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Author

Furth, Megan

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Holy Alliance: Saint Catherine of Siena and the Paradox of Flesh

Saint Catherine of Siena believed radical asceticism would bring her closer to God. She denied all bodily needs, among them food, water and sleep. She flagellated her body and endured other self-imposed tests of will. Through these practices the Saint rebuked the world of corporeality, attempting to conform herself to the divine will. Through her asceticism, work and writings, Catherine created her own brand of religiosity. Her standards were very different for herself than those of the individuals she counseled, but the vision which lay at the foundation was the same. Although the practices and beliefs of Catherine were common for female medieval mystics, her behavior and rhetoric reveal a distinct ideology. Catherinian doctrine is defined through its paradoxical treatment of corporeality. Catherine maintained that man must battle physicality at every turn; yet only through the suffering flesh of the crucified Christ was salvation possible. This ambivalent judgment of body will be explicated through a biographical description of the Saint's ascetic practices, followed by an analysis of the theology represented in the letters of Catherine. Both her life and letters reflect the ambiguous central role flesh played in her ideology.

The roots of the Saint's radical piety lie in the events of her childhood and adolescence.¹ On March 25, 1347, Catherine Benincasa was born along with a twin sister, Giovanna. Her mother, Lapa Piacenti, chose to breast feed the future saint and sent her sister to a wet-nurse. This was to become significant. Giovanna died, Catherine lived. In a few years, Lapa gave birth to another girl, who was named Giovanna after the dead twin (Bell 29-30). As Catherine grew up, she lived with a constant reminder that her sister had died and that she was the chosen one, the one her mother had breast-fed. This leitmotif set the tone for Catherine's life.

The Saint's first religious vision, at the age of six or seven, reflected Catherine's sense of having been chosen. The story tells that she was returning with her brother from an errand outside the city walls: "In the sunset sky . . . she saw a loggia full of radiant light; Jesus, robed all in white like a bishop . . . smiled at her. Behind him were several saints, also dressed in white, and a shaft of light,

a sunbeam, came from him and fell on her” (Bell 35). At her brother’s call Catherine looked away; when she looked back, the vision was gone, yet not before the young girl had seen the light stream from Jesus directly to her. She felt that she was to be one with Him. The Saint’s reaction might be considered extraordinary for a young child; instead of running home and announcing to everyone what had happened, Catherine meditated on the content of what she had seen, attempting to discern whether it was good or evil (Bell 35). This would seem to be an indication that even as a young girl Catherine saw her relationship with God as an intensely personal and meditative one.

After her vision, the young Catherine made a first and lasting decision to devote her life to God. The year after it occurred, she took a vow of virginity. However, her final conversion to a religious life did not come until Catherine’s older sister Bonaventura died. She had been Catherine’s favorite sister and had encouraged her little sister to display a bit of vanity and wear pretty clothes. Rudolph Bell writes about this in his book, *Holy Anorexia*: “the older sister made Catherine understand that every young woman had a right to adorn herself and that such beautification was in no way displeasing to God. The girl much admired and loved Bonaventura, and under no circumstances could she consider her sister’s advice sinful” (Bell 37-38). Bonaventura had starved herself in an attempt to reform her dissolute husband. The fast was successful in convincing the young man to amend his behavior. Soon after Catherine had agreed to display some vanity and beautify herself, Bonaventura died in childbirth. Caroline Walker Bynam writes on the significance of these events in the young Saint’s life:

Catherine thus had in her beloved sister Bonaventura a graphic illustration of the success that fasting could achieve and the dangers of marriage and pregnancy. . . . Furthermore, since one source reports that there was talk later of marrying her to Bonaventura’s widower, we may also suspect that Catherine felt guilty about surviving as a replacement for both her sisters and thus determined to substitute for their suffering rather than for their pleasure.

(Bynam, *Holy Feast* 167)

In these early years, there were already glimpses of the asceticism that the Saint would come to embody. Catherine began fasting as child. There are reports that she and some playmates secretly flagellated themselves together. There is also the tale of Catherine running off to a cave to become a hermit. Nonetheless, outward manifestations of piety did not occur until after Bonaventura’s death.

