

History, Department of

History Theses

University of Puget Sound

Year 2019

THRIVING AGAINST ALL ODDS:
HOW THE WRITING OF
CATHERINE OF SIENA SHAPED
CHRISTIANITY IN EUROPE IN THE
14TH CENTURY

Emily Harden
eharden@pugetsound.edu

This paper is posted at Sound Ideas.

https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/history_theses/35

**THRIVING AGAINST ALL ODDS:
HOW THE WRITING OF CATHERINE OF SIENA SHAPED CHRISTIANITY
IN EUROPE IN THE 14TH CENTURY**

EMILY HARDEN

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, THESIS SPRING 2019

Introduction

In the early middle ages, women were seen as completely inferior to men, and a resource to only be used to reproduce, cook and clean. In no way were women allowed to have any concrete role in religion. They were expected to be seen at church, and to be pious but nothing more. But in the early 1300s, there was a rapid change in this mind set. Quickly, and it seems almost out of nowhere, men began to see women as a new way to access parts of the world that they could not access on their own.¹ Women had behaviors and worlds that men were not privy to. While this did not mean women were at all treated fairly or equally, it did give these women some agency in the world that they had never experienced before. This dramatic shift is marked in the Catholic church with the rapid increase in the number of canonized female saints. Before 1300, women made up only eleven percent of all saints while by 1500, they made up almost thirty percent.² This huge increase highlighted the realization that men had that women are useful and open up the world more than they ever saw before.

Up until the late 1960s and early 1970s, women's studies did not exist as a formal area of study. Women were often discussed in the context of other historical events, but those events often focused largely on the men involved in those situations. When women's studies was created, it allowed for a new area of research and intentional learning to be developed. This creation meant that for the first time, women were the focus and center of the conversation. Women's history, especially women's religious history, has become a growing field since the late 1990s. This paper hopes to build off that scholarship in a way that allows for discussion about how the older history focusing on religious men can be tied in with this newer branch of

¹ Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700*. University of Chicago Press, 1986, 219-220.

² Ibid.

women's history. The women this paper will discuss occupied a unique position in the societies they lived within.³

Catherine of Siena was not persecuted for her visions. She was part of a smaller group of women who were believed but more than that: they were trusted. Important people across Europe, including the pope, listened to these women and allowed their opinions to direct choices they made that would affect the entire Catholic controlled world. But there was a crucial difference in the lives of these women. For the women who were trusted, they had a very clear relationship with men in their communities. These women's families were often willing to support their choice to become religious figures (although this was not always the family's initial belief). Because many of these women were born into upper class families, they were able to afford a certain lifestyle that others could not. Due to family money, they were able to not work and still have the money and resources to survive. These women were often raised in religious families, who would take them to church and educated them in religion. This led to a strong foundational knowledge of how Catholicism functioned. Usually within their early adulthood, the women would meet someone who would become their trusted partner. Often a clergy member or someone of similar status, these women were allowed into religious spaces that they previously had not been able to access. While these were not the circumstances for every female mystic in this time period, they were for Catherine of Siena.

³ During the Middle Ages, tensions were always high. Disease and death ran rampant and everyone searched for scapegoats to blame. Unfortunately, these people frequently sought out mystical women to blame. These women claimed to have visions from God and saw themselves as a vehicle for spreading those messages. Many women who claimed to be religious mystics were instead deemed to be heretics by their communities, leaving them to be tortured and burned alive for their "crimes". People feared that these women may be creating visions in order to lead others astray, actually spreading evil rather than good. While it is crucial to acknowledge that this is a big piece of medieval women's religious history, it is not what this paper will focus on.

This paper will closely examine Catherine of Siena's life, her ideology and extensive writing with the lens of understanding the impact her writing had during her lifetime as well as after her death. The paper will aim to prove that Catherine of Siena's writing was exceptional because she was able to have incredible impact on the world during her lifetime, rather than after her death like many other mystics. It will argue that because of those she surrounded herself with, particularly Raymond of Capua and other religious men, and her message to always look to God, she was able to send her letters into spaces that she otherwise would not have had access to. This created a cycle where her letters repeatedly gave Raymond and others more religious credibility and access to new spaces to share her letters.

