroundings and what is that territory? What stimulates and sustains the journey?

In her *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, Saint Teresa of Avila writes of the verse “Let Him kiss me with the kiss of His mouth” as an expression of the profound desire to be united with God. She says, “The soul that is enkindled with a love that makes it mad desires nothing else than to say these words” (1:10).¹ An enkindling love, a burning love intense enough to make the soul so single-minded that it “desires nothing else”—this is madness. Such a love has the power to stimulate and sustain the journey. The destination? A new identity with which we see ourselves and the world around us, a new set of values by which we establish the standards for our life. This identity and those values ground us in the example and teaching of Jesus. They stand in sharp contrast to the siren voices of society that beckon us to build our life on commodities claiming to give humanity meaning and worth, rather than the other way around.

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Choosing to live in a way that contradicts and ignores those voices will make us appear mad in the eyes of many, for they will not see the seriousness or the strength of the foundation on which we stand. As followers of Jesus, we must welcome and embrace such madness. We do this with confidence and conviction because we know the extent of God’s love for us.

Saint Catherine of Siena does not hesitate to say,

“You temper your justice with mercy. In mercy you cleansed us in the blood; in mercy you kept company with your creatures. O mad lover! It was not enough for you to take on our humanity: You had to die as well!” (*The Dialogue*, 30)²

God as a “mad lover” is an image needing to be explored more extensively than can be done in these present reflections in order to tap the full richness of its implications for the spiritual life. Depending upon our immediate experiences in life, it can be quite difficult to acknowledge that God is madly in love with us or “will take delight” and “sing and rejoice” over us, as the prophet Zephaniah (3:17) teaches. Regardless of what our experiences may lead us to believe, God’s love is irrevocable. Given human weakness and sinfulness, such irrevocability appears to be sheer madness. Indeed it is. And, like God, each of us must become a “mad lover.”

Our new dwelling place must be love. This alone constitutes our identity and shapes our values. Love is the true madness that must move and maintain our spiritual life. It will assuredly and steadily lead us on a journey to the territory of transformation into the living likeness of Jesus.

“Why Then Are You So Mad?”

A second shared meaning that reflects madness is the holding of something in common with another person. This communicates a sense of mutuality, of sharing desires and goals. What will nurture that mutuality and sharing? What are those desires and goals?

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In *The Dialogue*, Saint Catherine of Siena identifies the solid foundation for this mutual sharing. She asks God,

“You have need of your creature? It seems so to me, for you act as if you could not live without her, in spite of the fact that you are Life itself, and everything has life from you and nothing can have life without you. Why then are you so mad? Because you have fallen in love with what you have made! You are pleased and delighted over her within yourself, as if you were drunk with desire for her salvation.” (153)

God creates humanity and then falls in love with what has been created. The relationship between God and humanity could have been designated as master to slave, or at least as superior to servant. But it is in fact a love relationship, as between peers, in which God the Creator acts as if life without the creature would be simply impossible. It is madness. Why is this so? Nothing less than God’s love for us. So powerful is this love that God appears “drunk with desire for (our) salvation.” This divine madness, even drunkenness, is a regular theme in Catherine’s prayers. On 18 February 1379, just after participating in the Eucharistic liturgy, she prays,

“O unutterable love, even though you saw all the evils that all your creatures would commit against your infinite goodness, you acted as if you did not see and set your eye only on the beauty of your creature, with whom you had fallen in love like one drunk and mad with love.... Not that the sin was hid from you, but you concentrated on the love because you are nothing but a fire of love, mad over what you have made.”³

God desires intimacy with humanity. Indeed, it was precisely for such intimacy that we were created. God is mad with love, even knowing our weakness and sinfulness, yet longing for a response that indicates that we too desire such intimacy.

