

CATHERINE OF SIENA

Vision Through a Distant Eye




Suzanne Noffke

Catherine of Siena

Vision Through a Distant Eye

Suzanne Noffke, O.P.

A Michael Glazier Book
 THE LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

A Michael Glazier Book published by The Liturgical Press

Cover design by Ann Blattner. Catherine of Siena, St. James Church,
St. Paul, Minnesota. Photo by Gene Plaisted, O.S.C.

© 1996 by The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., Collegeville, Minnesota.
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any
form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy-
ing, recording, taping, or any retrieval system, without the written
permission of The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321.
Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Noffke, Suzanne.

Catherine of Siena : vision through a distant eye / Suzanne
Noffke.

p. cm.

"A Michael Glazier book."

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8146-5311-1

1. Catherine, of Siena, Saint, 1347-1380. 2. Christian saints—
Italy—Siena—Biography. I. Title.

BX4700.C4N64 1996

282'.092—dc20

[B]

95-47159

CIP

Contents

Introduction 1

Part One: Perspectives on the Vision

1. Truth, the Heart of Catherine's Life and Spirituality 11
2. Love, the Only Way to Live in Truth 23
3. Nourished and Nourishing in the Word 38
4. A Woman and Her Church 54
5. Growth into Truth and Love 65
6. Justice, Companion of Love 74
7. Catherine and Economic Realities 87
8. Visions of Eternity 106

Part Two: Perspectives on the Visionary

9. Exploring Catherine's Theology and Spirituality 125
10. The World of Catherine of Siena 154

Bibliography of Works on Catherine of Siena in English 233

Catherine's Writings 233

Commentaries on Catherine's Works 236

Hagiographical and Biographical Works 239

Catherine's Theology 244

Catherine's Spirituality	245
Catherine's Asceticism	254
Catherine and the Church	256
Catherine's Disciples	257
Literary Studies	259
Poetry	260
Dramatic Presentations	260
Catherine's World	261
Catherine in Art	262
General Commentary and Reflection	262
Miscellaneous	267

Introduction

She was born Caterina di Iacopo (or Giacomo) di Benincasa in Siena in 1347, the younger of twins and twenty-fourth of the twenty-five children of Iacopo, a wool dyer, and his only wife, Lapa di Puccio di Piacenti. All contemporary testimony indicates that she was a bright, vivacious, and sociable child, though even then she showed an innate tendency to privacy where her inner life was concerned. As effectively as she later learned to share the things of God, personal revelation seems never to have been easy for her. Her father's influence seems to have fostered her religious piety and bent for service, while from her mother she inherited an uncompromising drive and determination. All of these elements would eventually contribute to the singular personality and spirituality of Catherine of Siena.

When she was about six years old, Catherine experienced what she would only much later describe as a vision of Christ. He was dressed in papal robes, enthroned above the Church of San Domenico near her home, surrounded by the saints who would become her favorites; he smiled and blessed her. No words were exchanged. But that experience somehow shaped her never-to-be-reversed decision to belong entirely to Christ as a virgin and as a Dominican.

After that day she became increasingly introverted and quiet, obsessively pursuing whatever her young mind and the society around her considered to be the marks of holiness. She even made a vow of virginity, since that was to the prevailing spirituality the one sure way to belong entirely to God. The externals of asceticism—self-denial, fasting, flagellation, solitude, silence, determination not to marry—seemed to be her

2 Introduction

whole preoccupation, to the growing consternation of her family. And no one fretted more than her mother Lapa, who was always particularly (and, to Catherine, exasperatingly) possessive of her youngest surviving child, the only one she had been able to nurse at her own breast.¹ But beneath these externals, and in some important ways *through* them, were germinating stage by stage the essentials of what would be her more mature, balanced, and once-more outgoing spirituality. She might muddle through some foolishness along the way, and moderation would be for her a hard lesson to learn. But the heart of it was that she would never be able to stomach compromising, whether for her own or anyone else's comfort, what she saw as the truth, nor close her eyes to seeing more of the truth.

Her dream of serving as a Dominican began in romantic fascination with the black-and-white-robed friars who regularly passed her home down the hill from their Church of San Domenico. She had early been nicknamed Euphrosina, and the legend of that saint inspired a naive plot to some day dress up as a boy, run away, and become a novice in some faraway Dominican priory where she would learn to be a preacher. While such fantasies gradually faded, the underlying dream only grew stronger.

