

St. Catherine of Siena and the City of the Soul

The City as the Image of the Soul

In the words of St. Catherine of Siena, the city is the image of the soul, the surrounding walls being the frontier between the outward and the inward life. The gates are the faculties or senses connecting the life of the soul with the outer world. The intelligence, according to the saint, questions each one who approaches the gates whether he be friend or foe, thus watching over the security of the city. Living springs of water rise within it; gardens lie protected by its walls, and at the center, where beats the heart, stands the Holy Sanctuary.

Because of its meaningful design, the city of Siena itself corresponds to this simile: it is indeed an image of the soul. Like the soul, the city can be filled with light: when, in the early morning, before the song of the swallows is drowned by the noise of the working day, one sees, as one climbs up from one of the terraced gardens, the first shafts of golden light strike the city standing high aloft; or again, at sunset, as one looks down on the town from San Domenico, when the light of the sinking sun steeps the houses and towers in glowing red, and the Cathedral, as if built of pearl and jasper, seems suspended in the air, illumined by the red sky. Then indeed can one see Siena as was in the mind of her founders: a holy city.

The Monastic Orders

In the construction of Siena there are two distinctly recognizable phases or stages of development: the first can be seen in the form of the old city, gathered closely around the Cathedral, which towers above it like the Citadel of Zion, or the Temple above Jerusalem; the second arises from the location of the monasteries with their monastic churches. These are at the outer limits of the city, and look rather like foothills keeping watch: San Francesco on the east and San Domenico on the west; and to the south and south-east, stand Sant'Agostino and Santa Maria dei Servi. The presence of these monastic churches on the outer limits of the city, but still within the city walls, tells of a time when the ascetic life of

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the monasteries, formerly completely withdrawn from the worldly life of the city, had begun actively to influence the lives of the citizens themselves. Up to the beginning of the 13th century, monastic life was devoted entirely to meditation and contemplation, and monasteries were founded and built in the wilderness (*desertum*). But in the 13th and 14th centuries, the city was invaded by friars of the begging and preaching orders, which caused a spiritual revival, a love of God that made an appeal to the inmost heart of the people. In Siena, all the monastic churches are influenced in their architecture by the ascetic sobriety of the Cistercians. Only the church of Sant'Agostino was rebuilt at a later date, namely in the 17th century.

That the inhabitants of Siena during the Middle Ages were deeply rooted in religious faith is clearly seen in the events which preceded the battle of Montaperto, when the people called down the assistance of Heaven by prayer and penance, and also in their consecration of the city to the Holy Virgin.

The preaching and charitable monastic orders began to intervene in worldly matters just when the theocratic unanimity of the citizens of Siena was weakening. Henceforth, they built their monasteries within the confines of the town, with the aim, precisely, of rebuilding the "City of the Soul".

Worldly events in the second half of the 14th century, however, had almost paralyzed the influence of the monasteries, when suddenly—as though to compensate for the threatened degeneration—all the spirituality that had previously sanctified and beautified the life of the city found a new embodiment in the form of St. Catherine. Through her deeds and words, everything that had hitherto seemed like a divine mystery-play naïvely and subconsciously experienced by the people, was suddenly given a deeper meaning, and freed from what had to some extent become custom and pageantry.

St. Catherine

Caterina Benincasa, the daughter of a simple master-dyer, had neither wealth, position, nor power, yet through the spiritual magnetism of her personality, she influenced the lives of individuals and whole communities far beyond the confines of her native city, and even eventually induced the Pope, against the will of most of his cardinals, to forsake Avignon and return to Rome. Because of her, the

whole political outlook of the Sieneſe was transmuted into a conſciouſneſs of the unity of all Chriſtendom; the chivalrous character of Siena reſounded in the ſpiritual love ſong that ſprang from her, and the object of which ſhe became; the robuſt, full-toned ſpeech of Tuſcany—which to this day adorns the women of Siena, juſt as a dance can ennoble the body—became, on her lips, ſpiritual muſic. If Siena has produced a counterpart to the great poet of Florence, it is to be found in the writings of St. Catherine.

