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“To This, I am Inviting You:” Community Building in the Letters of Catherine of Siena, 1378-
1380

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in History

by

Wyatt James Wiggins

Dissertation Committee:

Assistant Professor Nancy McLoughlin, Chair

Associate Professor Renee Raphael

Associate Professor Laura S. Mitchell

2020

DEDICATION

To

my parents and friends

who sustain and support me

and in hopes that

If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise.

William Blake
Proverbs of Hell

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

To This, I am Inviting You: Community Building in the Letters of Catherine of Siena, 1378-1380

by

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Master of Arts in History

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Professor Nancy McLoughlin, Chair

In exploring the community building techniques of the medieval saint and doctor of the church, Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), this essay argues that the Italian mystic actively envisioned a vibrant community of followers alongside collaborative efforts of Dominican clergymen. It is through the use of the epistolary form that this paper argues that the saint and her interlocutors directed supporters to act authoritatively in political and spiritual matters. This project specifically interrogates letters between 1378-1380, at the beginning of the Great Schism (1378-1417), where there existed multiple claimants to church authority. This paper argues that through Catherine's letter writing during this political and spiritual crisis, Catherine and her interlocutors envisioned and created a heightened mystical community of believers

Introduction: Making That Most Perfect Community

Despite the fact that women were precluded from institutionalized church authority in late medieval Europe, Catherine of Siena came to be one of the most famous and influential medieval saints. Through her letter writing, Catherine maintained individual relationships with each of her addressees, allowing her to capitalize on her close bonds to intervene authoritatively in political, spiritual, and social matters. With her letters, Catherine came to envision and generate a community of followers in order to address the political situations of her time, and, in her attempts to suture the jagged edges and bleeding boundaries of a fractured church, she altered European civic and ecclesiastical politics. It was however Catherine's family connections and publicly acknowledged devotion to God that enabled her to use letters to forge such strong ties with a wide range of co-religionists.

In maintaining these relationships, Catherine invited individuals to participate in shared religious experiences that she facilitated and oversaw. Such invitations were communicated primarily through Catherine's participation in a long tradition of medieval letter writing. With over 400 letters (*epistolae*) and a collection of 26 prayers (*orationes*) that have been attributed to Catherine, she sought to create a community through using well-established textual mediums. Catherine's use of the epistolary tradition allowed her to make herself present in the hands of her reader(s). Scholars have argued that through letter writing, medieval women's self-consciousness surfaced and medieval letter-writing practices served as "the primary vehicle for [the

amplification of their] own voice.”¹ Through letters, we inch closer to the figure of the author, and gain a glimpse at discerning what the intended purposes for writing their epistles.

Catherine’s interactions and relationships with supporters in her community become most visible in the letters themselves which were written during an intense moment for Italian and European politics. This paper tracks letters Catherine wrote during the Great Schism of the Western European Church (1378-1417), which was largely a dispute between French and Italian claims to papal authority. The Great Schism, which divided communities religiously based upon papal allegiance, occurred alongside and exacerbated the ongoing disputes amongst rival autonomous city states throughout Italy. In light of the resulting political tensions and social disruptions, we can begin to see that Catherine’s community formation was a cogent response to the rapidly increasing political situations in which she lived.

In order to intervene authoritatively in her political landscape, Catherine generated letters to communicate to her constituents. However, the agency of the letters extended well beyond Catherine and the recipients of her letters. In fact, a key building block in the formation of her community revolved around what the community of addresses did with the letters themselves. To remain in constant and close contact with one another, Catherine’s supporters made copies of the saint’s letters, dispersing them throughout various channels of communication from one supporter to another. As supporters moved copies of Catherine’s letters from hand to hand and town to town, they facilitated the movement and circulation of political and spiritual activity vis-à-vis her letters. Such familiarity of Catherine’s letters amongst her supporters enabled the saint

¹ Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, eds. *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 15.

to connect with a wide assortment of individuals from varying backgrounds at a time of internal and external crisis.²

In order to best examine how Catherine communicated with her co-religionists during this intense moment for Italian and European politics, this project explores letters in three different sections. The first section examines a letter Catherine sent to a nunnery, arguing that Catherine understood the community she sought to build as a heightened mystical network that could act authoritatively in political and spiritual matters. The second section interrogates two letters written about different prisoners to advance the argument that Catherine's understanding of her own community was reflective of her own communal theology that was essential for her ability to mobilize co-religionists. The last section analyzes two letters sent to a powerful detractor in order to flesh out how Catherine modeled her own community as both accessible and inaccessible.

In writing to both those who supported and opposed her, Catherine used letters as a primary mode of maintaining solidarity with those whom she could not meet face-to-face as well as correcting those who faltered politically or spiritually. By communicating to those who were geographically removed and inaccessible to Catherine, her letters enabled her to imagine that most perfect community. In her terms, this was the community of Christians who recognized the Italian pope and Papacy in Rome and thus remained faithful against the selfish desire from which all sin sprung forth. While Catherine extended her community through letters, her initial authority derived from her family and her austere religious practices.

² F. Thomas Luongo, *The Saintly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) 124.