As Catherine entered the teen years and Mamma Lapa set her sights on marrying her off, Catherine began to set her own sights tenaciously on a group of Sienese lay women known as the Mantellate, widows who lived by a Dominican rule and pledged their remaining time and their resources to the service of the sick and the poor. These women made it clear they did not want this never-married and inexperienced girl as one of their number. But Catherine argued and connived her way into the order. Then, immediately after her profession, she plunged into contemplative solitude, talking with practically no one and leaving her room only for services at San

¹Rudolph M. Bell, in *Holy Anorexia*, places Catherine among those he calls the "holy anorexics" of the period and finds the roots of her "anorexia" in this religious and familial background. Though he makes some valid points, I believe his conclusions must be seen in light of the broader religious backgrounds developed by Carolyn Walker Bynum in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

Domenico! In this pattern, so much more suited in terms of custom and policy to the monastic cloister than to the lay group she had joined, she was different, and her differentness was certainly not attributed to sanctity by all of her contemporaries, including her mother and many of the Dominicans.

For about three years she persisted in this withdrawal, until the very prayer for which she kept herself apart from others persuaded her that love for God could not be divorced from tangibly involved love for others. The more deeply contemplative her prayer became after that insight, the more inexorably it directed her efforts outward in service. Likewise, the more intense her external ministry became, the more deeply she was driven into prayer.

At first she simply took on the very nursing of the sick and attention to the poor that her sisters of the Mantellate took for granted, and her avoidance of which up to that point had surely scandalized and even alienated them. Gradually this now twenty-some-year-old began quite spontaneously to assume roles of leadership, unabashedly regarding herself as "mamma" to the disciples who came to her, many of whom were by far her senior in age, rank, and education. They looked to her for inspiration and guidance; she increasingly took on a maternal concern and sense of responsibility for their spiritual good.

Mediation was clearly one of her gifts, and it led her first into local and then into wider and wider issues of civil and ecclesiastical politics, naive as she was and would remain regarding some of the complexities of those issues. Her travels took her as far as Avignon, where she is credited by most historians with having influenced Pope Gregory XI's ultimate decision to end what has been called the "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy, and as far as Rome, where she spent her last intense months struggling to rescue the Church from schism. It was, in fact, the psychological stress of her failed embroilment in the most central politico-ecclesiastical crises of her day, coupled with the by-then irreversible damage worked by her early ascetical extremes, that brought about her death in 1380 at the age of only thirty-three.

Church and society were at critical turning points in the late fourteenth century. Barbara Tuchman has called that century

a "distant mirror" of our own.² If the century is a mirror, this woman, Catherine of Siena, might be said to be a "distant eye." For Catherine, who made such an impact on her own Church and society, has a vision to offer to our own struggles at our own turning points in this late twentieth century. That is the point of this collection of essays.

Whatever insight these essays may bring has profited, to be sure, from the work of generations of scholars (mostly European) who have studied and written about Catherine's life and works. But it has been fed even more significantly by my intimacy with Catherine herself through her writings, in the task of translating and annotating these over the past fifteen years. I have especially to thank, ironically perhaps, the wonderfully absorbing and often frustrating process of computer analysis of the texts, which for all its apparent abstraction has led to some understandings which no single lifetime of pondering could otherwise produce.

Catherine's Writings

Catherine's written "works" fall into three categories, each distinct in its origins, orientation, and mode of composition. The earliest begun and those that spread over the greatest span of time are her letters.³ Catherine began using letter writing as a favored vehicle for persuasion sometime in the early 1370s, and the volume of her letters continued to increase over the years until very shortly before her death in 1380. Though there is some evidence to support the speculation that she learned how to read late in life and that she actually wrote a few of her letters in her own hand, no such manuscript has to date been discovered. The manuscripts of the 382 letters we now possess are mostly in the hand of one or the other of her several secretaries, though in some cases the earliest exemplar we have

²Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, 1st trade ed. (New York: Knopf, 1978).

³I have published the first volume of the first complete English translation of Catherine's letters in *The Letters of St. Catherine of Siena* (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1988). The remaining volumes will be published as they are completed.

is in the hand of a later copyist.⁴ She used as secretaries a number of her disciples, women as well as men, at different periods of her active career, and, one of them tells us, never proof-read or edited their transcriptions.

