

# Catherine of Siena

THE DIALOGUE

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TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION

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PREFACE

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## INTRODUCTION

The Roman Catholic Church in all its history has granted but two of its women the title of doctor: Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena. The date was October 4, 1970; the pontiff, Paul VI. Six centuries lie between the living voice of Catherine and that date, but history bears persistent evidence from then until now of her power to attract an audience. Her own disciples were the first to spread her works, both for the value they saw in them and for the support they would lend to the cause of her canonization. Her *Dialogue* and Raymond of Capua's biography of her were among the first books to see print, not only in her native Italy but in Spain, Germany, and England as well. Century by century new editions and translations have made their appearance and the catalogue of biographical, interpretive, and critical works has continued to grow and will be swelled again in this sixth centenary of Catherine's death. And the interest is not generated by mere historical curiosity but by the perennial relevance of this extraordinary woman.

Catherine lived in a century when Church and society and her own Dominican Order were in chaos. It was also a great century for mysticism. But while her Dominican contemporaries in the north—Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, Henry Suso—were caught up in the speculative, Catherine's impact was inherently practical. She was the center of a group ("*la bella brigata*," she called them) drawn from many levels of society and many religious traditions, and they regarded her as teacher and spiritual guide. And through her influence on Raymond of Capua she was to be a major force in Dominican reform even after her death. Even those who exploited her saw her as a woman to be reckoned with.

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### THE SOURCES

The present-day interpreter of Catherine is faced not with a lack of data but with the critical task of sorting out fact from culturally and pragmatically conditioned myth in the plentiful testimony of the saint's disciples in their efforts to promote her cult and canonization. Vying for first place among these are the works of Raymond of Capua, her spiritual director and close friend from 1374 until her death, and those of Tommaso d'Antonio Nacci da Siena (commonly called Caffarini), a disciple from the earliest days and the prime mover in her cause for canonization. We do not know the academic credentials of Caffarini, but Raymond was a scholar of no mean standing, having studied at Italy's most prestigious university in Bologna, lectured in theology at Siena, and held the degree *magister in Theologia*. Raymond, under pressure from his Dominican brothers (he was by then master general of the order), began writing his life of Catherine, the *Legenda Major*,<sup>1</sup> in 1384 but did not complete it until 1395. And while his work is certainly influenced by the religious mentality of his age, his carefulness about fidelity to his sources is everywhere evident. Caffarini undertook first an ambitious expansion of Raymond's work, his *Libellus de Supplemento*, valuable in many respects, but most significantly in its heavy use of the notes of Catherine's first confessor, Tommaso della Fonte—notes we do not have in any other form. Later, Caffarini saw a need for a more compact presentation and published his *Legenda Minor*.

The *Processus* of Venice, compiled by Caffarini beginning in 1411, affords us testimony from nearly all of Catherine's disciples. Besides this we have the *Miracoli* composed by an anonymous Florentine; the memoirs of another disciple, Cristofano di Gano; letters of her disciples to Catherine and to each other; a few short pieces from the English Augustinian William of Flete, whose hermitage was just outside Siena at Lecceto and who was both teacher and disciple to Catherine for many years; and a number of poems written in her honor by her disciples after her death.

All of this testimony is certainly biased, but hardly merits the extreme suspicion with which Fawtier<sup>2</sup> regards it. Anything at all con-

1. For complete data on all sources, see Bibliography.

2. R. Fawtier, *Sainte Catherine de Sienne: essai de critique des sources* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1921, 1930). It must, however, be noted that Fawtier made perhaps one of the greatest contributions to Catherinian scholarship in that his sometimes iconoclastic approach roused other students of Catherine to a more careful attention to the data.

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temporary with Catherine is bound to be colored by the times that produced it. Yet, while more neutral sources such as chronicles supply but little that reflects directly on Catherine, we do have the internal evidence of her own works: nearly four hundred letters,<sup>3</sup> her *Dialogue*, and some two dozen prayers recorded by her secretaries.<sup>4</sup> It is, in fact, this internal evidence that in the end gives us the clearest picture of Catherine's personality, teaching, and work. All the rest is ultimately merely the setting, necessary for the complete picture but secondary in every sense of the word.

### CATHERINE'S LIFE

Caterina di Giacomo di Benincasa was born in 1347<sup>5</sup> in the Fontebranda district of Siena, the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children. Her father was a wool dyer of comfortable means but politically one of the popolo minuto in a city-state familiar with family feuds, class conflict, and revolution.