A Biography of Catherine of Siena

Catherine of Siena was never an ordinary child. Born in 1347, she was one of two twins, and the twenty-third of twenty-four children born to her mother. Her twin died quickly after she was born, as had many of her siblings. Despite the odds that she would likely die as well, she survived past infancy and began to form an intense relationship with God.⁴

During this point in history, infant mortality was incredibly high, and chances of surviving well into adulthood were slim as well. Plague caused a constant fear of death to circulate, often killing entire communities very quickly. The black death, which killed up to a third of Europe's population during its peak, was at its most deadly moment. Because there was a fear that children would not survive long, many girls were married off in their early teenage years, in hopes that they would have children and continue the family on. This was the case with Catherine's family. As a child of about six or seven, Catherine devoted herself to God. She promised to remain abstinent for the rest of her life, a promise her parents did not take seriously.

⁴ Caroline W Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast, The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 192.

Catherine was said to have her first vision at six, seeing Jesus and the Apostles in the sky above her. It was this moment that drove her to be pious in her religious conviction. Only five short years after this secret dedication to God, Catherine's mother began to find suitors for her youngest daughter. Catherine quickly grew to resent this process and told her parents she would never marry. Her parents resented her for this and in turn punished her by forcing her to spend all her time with other people, knowing that all she wanted was solitude. But instead of breaking down her conviction to worship and serve God, they actually made it stronger. The punishment turned into a learning opportunity for Catherine: it strengthened her patience and ability to meditate anywhere in the world.⁵

Eventually, her parents realized that their child was special, and that she was not going to easily be broken. They quickly changed their minds and allowed Catherine to fully live in the ascetic lifestyle, even building her a small space for her to sleep, pray, and fast without interruption from her family. She soon joined the Dominican tertiary, a religious community that was composed mostly of widows and matrons of the order.⁶ While these women were not nuns, they did have an intense religious connection. What separated these women from being nuns is that they often were not celibate throughout their entire lives.

During her time with the order, Catherine began having more visions and mystical encounters. As she notes in her own book *The Dialogue*, many of these encounters were torturous and painful to experience, teaching her mercy and grace.⁷ These traits would later move to inform Catherine's life and writings. She was also quick to protect and care for others who

⁵ "St. Catherine of Siena." Saint Catherine of Siena. Accessed April 01, 2019. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/mary/catsiena.htm>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Algar Thorold. *The Dialogue of the Seraphic Virgin, Catherine of Siena : Dictated by Her, While in a State of Ecstasy, to Her Secretaries, and Completed in the Year of Our Lord 1370 : Together with an Account of Her Death by an Eye-witness*. A New and Abridged ed. (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1974).

were suffering, especially those who had contracted the plague and other deadly illnesses. Catherine never shied away due to fear of the illnesses but rather was responsible for nursing dozens of people back to health, including her own confessor, Raymond of Capua.⁸ These prayers that she prayed over others became important when it became time for her canonization as a saint.⁹

At the age of seventeen or eighteen, Catherine took the next step in her commitment to Catholicism. During one of her visions, she witnessed Jesus descending from heaven to put a wedding ring on her hand. This mystical marriage bound her to Jesus in a new and even stronger way than she had been before. It was at this point that she flourished as a model of what being godly looked like in the fourteenth century. In addition to caring for the ill, she also began to tirelessly serve the poor. During this time, it was said that she survived off of no more than the eucharist for weeks at a time, starving herself of food, water, and sleep in order to better serve those around her.¹⁰

Following a vision from God, she began to write letters and distribute them to people across Europe. She wrote to people like Pope Gregory XI in hopes of bringing the Papacy back to Rome from Avignon and reunite the Catholic roots.¹¹ She also fought to help Gregory to create a crusade plan to send people from Europe down to the holy land.

Upon entering society, she became close with a priest who was a member of the same Dominican society as her. Raymond of Capua grew to be Catherine's closest friend and her

⁸ St. Catherine of Siena, www.ewtn.com

⁹ In order for a person to become a saint they must either be martyred (killed for professing or fighting to protect their faith) or perform at least two miracles. These miracles for Catherine of Siena included multiple healings of those infected with the plague, and others which will be mentioned throughout the body of this paper.

¹⁰ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*. (Wilmington, Delaware, 1980), 43.

¹¹ Edmund Gardner. "St. Catherine of Siena." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03447a.htm> (retrieved April 1, 2019).

religious confessor. He oversaw her religious activity and helped her to construct the letters that she was sending to people. Following Catherine's death, he took it upon himself to write a biography of her life which is the clearest source historians have about what work she did during her life. It is also very clear in her writings and in his book the effect that Raymond had on Catherine's life, and the effect she had on his.