The future saint blamed herself for Bonaventura’s death, convinced herself that it was her own brief flirtation with worldliness that had brought God’s just

wrath not upon her but upon her sister. Once again, as in her infancy, Catherine lived in the place of another. . . . [S]he turned inward, meditated deeply upon how her sin had brought about the death of someone she loved, and determined to have no more to do with the world. (Bell 38)

In an act of penance and self-hatred Catherine cut off her long blond hair; her parents, who were intending for her to soon marry, were furious. In retaliation, they made Catherine assume the role of servant in their house (*Letters* 32).

The complete conversion to ascetic practice would occur for Saint Catherine when her third sister, Nanna, as she was called, died—the child who had been named Giovanna after Catherine's dead twin. On April 18, 1363, less than a year after Bonaventura had died giving birth, Nanna died from a plague; Catherine was sixteen. At this point, the Saint openly declared her intention never to marry. This is a testimony to her personal strength and conviction, as the familial pressure for her to marry had increased. Catherine was the last daughter left; her parents wanted to use the marriage to secure certain business allies for the family's wool-dyeing enterprise (Bell 39-40). At this point in her life, the young Saint made a pact with God; if she would devote her life to him, then he would protect her family both in this life and the next one.

Oppressed with personal guilt over her own survival and the deaths of her sisters, [Catherine] achieved inner peace by conceiving in her mind a bargain for all eternity. She would not be a murderer, but a savior: for her twin Giovanna, for her beloved Bonaventura, and for little Nanna. The price to be paid was . . . a life of hard penance and solitude. (Bell 41)

For a long time, Catherine's family would not accept her choice to renounce marriage and a normal lifestyle. They took away her room where she had meditated, flagellated herself, and held nightly vigils of sleep deprivation. Her family forced her to sleep in her brother's room and to work all night and day; they did anything that they could conceive of to force Catherine to act like other girls her age. It is during this period that the Virgin first began to realize the power and security of one's own mind. She would later say, "my cell . . . will not be one of stone or wood, but that of self-knowledge" (Lawrence 287-88).

[Catherine] could not fight the physical forces brought to oppress her, but with sufficient mental effort she would change their meaning. Raymond of Capua [Catherine's confessor and first biographer] . . . explains how Catherine came to realize that a private room would be unnecessary if she could construct for herself an interior oratory. He recalls . . . her advice to him when he had been burdened with worldly cares: "Build a cell in your mind from which you can never escape." It was as an adolescent that Catherine built her mental fortress,

and if . . . she became its prisoner . . . the oratory proved impenetrable to the world around her. (Bell 42)

Bell's analysis in the paragraph above is accurate; this period of punishment forced the Saint to discover an even deeper personal conviction. Since she was no longer able to have physical solitude, Catherine was led to believe that although real solitude could not be found in the physical world, it could be found in the depths of one's own soul.

Finally, her family relented to Catherine's wishes not to be married. Her father allowed her to have her room back where she could continue her ascetic practices at will. The Virgin commenced a three-year self-imposed exile.

She subsisted on bread, water, and raw vegetables. She wore only rough wool, and . . . an iron chain bound so tightly against her hips that it enflamed her skin. For three years, she observed a self-imposed vow of total silence except for confession, and this she maintained even though she lived at home. . . . [S]he conquered fatigue and reduced her sleep to as little as thirty minutes every two days on a wooden board. . . . Three times a day she flagellated herself with an iron chain, once for her sins, again for the living, and then for the dead. . . . [E]ach beating lasted for one and one half hours and blood ran from her shoulders to her feet. . . . [T]he once sturdy girl . . . lost half her body weight. (Bell 43)

Catherine's desire to suffer was so extreme that nothing could deter her. When her mother took the Virgin to the hot springs in Vignoli in order to remove Catherine from her self-imposed torture, the Saint flung herself into the part of the canals where the hot sulfuric water flowed into the pool—the burn of the boiling waters surpassing the pain of any flagellation.

Catherine's most frequently discussed ascetic practice is her self-starvation, her "holy anorexia."² Beginning when she was not yet sixteen, Catherine restricted her diet to bread, uncooked vegetables and water. The next step toward complete rejection of terrestrial sustenance came five years later.

While dressing the cancerous breast sores of a woman she was tending, Catherine felt repulsed at the horrid odor of the suppuration. Determined to overcome all bodily sensations, she carefully gathered the pus into a ladle and drank it all. That night she envisioned Jesus inviting her to drink the blood flowing from his pierced side, and it was with this consolation that her stomach "no longer had need of food and no longer could digest." (Bell 25)

In this vision, Christ told her to give up her solitary ways and go forth in the company of worldly men and women. This pivotal mystical experience—

Catherine considered it her “mystical espousal” with Jesus—culminated three years of solitude with the epiphany that love for God is intrinsically connected with serving others. At this juncture, the Saint started to go out to those in need, driven by the unyielding conviction that this was her duty (*Letters 2*). Although her physical isolation then ended, her self-deprivation did not; by the age of twenty-five, it is reported that she ate absolutely nothing.