Her letters are addressed to persons as diverse as popes, princes, and prisoners; queens, abbesses, and prostitutes; relatives, intimate friends, and opponents. She would write, in fact, to anyone to whom she had something to say that she thought needed saying. She would sometimes chat about the events of the day, the goings-on of her friends, and her own state of mind and health, as we know from those letters, especially to intimates, that we possess intact (that is, without the expurgation of what early disseminators considered irrelevant to their purposes of religious inspiration). But the greatest bulk of every letter consists in her own unique and personalized brand of preaching. The core of each letter is in fact a sermon, developed spontaneously but with amazingly coherent logic. It is the letters that make up the greatest bulk of all of Catherine's writings.

The second category comprises a single work. Between November of 1377 and October of 1378, in the midst of intense ministerial activity and through several changes of residence, Catherine composed, dictated, and personally edited what she called "my book," what would eventually be called by others *The Dialogue of Divine Providence*.⁵ Its inspiration lay in an intense mystical experience she describes in a long letter to her now-absent confessor, friend, and confidant, Raimondo da Capua, in October 1377.⁶ Her intent in writing the book was

⁴The number of extant letters is increased by about half dozen if we include near-identical letters sent to more than one separate addressee.

⁵Published in English as *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke.

⁶Letter T272. Letter numbering is given with the prefix "T," designating the numeration established by Niccolò Tommaséo in his edition of Catherine's letters. This is the numeration usually used in references, though sometimes that of Girolamo Gigli is used. In my translation I have followed the numbering of Eugenio Dupré Theseider, but for consistency in this book I will always give the Tommaséo number, followed simply by a page reference to the translation if the letter in question occurs there, e.g., "Noffke, p. 88."

to attempt to share with her disciples and others the insights she had gained into the mystery of Christian life with God, and she did this in a form dictated by the nature of the experience on which it was based, a conversation with God the Father in which the latter does by far most of the talking. It is a synthesis of Catherine's own spirituality, a mystical and pastoral rather than a systematic work.

Finally, there is a collection of Catherine's spontaneous prayers, twenty-six altogether, all but one of them recorded by friends at various times as the saint prayed in ecstasy.⁷ She had, when she decided to begin work on her book, told them to write down anything she might say aloud in such a state of prayer, evidently intending to use it later.⁸ Yet quite possibly she was not even aware of many of these specific prayers having been recorded and almost certainly never read or edited them at all. Most of them date from the last seventeen months of her life, after *The Dialogue* had been completed and after she had moved to Rome in hope of helping to repair the schism that had followed the election and early reign of Pope Urban VI.

Though Catherine's writings have long been reckoned important in literary and political history, they are significant very particularly from a religious point of view, given their content and the direction of her life and ministry. She drew copiously (though usually without citation) from a wide range of sources in the Christian tradition, from Scripture to popular writers who were her contemporaries. She cannot be said to have made any really new contribution to the development of theological thought. Still, her synthesis is original, unique, and

⁷Published in English as *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanne Noffke. Note that the numbering of the prayers in this translation is chronological and does not correspond with the numbering of Italian editions.

⁸*Life* III, iii, 349, p. 324. Raimondo da Capua, Catherine's confessor, composed the hagiographical account of her life in view of her canonization. All citations from this *Life* (in Latin, *Legenda major*) are taken from Raymundus de Vineis (da Capua), *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. Conleth Kearns. The work will be referred to simply as *Life*; the Roman and Arabic numeral combination refers to part, chapter, and paragraph in the original, the page number to the Kearns translation.

notable—notable enough to have earned her in 1970 the title Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, a title she and Teresa of Avila are so far the only women to hold. Most notable is the pastoral sensitivity with which she applied and communicated her theological understanding and personal experience of God, clothing these in an exquisite fabric of logic and imagery uncannily apt to each situation or addressee.

Catherine was, moreover, a woman. Precisely because of her reputation for genuine holiness, her voice was heard where few women's voices would gain an audience. Because she was also the first woman to write and be published in any of the Italian dialects, she provides us with an early feminine viewpoint on and interpretation of the events, culture, and spirituality of her era. And that era was, as we have said, like ours, an era of crisis and turning points for Church and society.

This is the woman whose person and voice and vision I hope to be able to share in this book from just a few of the perspectives from which I have studied her. The essays in part one are studies of various aspects of Catherine's vision in her theology and spirituality, for the most part revisions of earlier lectures and papers, which I have reworked in light of my most recent research and have edited here into a coherent sequence. (Each essay can, nevertheless, be read independently.) In part two I offer several resources for further exploration into the woman and her vision. The first of these is a schematic presentation of principles and factors one must take into consideration in exploring the life and thought of a woman such as Catherine, with examples from my own research. The second is a very practical guide and companion for those who may have the opportunity to travel in Italy and southern France and who may want to visit the places associated with Catherine; it includes appropriate readings for reflection on site. The third is an extensive (all but exhaustive) annotated bibliography of works on Catherine in English; no such extended bibliography is available elsewhere, and I would hope it might be of assistance as readers search out new avenues to explore.