The Inner Light

The great ſoul of St. Catherine, however, is not to be explained by the laws of heredity; ſuch greatness transcends all that can be inherited from anceſtors, or is fashioned by environment and nourished by nature. The key to this greatness of ſoul lies in the words which Catherine, in a ſtate of ecſtaſy, heard from the very mouth of Chriſt: “I am He who is and thou art ſhe who is not”. The “thou” has no “being” of its own when ſeparated from its divine origin; it expreſſes that frail web of changing impreſſions and deſires which man is wont to call his ſelf. Its chief characteristic is ſelf-love, which Catherine compares to a cloud veiling the Divine Light in our hearts. Considered from the level of our human nature, this light is our ability to diſtinguiſh between right and wrong, good and evil; on the higher plane it is the Knowledge of God, through grace. It is “the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9). In Him alone each ſoul finds its own abiding reality.

In her writings, St. Catherine returns again and again to this fundamental truth. Among many ſuch letters may be cited the following, written to one of her diſciples, Ritorio Canigiani of Florence:

Epistolario

We have been endowed by God with a natural, inborn light enabling us to diſtinguiſh between good and evil, perfection and imperfection, purity and impurity, light and darkneſs, and between the infinite and the finite. It is a Knowledge that God has placed in our nature, and experience repeatedly ſhows us that we poſſeſs this ability. You will ſay: “If this power of diſcrimination is ours, how comes it that we ſo often cling to that which is harmful?” To which I would reply: “That comes from ſelf-love veiling the divine Light, juſt as the light of the ſun is veiled by a cloud.” Therefore our miſtakes come not from lack of light but

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from the cloud which darkens it. And so it happens that we blindly choose that which harms instead of that which benefits the soul. By her very nature the soul inclines towards the good and good things; but error comes from the fact that self-love, depriving the soul of light, causes her to seek good where it is not to be found. Therefore deluded people set their heart and their love on the things of this world, things as transient as the wind. O man, foolish beyond all foolishness, who seekest good where there is evil, and light where there is darkness! Where there is death, thou seekest life; where there is poverty, thou seekest riches, and thou seekest infinity among finite things. Good will elude the seeker so long as he seeks it where it cannot be found. We must seek it in God, who is the high and eternal good. If we seek it in Him, we shall assuredly find it, for Almighty God contains no evil, but only pure and perfect goodness. Just as the sun, the giver of light, could never give us darkness, so God can never give us other than that which is in His perfect Self. Thus shall we know (if we will but see by the aid of the Divine Light), that everything that God gives us, even everything troubling, painful, or fearful that He permits this life to bring us, is intended to lead us to the Highest Good, and to teach us not to look for it in this world, but in Him. For the Good is not in this world, neither in riches nor in any other condition which earthly life can offer us: for on the earth bitterness and sorrow reign. If the soul should possess the world against the will of God, it loses grace. Therefore He vouchsafes to us that which is good and perfect, namely the grace truly to seek Him, while man, blinded by his own imperfection, thinks to be bad that which is for his good. His own wrongdoing robs him of God and of God's grace; he fails to see his wrongdoing as an evil, and so he continues in his delusion.

We should therefore strengthen the natural light of perception which has been given us by avoiding evil and practicing virtue, seeking by this same light perfection where alone it can be found. Truly seeking, we shall find it in God. Only then shall we know the ineffable love that God has shown us through His Son, and know His Son who, with such a great fire of Love, shed His blood for us.

By using this natural light, which is imperfect, we shall attain, through grace, a supernatural Light which is perfect, and which will bind us to the truth, and give us steadfastness at all times, and in every condition of life, into which God may lead us. His loving-kindness will grant us this grace, for His only desire is our sanctification. The first light, as I have said, separates us from the world; the second light binds us and unites us with virtue. . . .