Our response to God’s loving desire is not of casual significance. Quite the contrary, it is crucial. A privileged means of inviting this intimacy with

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God and even fostering it is prayer, particularly the prayer of quiet and union through which we are completely focused on the Lord. In writing about union, Teresa of Avila notes that “this prayer is a glorious foolishness, a heavenly madness where the true wisdom is learned; and it is for the soul a most delightful way of enjoying” (*The Book of Her Life*, 16:1). Prayer thus becomes a school of madness where our transformation into love gradually unfolds and our intimacy with God grows ever more profound. Prayer nurtures within us the desire for union with God, even as God desires union with us. Saint Teresa’s hope for us is clear: “May we all be mad for love of the One who for love of us was called mad” (16:6). Our relationship with God every day, in every situation, must become and be love for love, madness for madness. By this loving madness, God recognizes us as followers of the Lord Jesus.

Intimacy with God, this love relationship with the Lord, is at the very heart of madness. This is what we long for. This is the goal toward which we are challenged to direct all our desires and energies. This is the madness by which we want to be known for we believe it is a grace of God’s presence and activity within us.

“True Lovers of Christ”

The third shared meaning by which madness can be characterized is serving the people. This communicates a sense of ministry, of reaching beyond the boundaries of one’s own concerns and preoccupations, of seeing and sensing beyond one’s personal world. The power of loving madness cannot be bound by the limits of the self. It seeks to make a difference in the lives of others and desires to respond to their needs. What is that difference? What is that response?

Saint Teresa of Avila recognizes that this madness is truly wisdom; its works reflect the presence and activity of God. In *The Book of Her Life* she notes,

“How wise they will be, they who rejoiced to be considered mad because that is what Wisdom Itself was called! How few mad

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people there are now.... Truly it seems that there are no more of those who people considered mad for doing the heroic deeds of true lovers of Christ.” (27:14)

There is a joy and a sadness in this text. The joy is reflected in the statement that this loving madness is truly wisdom and a source of rejoicing for those willing to be known as mad for the sake of being identified with Wisdom itself. The sadness lies in the observation that such willingness—expressed through “doing the heroic deeds of true lovers”—is becoming ever more rare. There are so few mad people now, yet the deeds remain to be done. And those deeds are nothing less than whatever services will continue the mission of Jesus.

Saint Catherine of Siena sums up all those services with but a word. She writes of what the Lord communicated to her: “All I want is love. In loving me you will realize love for your neighbors, and if you love your neighbors you have kept the law. If you are bound by this love you will do everything you can to be of service wherever you are” (*The Dialogue*, 7). Love is the primary means to continue Jesus’ mission; it constitutes the very nature and action of that mission. Indeed, love encompasses the entirety of God’s mandate to humanity and reveals the fullness of Jesus’ teaching and example. Jesus himself confirmed this in response to the Pharisee’s question concerning the greatest commandment:

Jesus said to him, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets too.” (Mt 22:37–40)

This apostolic dimension of madness offers a safeguard and a challenge. The willingness to serve others in love safeguards us from insularity on the one hand and arrogance on the other. Our spiritual life must reach beyond itself, or it becomes a closed world consumed with its own accomplishments. The challenge can be expressed through the

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simple but haunting question of whether we are willing to do it. Will we embrace the power of love that places us at the disposal of others? Will we embrace the madness by which we would be known to live and act as “lovers of Christ”?

“Mad Over Your Creature”

The madness that the spiritual life calls us to live—indeed, dares us to live—touches every dimension of our lives. It forms and transforms our personal life, rooting our identity in Jesus the Lord. This must become the only root from which we want our life to grow and develop. We do not thereby devalue the good within the world around us. Rather, we revalue it in light of “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8). We are challenged to set priorities and make decisions in light of that value. We are called to live that value as the first of the nonnegotiables within our daily tasks and responsibilities. The world will consider us mad for what it sees as a misplacing of our best efforts. But such must be our faith.