Chapter 1: *The Girl Who Would Not Eat*

Caterina di Giacomo di Benincasa was born in Siena on the 25th day of May 1347 to a cloth dyer and the daughter of a local poet.³ Her birth family was both economically and politically powerful, with members in leadership positions in local government. As Catherine continued to garnish attention, her family remained “close to the highest levels of social and political power” in Siena.⁴ Catherine’s father, Iacopo di Benincasa came from a family of well-to-do dyers and wool merchants, rather than mere wool workers. By affiliation, Catherine’s father was within the social circle of the *monte dei Dodici*, which was the council of nobles that controlled the Siennese government between 1355 to 1368, making Catherine’s father “among the dominant political class of the city.”⁵ Additionally, Catherine’s two brothers, Bartolomeo and Stefano gained their footing in local government, and due to their successes, extended their businesses and citizenship to Florence.⁶ Catherine on the other hand, decided to venture down a more spiritually guided route, opting to have a mystical marriage between her and Christ, rather than marry a member of another wealthy Italian family.

At the young age of six, Catherine began to receive visions that signaled to local authorities that the young Siennese girl was divinely inspired.⁷ In her teens, Catherine began to practice strict asceticism in hopes of strengthening her relationship with God. She refused food

³ For the duration of the essay, I will use the English translation of Caterina’s name, Catherine.

⁴ F. Thomas Luongo, *The Saintly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 30.

⁵ Luongo., 30.

⁶ Luongo., 32. As Luongo mentions, it was common practice for merchants to seek dual citizenship in order to avoid paying import taxes on their goods. Additionally, inter-city citizenship provided merchants protection from the local merchant’s guild and courts in case home cities waged war or diplomatic disputes emerged.

⁷ Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe 1200-1500*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 215. As Catherinian scholars have noted, it is a risky methodological task to reconstruct Catherine’s early life due to the hagiographic domination over her early life narratives.

and what she understood as the selfish will behind eating.⁸ While scholars have debated whether or not this constitutes a modern diagnosis of *anorexia nervosa*, my curiosity lies in how this uneducated and possibly emaciated girl managed to emerge as a major political and spiritual leader.⁹ Catherine's extreme fasting was understood by contemporaries as a sign of holiness that supported Catherine's claim that she was in direct communication with God. It is through this special relationship to the divine that Catherine claimed the authority to invite the recipients of her letters to the shared religious experience of a distinct community of believers.

Catherine's connections to a diverse network of people was made possible due to the attention she received around her eating habits. From a young age, Catherine restricted her diet to only bread, uncooked vegetables, and water.¹⁰ By the age of twenty-five, Catherine's first Dominican biographer tells us she ate "nothing."¹¹ Several years later, it is said that Catherine survived solely on the host alone, or the Communion wafer that in Christian tradition comes to be a physical embodiment of Christ's body through the priest's blessing. As a testament to Catherine's sanctity, male church authorities wrote that if Catherine ate the host blessed by a corrupt clergy member, she would vomit immediately.¹²

While restricted diets were common in hagiographic accounts of predominantly male monks such as Saint Anthony of Egypt, late medieval women's spirituality used extreme fasting

⁸ For an important study on medieval women's eating and fasting practices, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁹ Some scholars have found it appropriate to deploy modern psychological terms and understandings onto medieval actors, see Rudolph M Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹ Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

as a primary pathway to access and imitate the divine.¹³ Indeed, Tommaso Caffarini created the first visual cycle of Catherine's life in the *Libellus de Supplemento* between 1412 and 1418. In the *Libellus*, the author Caffarini and the Venetian illuminator Cristoforo Cortese (active ca. 1400-1445) attempted to create a separate pictorial tradition which placed Catherine alongside a community of already established saints. In Cortese's depictions, Catherine was visually depicted as enduring the kinds of torments and beatings from demons usually associated with the early Christian desert fathers, who also endured long penance and hard labor on their bodies as a means of separating themselves from people "of the world," and pursuing the angelic state that Adam enjoyed in the Garden of Eden.¹⁴ These were saints whose reputation was beyond reproach and served as the exemplar for all later Christian ascetics.

By visually depicting Catherine alongside the preeminent desert monk, Saint Anthony, the widely revered ascetic associated with the rival Franciscan order, Chiara of Montefalco, and the famous aristocratic ascetic, Elizabeth of Hungary among others, Caffarini showed that Catherine suffered for the faith on behalf of the faithful in a manner that proved her own holiness and those of her associates. In other words, Caffarini and Cortese visually placed Catherine to be a part of a community of Christian saints to elevate her status to saint before she was officially pronounced such by the papacy in 1461 (see illustration 1).¹⁵

¹³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast Holy Feast*

¹⁴ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 173.

¹⁵ As requested by Pope Pius II, Catherine became officially recognized as a doctor of the church in 1461, see Otfried Kraft, "Many Strategies and One Goal: The Difficult Road to The Canonization of Catherine of Siena," in *Creation of a Cult*, eds. Jeffrey Hamburger and Gabriela Signori (Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 25. See also, Jane Stylus, "Writing versus Voice: Tommaso Caffarini and the Production of a Literate Catherine," *Creation of a Cult*, pp. 291-312. For illustrations, see Emily A. Moerer, "The Visual Hagiography of a Stigmatic Saint: Drawings of Catherine of Siena in the "Libellus de Supplemento," *Gesta* vol. 44, no. 2 (2005), pp.89-102.