Caterina Benincasa was born in the Fontebranda quarter of Siena in 1347, just one year before the outbreak of the Black Death, described by Agnolo di Tura, which raged throughout the city. At the age of seventeen she entered the Dominican Third Order, living

as a nun in the house of her father. In 1374, when the plague broke out once more, Catherine and a few Sisters of the Third Order whom she had gathered around her devoted themselves to the care of the sick, without considering the danger to themselves. Even before this, a group of young people of both sexes, drawn from all social circles and professions, had already rallied around her. By the time she was twenty-three years old, this group of disciples was meeting regularly for spiritual discourse in the Chapel of the Vault under the Hospice of Santa Maria della Scala—where to the present day the Brethren of St. Catherine meet for devotions. The circle of her devotees and followers gradually spread beyond Siena. With advice and exhortation, Catherine intervened in public life: she reconciled warring families, particularly the two powerful Sieneese aristocratic clans of the Salimbeni and the Tolomei, exhorted to greater watchfulness the princes of the Church who had become negligent, and challenged royal princes to participate in crusades rather than wage war against each other.

Political Dissensions

At that time Siena was torn by internal party dissensions. The government of the “Nine”, consisting of rich merchants, had fallen from power in 1355. There followed a series of political subversions, brought about each time by militant intervention of the deposed aristocracy. The rule of the merchants was replaced by that of the small shopkeepers, headed by a council of twelve senators. The rich merchants as well as the nobility, having both been excluded from political power, had now produced a strong counterpoise, against which the Council of twelve senators could only retain office by resorting to terror. In 1368, they were supplanted by the rule of the craftsmen who called themselves the “Reformers”. These Reformers succeeded to a certain extent in preserving the balance of power by admitting, as collaborators, representatives of previous ruling parties—known as “mountains” (*monti*)—into the Council of their democratic government. So, for a while, political peace was restored, the remaining fragments of the earlier hierarchy being more or less reduced to the level of the common people, at the expense of what had previously been a multi-layered and qualified city body.

The Adventurers

The exclusion of the nobles from the governments of the Italian city-states had brought bitter retribution: robbed of the military element on their councils, the towns were not capable of defending themselves against the many adventurers willing, as mercenaries, to carry on war for some princely employer: these soldiers of fortune, when their services were no longer required, roamed the land terrorizing and blackmailing the cities. Among these gangs, which were mostly led by German or English *condottieri*, were to be found a number of deposed and degenerate nobles. In the years 1364, 1365, and 1366, the Sienese territory was periodically ravaged by one of these bands led by Sir John Hawkwood—named “Aguto” by the Italians. In vain did the Republic—at the cost of considerable payments of money—exact promises from this *condottiere* that Siena should in future be spared; he accepted the monies and then broke his promises. St. Catherine sent Father Raimondo of Capua to Sir John Hawkwood, exhorting him to give up his raids and to take part instead in a crusade, but her intervention was unsuccessful.

The result of depriving the council of the rich merchants was that commerce dwindled, riches decreased, and a city such as Siena suffered the gradual loss of her far-flung commercial connections.

Confusion ruled not only in Siena but in the whole of Italy. The Emperor was powerless. Charles IV was overruled and humiliated by the Sienese when, while staying in the city in 1368, he offered his support to the aristocracy and the ruling “Twelve” to raise an insurrection against the democratic government of the “Reformers”.

The Pope

Since 1309, the Pope had resided in Avignon, thereby losing the support and the confidence of the Italian people.

St. Catherine recognized that the root of this evil lay not only within the framework of city politics or in the spiritual decline of the clergy, but more particularly in the fact that the head of the Church no longer lived in the holy city of long and consecrated tradition, but in exile under foreign protection and influence. She therefore concentrated the power of her prayer and exhortation on achieving the return of the Pope to Rome. She was successful in restoring peace between the cities of Tuscany and in reconciling them with

the Pope. The following is an excerpt from a letter of St. Catherine to Pope Gregory XI:

Epistolario

Ambassadors from Siena are on their way to see Your Holiness. If there are any people in the world who can be won over by love, it is they. Therefore I beg of you that you try to win them over in this way. Be a little lenient towards their excuses for the fault they have committed; for they are sorry for it. It seems to them that they have gone so far that now they know not what they should do. May it please Your Holiness, that, if you should see any way in which they could act towards Your Holiness which would be acceptable to you, and whereby they might no longer remain in the war on the side of those to whom they have allied themselves, I beg you to tell it to them. Uphold them for the love of Christ crucified. I believe that, if you do this, it will be of great benefit for Holy Church and reduce the occasion for evil.