This same madness nurtures our relational life, urging us to love others even as the Lord has loved us. Such love is eminently practical: it seeks out the goodness of those whom society has cast aside or chosen to neglect; it listens without prejudice and without formulating a response in advance; it offers assistance apart from concern for personal gain; it forgives when convention assumes condemnation is the only reasonable course. Such mad love insists on the immediacy of God’s personal presence for it knows that “whatever you have done to even the least of my people, you have done to me” (Mt 25:40). We build and conduct our relationships accordingly, and then we must act with consistency and constancy. The world will consider us mad for what it sees as a taking of people much too seriously. But such must be our love.

Madness finds expression in our ministerial lives, calling us to put our gifts at the service of others. We recognize and embrace ever more profoundly the truth that “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit

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for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). Our gifts are for others because that is their very nature. To refocus them so we become their singular beneficiaries is to neglect the grace they are meant to communicate and is to misuse the blessing they are designed to bestow. The acknowledgment and acceptance of our gifts are also a declaration and a decision that we will serve others and that we want to cooperate with them in hastening the reign of God promised by Jesus. It is a response to the call for selfless service. The world will consider us mad for what it sees as a missing of opportunities for self-advancement. But such must be our hope.

The faith, love, and hope that will nurture madness are themselves born of the simple realization articulated by Saint Catherine of Siena: “I acknowledge and do not deny that you loved me before I existed, and that you love me unspeakably much, as one gone mad over your creature” (*The Dialogue*, 167). We have been loved and will be loved for eternity. In the face of such love, we must respond with love. We choose to live in madness for God precisely because God has “gone mad” with love for us. Clearly, that is the choice evident in Jesus’ life and in the example he left to us. Even his family thought he was mad and took action to “get him under control” (Mk 3:21). But how can God’s love be controlled? By what means can it be restricted? Jesus’ work continues. Some rejected his words and named him possessed and mad. Still, others were moved to ask, “Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” Jesus affirms that “the works I do in my Father’s name testify to me” (Jn 10:25). Only faith, love, and hope enable us to accept that testimony, assimilate it, and have the courage to live it, even in the midst of others who will not understand, others who will dismiss us as mad, and others who will say we are wasting valuable time on uncertainties.

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The society and cultural surroundings in which we live and work offer powerful incentives to adopt a *sane* style of life that will elicit acceptance

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and affirmation from the masses. Seductive are the incentives to base our personal value and esteem—and worthiness for enduring recognition—on possessions and accomplishments, thereby sparing us from looking too deeply within ourselves. Effective are the incentives that encourage a utilitarian approach to others, minimizing the time and energy needed to develop relationships, thereby preserving us from the tasks of self-revelation. Persuasive are the incentives for directing the principal benefits of our gifts and skills toward self and for expending any remainder, if we choose, on service to others, thereby conserving our effort and energy for personal pursuits.

The sheer force and frequency of these incentives confirm that the perspective of Saint Teresa is quite accurate even today: “How few mad people there are now.... Truly it seems that there are no more of those who people considered mad for doing the heroic deeds of true lovers of Christ” (*The Book of Her Life*, 27:14). We could take the approach that social and cultural mores will win the day and that the spiritual life has no power to unravel their effects. Neither Teresa nor Catherine settled for such an approach precisely because the God with whom they were in love did not. Saint Catherine reminds us that, in moving on our behalf and for our salvation, God “acted as if you were drunk with love, infatuated with your creature” (*Prayers*, 3 March 1379). The truth of that reminder stands as a solid support for our faith, love, and hope.

As followers of Jesus we must take the prophetic stance of living this same madness to demonstrate that not only is such extravagant love a possibility but that it is indeed the sanest way to live if we want to make a lasting difference in this world. Let us, then, heed well and live fully Teresa’s wise and timely instruction: “May we all be mad for love of the One who for love of us was called mad” (*The Book of Her Life*, 16:6).

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NOTES

1. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, 3 volumes; trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications 1980-1987).
2. *Catherine of Siena—The Dialogue*; trans. Suzanne Noffke, OP (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).
3. *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*; ed. Suzanne Noffke, OP (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

The Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ

- “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself.” (Jn. 12:32)