Even more spectacularly, Cortese had illustrated Catherine as having received the stigmata, or wounds Christ endured during the crucifixion (see illustration 2).¹⁶ Such a deliberate pictorial decision demonstrates Caffarini's use of Catherine's perceived sanctity to suggest the Dominicans had a powerful female visionary under their control. Catherine's actions alongside Dominican interlocutors fall in alignment within the well-established grooves of medieval female ascetic visionary practices. Ascetic visionaries like Catherine fit so well within the expectations of the institutional church that they often worked in collaboration with male clergy members.¹⁷

Indeed, Catherine's participation in these behaviors prompted the powerful clerical order, the Dominicans, to guide the remarkable young girl, overseeing her spiritual development and boosting their authority in the process. By supervising female saints' spiritual progression, clerical interlocutors participated in an unequal relationship, where priests relied upon their greater position of ecclesiastical authority to both shape and direct an emerging saint's religious activity.¹⁸ In turn, the support that Catherine received from the Dominicans placed her in a position to act authoritatively in both civic and spiritual matters.

For visionary women, to be one of "God's chosen intimates" was to have access to divine knowledge that carried along with it the urgent responsibility to make that knowledge known.¹⁹ Such unique knowledge gave women authority in a climate where women were otherwise

¹⁶ Kristin Böse, "'Uff Daz Man Daz Unsicher Von Dem Sichren Bekenen Mug,' The Evidence of Visions in the Illustrated Vitae of Catherine of Siena," *Creation of a Cult*, 219.

¹⁷ John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2006), 3.

¹⁸ Coakley., 17.

¹⁹ Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing about Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2004), 280.

forbidden to act decisively for the church or to express their own theological views.²⁰ We can understand then Catherine's eating habits less as a symptom of modern conceptions of *anorexia nervosa*, but more as a practice of authority. As Caroline Walker Bynum notes, substituting one's own suffering through refusal to eat for the redemption of others is not a "symptom" – but is in fact, "theology."²¹ Bynum notes that for female ascetics, the idea of service through one's own suffering emerged as a solution for accessing spiritual power over their own lives.²²

When Catherine ate the Eucharist, she ate God and as Bynum notes, reversed the "ordinary cultural role of food preparers and food abstainers."²³ In other words, by only eating the Eucharist female ascetics were able to access a connection with authority vis-à-vis their own, unmediated experiences with God. Through subordinating the body to join God in spirit, Catherine was able to act authoritatively in political matters and to address broader spiritual concerns facing the various communities throughout Italy. Many of her interventions were made through letters.

Chapter 2: *Currents of Catherine Scholarship*

Catherine of Siena used letters to create a community centered on her unique religious praxis and theological approach. In order to disperse her spiritual and political message, Catherine made use of letters as a primary vehicle to make herself present when she was unable to be there in person. Understanding exactly how Catherine's theology and use of letters created a community of believers requires a discussion on what I refer to as three essential currents of

²⁰ Winston, 280.

²¹ Bynum, *Holy Fast Holy Feast.*, 206.

²² Ibid.

²³ Bynum., 207.

scholarship which focus on Catherine, as well as broader scholarship on the epistolary tradition she participated in.

The first current of scholarship on Catherine was spearheaded by Robert Fawtier in the early 1920s and now led by Catherine M. Mooney, Jane Stylus, and Suzanne Noffke, which explores questions regarding Catherine's literacy, and whether or not she was in fact, a writer.²⁴ In other words, such scholarship attempts to decipher whether Catherine can be understood as someone who had her own authorial identity independent from the influence of those who copied what she dictated. The majority of the letters were dictated by Catherine and copied by male and female secretaries, where at times, Catherine would speak several letters at one time to multiple scribes.²⁵ Jane Stylus however has attempted to reclaim Catherine's unique authorial identity from the margins of Italian literary history, and argues that Catherine's letters are themselves literary sources.²⁶ Stylus's approach relies on Catherine's use of particular words and images to explore the plurality of textual references they would have had for Catherine and her audiences. While Stylus's work remains important for exploring the literary influences upon the writings of medieval saints, it neglects to account for the role of male interlocutors in forming the linguistic product of Catherine's letters.

²⁴ Robert Fawtier, "*Sainte Catherine de Sienne: essai de critique des sources, source hagiographiques*," vol. 1. Sources hagiographiques (Paris: Editions de Boccard, 1921); and id., *Sainte Catherine de Sienne. Essai de critique des sources*, vol. 2, *Les oeuvres de Saint Catherine de Sienne* (Paris, 1930). See also Jane Stylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Stylus, "Writing versus Voice: Tommaso Caffarini and the Production of a Literate Catherine," Stylus, "Caterina da Siena and the Legacy of Humanism," in *Perspectives on Early Modern and Modern Intellectual History*, eds. Joseph Marino and Melinda Schlitt (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001): pp. 116-44; also see Catherine M. Mooney, "Wondrous Words: Catherine of Siena's Miraculous Reading and Writing to the Early Sources," *Catherine of Siena: Creation of a Cult*, eds. Hamburger and Signori (Brepols, 2013).

²⁵ Luongo., 71.