In 1378, Gregory tried to return to Rome, but by this point, Rome had already selected another pope. Catherine was called to help remedy the situation in Rome, and she ended up spending the rest of her life living near the Vatican and working closely with the pope in order to resolve the papal schism and resulting issues. In 1380, at the age of 33, Catherine of Siena died. After three months of a long and painful mysterious illness, which Catherine faced with the same patience and grace she had exhibited her entire life, she passed away. When she died, the city of Siena requested that her body be transported back to her hometown for burial. This is where one of the biggest conflicts about Catherine of Siena arose.

Due to her work with the papacy and the credit they gave her for bringing the papal court back from Avignon, the Vatican wanted her body to remain within the walls of the holy city. The pope denied Siena's request for Catherine's body and interred her in Rome. Soon, residents in Siena decided to take matters into their own hands, and with the help of Catherine's close friend and confidant Raymond of Capua, traveled to Rome and dug up Catherine's body. Because they knew it was impossible to take her entire body back with them, they decided to cut off her head and one of her thumbs. Placed in a bag, they were transported out of Rome. Legend says that at the wall of the city, guards asked to check the inside of the bag, and when they looked, the head and thumb had turned into hundreds of rose petals, and when they got back to Siena, the body

parts had rematerialized¹². Catherine's head was then enshrined in a church in Siena, and it is still visible and intact today. It has become a key symbol of women's key involvement in the growth of the church.

In 1461, Catherine was canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church. By combining her works as a mystic, the miracles she performed when she cured people of the plague, and the miracle of her head transformation her nominators were able to prove her cause for awarding her the title of Saint.

Bringing Catherine into conversations with other Mystics

Raymond and Catherine's pairing was not unique. Many female mystics found a man who could help them to access otherwise forbidden areas of the world. Dozens of women fit in this pattern. For example, Saint Bridget of Sweden was known across Europe. She plays an interesting role in the history of Mystical women because of her marriage and family life. Many of these women chose to be celibate and remain unmarried during their lifetimes but Bridget did not follow this equation. She married and used her husband as a man who was able to communicate her ideas out to the world. But more than her husband, she was born to a father who was royalty and a mother who was a member of the aristocracy. It was these connections that allowed Bridget to spread her influence across Europe and communicate with people such as the pope and other important leaders. Her ideas sparked a new group of nuns to form a convent in her name, becoming the Brigittine Order. The abbey created extensive written works which were distributed to religious authorities as well as the surrounding community in order to spread the ideas of Bridget even following her death.

¹² "Catherine of Siena." Catherine of Siena - New World Encyclopedia. Accessed April 01, 2019. http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Catherine_of_Siena.

Bridget stands as one of the strongest examples next to Catherine of Siena. Both of these women used men within their own lives to spread their ideas and visions with the world. Their ideas did not only stay within their local communities but literally spread to the edges of Europe and beyond. These two are part of a handful of women who used this technique. While a handful might not seem significant, it is due to the fact that multiple women all figure this system of gendered spaces and how to manipulate them all around the same time. Most of these women are living and writing in between the 13th and 15th centuries. Many scholars note this change in dynamic and gender in this late medieval period, Andrea Janelle Dickens's monograph *The Female Mystic, Great Women Thinkers*.¹³ Within this text, Dickens works through the story and lives of twelve different mystical thinkers. The book gives the reader a basic understanding of these women and allows for readers to see a broader narrative that will allow for all of these women to be in conversation with each other due to their proximity in the text. By comparing these twelve women (Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden included), it becomes more apparent that the idea of male counterparts was not only beneficial but almost a requirement for success. Without a man backing her up, these mystical women were often left to fight their own battles and attempt to gain entrance into guarded spaces. Dickens' introductory text gives readers a clearer understanding of these women, their lives, and their stories. This resource allows for a greater understanding of this necessity of a male and female mystical partnership.

Ideology and writings

Catherine of Siena wrote an incredible number of letters, ranging in recipients and content. The next section of this paper will dig deeper into these letters in hopes of understanding

¹³ Andrea Janelle Dickens. *The Female Mystic : Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages*. International Library of Historical Studies ; 60. London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

some of Catherine's beliefs through her writings. The section will be split into three groups that Catherine wrote to most: important leaders, women, and her male counterparts.