The Saint was not afraid either of reproaching the Pope with the depravity of the clergy or of imputing half-heartedness to him personally:

Epistolario

In the Name of Jesus Christ crucified and of gentle Mary.

To you, most reverend and beloved father in Christ Jesus, your unworthy, poor, miserable daughter Catherine, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, writes in His precious Blood: with the desire to see you a fruitful tree, full of mellow fruits, and planted in fruitful earth—for if the tree be removed from the earth it would dry up and bear no fruit—I speak here of the “earth” that is true knowledge of yourself. For the soul that knows itself becomes humble, because it sees nothing of which it can be proud; it nourishes itself on the sweet fruit of love, recognizing within itself the limitless goodness of God. When it becomes aware that it is not, it attributes all its being to Him who Is. Whence the soul is constrained to love what God loves and to hate what He hates.

Oh, sweet and true knowledge, which, as the knife of self-hatred, thou carriest with thee, and which, out the hand of holy desire, thou drawest forth in order to kill the worm of self-love—a worm that spoils and gnaws the root of our tree, so that it cannot bear any fruit of life, but dries up, and loses its verdure! For if a man loves himself, perverse pride (head and source of every ill) lives within him, whatever his rank, prelate or layman, may be. If he is a lover of himself alone—that is, if he loves himself for his

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own sake and not for God—he cannot do other than ill, and all virtue is dead in him. Such a one is like a woman who brings forth her sons dead. And so it really is; for he has not the life of love within him, and seeks only for praise and self-glory, and not the Name of God. I say therefore: even if he is a prelate, he does ill, for through his self-love and self-indulgence (arising from his wish to avoid the disfavor of creatures), holy justice dies within him. He sees his subjects commit faults and sins, and pretends not to see them and fails to correct them; or if he does correct them, he does it with such lukewarmness that he accomplishes nothing, but whitewashes the vice; he is always afraid of giving displeasure or of getting into a quarrel. All this is because he loves himself. Sometimes he tries to do everything in peace. This, however, is the very worst of cruelties; for if a wound is not cauterized when necessary, or cut out with steel, but simply covered with ointment, not only does it fail to heal, but it infects everything, and many a time death will result.

In 1376 St. Catherine traveled to Avignon as mediatrix between Florence and Pope Gregory XI. While there, she wrote a letter to the eight “War Lords”, the Magistrature chosen by the Commons, in Florence. The most important section of this letter is as follows:

Epistolario

I complain strongly regarding you, if what is said in these parts is true, namely, that you have imposed a tax upon the clergy. If this is so, it is a very great evil for two reasons. The first is that you are wronging God, for you cannot do it with a good conscience. But it seems to me that you are losing your conscience and everything good; it seems as if you cared for nothing but the transitory things of senses, that disappear like the wind. Do you not see that we are mortal, and must die, and know not when? Therefore, it is great folly to throw away the life of grace, and to bring death on one’s own self. I do not wish you to do so any more, for if you did you would be turning back, and you know that it is not he who begins who deserves glory, but he who perseveres to the end. So I tell you that you would never reach an effective peace, unless by perseverance in humility, no longer insulting or offending the ministers and priests of Holy Church.

This is the other thing that I was telling you was harmful and bad. For besides the evil that comes from wronging God, I tell you that such action is ruinous to your peace. For the Holy Father, if he knew it, would conceive greater indignation against you.

This is what some of the cardinals have said, who eagerly seek and desire peace. But on hearing this report, they say: “It doesn’t seem that the Florentines want to make peace; for if it were true, they would avoid the least action that was against the will of the

Holy Father and the customs of Holy Church.” I believe that Christ himself on earth would say these and like words, and he would have excellent reason to say them.

I tell you, dearest fathers, and I beg you, not to choose to hinder the grace of the Holy Spirit, which by no merits of yours He by His clemency is disposed to give you. You would bring great shame and reproach upon me. For nothing but shame and confusion could result if I told the Holy Father one thing and you did another. I beg you that it may no longer be so. Nay, do you exert yourselves to show in word and deed that you wish peace and not war.

