

5. Catherine of Siena: Public Ministry to Church and World

Catherine of Siena (1347-80) lived in the complex world of fourteenth century Italy. The culture was marked by notable literary production on the one hand (Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio), and disastrous political, ecclesial, and social upheaval on the other ("Babylonian Captivity" of the Papacy, the Black Plague). At great cost, and not always successfully, Catherine remained faithful to her call from God to bring about reform and peace. In the midst of her active ministry, she managed to produce a significant theological corpus that has Incarnation as one of its major themes.

I. Introduction: Catherine of Siena was the first Italian woman to be published in the vernacular, her local Tuscan dialect. Since the vernacular was considered inferior to Latin, Catherine's writings were later translated into Latin to give them more gravitas. Fortunately, the original Italian texts have been preserved.

Scholars note a tension between hagiography (lives of the saints whose purpose is to edify) and historical scholarship: Hagiography emphasizes divine inspiration. Historical scholarship is more interested in Catherine's authority as an author in her own right. Until recently, a too exclusive focus on the supernatural sources of Catherine's theology has rendered Catherine's personal talents invisible. Unlike most women in Christian history, Catherine, like Hildegard, was officially blessed by Rome as teacher and preacher.

II. Fourteenth Century Italy: Dante and Boccaccio - Plague and Decadence: Renowned for its sensuousness, Italian culture is an apt setting for an incarnational theology, with its sensitivity to the sacredness of nature and matter. St. Francis of Assisi had paved the way a century earlier. The art of the period reveals a compelling naturalism and strong emotional expression based on acute observation. Scholars trace the seeds of the Renaissance and Italian humanism to the fourteenth century.

But there was another side to Siena that suffered through the Plague and war: Estimates suggest that 60% of the population of Siena and a third of Europe's urban population succumbed to the Plague that visited Siena three times during Catherine's lifetime. During the outbreak in 1364, Catherine lost several sisters and nieces. Catherine spoke of the "darkness that has come over holy Church!" and said she felt "surrounded by many enemies" (Letter IV).

Civic and ecclesial politics were marred by corruption and scandal. Giott0'ca-1310
From 1309-1378, the Church experienced what is known as the "Babylonian Captivity," a term coined by the Italian poet Petrarch to describe the period in which seven successive French popes resided in Avignon rather than Rome. Catherine's theology and ministry had to take into account not only the reform of the Church, but also the pervasive fear and insecurity that accompanied such high levels of dysfunction.

European Christians responded to this chaos by embracing a culture of penance. Public penitential processions and flagellation were common, and surely influenced Catherine, who engaged in extreme forms of asceticism. Such practices were aimed at appeasing a God angry with human behaviors, but in the end, Catherine's theology opts for a God of love and mercy.

In the political realm, the emergence of nation states was the setting for intrigue and war among emperors, kings, popes, and nobles for land and power. Wealthy families from Tuscan city-states fought with each other and also confronted the enormous power and wealth of the bishops and the papacy.

Catherine was directly involved in these battles. These violent struggles may partially explain the intensity of her prayer and action. Calamitous times call for strong remedies.

III. Catherine's Life and Works: Catherine's life began in Siena. She was born in a large house on the Via dei Tintori (the street of the "tints" - her father was a wool dyer). Her parents, Giacomo di Benincasa and Lapa, nurtured a family of twenty-five children. Catherine was born on March 25, 1347 with her twin sister, Giovanna, who did not survive. Catherine died in 1380 on April 29th - the date on which her feast day is celebrated.

Catherine's personality was large and complex. She was in turn fiery and determined, but also reflective and compassionate. Catherine's life was also filled with death. Her older sister, Bonaventura died in childbirth when Catherine was young, and a cousin, Tommaso, was absorbed into the Benincasa family when his parents died. Catherine was also close to the death associated with war, illness, and plague. After a vision of Christ in the sky when she was six years old, Catherine became more introverted, drawn to a life of solitude, penance, and prayer. This calling elicited significant conflict in her family, who had other plans for her, including a marriage that would enhance the family fortunes.

Gradually, through prayer and attention to the world around her, Catherine developed an outward, public ministerial vocation. Her call led her to join a group of third-order Dominican lay women called the Mantellate who served the sick and poor of Siena.

In time, Catherine's vocation as a public figure grew as she became enmeshed in the needs of a papacy in disarray and in local Italian conflicts. All this activity came at a price. Catherine experienced significant opposition within and beyond the Church. Her theology emerged out of this intense involvement in worldly affairs.

Despite all of this, she managed to produce a serious body of theological work. Her corpus includes: Almost four hundred letters. Her letters reveal how her theology became visible in the concrete concerns of everyday life. Twenty-six prayers dictated while she was in ecstasy. Her major theological work, *The Dialogue*, written during 1377-78. *The Dialogue* is Catherine's vision of salvation as the working out of the love of God in Christ and the Spirit.

Pope Pius II, who came from an eminent Sienese family, canonized Catherine in 1461 and Pope Pius XII named her, with St. Francis of Assisi, co-patron of Italy. In 1970, Paul VI declared Catherine of Siena a Doctor of the Church, along with St. Teresa of Avila. In 1999, Pope John Paul II named her patron of Europe, along with Benedict of Nursia, Saints Cyril and Methodius, Birgitta of Sweden, and Edith Stein.

IV. Theology of Incarnation: Incarnational theology is characterized by a sacramental consciousness that views every aspect of the universe as irreversibly holy - in spite of our attempts to view reality primarily in secular or sin-filled terms. The doctrine of Incarnation deepens and enriches the doctrines of creation, grace, and the Holy Spirit and is incompatible with dualistic outlooks that pit matter against spirit. Incarnational theology takes seriously the effects of Christ taking on human flesh. Grace does not run parallel to life, but is the ground of its being. Nothing, in and of itself, is off-limits to the grace of God.

Seeing the entire world as holy is not automatic. It is a cultivated perspective. Theologies of Incarnation remind us of the wholeness of divine and human reality, and elicit a desire to live an integrated existence. Incarnational theologies move us to attend to the world with a long, loving, compassionate gaze that leads to active, passionate care.

A key aspect of Catherine's incarnational theology is engagement in the real world of daily life, serving others in their material, political, and spiritual needs. It nurtures a love that finds concrete, earthly solutions to suffering and violence.

Reflection Questions

1. How vibrant is your sense of the sacredness of reality? Name one spiritual practice that might enrich your theology of Incarnation in a practical, everyday way.
2. Theology grows out of reading and responding to the "signs of the times." Identify two aspects of Catherine's fourteenth century world that you think influenced her theology.
3. Identify one force in your culture that you think influences theology to the good and one that undermines Christian theological values. How can belief in Incarnation affect how we view the world around us?
4. In spite of Catherine's tireless efforts to reform her culture and her Church, she often fell short of her goals. How do you respond when the results of your spiritual/moral efforts come to naught?