²⁶ Jane Stylus, *Reclaiming Catherine*

The second current of Catherinian scholarship crucial to my thesis is led by Karen Scott, who has contributed to questions of whether or not Catherine's letters are best understood as literary or oral works. In situating Catherine's dictation within a female tradition of oral authorship, Scott contends Catherine had a distinctive authorial voice, despite her dictations being abridged by the voices and pens of her secretaries. In trying to parse through Catherine's own authorial voice and that of her male hagiographer, Karen Scott analyzes Catherine's presentation of herself through her letters versus the figure of sanctity that Raymond of Capua (c.1330-1399), her confessor, presents in his biography. Scott identifies what she argues are Catherine's unique symbols of authorship, for instance her comparisons to food preparation, such as the metaphors of candied oranges she uses to elaborate to her readers the conversion of pope Urban VI. She infers that just as the oranges sit submerged in boiling water to remove their pulpy bitterness, Christ's blood and its attendant water of grace will draw "all pervasive bitterness out of the pope."²⁷ According to Scott, analyzing Catherine's letters for these specific types of metaphors are emblematic of a female tradition of writing through dictation, where their letters are oral documents, rather than literary works.

Karen Scott's work on Catherine's authorial identity has also provided useful dialogue for the broader culture of medieval women's voices within letters.²⁸ This project expands upon the insights of these threads of scholarship by demonstrating that both Catherine and her male

²⁷ Karen Scott, "Candied Oranges, Vinegar, and Dawn: The Imagery of Conversion in the Letters of Catherine of Siena," in *Annali d'Italianistica*, Vol.13, Women Mystic Writers (1995), 105.

²⁸ Karen Scott, "*Io Caterina*: Ecclesiastical Politics and Oral Culture in the Letters of Catherine of Siena," *see also* Claudia Papka, "The Written Woman Writes: Caterina da Siena: Between History and Hagiography, Body and Text," in *Annali d'Italianistica* Vol. 13 Women Mystic Writers (1995), *see also* F. Thomas Luongo, "God's Words or Birgitta's? Birgitta of Sweden as Author", *see also* Cheryl Forbes, "The Radical Rhetoric of Caterina da Siena," *see* D.L Villegas, "Catherine of Siena's Wisdom on Discernment and Her Reception of Scripture" in *Acta Theologica* Vol. 17 (2013).

interlocutors collaboratively constructed a community-inspiring figure of Catherine during the saint's own lifetime. Catherine is not alone in this aspect, for Nancy Caciola has demonstrated that the thirteenth century saint Margaret of Cartona (c.1247-1297) was appropriated by the Franciscan order where the leading men of the commune sought to have her recognized as a saint.²⁹ Caciola argues that in order for Margaret to be collaboratively molded into an exemplary Franciscan saint, she first had to be read as a cipher. For without clerical intervention and proof of Margaret's sanctity, her supernatural abilities could have been interpreted as demonic. It is within this collaborative context that women displayed signs of holiness, and clerics rushed to interpret them.³⁰

Despite scholarly attempts to reclaim Catherine's authorial voice, trying to pinpoint and identify an epistolary voice which was written, re-written, recorded, re-ordered, and copied over by male secretaries affiliated with church ambitions is impossible. At the same time, Caciola and Scott have suggested that saintly women were involved in the process of creating their own saintly persona and message. Therefore, in order to understand Catherine's community building project, we must take into account that the letters were written and composed within a deeply collaborative environment and represented an assemblage of authorial identities.³¹

This collaboration included the voices of previous female saints. These authors collectively discuss how Catherine participated within a complex network of other female

²⁹ Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 99.

³⁰ For an in depth study on living mystics and the need for clerics to establish proof of their sanctity, see Dyan Elliot, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), particularly Chapter five: "Between Two Deaths: The Living Mystic," pp. 180-233.

³¹ Luongo., 77.

writers, who used specific language, rhetorical devices, and metaphors to convey to their readers the important messages they sought to impart. Particularly, scholars have focused on Birgitta of Sweden (c.1303-1373) who was a contemporary of Catherine and also enjoyed a reputation for holiness and papal support based upon her visionary experiences. Scholars have analyzed Catherine and Birgitta's writings together, noting that they were a part of collaboratively constructed, textual communities that consisted of their scribes and their love for God as crucial for their authorial identity.³²

Such scholarship allows this project to account for Catherine's participation among well-established traditions of male supervision of female religious experiences. The interdependence between female saints and male clerics allowed clergymen to boost their authority by guiding, mentoring, and being present alongside a saintly individual. By helping God's chosen intimate, a cleric had increased responsibility to ensure that a charismatic mystic did not subvert the religious authority of the church to supervise and mitigate encounters with the divine.³³ Furthermore, if a male cleric could responsibly lead a female mystic alongside the wishes of his religious order, then that very mystic could serve as an example to future communities of believers, equally attesting to that order's ability to communicate with the divine and safeguard their co-religionists. Lastly, this collaboration afforded male clergy members all of the advantages specific to male and female spiritual positions. For medieval Christians, rational understanding was associated with men and affective religious experience and ecstasy was

³² F. Thomas Luongo, "Birgitta and Catherine and Their Textual Communities," in *Sanctity and Female Authorship: Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena* eds. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid, pp. 14-35

³³ Coakley., 17.

associated with women.³⁴ But as in the case of Catherine and other women religious, regardless of the classification and perception of medieval women's voices, they were nonetheless powerful and authoritative.