Catherine has become for me a friend and companion in my own searchings. It is my hope that this small collection of explorations may enrich many other such friendships and serve as introduction and stimulus for many more.

I am grateful to all who have supported me in this work: to the groups who have listened and responded to the presentations that were the precursors of these essays, to my Racine Dominican community for time and space and encouragement, and to the editors of The Liturgical Press. I am particularly thankful to my brother Jim for his help with the maps, to Ellen Murray, R.S.M., for last-minute assistance in gathering bibliographic materials, and to Mary Catherine Nilles, O.P., for hours upon hours of idea testing and proofreading.

Part One

Perspectives on the Vision

1. Truth, the Heart of Catherine's Life and Spirituality

One central conviction determined the quality and character of Catherine's life and spirituality. This was her conception of God as Truth and Love. Perhaps it was her natural intellectual bent; perhaps it was her Dominican orientation (the order's motto is *Veritas*: truth); perhaps it stemmed from that early experience of God's saying to her, "You are the one who is not; I am the One who is." Whatever the interplay of influences, Catherine's fondest name for her God became "gentle First Truth," "supreme eternal Truth."

Catherine, in fact, seems to know no truth but the truth of God, the truth that is known to faith alone. Only of this reality does she even use the word *verità*, truth. But this should not surprise us, since for every medieval Christian all of reality comes from God and returns to God, has being only because in virtue of creation it shares in the being of God. What is different about Catherine in this is that it is so central and conscious an assumption that over the span of her lifetime she weaves the entire fabric of her thought and spirituality out of it.

"Do you know, daughter, who you are and who I am? If you know these two things you have beatitude in your grasp. You are she who is not, and I AM THE ONE WHO IS. Let your soul be penetrated with this truth, and the Enemy can never lead you astray."¹ But isn't this the sort of self-denigrating humility we moderns have put aside for a more affirming, positive view of ourselves as God's creation? No, not if we see it as Catherine saw it. "We must recognize the truth in everything," she writes to Queen Giovanna of Naples.

¹*Life*, I, x, 93, p. 86.

"I mean, we must love in God and for God's sake everything that has being, because God is Truth itself, and without God nothing has being."² This is why God says that Catherine "is not": Catherine's being is totally dependent upon God. Catherine of herself *is not*; when Catherine does what is not of God, she does "that which *is not*"—she sins. But as creature of God, it is in the very being of God, in the very truth of God, that Catherine shares. So she calls God "the gentle Master of truth, who is the maker and giver of everything that is."³

Because creation has in fact come to be, Catherine cannot separate the truth of God's absolute, ultimate, noncontingent being from God as Creator. "Truth and Love, the eternal Father," she calls God in a letter to Tommaso d'Alviano.⁴ And so she comes to speak of "the truth of God" or "God's truth" as the reality of our creation out of love in the divine image for the divine glory. The argument becomes her summary of salvation history, and she never tires of repeating its elements in various combinations and contexts.

²Letter T317. All translations from Catherine's letters are my own. If the letter cited occurs in the published volume of my translation, the page in that volume will be indicated as "Noffke, p. #."

³Letter T68, to Bandeçça de' Belforti.

⁴Letter T259. Catherine, fully a child of her age, did conceive of God as Father, as Lord, as male, even though she applied some feminine images (such as the nursing mother) to Christ and the Spirit. It would be less than honest to translate this bias out of her writings, beyond the avoidance of unnecessary multiplication of masculine pronouns.

Note that there are several men named Tommaso in Catherine's life, among them Tommaso dalla Fonte (Catherine's Dominican cousin and first confessor); Tommaso di Antonio da Siena (the Dominican friar usually referred to more simply as Tommaso Caffarini, a disciple who would later be very active in promoting Catherine's cult and who would write both abbreviated and expanded versions of Raimondo da Capua's *Life* and compile testimony in view of Catherine's canonization [the *Processo castellano*]); Tommaso d'Alviano, a mercenary captain in the service of the papacy; Tommaso de' Bardi, a Florentine nobleman; and Tommaso Petra, a disciple who wrote an eyewitness account of Catherine's death. None of these is to be confused with Niccolò Tommaséo, the nineteenth-century editor of Catherine's letters.