What we know of Catherine's childhood is embedded in pious legend, but it is clear that she was a strikingly pleasant and outgoing youngster, imaginative and idealistic in her devotion. (In light of this it is interesting that in her later years "devotion" as a sham and pretense earned such vivid contempt from her.) The stubborn independence that was to be a hallmark of most of her life showed itself early, as well as the intense emotional struggle she knew when faced with more pleasant alternatives to the austere way she felt herself called to follow. Yet what emerges slowly but steadily and clearly as she approached the age for marriage (the early teens in fourteenth-century Italy) is a passion for the truth of things, a passion that overrode her every other passion.

Dominican influence in Catherine's life was to be expected. Her family lived just down the hill from the church and cloister of San Domenico, a center of Dominican learning and preaching, and Catherine was there often—too often and too long to suit many. Besides, Tommaso della Fonte, brother of Catherine's brother-in-law, had spent his

3. Cf. especially the Introduction of E. Dupré-Theseider, *Epistolario di Santa Caterina da Siena*, vol. I (Rome: R. Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 1940).

4. There is also a short piece, *Il Dialogo Breve*, attributed to Catherine. Her authorship of it has not been established.

5. The data has been questioned by Fawtier (see note 2 above), but his arguments are quite easily refuted.

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youth in the Benincasa home after being orphaned by the Black Death in 1349 and had joined the Dominicans while Catherine was yet a child. He was to become her first confessor and director. Also very active in Siena were the Mantellate, women (the assumption was that they were widows) who were affiliated with the Order of Saint Dominic and wore the habit but lived in their own homes, serving the needs of the poor and the sick under the direction of a prioress and ultimately under the direction of the friars. This was the group to which Catherine sought and finally obtained entrance once her decision not to marry won its hard victory over the opposition of her family.

Raymond tells us she was only seven years old when she vowed her virginity to God;<sup>6</sup> she was fifteen when she cut off her hair in defiance of efforts to make her marry, eighteen when she received the Dominican habit. At this last juncture she began to live in solitude and silence in her room, going out only for Mass at San Domenico. Somewhere, somehow in the silence she learned to read. Her solitude climaxed in 1368 in her "mystical espousal" to Christ. Then, almost brusquely, she sensed the imperative to rejoin her family and give herself to the service of the poor and the sick with her sisters of the Mantellate. She was twenty-one.

The tales that have come down to us from these years of "social work" in Siena are full of the warmly human side of Catherine. She served as nurse in homes and hospitals, looked out for the destitute, buried her father. Yet this sudden shift to the outside did not end the silence and contemplation she still found in solitude. Her public activity gained her notoriety, but those who began to gather round her looked for her most of all at home in her room, where in hours of conversation she both learned and taught—learned the subtleties of theological argument and biblical interpretation, and taught what she knew from experience of the way of God.

In 1368 she met the learned Bartolomeo de' Dominici, who was to become her second confessor and lifelong friend. Mystical experiences continued to increase and intensify, with another climactic point in her "mystical death"—four hours during which she experienced ecstatic union with God while her body seemed lifeless to all observers—in 1370. Her austerity was stripped to all-but-total abstinence from food and sleep. Social/political tensions were mounting in Siena and all of

6. *Legenda Major* I, iii.

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Italy, and Catherine began to find herself drawn to intervene in counsel as well as prayer, at least with individuals, wherever she saw truth being compromised.

She made her first journey to Florence in the spring of 1374,<sup>7</sup> and it seems that at this time she acquired Raymond of Capua as her confessor and spiritual director. He did not nearly measure up to her own stature, but he was intelligent, broadly educated, and sincere. The two were to become tender friends, and she would refer to him in one of her last letters as "the father and son given to me by that gentle mother Mary." It was, in fact, she who urged him and others to share with her the risky mission of tending the sick and dying when the plague burst out again in Siena that summer. She was twenty-seven.

<sup>age 28</sup> In Pisa, in 1375, she used what influence she had to sway that city and Lucca away from alliance with the anti-papal league whose force was gaining momentum and strength. Convinced that military ambitions could be better used in the Holy Land and that it would be an honor for Christians (including herself) to shed their blood to win unbelievers to salvation in Christ's blood, she also lent her enthusiasm to preaching a crusade. It was in Pisa that she received the stigmata (visible, at her request, only to herself). That same year she began her prolific letter-writing career, and interceded by letter with the English mercenaries who were ravaging the Italian countryside and impoverishing the city-states with their demands for peace money. She traveled back to Siena to assist a young political prisoner, Niccolò di Tuldo, at his execution, and finally returned there toward the end of 1375.