The collaboration between ascetic visionaries like Catherine and clergymen like her confessor Raymond also concerns the third thread of Catherine scholarship, which has focused on the creation of cult and community formation *after* the saint's death. After her death, Catherine became transformed into an adaptable figure, appropriated for different and evolving needs of various communities.³⁵ This has been best elaborated by Jennifer Ward's study on late medieval England, where Catherine of Siena became a widespread representative of English piety amongst Dominicans in the devotional practices of the period.³⁶ Ward's study has demonstrated the integral role that the figure of Catherine played in the creation of later civic and spiritual identities.

Drawing on all three currents of Catherine historiography, the work of F. Thomas Luongo has also provided crucial insights into how Catherine and her supporters used her letters for primarily political work. Exploring her political advocacy and carefully constructing her saintly persona, Luongo refers to Catherine's movements as saintly politics. He does so as a means of arguing that the network created around her was simultaneously a spiritual association

³⁴ Nancy McLoughlin, *Jean Gerson and Gender: Rhetoric and Politics in Fifteenth Century France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 154.

³⁵ *Catherine of Siena: Creation of a Cult*, eds. Hamburger and Signori (Belgium: Brepols, 2013), *see also* Gerald Parsons, "The Cult of Catherine of Siena: A Study in Civil Religion," *see also* Parsons "A Neglected Sculpture: The Monument to Catherine of Siena at Castel Sant' Angelo," in *Papers of the British School at Rome* Vol. 76 (2008) pp. 257-276.

³⁶ Jennifer Brown, *Fruit of the Orchard: Reading Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

and a political movement.³⁷ Luongo traces Catherine’s political trajectory from birth, noting Catherine’s well-connected family in order to argue that the Sieneese girl’s saintly identity took shape within the circumstances of Tuscan and ecclesiastical politics of the 1370s.³⁸ While Luongo offers crucial insights into Catherine’s political work before and during the Schism, his investigation privileges Catherine’s most politically connected followers. This paper seeks to build upon Luongo’s contribution by demonstrating Catherine’s ability to generate community between those who remained at the political fore and individuals who were less instrumental in large-scale political action.

Chapter 3: *Theoretical Frameworks*

The task of interrogating Catherine as a community builder and letter writer has posed several theoretical questions. First, how can the community be understood amidst the politics of the late medieval period? Second, how can we account for a community whose members were separated geographically? Third, how can one treat Catherine’s wide range of correspondence? To tackle these issues, I have first drawn my attention to Felix Heinzer and Allison Beach’s work on the eleventh and twelfth century Gregorian religious reforms.³⁹ Heinzer argues that liturgical books played an important role in the development of reform *Kommunikationezte*, or

³⁷ F. Thomas Luongo, *The Sainly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 135.

³⁸ Luongo., 157.

³⁹ Alison I. Beach, *The Trauma of Monastic Reform: Community and Conflict in Twelfth-Century Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 46; specifically quoting in her bibliography—Heinzer, Felix. “Klösterliche Netzwerke und kulturelle Identität – Die Hirsauer Reform des 11. /12. Jahrhunderts als Vorläufer spätmittelalterlicher Ordensstrukuren.” In *Klosterreform und mittelalterliche Buchkultur im deutschen Südwesten*, 39: 168-184. *Mittellateinische Studien und Texte*. Leiden: Brill, 2008., 168. Beyond historians, there is a healthy body of literature on communication networks and the way social relationships functioned communally. Perhaps the most canonical work, see Ernst Adolph Guillemin, *The Classical Theory of Lumped Constant Networks* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964).

communication networks, and Beach demonstrates that these books played an important role in the cultivation of community across generations of monks. Given the role that these reforms played in the politics of the investiture controversy and resulting papal schism (1085-1122), Heinzer's and Beach's work provide an excellent example for how written work reflecting proper religious practice may contribute to the development of strong communities in a climate of disputed authority and political factionalism, like the climate Catherine operated in.⁴⁰

The religious reforms of the eleventh and twelfth centuries share striking parallels to the Schism of 1378 between French and Italian supporters in so far as both the earlier reforms and the Schism of Catherine's time concerned themselves with the location of church-centered authority. The Gregorian reforms associated with Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073-85) concerned themselves with the moral integrity and independence of the clergy.⁴¹

Heinzer and Beaches' useful work on these reforms has been crucial for my understanding of how Catherine mobilized her community to call for church reform and to mitigate the shifting boundaries of ecclesiastical power. Their work also provides useful examples for understanding how Catherine's letters served as pathways to communicate her spiritual and political agenda to community members throughout Italy. In particular, this scholarship helps to show how letters were sites of community formation, where communities of

⁴⁰ Thomas N Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 6.

⁴¹ Augustine Fliche, *La Réforme Grégorienne: La Formation des Idées Grégorienne* (Louvain: L'Université de Louvain, 1924-37), 8.

readers could share and reinforce Catherine's call for community formation by circulating her letters amongst themselves and to additional readers.⁴²

My attention to how communities functioned in the medieval period is also largely informed by Benedict Anderson and Steven Brint's work on imagined and constructed communities.⁴³ While Anderson's primary focus is on the origins of nationalism in the modern period, I fall in alignment with other scholars who have recognized Anderson's concept as one suitable for the pre-modern and pre-print society of Catherine and her letters.⁴⁴ Anderson argues that nationalism cannot exist unless people come to understand themselves as part of a community that is larger than can be sustained by face-to-face interactions.⁴⁵ For Anderson, nationalism was manufactured in the modern age of print and capitalism, where 'official nationalism' was historically impossible until after the appearance of dominant linguistic patterns that were labeled as "linguistic nationalism."⁴⁶

Medievalists have adopted this term "imagined communities," replacing the modern nation state with the institutional church. Medievalists have also demonstrated that although a unified Christian polity was idealized in spiritual and political works of the time, more vibrant and politically effective communities needed to be imagined among the larger church

⁴² Beach, 47.