Her family and friends began to suspect a diabolic trick. Frate Tommaso dalla Fonte, her first confessor, insisted that she ignore what he believed was a demonically-induced impulse and required that she eat once a day. Although Catherine was more energetic when she did not eat, she obeyed his orders. Even when she became sick and weak, Tommaso would not relent. He forced her to eat until she arrived nearly at death. Finally he accepted the Saint’s logic “that it would be better to die from fasting than from eating and [told] her ‘to do as the Holy Spirit suggests you to’” (Bell 25).

Raymond of Capua, Catherine’s mature confessor, dearest friend, and first biographer, believed the Saint capable of surviving without food due to the Lord’s will. He believed that “divine grace so infused her body and deadened her life fluids that the nature of her stomach was transformed.” Raymond wrote: “Not only did she not need food, but she could not even eat without pain. If she forced herself to eat, her body suffered greatly, she could not digest and she had to vomit” (Cited by Bell 25). Bell writes about the strange phenomena of Catherine’s ascetic regime:

Certainly her habits were difficult to understand. She drank only a little cold water and chewed on bitter herbs while spitting out the substance. . . . [S]he seemed about to die at any moment, yet, until the very end, at the opportunity to honor God or do an act of charity, and without medicine, she became robust, vigorously out walked her companions, and never grew tired—in short, she became hyperactive. She took nourishment from the host alone. . . . Raymond asked Catherine whether when she did not receive communion her appetite was stimulated. Her answer . . . reveals continued mental effort to suppress bodily urges . . . : “When I cannot receive the Sacrament, it satisfies me to be nearby and to see it; indeed, even to see a priest who has touched the Sacrament consoles me greatly, so that I lose all memory of food.” (Bell 25)

However, many of her contemporaries were not convinced that Catherine was sustained by this eucharistic piety alone. Detractors accused the Virgin of self-aggrandization and said that she ate secretly. Others thought that she should heed Jesus’ command to his disciples in Luke 10:7: eat and drink that which is placed before you. Still other disparagers shouted: “Who was she to refuse to do what Christ on earth, his glorious mother, and the Apostles did? They ate and

drank; a truly holy person ought to seek never to be singled out for attention and therefore in all matters follow common customs" (Bell 26). There were also those who believed that she was engaged in a symbiotic relationship with the devil.

[T]o demonstrate that she was not possessed, or possibly the even more serious charge that she might be a witch, Catherine began to eat once daily and in the company of her companions. Raymond of Capua . . . describes her lifestyle: ". . . her stomach could digest nothing and her body heat consumed no energy; therefore anything she ingested needed to exit by the same way it entered, otherwise it caused her acute pain and swelling of her entire body. The holy virgin swallowed nothing of the herbs and things she chewed; nevertheless, because it was impossible to avoid some crumb of food or juice descending into her stomach and because she willingly drank fresh water to quench her thirst, she was constrained every day to vomit what she had eaten. To do this she regularly and with great pain inserted stalks of fennel and other plants into her stomach, otherwise being unable to vomit." (Bell 29)

Thus, despite the mandate to attempt to eat and digest food, the Virgin could not and would not.

Catherine's ascetic practices were considered radical, falling far outside the standard practice of her age, even for the most devout. Throughout her life she claimed to listen only to her inner conversation with God. Although she made concessions in order to disprove her critics' theories about her fasting, in the end Catherine returned to that which she felt was her path.

[S]he acted in every manner as she said her spiritual bridegroom Jesus Christ told her she should, and not as earthly men might order or advise. That she ate almost nothing was widely known; such behavior was not only scandalous in itself but led some of her contemporaries to believe that she was possessed by the devil. Her abstemiousness went far beyond the austere or ritual fasting of even the most holy men and women of her day and often was in direct violation of the explicit directions of her confessors. Various of these men assigned to watch, control, and guide her in her path of holiness (and to protect the Church from a possible heretic in its midst) ordered her to eat. For a time she obeyed, but the presence of even a mouthful of food in her stomach caused her to vomit, and after a while she simply refused. (Bell 23)

The virgin was true to the ideology she preached: renounce earthly concerns and listen only to the Word of the Lord—walk with the Savior on road to the cross.