Historian Suzanne Noffke has worked to translate a large number of Catherine's roughly 400 surviving letters.¹⁴ Noffke notes that many of these letters were dictated and written by one of Catherine's associates, but some were written by Catherine herself. Noffke's edited text, separated into two volumes, features dozens of translated letters, separated by different times in Catherine's life. While this is an extremely successful and helpful way to set up her letters for a reader, this paper will take a different approach as it will be bringing these different time periods into conversation with each other. Noffke's texts also allow the reader to gain insight into some of the key people in Catherine's life and are a very helpful resource for keeping track of these relationships, even including reference to the letters that these people received.

The first recipients of letters that this paper will examine is letters that Catherine sent to religious authorities. Catherine's letters gave advice, sought religious council, and hoped to produce change in ways that are not seen in the other two groups. In the course of her letters, she writes to cardinals and popes about the papal schism and the papal court in Avignon. She hoped that through her writing she would be able to influence Pope Gregory XI and his cardinals to leave Avignon and return to Rome. In one letter, dated by Noffke to have been written in 1376, Catherine writes that it is the pope's responsibility to look to God for guidance, and take what he learns and distribute that knowledge to Catholics.¹⁵ Catherine writes this letter in a time of

¹⁴ I believe it is important to note that in the course of my research I did not read all of her letters in their entirety. While I do have a general sense of themes and concepts of the body of her letters, especially letters that other scholars have deemed important, I am positive that there are details, possibly big ones, that I have missed due to the sheer number of available writings. While these texts have provided an incredible and fruitful source base, I see it as very important to note that other scholars may see my groupings as incorrect or incomplete based upon their own, more extensive, research.

¹⁵ Noffke, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 1 244-251

tremendous religious upheaval. People are starting to become aware that the papacy residing in Avignon removes some sort of concrete power that it held while located in Rome. Catherine writes:

I have been in Pisa and Lucca until just now, and have pleaded with them [the inhabitants of these cities] as strongly as I could not to join in league with the rotten members who are rebelling against you. But they are very anxious, since they aren't getting any encouragement from you, and are being constantly goaded and threatened by the other side.¹⁶

The other side that Catherine is alluding to is the groups of Italian cities that in 1376 are joining together in rebellion against the papacy. More and more Italians saw the move out of Rome not only as a sin against God for leaving the Vatican, but also as a move against the Italian people. Following the death of Gregory XI (who was the recipient of this letter), a new pope had to be elected by the cardinals. Due to high tensions, inhabitants of Rome formed a mob and swarmed the Vatican, threatening violence if the pope selected was not of Italian origin.¹⁷ The cardinals selected a man who took the name of Urban VI, who wanted the papal court to permanently return to Rome. This was the birth of the Great Schism, as the French Cardinals selected a different man as pope, leading to two heads of the Catholic church. Catherine, among many other Catholics, understood this to be extremely problematic. Catholics believe that the pope, as head of the Church, must remain in Rome due to the history of that position, as it was given to Peter the apostle by Jesus.¹⁸ Many see the pope as the continuation of this line, all connected back to Peter and ultimately to Jesus. Catholics across Europe, and especially in Rome, saw this break

¹⁶ Ibid., 249

¹⁷ "The Great Schism, 1378-1415," The Great Schism (1378-1415)| Lectures in Medieval History | Dr. Lynn H. Nelson, Emeritus Professor, Medieval History, KU, , accessed May 05, 2019, http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/great_schism.html.

¹⁸ "The Pope," CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: The Pope, , accessed May 05, 2019, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12260a.htm>.

from Rome as a break from Jesus, which to many was unforgivable. Catherine wrote in many of her letters to both Gregory XI and Urban VI that it was crucial that the pope return and stay in Rome, and that the pope select stronger cardinals in order to protect that move.

Along with letters to the popes, Catherine also wrote to secular rulers as well. One such letter was sent to Charles V, the king of France. In this letter, Catherine explains that it is Charles' responsibility to lead his people in their faith. Catherine explains that she wishes that Charles would

Make light of the world and of yourself and of all earthly pleasures. Hold your kingdom as something lent to you, not as if it were your own. For you know well that life, health, wealth, honor, status, dominion- none of these belong to you... This is why I am asking you to act wisely, as a good steward, holding everything as lent to you who have been made God's steward.¹⁹

Catherine highlights in this opening request of her letter that Charles should rule his kingdom as if it were a loan, because, she notes, it was a gift to Charles from God and should be treated as such. Catherine here is clearly speaking to the fact that many kings acted as though they were gods and should be worshipped as such, rather than worshipping the Christian God. Most kings in England at this time believed themselves to be chosen by this God, through a process called divine right. They saw themselves as extensions of God, and this is exactly the idea that Catherine was playing off of. If these men were meant to be servants of God, then they could not be worshipped themselves, but rather needed to be exemplary Christians in order to encourage their subjects (in this case the population of France) to be better Christians as well. Catherine moved on in her letter to explain to Charles that he was not being a good Christian and rather was "being an agent of... evil".²⁰ This is a similar message to the one Catherine writes to the wife of one of Siena's senators. Catherine sees the wife as a clear and easy way to influence the

¹⁹ Noffke, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 2, 220.