⁴³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. Edn. (London and New York: Verso, 2006). See also, Steven Brint "Gemeinschaft Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept," in *Sociological Theory*, vol. 19, No. 1 (Mar., 2001), pp. 1-23.

⁴⁴ Beach, *The Trauma of Monastic Reform.*, see footnote 73., p. 29.

⁴⁵ Anderson, 28.

⁴⁶ Anderson, 109.

community. This was in large part due to the inherent religious factionalism of the period as well as the disagreement amongst Christians on questions relating to praxis and authority.⁴⁷

As a result, medievalists have noted that smaller imagined communities began to develop around persons, localities, and institutions that presented themselves as representatives of the entire idealized church. These smaller imagined communities understood themselves to be bound together by faith instead of political identities.⁴⁸ Catherine's community was imagined in the sense that although her followers might or might not have ever met in person, they nevertheless shared a common sense of identity through their belief in Catherine's sanctity and relation to God.⁴⁹

Another important study that has influenced my own framing of community in this paper is the work of Steven Brint. In classifying different configurations of communities and the impetuses that bind them together, Brint distinguishes between two types of community formation. The first type of community formation Brint recognizes is based on geographical proximity. The second is based on choice. Offering models of his own, Brint differentiates between communities formed on the basis of shared belief (e.g. religious groups) and those on the basis of shared models of activity (e.g. merchant guilds). In his understanding of these two communities, Brint provides insight into framing Catherine's involvement with the Dominican

⁴⁷ Tanya Stabler Miller, "What's in a Name? Clerical Representations of Parisian Beguines, 1200-1327," *The Journal of Medieval History*, 33:1 (2007): 60-86. See also, Ian Christopher Levy, "Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages," *Notre Dame Reading and the Scriptures* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2012).

⁴⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* Vo. 31, Issue 1 (January, 1980).

⁴⁹ Luongo., 123.

order and merchant guilds throughout Florence that she interacted with during her stay in the city.

Additionally, Steven Brint distinguishes between communities whose members are concentrated in a single or several locations, and finally, between communities whose members interact face-to-face and those whose members never meet.⁵⁰ Catherine's community crosses these last three groups. While some of Catherine's followers met and remained in close physical contact with each other, others lived throughout Italy, probably never meeting in person. Those who could not meet face to face, relied solely on copies of Catherine's letters to remain connected with each other. It is through her letters that Catherine made herself consistently present to her community. In other words, even when the saint was not present to those living near her, she was able to be present to her readers on demand if they held access to the letters.

In order to make sense of religious communities in the fourteenth century alongside Anderson's nationalisms of the twentieth, this paper also looks at Ernest Renan's work on nationhood.⁵¹ Whether medieval religious orders are in competition with one another, or contemporary large nation-states, Ernest Renan provides a powerful way to understand both, simply by posing his provocative question: *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (What is a Nation?) According to Renan, "La nation moderne est donc un résultat historique amené par une série de faits convergeant dans le même sens" (The modern nation is therefore a historical result brought on by a series of facts converging in the same direction).⁵²

⁵⁰ Steven Brint, "Gemeinschaft Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept," *Sociological Theory* 19 (2001): 1-23.

⁵¹ Ernest Renan, *Discours et Conférences*, (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1887), pp. 277-310; primary source is accessible at <https://archive.org/details/discoursetconf00renauoft/page/n5/mode/2up>

⁵² *Discours et Conférences*, 286. Translation are my own unless otherwise noted.

This convergence of “facts” that Renan mentions comes to define the nation, where the nation itself “est un âme, une principe spirituel” (a soul, a spiritual principal) by which individuals decide to collectively possess a “riche legs de souvenirs” (a rich legacy of memories).⁵³ Renan helps inform how I understand Catherine’s community, for the nation and the saint’s network shared “la volonté de continuer à faire valoir [leur] héritage...” (the desire to continue to value their [shared] heritage).⁵⁴ It is my contention that through ascribing value to Catherine’s sanctity and dispersing her letters, followers maintained the spiritual connection they had to the girl from Siena.

For viewing community *through* Catherine’s letters, I have found Janet Gurkin Altman’s work as a useful point of departure. Altman argues that letters are best understood individually as well as in dialogue with other letters as part of a larger narrative unit.⁵⁵ In other words, Altman posits that while each letter retains its own identity based on its content, it is simultaneously related to other letters written by the same author. Despite Altman’s focus on eighteenth-century French figures like Diderot and Rousseau, her approach can be applied to Catherine. In Catherine’s letters addressed to various persons, each unit or letter can be defined by its own characteristics, rhetorical structure, and message. Yet, each individual letter retains its own unity while remaining a part of a larger configuration of letters. Altman refers to letters’ dependent and interdependent status as comprising an “epistolary mosaic ” to highlight letters’ simultaneous similarity and differences. I will borrow this term and apply it to the letters themselves in order

⁵³ Renan, 306

⁵⁴ Renan, 306.