In January of 1380, now in Rome, while contemplating Christ's circumcision and his precious blood there shed, Catherine decided to increase her asceticism and drink no water. She still traveled the mile to St. Peter's each day to spend

hours in prayer. On February 26, the Saint lost the use of her legs, yet one biographer claims that she still managed to arrive at St. Peter's during Lent. On April 29, 1380, starved, dehydrated, and physically ravaged, Saint Catherine died. To the end she was faithful to her pledge to follow the crucified Christ in every way—she was thirty-three. Dying as she did at thirty-three years, one month and four days, it is notable that the Saint did not live longer than Jesus.

As though it were the conclusion of a macabre novel, the Virgin's death was a microcosm of the life that Catherine herself chose. For a woman who lived with her physical body as her mortal enemy, it is strangely appropriate that her final demise would be rife with physical pain and suffering. Edmund Gardner, one of Catherine's biographers, poetically describes the Virgin's final moments:

Fearful visions of demons began to assail her, mingling with the celestial visitations of her Divine Spouse. Her bodily sufferings became unendurable. She cried to God to receive the sacrifice of her life in the mystical body of the Church. . . . [I]t seemed to her that the Navicella—the Ship of the Church—was laid on her shoulders, and that it crushed her to death. The few weeks of life that remained to her were one prolonged martyrdom, out of which we have her last letter . . . full of mystical exultation in her own sufferings, "*tanti dolci tormenti corporali* (so many sweet bodily torments)." (Gardner 65-66)

"*Tanti dolci tormenti corporali*" were the matrix from which the personal ethic of Catherine was born. The Saint had believed she could transcend the "earthly cell" through pain and suffering. Asceticism had finally yielded the Saint to death.

Catherine not only walked the path of the crucified Christ as she herself saw it, but she also espoused for others to do it. She preached to everyone from Popes, to the powerful Milanese Visconti tyrants, to novice monks. The integral facet of catherinian doctrine was the complete divorce of the individual from earthly concerns. For the Saint, the profane world was entirely incompatible with communing with the Divine. Her words are not ambiguous. In a letter³ to a young Sienese monk, she wrote:

My cherished son, we cannot achieve this perfect conformity with Christ without complete detachment from conformity with the world. The world is opposed to God and God to the world: they have nothing in common. This is indeed so: we see that the God-Man chose abject poverty, insults, torment, derision, and ridicule, hunger and thirst. He scorned human glory and honor and sought always the Father's glory and our salvation. . . . There was no pride in him, but rather perfect humility. (*Letters* 51)

The Saint's words: "the world is opposed to God and God to the world: they have

nothing in common.” Her words to the young monk were not equivocal but her letter continues and Catherine makes herself even more explicit:

Oh how deluded they are, these stupid people who are conformed with this evil world! Though they seek honors they are disgraced; in pursuit of riches they are poor, because they are not looking for genuine wealth; wanting happiness and pleasure they find sadness and bitterness, because they lose God, who is supreme happiness. They want neither bitterness nor death, but fall into both. They want firmness and stability, yet wander far from the living rock. So you see, dearest son, how great is the opposition between Christ and the world.

(Letters 51)

In Catherine’s vision, Christ is not neutral with respect to the world; it is not a passive relationship, but rather the terrestrial realm is an enemy of the Divine. This battle was seen as more fierce than any earthly one. Catherine wrote:

There are many who have been victorious over a city or a fortress, but if they have failed to conquer themselves and their enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil—one could say they have nothing at all. So up. . . . Choose to hold fast your lordship over the city of your soul. Fight fiercely against those three enemies. *(Letters 68-69)*

The Saint saw three evils assail the security of the soul : the world, the flesh, and the devil. Catherine encouraged “mortal combat against the physical world”⁴ to fight those enemies.