The feud between the city-states and the papacy worsened, and in the spring of 1376 the Signoria of Florence sought the help of Catherine's influence in winning release from the interdict under which they had been placed by Pope Gregory XI, a situation that put them at a severe economic disadvantage. Politically naive yet convinced that every possible measure must be taken to restore peace in the Church, Catherine consented to go to Avignon to plead the cause of Florence, trusting

7. Practically all of Catherine's modern biographers have adopted the view that this journey to Florence was motivated by an order to appear before the Dominican General Chapter for examination, presumably of her orthodoxy. But none of the early sources allude to such an order. The confusion may have arisen from a misreading of a passage in the opening paragraph of the *Miracoli*, influenced by a bit of Florentine chauvinism. Cf. T. M. Centi, "Un processo inventato di sana pianta," *Rassegna di Ascetica e Mistica* XXI (1970), pp. 325-42. (Cavallini).

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the latter's promise of compliance with whatever would be demanded for reconciliation. Her trust was, as friends had warned her, ill founded: As soon as she had paved the way for them the Florentines disowned her and sent their own ambassadors to negotiate on their own terms. Catherine sent an appropriately scorching letter<sup>8</sup> back to Florence and turned her attention to her larger concerns: the crusade, the reform of the clergy, the return of the papacy to Rome. On the last issue, Gregory XI had already made up his mind, but he was one who was faced great store by prophetic voices, and Catherine's insistence that she must return certainly strongly influenced the actual move. Contrary to artistic representations, however, she did not accompany him on the journey, nor was she even present when he entered Rome. Her own way took her slowly back to Siena, where she spent the early months of 1377 founding a women's monastery of strict observance outside the city in the old fortress of Belcaro—a monastery she herself could never be long contained in.

Summer, fall, and most of winter of that year found her at Rocca Orcia, about twenty miles from Siena, on a local mission of peace-making and preaching. It was a period that ended in both loneliness and fullness: loneliness because Raymond was appointed prior of the church of the Minerva in Rome and never permanently returned to her;<sup>9</sup> fullness because it was during that autumn that she had the experience which led to the writing of her *Dialogue* and actually learned to write herself. (Before this she had always had to dictate.)<sup>10</sup> She was thirty years old.

Late in 1377 or early in 1378 Catherine was again in Florence, this time at the order of Gregory XI, once more to take up the cause of peace between that city-state and Rome. And once again her naiveté was used by the Florentines for their own ends. But she continued to plead for obedience and peace. On March 27 Pope Gregory died and was succeeded by Urban VI. Uprisings and riots continued, during one of which Catherine was almost assassinated as an accomplice of the Guelphs—and in an emotionally charged letter to Raymond she wept over the martyrdom that had escaped her. The olive branch of peace

8. Let. 234. (All references to Catherine's letters follow Tommaseo's numbering unless otherwise noted.)

9. Cf. *Leg. Maj.* III, vi, trans. G. Lamb (New York: Kenedy, 1960), p. 377. Raymond says Catherine had sent with him "a number of suggestions which if properly carried out would be to the advantage of the holy Church of God."

10. Let. 272.

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came to Florence in July, but Catherine slipped quietly back to Siena, wishing "not to be the cause of new injustice."<sup>11</sup>

Urban had been opposed by many from the time of his election, and now schism was brewing fast. Catherine wrote letters to any and all who were involved, arguing for loyalty and unity. She had ideas of her own as to what was needed to make that possible, and she longed to be in Rome where she might personally promote those ideas. Finally, in late November, Urban VI sent for her. But people in Siena were talking about this woman who was too much on the road, and Catherine pulled back. Only if the pope sent explicit orders would she go, she wrote to Raymond.<sup>12</sup> The written summons came, and Catherine set out for Rome with her "family"—the last journey she was to make.

She set up her household there, a handful of women, a handful of men, all living on alms. She met with pope and cardinals, dictated letters, counseled her disciples. She had her great dream of a "Papal Council" of holy people to bring about—another dream that would splinter in its collision with reality. She basked in the joy of being reunited with Raymond, but hardly for a month, for Urban sent him off on a mission to the king of France. Raymond never completed that mission because he was afraid when he heard that the enemy was lying in wait to kill him as he crossed the border—and Catherine put him in his place for that:<sup>13</sup>—but neither did he return to Rome in Catherine's lifetime.