²⁰ Noffke, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 2, 222.

senator as he is much more likely to listen to his wife than a random citizen of Siena. Catherine used this to her advantage, writing from one woman to another in response to concerns that the wife had brought to Catherine. Catherine clearly explains that as leaders in the community, it was the couple's responsibility to show their religious piety and show that they are not afraid of death.²¹ This is important because plague and other illnesses were still killing people frequently in Siena and surrounding areas. To show fear of death demonstrates a lack of understanding of God because Christians believe in the resurrection of Jesus, meaning that people who believe in Jesus will go on to live in heaven. Catherine uses this idea to explain that this couple must not fear death but rather embrace it, and in doing so will extend their faith on to the community they serve.

This ties very clearly into one of the other main communities Catherine wrote to: women. Unlike the senator's wife, these women were not in positions of power, but rather were often part of religious groups that Catherine frequently interacted with. A large body of her letters were sent to the Mantellate, the religious order that Catherine joined at the age of 17 (roughly 1364). While this group was not a convent and did not have to follow the same rules as nuns, Catherine often was stricter and more pious than many nuns and religious groups. The Mantellate represents Catherine's true entrance into the spiritual community. They became a space for her to explain her visions and to receive acceptance that others like her family did not know how to give. Catherine was likely introduced to this tertiary Dominican group by her cousin Tommaso dalla Fonte, who was her first informal confessor since she was 15.

In her letters to the Mantellate, the message is clear and consistent: the way that women should worship and interact with God should be based off the model of the Virgin Mary²².

²¹ Noffke, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 1, 28, 2001.

²² *Ibid.*, 4

Catherine writes to her fellow worshippers in hopes that her messages will be used to create a strong faith community for others who were like Catherine was as a child and teen. Catherine was beloved by this community. They had taken her from the beginning stages of her religious journey and were still standing behind her as she traveled throughout Europe. Catherine continued to bring women into community with her, hoping to create other tertiary communities to inspire people as the Mantellate had done for her.

Catherine also wrote letters to nuns and other religious women. In both of these situations, Catherine writes with the intent of explaining how these women should live their lives. Her message explains that in order to be successful in life, one should be willing to serve God as much as possible. Catherine explains this by saying:

If you should ask how you can show your willingness, I reply that there are two ways I wasn't you to show it in God's sights. First, I wasn't you to want things to go not your own way but the way of the one who is. ... The other way is by your submission to the yoke of holy obedience.²³

In this letter, Catherine is explaining that the only way to be truly successful in the world is to fully submit to God's will and to allow his will to overtake their own will. This message is very similar to the letter she sent to a group of newly converted women in the town of Vercelli in 1375. She writes to congratulate them on entering the Catholic church and then moves on to give them advice for the rest of their lives. She explains to the women that the best way to be a disciple of Christ is to always look to God in everything. Catherine explains that by doing this, it guarantees that these women will be strong believers and religious figures in their families and community.²⁴

²³ Ibid., 51

²⁴ Noffke, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 1, 70-71

The final woman this paper will examine is Catherine's own mother, Lapa. Catherine travelled extensively after meeting Raymond of Capua. In her travels to Avignon, Rome, and Genoa (as well as others), Catherine constantly wrote letters home to her mother. These letters give readers a look into her own personal relationship with her mother. As one of only a handful of Lapa's surviving children, they had an interesting and intense relationship. Noffke notes that Lapa was more controlling of her than her other siblings²⁵, likely because she took an unorthodox path in life and did not marry. Lapa became one of Catherine's sources of protection and comfort, who relied on others like Dalla Fonte and Raymond of Capua to protect and aid her daughter during their journeys. In these pieces of writing we see a different, softer side of Catherine. In her letters to her mother, she clearly takes a subordinate role to Lapa; in other letters where she strongly urged, with Lapa she makes gentle requests. In all of Catherine's letters to her mother, she requested that Lapa shows patience while waiting for Catherine to return from her journey. Catherine writes:

This is why you should try with a genuine and holy eagerness to realize that you are not [as good as God] and to acknowledge that your existence is from God, along with whatever gifts and graces you have received and continue to receive from him every day. This will make you grateful and appreciative. You will achieve true holy patience and won't see little things as so big.²⁶

The little things that Catherine is referring to could be summarized as anything earthly, especially her daughter's safety and health. Catherine's letters highlight her mother's worry and concern for her daughter's life. Catherine encourages her mother to release these concerns as it is up to God to protect her so that she can serve a greater purpose for the church, bringing up the continued theme of looking to God. Lapa must accept that there is nothing she can do to protect this child and leaves her in the hands of Raymond of Capua and other men to protect her.

²⁵ Ibid., 543

²⁶ Noffke, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 2, 413

Catherine's Male Counterparts

The final group of letter recipients this paper will discuss is the male counterparts in Catherine's life, specifically Raymond of Capua, Neri Di Landoccio Pagliaresi, and Tommaso Dalla Fonte. These three men played crucial roles in Catherine's life, each one different than the rest.

Tommaso Dalla Fonte was Catherine's cousin, who came to live with her family in 1349 after both of his parents died of the plague.²⁷ Because the two grew up together, they had a special sibling-type bond that existed throughout both of their lifetimes. When Tommaso later joined the Catholic Church as a preacher in Siena, he became Catherine's first confessor. Catherine would tell him in detail about her early visions, her mystical marriage to Jesus, and about her devotion to Jesus and the church. In her letters to him, their family connection comes through as she talks about familial love as well as divine love to and from God. In one letter, Catherine expresses concern that Tommaso plans to leave Siena for somewhere else. While she does not want this to happen, she releases her will in turn for God's, in hope of serving the church better. She writes:

It seems to me that you are planning to go somewhere else. I didn't think you ought to do that now, but let it be the way God and you want it. May God give you grace to choose the best course in this, and make all you do serve his honor and the good of your soul.²⁸

Catherine does not want to lose a close friend and confidant but realizes that it is not her decision and lets him go on with his life. Although he did not stay her confessor forever, he was involved in her faith and many of her trips to Avignon and across Europe.

Another man in her life was Neri, who she met as a young teen. They developed a special relationship, often compared to a mother-son bond. In a letter to him in 1372, she writes:

²⁷ Noffke, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 1, 548

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8

You have asked me to receive you as my son. Unworthy, poor, and wretched though I am, I have already received you and do receive you warmly. I pledge myself and will pledge myself always in the sight of God to be answerable for all your sins.²⁹

Neri quickly became a key person in Catherine's life. He makes appearances in many of her letters. He travelled with her extensively and became one of her most important friends.

Catherine became an important source of refuge and advice for Neri, helping him to grow in his faith. Only four years later, Catherine writes to the pope, asking him to listen to Neri, who was carrying her message to him.³⁰

Finally, the last recipient this paper will examine is Catherine's long-term confessor Raymond of Capua. Her letters to Raymond are extremely fascinating but arguably the most difficult to analyze. Throughout the extensive letters that have survived from their communications, multiple themes emerged. The most important theme, the one this section will focus on, is Catherine's discussions with Raymond about her spirituality and faith. While all of her letters focus on her beliefs, these letters to Raymond take a special space because they are discussing her own religious wellbeing, guiding her in her choices and opinions. As Catherine's confessor, it was Raymond's job to perform these tasks.

The Catholic Church, throughout its entire history, has had a policy of the confession of sin. This generally entails the parishioner (in this case that would be Catherine of Siena) traveling to their local place of worship and discussing all of their recent sins with a priest. This was the origins of Catherine and Raymond's relationship, but it grew to encompass so much more. What originally was a business partnership, grew into an intense friendship that would create a space for Catherine to share her writing. As they began to grow closer, they began to

²⁹ Noffke, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 1, 15

³⁰ Noffke, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 2, 202

trust each other more. Once Raymond was able to fully understand Catherine's visions, it allowed for him to give her some form of credibility.³¹ Raymond began to carry letters for Catherine when he traveled. Because of this, he became arguably the most instrumental person for the expansion of Catherine's audience.