Catherine cogently encouraged every individual to whom she wrote to shed the concerns of this life, to turn to God, and walk in the footsteps of the crucified Christ. Her language often phrases the benefits of religious experience in the terms of material rewards. The seemingly ubiquitous example of this rhetoric is the Word of God as the only nourishment that one needs. Maud Ellmann, in her book about the links between starving and ideology, writes about the origins of this conception and cites Saint Catherine as its chief proponent:

The belief that words can take the place of food goes back as far as the Old Testament, specifically to the famous passage in Deuteronomy 8:3, where we are told that God humbled his people and suffered them to hunger so that they might know that “man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.” “If you follow this truth,” Saint Catherine wrote, “you will have the life of grace and never die of hunger, for the Word has himself become your food.” *(Ellmann 22)*

Food is not the only material concern which Catherine used as a metaphor for the bounty of the grace of the Lord. She wrote to one of her closest disciples

that he must clothe himself with the crucified Christ. She pleaded:

I beg you to fulfill my desire: conform yourself with Christ crucified. Elevate yourself completely above the world's traffic. . . . In no other way can we be conformed with Christ. Clothe, clothe yourself with Christ crucified. He is the wedding garment that will give you grace, and afterward will afford you a place with the truly joyful at the table of everlasting life. (*Letters* 53)

Not only will the love of Christ provide clothes, but it will provide the ultimate vestment, a wedding garment. Catherine geared her language to the individual to whom she was writing. In this case, she was writing to Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi, a young Sienese nobleman and poet who was studying with monks in Asciano; by using the term wedding garment, the Saint touches at the heart of the life of Pagliaresi, who would soon be expected to return to Siena and marry.

This manner of individualizing religious metaphors appears in many of the Saint's letters. In a letter to Bernabò Visconti of Milan, the tyrant who ruled for twenty years and was excommunicated twice for his opposition to the papacy, Catherine put a relationship to God in terms which Visconti could have appreciated, not agreed with, but understood. She wrote:

It seems to me, that no man ought to consider or call himself lord, but rather administrator. And this administration is not for always, but only for a time—as it pleases our gentle Lord. And if you should ask me, “Then don't we have any lordship at all on this earth?” I would answer, yes, we have the most satisfying, most gratifying, most mighty lordship there is—lordship over the city of our own soul. Oh, is there anything greater or more magnificent than to possess a city in which the all-good God dwells, where peace and tranquillity and all consolation are to be found! So strong is this city and such a perfect realm that neither the devil nor anyone else can seize it unless we ourselves consent. It is never lost except through deadly sin. . . . [W]e shall keep guard over our city and shall master ourselves and the whole world. . . . [W]e shall laugh off the world and all its pleasures, considering them corruptible and worse than dung. (*Letters* 68)

Catherine's diplomacy is striking; employing delicate yet trenchant words, she subtly chastised a tyrant and suggested that he substitute his vast kingdom for the lordship of his own soul. Despite the shrouded rhetoric, the sibilant voice is heard: only renouncing the sensual world and assiduously following the path of the crucified Christ will yield true wealth.

Her astute choice of words is also evident in Catherine's letter to the wife of Visconti, Regina Beatrice della Scala, a woman described by one historian as “the ambitious and able daughter of the despot of Verona. . . . [A woman who]

‘ruled in great part her husband’s dominion; she was of an imperious nature, proud, and daring, insatiable of wealth’” (Gardner 31). Catherine wrote to this queen:

The soul who has fallen in love with God, she who is a servant and slave ransomed by the blood of God’s Son, attains such great dignity that she cannot be called a servant now, but an empress, spouse of the eternal emperor! . . . To serve God is not to be a slave, but to reign! For God rescues her from the servitude of sin and makes her free. . . . There she is at peace, in perfect rest and quiet, for her desires are fulfilled. (*Letters* 75)

Catherine intimated that Regina della Scala would not be a real queen until she renounced profane concerns for sacred ones, becoming the empress of the eternal emperor. Catherine gently denounced the queen’s lifestyle:

I don’t want you to be preoccupied with your exalted status, or with wealth and pleasure, or with any difficulties or trouble you see coming your way. Let neither pleasure nor pain hold you back . . . find your delight in virtue and in suffering for Christ crucified. . . . Use the things of this world as nature needs them, but not with excessive attachment. For it would be very displeasing to God if you were to set your heart on something of less value than yourself. That would be nothing but a surrender of your dignity. For people become like what they love. If I love sin, which is nothingness, I too become a nothing. I cannot fall any lower than that. (*Letters* 74-75)

The Saint begged Regina della Scala to shed her attachment to the earthly realm, to end her nefarious ways which Catherine believed left her outside of the grace of the Lord. From these words is gleaned another facet of Catherine’s ideology, that without the Lord, a human has no real being. As she wrote above: “If I love sin, which is nothingness, I too become a nothing.” The Saint adopted the common medieval conception that humans have no real being without God, therefore one must conform to the will of God. The Saint writes on how to attain being through God: “If we were to ask that . . . most merciful Father [how to discover the holy will], this is how he would answer us: ‘Dearest children, if you wish to discover and experience the effects of my will, dwell within the cell of your soul.’” Catherine again:

we can recognize our own poverty: we see that we are not. For we are not. We see that our being is from God. . . . In recognizing that we are nothing we humble ourselves. And in humbling ourselves we enter that flaming, consumed heart, opened up like a window without shutters, never to be closed.