From the beginning of 1380 Catherine could no longer eat or even swallow water. Except for a few more letters, her activity for the Church was now totally in her prayer and the offering of herself. Diabolic visions tormented her as much as ecstasy ravished her. Till late February she still dragged herself the mile to Saint Peter's each morning for Mass and spent the day there in prayer until vespers. On February 26 she lost the use of her legs and was confined to bed. She died on April 29. She was thirty-three years old.

## CATHERINE'S MYSTICISM

Looking at a life so short yet so feverishly filled with activity one might legitimately ask, where is the space for the mystical? Yet were it

11. Letter published by E. Gardner in *Saint Catherine of Siena* (London: Dent, 1907), pp. 413-414.

12. *Leg. Maj.* III, i, Lamb, p. 304.

13. Let 344.

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not for her mystical experience, Catherine's activity as it was would never have been. Grion has rightly said, "To divorce the mystical from the history of a saint like Catherine would be to empty her of her personality."<sup>14</sup> "Being so closely associated with her," says Raymond, "I was able to see at first hand how, as soon as she was freed from the occupations in which she was engaged for the work of souls, at once, one might almost say by a natural process, her mind was raised to the things of heaven."<sup>15</sup>

The balance of contemplation and action in the last twelve years of Catherine's life was not merely a relationship of complementarity. She did not pray simply to "refuel" herself for further activity (the principle behind even the interpretation that her three years of solitude were but a preparation for the years of activity to follow); nor was prayer an oasis of rest from work, a kind of holy self-indulgence. It was precisely what she experienced in contemplation that impelled her into action. And all that she touched or was touched by in her activity was present in her prayer. Indeed, in her later years she was seldom physically alone when she prayed, except in her room at night. And her contemplation, on the other hand, was so present to her active life that she prayed and even burst into ecstasy within the text of many of her letters. This integration is the characteristic that marks Catherine among the mystics more than any striking quality of her mystical experience as such, and makes her writings so very pertinent today, when the interplay between prayer and active ministry is so much at issue.

Inseparable from this integration is the question of Catherine's central motif. There are critics who say it was Truth, others who contend it was Love. Both are in fact right. For Catherine God is *la prima dolce Verità* (gentle first Truth) and God is *pazzo d'amore* (mad with love) and *essa carità* (charity itself). The way to God is the constantly lived dynamic of knowledge and love. The stage is set in the very first paragraph of the *Dialogue* for this dynamic, which is at the heart of her whole teaching as it was of her life:

A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God's honor and the salvation of souls. She has for some time exercised herself in virtue and has become accustomed to dwelling

14. A. Grion, *Santa Caterina da Siena: dottrina e fonti* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1953), p. 9.

15. *Leg. Maj.* III, i, Lamb, p. 302.

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in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God's goodness toward her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.

Catherine's love walked always very consciously in the light of truth—so intensely so that one wonders how she has been so facilely idealized as the "social mystic." Her absolute refusal to compromise Truth as she experienced it in God, the urgency she felt to reverse every falsification she saw, made her look the naive fool more than once. It was a tension that, I am convinced, killed her physically but created her triumphant, morally and in the fullest sense humanly. She was indeed a social mystic—but even more properly a mystic activist. Poverty, sickness, the suffering of injustice even to the point of death, were not merely evils or even systemic evils to her: They were that, and as such she fought them—but they were still more pawns in the hand of the will of *both* oppressed and oppressor under God. Political realities were to be reckoned with, but if the ultimate truth in the reckoning played havoc with her human limitations (yes, and her naiveté), if she would be used and abused and to all appearances fail, she would pay that price, along with the price of being judged incircumspect. But the very emotions that were seared in the process and in turn seared her body beyond its capacity emerged ever more whole and healthy. Such an activism is not nearly as pleasant as that in which Catherine has often been cast, but it is the kind of activism her mystical experience demanded and the kind her writings set before us. Some have called it neurotic and pathetic.<sup>16</sup> If it is, then I would suggest it is, like Chesterton's paradox, "truth standing on its head," or in Catherine's own terms, "the madness of love."

16. E.g., M. B. Ryley, *Queens of the Renaissance* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1907), pp. 1–52.