Catherine was not born into a rich household, nor was she supported endlessly by her family. Rather, to gather support she had to seek help from others within the religious community. Eventually, as Catherine began to gain more and more notoriety in Siena and the surrounding area, the local people were not sure if Catherine could be trusted. She was called to Florence to answer in front of the Dominican Counsel about visions she reported having. Following these proceedings, Raymond of Capua was assigned to work with Catherine as her confessor³². He took over for Tommaso and another priest in the Dominican order who had been with Catherine since her childhood. The two grew very close quickly, as Catherine fully accepted Raymond as part of God's plan for her life. This meant that the two were able to work closely with each other in the hopes of achieving both their goals. Little did either of them know that the other would be crucial in becoming some of the most well-known duos in late medieval history.

There are not extensive details about Raymond's childhood, but it is known that he joined the Dominican Friars while studying scripture at a university in Bologna. Due to his intelligence and dedication, he quickly was given more and more responsibilities within the order. In 1363, he was given a leadership position in a Dominican convent, where he developed strong skills in working with religious women, listening to and understanding their views on faith and the

³¹ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*. (New York: P.J. Kennedy) 1960, 138

³² "Saint Catherine of Siena. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/mary/catsiena.htm>.

Church³³. Raymond's experience aided his ability to work so well with Catherine of Siena almost a decade later.

Raymond had many connections in the religious world, which gave him access to people in Rome and specifically within the walls of the Vatican. When Catherine began writing letters to Pope Gregory XI, it meant that she had a way to actually get him these letters. Raymond's vast network allowed for post to travel all across Europe. He was able to gain access to kings, queens, popes, priests, all the way down to the common man or woman in cities who had questions for Catherine. He created a space for her to speak, and eventually became a messenger himself. Catherine and Raymond worked in tandem to solve the problems they saw as the most detrimental to the world. They wrote to leaders about the crusades, fought for the end of the papal court's time in Avignon, and even attempted to end the papal schism, supporting Pope Urban VI.³⁴ While there isn't primary source writing stating that it was Raymond who allowed this access, scholars like James White agree that it was through Raymond's work that Catherine was able to become a public figure.³⁵ Catherine provided her visions and ideas (many of which have been previously discussed) in a way that allowed for Raymond to share them with the world. His platform and her network created a new space for Catherine to enter into to spread her ideas, while her ideas created something to rally around. This meant that people could support them both in a way that could not have existed without the other. To remove Raymond would mean that Catherine would have been believed by some but most likely only in her city of Siena, and she possibly could've been killed as a heretic. To remove Catherine would mean that

³³ Robert McNamara, "Bl. Raymond of Capua," Saint Kateri Tekakwitha Parish Irondequoit NY, , accessed May 05, 2019, <https://www.kateriirondequoit.org/resources/saints-alive/quirinus-rupert-mayer/bl-raymond-of-capua/>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ James White, "Hungering for Maleness: Catherine of Siena and the Medieval Public Sphere." *Religious Studies and Theology* 33, no. 2 (2014), 157

Raymond would have stayed a quiet leader in the church, working his way slowly up the chain of command, rather than catapulting him into the spotlight like she did.

Conclusion

It is rare to find people anymore who claim to see visions from God. Whether mystics exist or are a thing of the past still remains to be determined by theologians and historians alike. Although gender structures have changed over the centuries, it still remains true today that in order to gain access to some spaces, it is crucial to have an ally of a different gender. Catherine of Siena stands as a key example of the idea that gender matters. To argue that she could have been successful, let alone survived, without Raymond of Capua would be incredibly controversial and highly debated. When you take everything down to its roots, it becomes apparent that both parties needed the other. Success was not fully possible without both Raymond and Catherine being absolutely willing and able to work together to spread their knowledge and wisdom across the world.

But what is arguably more important is that both parties benefited from this relationship. One did not gain more than the other. The relationship was truly balanced and stable. When reading the documents left behind in Catherine's Letters and Raymond's bibliographies of her life, it is clear that both people did an incredible amount of work in order to reach the success and levels of trust they did. To travel from northern Italy to France in the 1300s was no simple feat, but they did it because they both believed that the other had what was best in mind, but more importantly, both believed the other was putting God's will ahead of their own. Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua had the utmost trust in each other, and without that trust, their lives would not have gone in the same direction that they did. Their relationship with each other meant that they were able to not only succeed but to thrive.

Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES

Holloway, Julia Bolton. *Saint Bride and Her Book : Birgitta of Sweden's Revelations*. Library of Medieval Women. Woodbridge, Suffolk ; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2000.