(*Letters* 44)

Catherine insisted that there was no being without God and that one could only draw closer to Him by looking inward and rejecting terrestrial concerns. Catherine was unequivocal with those who refused to relent. She wrote: "If you tell me about the great concern you must have over temporal things, [I answer that] things are only as temporal as we make them. . . . I want you to be conscientiously concerned with your attention directed as God would have it" (*Letters* 40). She advocated the path of the disciples who abjured all earthly comforts and looked to God alone for guidance:

[We must act] the way the holy disciples acted. They took all spiritual and material comfort lightly. . . . [T]hey submitted to every burden and humiliation, and to death, for God's honor and their neighbor's salvation. So they were separated from each other. So they made light of consolation and embraced suffering. And this is the way I would have you act. (*Letters* 39-40)

Catherine preached for all to walk in the path of the crucified Christ. She admonished: "go the path of suffering, the path of disgrace, derision, torment, ridicule, and persecution. It is by such suffering that we become conformed with Christ crucified. He is the spotless lamb who scorned the world's wealth and power" (*Letters* 74). In Catherine's words, conformity with God is found only within the cell of one's soul. She wrote:

This is why God's true servants, realizing that the world has nothing in common with Christ, try conscientiously to avoid any conformity with the world. They . . . become lovers of what God loves and haters of what he hates. They have no other wish than to be conformed with Christ crucified, ever following in his steps, ablaze with love for true virtue. . . . [I]t is good to follow him, to remove yourself and cut yourself off entirely from this dark life. . . . [P]ure love for God will sever you from it. (*Letters* 52)

For Saint Catherine, one could not attain the grace of God without becoming an exile from profane concerns; one must imprison oneself within the cell of one's mind, that intangible part of a human which she saw communing with the divine will. Catherine wrote to an abbess:

I don't think it is possible to have virtue or the fullness of grace without dwelling within the cell of our heart and soul, where we will gain the treasure that is life for us . . . the holy abyss that is holy knowledge of ourselves and of God. . . . [T]his holy knowledge . . . makes us join ourselves with supreme eternal First Truth, because we recognize that we ourselves are the basest of lies, agents of that which has no being. This hatred will make us proclaim his goodness with a cry from the heart: "You alone are the one who is good. You are the peaceful sea from which come all things that have being." (*Letters* 38)

Hence, Catherine implored those to whom she wrote to choose what she believed to be the right path: to have real being derived from God, to scoff at earthly concerns, and to chain themselves to the Love of Jesus and the will of God. The Saint viewed the righteous choice not as relinquishing something, but as gaining everything. She often phrased the gifts of the divine love in terms of material reward. The exegesis of her letters provide an integral aspect of the Saint's ideology: those who concerned themselves with the world were not choosing profane life now in exchange for divine reward in the hereafter, as a layman might conjecture; rather, the Saint saw those individuals as choosing eternal death. Her disdainful words have just a shade of pity:

[T]hat poor wretched soul—who mirrors the carnal pleasures in which he wallows like a pig in mud—changes from a person into an animal in that putrid avarice of his! . . . He becomes swollen with pride, and spends his whole life seeking honor. And what should be given to serve the poor he spends on banquets and a host of servants and well-fed horses. These are the deeds that are presented at the moment of death for judgment and justice. He thought he was acting against God, but in reality he was acting against himself. He has become his own judge, and has condemned himself, since he has made himself deserving of eternal death. (*Letters 57*)

Thus, the man who lived outside the grace of God and busied himself with worldly concerns became bestial, less than human. If being was derived only from God, humanity was as well; without God's grace and Jesus' love, man was nothing more than a swine rolling happily, but foolishly, in his own excrement. Catherine warned those in her flock to avoid this inauspicious demise. She wrote: "Let's not be naive: it is the height of stupidity to make oneself deserving of death when one could have life. It is up to us, then, to use the freedom we have been given to choose life or death" (*Letters 57*).