⁵⁵ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1982), 169.

to articulate that while Catherine's letters speak of different matters, people and contexts, they are similar in their strategies of creating a community.

Chapter 4: *A Letter to the Nuns*

When applying these conceptual frameworks to Catherine's letters, we can see Catherine community ground. This is particularly shown in an epistle Catherine sent to a group of nuns in Montepulciano, about forty miles from Catherine's native Siena and seventy-seven miles from Florence. Situated in Southern Tuscany lies the hill town and commune of Montepulciano, where the nuns themselves lived and died. The hill town had been home to a revered Dominican prioress and a Catholic saint named Agnes of Montepulciano, who died nearly thirty years before Catherine's birth and where a monastic housed had been named after her. In Mid April of 1379, Catherine wrote a letter to the nuns of this cloister, announcing that she had received a plenary indulgence, or the complete remission of all temporal sin for her entire network of followers. In this letter, Catherine calls upon the nuns to remain steadfast in their love and devotion to Christ and his chosen representative and author of the indulgence, Pope Urban VI. By promoting spiritual practices amongst the nuns, Catherine simultaneously encouraged political action. The saint's call for continued support from the Dominican nuns should be seen as an attempt to encourage unity during a period of instability for Italian centered church authority.

By the time Catherine wrote her letter, the Great Schism of the Western European Church had been gaining traction and both French and Italian advocates continued their support for rival claimants to the papal throne. It is important to note that this schism resulted from an internal

rupture based on politics, in particular, a struggle over who ought to control the church's wealth, location, and authority.⁵⁶

The Schism began in 1378, just one year after Catherine, among others, had successfully lobbied the pope to re-center church authority in Rome. Since 1306 popes had resided in Avignon, on the French border. They had fled Rome in the early fourteenth century due to the political turmoil that plagued the city. Pope Gregory XI's decision (1329-1378) caused internal chaos amongst the French cardinals and canon lawyers, who argued and advocated against the decision based on a variety of legal defenses. As a result of the decision brokered by Catherine, a division amongst French and Italian papal claimants and their supporters crystallized and lasted until 1417.⁵⁷

Catherine composed her letter to the nuns in Montepulciano around the time of her trip to Rome, which Catherine visited in support of the church reform sponsored by the Italian claimant to the papal throne, Urban VI. It is also around the time that Catherine's male confessor and mentor Raymond of Capua enlisted as an *apostolic nuncio*, or ecclesiastical diplomat in service as one of Urban's representatives. With this heightened responsibility, Raymond secured for himself increased authority, giving Catherine increased access to church support. However, when we analyze the letter in comparison to previous male-authored biographies of her life, we see that Catherine herself was more than an embodiment of clerical desires for sanctity. Instead, Catherine's letter to the nuns demonstrates that she actively understood her own community and directed it in order to draw attention to her own spiritual and political agenda.

⁵⁶ A Companion to the Great Western Schism (1378-1417), eds. Jöelle-Rollo-Koster and Thomas M. Izbicki, *Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

⁵⁷ Luongo, 56.

The letter itself has a trilateral design. First, there is the salutation to the mothers and daughters in Christ, then the invitation to Christ's blood and subsequent truth, and lastly, the announcement of the indulgence that Catherine received from Urban VI. In tracking the letter's structure, it will be shown that Catherine created a community through offering the fellow women religious access to Christ's blood, which represented the treasury from which all papal indulgences originate.⁵⁸

In the letter written to the prioress and nuns of Sant'Agnese in mid-April of 1379, Catherine of Siena spoke of good news. The joyous announcement was the plenary indulgence from Pope Urban VI. Only able to be granted by a pope, a plenary indulgence is intended for restless souls in purgatory (i.e. deceased individuals) or those who actively support the church and its mission in a tremendous way (i.e. going to fight in the crusades or going on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem). Through the correspondence, Catherine clearly explains that the indulgence "has [been] granted to *me*" at the "moment of death for this entire family," representing her network of supporters. Speaking to her own authority by virtue of having been granted the indulgence in the first place, Catherine offers the pontifical pardon to "those who don't already have it." In offering the pardon, Catherine situates her call for community, primarily through the device of the indulgence and Christ's blood. It is then that the pardon itself represents more than a remission of sin, but a spiritual reward for remaining alongside the saint.

Catherine employs vivid imagery of Christ's blood to simultaneously frame her community building project and places the indulgence within the letter's larger theological context. Catherine orients the nuns of Sant'Agnese around the idea of blood as emblematic of

⁵⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," *Church History* vol. 71, no.4 (December., 2002).

God's indescribable love and truth.⁵⁹ According to Catherine, this love—or blood—will cause the sisters to be “strengthened,” made “patient,” and “holy.” Through describing the possible transformations available to the sisters, Catherine adds that “those who are immersed in this sweet blood [will] completely lose themselves...Nothing causes [them] pain...or [dries] up their soul.” This section of the letter should be read as a profound offer, an attainable and attractive opportunity for the nuns to transcend themselves and their corporeality; to join Catherine and be made anew, awash with Christ's love. By being a part of Catherine's community, individuals had privileged access to Christ's blood, or the spiritual reservoir which all powers of the church draw from. In such closeness to divine truth and mercy, Catherine's followers were able to have access to Christ through the saint herself.