Noffke, Suzanne. *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*. Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies (Series) ; v. 202-<203, 329, 355>. Tempe AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000.

Raymond of Capua. *The Life of Catherine of Siena*. Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 2003.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Bennett, Judith M., and Karras, Ruth Mazo. *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*. First ed. Oxford Handbooks. Oxford, England ; New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Boon, Jessica A. "Trinitarian Love Mysticism: Ruusbroec, Hadewijch, and the Gendered Experience of the Divine 1." *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 72, no. 3 (2003): 484-503.

"Catherine of Siena." *Catherine of Siena - New World Encyclopedia*. Accessed April 01, 2019.
http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Catherine_of_Siena.

Coakley, John Wayland. "The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages (review)." *The Catholic Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (2010): 776-77.

Dickens, Andrea Janelle. *The Female Mystic : Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages*. International Library of Historical Studies ; 60. London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

Elliott, Dyan. *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004.

- Freeman, Elizabeth. "The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages by Andrea Janelle Dickens (review)." *Parergon* 29, no. 2 (2012): 233-36.
- Fudge, Thomas A. *Medieval Religion and Its Anxieties : History and Mystery in the Other Middle Ages*. New Middle Ages (Palgrave Macmillan (Firm)). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Gerrer, Karen. *Joan of Arc's Fatal Response : An Image of Gender and Women's Spirituality*. Central Washington University, 2000.
- Gutgsell, Jessie. "The Gift of Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination of Western Medieval Christianity." *Anglican Theological Review* 97, no. 2 (2015): 239-53.
- "The Great Schism, 1378-1415," The Great Schism (1378-1415)| Lectures in Medieval History | Dr. Lynn H. Nelson, Emeritus Professor, Medieval History, KU, , accessed May 05, 2019, http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/great_schism.html.
- Heffernan, Carol. "The Revelations of St Bridget of Sweden in Fifteenth-Century England." *Neophilologus* 101, no. 2 (2017): 337-49.
- Kirakosian, Racha. "The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe JUDITH M. BENNETT & RUTH MAZO KARRAS." *Women's History Review* 23, no. 6 (2014): 1-2.
- MacLennan, Jennifer., Robinson, Dan, Garay, Kathleen E., Jeay, Madeleine, Wesley, David, Benoit, Avril, Catherine, Redcanoe Productions, Inc, Vision TV, and Films for the Humanities. *The Divine Negotiators. Bridget of Sweden, 1303-1375 [and] Catherine of Siena, 1098-1179 [sic]*. Mystic Women of the Middle Ages ; Pt. 2. Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 2003.
- McCarthy, Conor. *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages : A Sourcebook*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2004.

- McNamara, Robert. "Bl. Raymond of Capua." Saint Kateri Tekakwitha Parish Irondequoit NY.
 Accessed May 05, 2019. <https://www.kateriirondequoit.org/resources/saints-alive/quirinus-rupert-mayer/bl-raymond-of-capua/>.
- Mews, Constant J. "Thomas Aquinas and Catherine of Siena: Emotion, Devotion and Mendicant Spiritualities in the Late Fourteenth Century." *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 1, no. 2 (2012): 235-52.
- O'Brien, Elmer J. *Varieties of Mystic Experience, an Anthology and Interpretation*. 1st Ed.]. ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.
- Phillips, Kim M. "Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Pp. Xiv 626. ISBN 978-0-19-958217-4 (hb and E-book)." *Gender & History* 27, no. 2 (2015): 498-99.
- "The Pope," CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: The Pope, , accessed May 05, 2019, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12260a.htm>.
- Roman, Christopher. "THE DIALOGUE OF CATHERINE OF SIENA: A CHARITY BORN OF SOLITUDE." *Magistra* 21, no. 1 (2015): 110-31,163.
- "Saint Catherine of Siena." Saint Catherine of Siena. Accessed May 05, 2019. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/mary/catsiena.htm>.
- Thorold, Algar. *The Dialogue of the Seraphic Virgin, Catherine of Siena : Dictated by Her, While in a State of Ecstasy, to Her Secretaries, and Completed in the Year of Our Lord 1370 : Together with an Account of Her Death by an Eye-witness*. A New and Abridged ed. Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1974.
- White, James. "Hungering for Maleness: Catherine of Siena and the Medieval Public Sphere." *Religious Studies and Theology* 33, no. 2 (2014): 157-71.