Catherine felt man had been given the chance to choose life or death, grace or sin, because Christ was crucified. One must not only try to emulate His path, but recognize that this life had been provided by the grace of the Incarnation. If one obsessed about temporal problems, one rejected the beautiful gift that Jesus had given them; one willingly bound oneself to the devil in sin when they should have been thankful that the blood of Christ had liberated them. Catherine wrote to her brothers: "I . . . beg you to put your hope decisively in God and not in this mortal life. I beg you, as ransomed servants, to set your desire and your souls' affection intently on your Savior who has ransomed you" (*Letters 63*). One discerns this same motif in a letter to a priest at Asciano whom Catherine felt was too involved in the political events of his parish. She admonished him:

Don't make yourself unworthy of what God has made you worthy of—I mean the precious blood of his Son, by which you were ransomed with such blazing love. We are ransomed servants; we can no longer sell ourselves. But when we are in deadly sin we do blindly sell ourselves to the devil. I beg you, for the love of Christ crucified; let's get out of such slavery! (*Letters* 58)

The Saint pleaded with the priest to free himself from the slavery of profane concerns and focus on the divine will. The catherinian conception is neo-platonic; once one glimpses the essence of the crucified Christ—that he had nothing in this material world and gave up his life to cleanse us—one can take no other road but that of the spiritual journey. The profane world ceases to exist; it embodies nothingness; one wants only to commune with divine love. Catherine wrote:

It is an awesome thing to see the good gentle Jesus, the one who rules and feeds the whole universe, in such want and need that no one else has ever been as poor as he. He is so poor that Mary hasn't a blanket to wrap him in. In the end he dies naked on the cross so that he might re clothe us and cover our nakedness. Our sin had left us naked; we had lost the garment of grace. So Jesus gave up his own life and with it clothed us. I tell you, then, the soul who has discovered love in the love of Christ crucified will be ashamed to pursue it in any other way than that of Christ crucified. She will not want pleasure, status, pomp, but will prefer to be like a pilgrim or traveler in this life, with her attention focused wholly on reaching her journey's goal.

Catherine believed everyone could be converted by the power of divine love. In a letter to an abbess, she explained:

[I]f we have not . . . been set aflame by the fire of this holy desire . . . I beg you . . . let this stone be melted in the hot overflowing blood of God's Son, in that blood whose warmth is enough to melt the hardness and frigidity of any heart. . . . This is what the Holy Spirit does when he enters the soul. . . . [S]how your willingness to be pierced by this sword. (*Letters* 39)

This neo-platonic catherinian view of divine revelation is abundant in Catherine's letters. For the sienese Saint, once one had seen the God-Man on the cross and felt his love in being crucified for mankind, one could not help but be pierced by the sword of God and want to run and bury oneself in Jesus' wound. From that point on, one will have no regard for earthly matters; the only sustenance that will be desired will be the divine *Logos*. Catherine wrote:

[N]o soul could look at Go'. becoming a man, running to the shame of the holy cross, and shedding his blood so profusely, and not draw near, enter in, and be

filled with true love. This is how we come to take delight in the food in which God delights. This is how we learn to enjoy eating . . . a food so sweet and mild that [it] makes us fat, till we can enjoy no other food. I tell you, here your weak teeth will be so strengthened that you will be able to eat big mouthfuls as well as small. (*Letters 55*)

The catherinian view envisions the crucified Christ as feeding all of humanity through its love and grace, simultaneously cleansing humanity in its blood and charity. The crucified Christ is the representation of the divine will accessible to the human striving toward God. Catherine wrote:

I want to see us at the table of the spotless Lamb, who is food, table, and waiter. The fruits on this table are the true solid virtues. No other table bears fruit, but this one's fruit is perfect, because this table is lifegiving. This table has been furrowed, with channels everywhere flowing with blood. But among them all there is one channel flowing with blood and water mixed with fire, and to the eye that rests on this channel is revealed the secret of his heart. This blood is a wine on which our soul gets drunk. The more we drink, the more we would like to drink, and we are never fully satisfied, because his flesh and his blood are joined with the infinite God. (*Letters 49-50*)

The catherinian devotee drinks the blood of Christ in order to commune with the Divine. It is as if Catherine conceived of one literally drinking from Jesus' wound as he hangs on the cross, and in so doing, honoring God and saving oneself. She wrote:

[T]he table on which we find this wine . . . [is] the pierced side of God's Son. This is the blood that warms, that drives out all chill, clears the voice of the one who drinks it, and gladdens heart and soul. . . . We have taken our example from the one who is continually pouring out his blood at this table—and not for his own good but for ours. We who eat at this table and become like the food we eat begin to do as he does—not for our own good but for God's honor and for our neighbor's salvation. (*Letters 50*)

Thus, through metaphorically drinking from the wound in humble supplication, the catherinian simultaneously honors the Divine and follows in the footsteps of the Son of God.