I have talked to the Holy Father. He heard me graciously, by God’s goodness and his own, showing that he had a warm love of peace; like a good father, who does not consider so much the wrong the son has done, as whether he has become humble, so that he may show him full mercy. How much he would rejoice, my tongue cannot tell. Having discussed with him a good length of time, at the end of our talk he said that if your case were as I presented it to him, he was ready to receive you as sons, and to do what I considered just. I say no more here. No other answer ought to be given to the Holy Father until your ambassadors arrive. I marvel that they are not here yet. When they arrive, I shall talk to them, and then to the Holy Father, and I will write you as to what the situation is. But you, with your taxes and frivolities, are spoiling all that is sown. Do so no more, for the love of Christ crucified and for your own profit. I say no more. Remain in the holy and sweet grace of God.

(Given in Avignon, the 28th day of June 1376)

Persuading the Pope to return to Rome was St. Catherine’s chief object, and in convincing Gregory XI himself of the need to return she was successful. But the French cardinals had, from the beginning, done all in their power to pour ridicule on St. Catherine’s efforts and to vilify her character; they now multiplied their efforts, producing every conceivable obstacle to prevent the departure of the Pope from Avignon. Catherine, who had preceded the Pope to Rome, now wrote him the following letter:

Epistolario

In the name of Jesus Christ Crucified and of gentle Mary.

Most holy Father, your unworthy and miserable daughter Catherine commends herself to you in His precious blood, with the desire to see you as a firmly planted rock, fortified in good and holy resolve; so that however many and contrary be the winds that batter you, whether from men holding office in the world or from

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deception or devilish malice, they may not harm you. For they only want to hinder all the good that may come about from your departure from Avignon. I understood from the letter you sent me that the cardinals claim that Pope Clement IV, when there was anything he had to do, would never do it without the advice of his brother cardinals; even if it often seemed to him that his own view was the more useful, nevertheless he would follow theirs. Alas, most holy Father, they adduce the example of Pope Clement IV, but not that of Pope Urban V, who, when he was in doubt about something, whether or not it were better to do it, would take advice; but on the matters about which he was sure and certain, as you are about the need for departure, he did not depend on the advice of others, but followed his own counsel and took no heed even if all were against him. It seems to me that the advice of good men has regard only to the honor of God, the health of souls, and the reformation of the Holy Church, and not to their own self-interest. I say that the advice of such men is to be followed, but not that of those who care only for their own lives and for honors, rewards, and pleasures; for their counsel turns on where their own preference lies. I beg of you in the name of Christ crucified that it may please Your Holiness to make haste. Employ a pious deception: give the appearance of readiness to stay on, and then act quickly and soon, since the sooner you act the less will you stay among these embarrassments and troubles. It also seems to me that they are giving you to learn from the example of wild animals, who, when once they escape from a snare, never return to it. Till now you have evaded the snare of their counsels, after they had once caused you to fall into it when you delayed your coming; and it was the devil that caused that snare to be laid, so that all the harm and evil might befall which in fact befell. You, being wise and inspired by the Holy Spirit, will not fall into that snare again. So let us go quickly, sweet my Father, and without fear. If God is with you, no one will be against you. Go quickly to your Bride (the Church) who awaits you with blanched cheeks until you bring the color back to them. I will not burden you with further words, though there is much more that I might say. Abide in the sweet and blessed favor of God. Forgive me my presumption. Humbly I ask your blessing.

Finally, in January 1377, Pope Gregory XI entered Rome where, a few months later, he died. To the day of his death, St. Catherine remained his adviser. To her great sorrow, after the death of Gregory, she lived to see the schism which befell the Church over the question of Pope Urban VI (elected in Rome) and the anti-pope Clement VII (elected in Avignon), whom the French cardinals had supported. She fought hard for the recognition of Urban VI as the rightful successor. In 1380, St. Catherine passed away, suffering and

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exhausted by the bitter dissension among Christians. In the very same year St. Bernardino of Siena was born.²

(from *Siena, City of the Virgin*)

2. See “St. Bernardino of Siena and the Sacred Monogram” later in this book.