The idea of Christ feeding the world from his wound, that is, feeding the masses through the Word of the Lord, appears in other medieval writings and can in no way be attributed to Catherine alone. Caroline Walker Bynam, in her book *Jesus as Mother*, gives a cogent example of this leitmotif in the theological genre.

The blood that flows from the wound in Christ's side becomes wine, the water

becomes milk; and the soul not only draws nurture from Christ but also flees for refuge into the wound in the wall in his body. "Then one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance and there came forth blood and water. Hasten, linger not, eat the honeycomb with your honey, drink your wine with your milk. The blood is changed into wine to gladden you, the water into milk to nourish you. From the rock streams have flowed for you, wounds have been made in his limbs, holes in the wall of his body, in which, like a dove, you may hide while you kiss them one by one. Your lips, stained with blood, will become like a scarlet ribbon and your word sweet." (Bynam, *Jesus as Mother* 122-23)

In the catherinian conception, man who has been ransomed out of slavery to the devil by the crucified Christ, can now drink the blood from His wound, be illuminated by the Word of the Lord, and take refuge in the wound of the Incarnation. For Catherine, one must abhor and reject every modicum of sensual physical reality **except** the Divine incarnation; Jesus' flesh has provided the opportunity for redemption and burnt the path to eternal life. One follows not only in the footsteps of the crucified Christ, but drinks His blood, and thus becomes conformed with the divine will. The only manifestation of the sensual physical reality that has value is the body of Christ on the cross. The one worthy manifestation of physicality serves as the model to transcend the earthly realm and move on to eternal life; the crucified Christ has simultaneously provided for salvation and offered the model for attaining it.

In the final analysis, Catherine's ideology is paradoxical. She lived and preached the rejection of physicality and earthly concerns in every way, yet she believed that only the **body** of Christ offered the path to eternal life.⁵ Furthermore, it is through the torments of her own physical self that Catherine found spiritual enlightenment. While eschewing all other corporeality, she advocated contemplation of the physical nature of the crucified Christ and conformity to that exemplum.

Although Catherine abhorred her own flesh, condemning it as a "dung heap," she saw the fleshliness of Christ not as some sort of miraculous protection to save us from human vulnerability but as the "way" or "bridge" to lead us to salvation through suffering. She even said that the ring of flesh with which Christ marries us in the Circumcision is a sign that he is a spouse of our humanity. Thus, hateful as body may have been to Catherine, it was **body** that she saw as uniting us to the body of God. And it united us to God by suffering.

(Bynam, *Holy Feast* 175)

The resin of catherinian ideology is revealed: follow the example of Jesus, break with the world, and you will sit with Him at the table of eternal life. The Incarnation is the rope which hangs down from the boundaries of Heaven

offering mankind redemption. In the catherinian theology, man must refuse all other corporeality and focus only on the suffering flesh of Christ. While all other physicality is the portal to sin, Christ's body is the key to salvation.

Megan Furth

Department of French & Italian
Stanford University

Notes

¹It should be noted that the events of Catherine's early life have been drawn primarily from the hagiography of Raymond of Capua, her mature confessor. Some critics have argued that this account is particularly specious. Catherine's mother was the source of the early biographical information. It has been implied that Lapa embellished to no end, given that there was talk of canonization. Regardless, it all created part of the mythos of the saint whose mature asceticism was as infamous as it was well-documented.

²A term coined by the title of Rudolph Bell's book.

³There are 382 extant letters of Saint Catherine of Siena. Although she did not learn to write until the last few years of her life (when she composed her *Dialogo*), it is believed that the letters are authentic. There is a consistent style which characterizes the letters although they were composed by various scribes.

⁴Paul Vangelisti, UCLA Italian Department, suggested this turn of phrase to me.

⁵Related to this, Caroline Walker Bynam, in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, has noted that Catherine placed the Incarnation, not the Resurrection, at the center of her theology.

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