Using the blood theme as a key epistolary strategy, the letter reaches its climax. Catherine places herself in the letter and associates herself with the nuns, commenting that “we must truly get drunk on [His] precious blood by holding it in continual remembrance, since so much good comes from it. To this, *I am inviting you.*”⁶⁰ The invitation itself conjures up women's communion practices, where through eating the Eucharist, women were able to access new forms of spiritual experiences. The theological import points to the doctrine of transubstantiation, where through pseudo-Aristotelian metaphysics, the inside of the communion wafer and wine become the blood and body of Christ entirely. By inviting these nuns to consume Christ's blood

⁵⁹ Bettina Bildhauer, “Medieval European Conceptions of Blood: Truth and Human Integrity,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2013) pp. 57-76. As Bildhauer demonstrates, in the medieval period blood, but particularly Christ's blood, had extremely complicated theological imports. Having a plurality of prominence in religious, legal, medical, and other discourses, Christ's blood was understood as exceptional, where it represented the divine truth that could hold the body and soul together. See also Bildhauer, “Blood in Medieval Cultures,” *History Compass* vol. 4 (6) November, 2006.

⁶⁰ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Susanne Noffke, 4 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-08), 4: 142.

excessively, Catherine offers an alternative mode for the sisters to transcend church centered life. Here, Catherine provides a route for the nuns to access an alternative relationship with Christ, where in joining Catherine in drinking Christ's blood, the nuns gain increased autonomy in shaping their experiences with the divine.

In pinpointing an imagined community, the context of the invitation represents more than a call to a sacrament and a particular form of religiosity. Shortly before the composition of the correspondence, Urban VI was elected as the Italian papal claimant amidst a moment of political fragility, making this letter an important piece of political advocacy. But anxiety was still ever-present as shifting political landscapes generated additional military engagements following Urban's election between French and Italian papal supporters. Catherine facilitated this support for Urban in the letter by mentioning that the sisters should "pray for the holy father, who is a just man, courageous and zealous for God's honor."⁶¹ It then becomes clear that Catherine's community building project, at least seen in this letter, requires a political acknowledgement and a spiritual action of prayer. Furthermore, by mentioning Urban VI as the author of the indulgence, Catherine creates a linkage for the monastic sisters to recognize Urban as a central figure in Catherine's political and spiritual network.

Towards the end of the letter, Catherine directs her audience towards actions they should take together. This includes rising above apathy, making an effort to acquire the true virtues, and continuing to pray incessantly and "with great watchfulness, tears, and sweat for the reform of Christ's dear bride, whom we see so troubled that it seems she can bear no more."⁶² Catherine

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Noffke, vol. 4., 142.

clearly refers to the church as “Christ’s dear bride,” which is part of a long held belief that until Christ returns in the second coming, the church resembles a bride during a betrothal period. During this betrothal, the church is separated from Christ until his return as a husband to his bride, and through each Eucharistic sacrament the mystical body of Christ is nourished in and by each believer.⁶³

The letter Catherine wrote to the nuns in Montepulciano is not only useful for understanding how Catherine generated a community, but equally important for pinpointing that Catherine’s own authorial identity lies in her collaborative effort to establish community. Seeing Catherine as a community builder informs how scholars can use the saint’s letters to see Catherine’s religious autonomy, despite male interlocutors.

Catherine spent time in the “margins between secular and religious worlds” which involved supervision from local Dominican clergymen, but also allowed her to stay at home and outside the walls of the cloister.⁶⁴ With several years of supervised and secluded prayer, Catherine refined her spiritual and theological stances on issues in a “highly personal, immediate, and energetic” fashion.⁶⁵ This collaborative element to Catherine’s spiritual development is integral for contextualizing Catherine’s imagined communities, and how the figure of the medieval penitent navigated the overlapping interests of different worlds. It is through the writings of Catherine’s life that we see a distinct attempt to build a figure of authority, which Catherine would use to her advantage throughout her life.

⁶³ Roch A. Kereszty, *The Church of God in Jesus Christ: A Catholic Ecclesiology* (Washington D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2019) 334.

⁶⁴ Luongo., 37.

⁶⁵ Luongo., 33.

The earliest known biography of Catherine, Raymond's *Legenda Maior*, outlined Catherine's sanctity, specifically highlighting how her life showcased God's use of Catherine as a vessel for His works.⁶⁶ Catherine's spiritual mentor and confessor, Raymond of Capua was a high ranking and well connected figure in the Dominican order. Before Raymond arrived in Siena, he served as a chaplain in the same monastery in Montepulciano as the letter that Catherine sent to the nuns. In order to bring acclaim to himself as the author and primary facilitator in Catherine's spiritual progress within a climate of competing religious orders, Raymond began to write her biography as if she was a saint during her own lifetime.

In Raymond's *Legenda Maior*, he wrote that Catherine was a *mantellate*, or a member of a third "Order of Penance" with a clear connection to the Dominicans.⁶⁷ However, in the later biography of Catherine written by Caffarini, it is mentioned that she was a virgin *pinzochere*, or a widowed religious woman living independently in her home and effectively "outside the domain of male protection in a society preoccupied with a necessity of maintaining women..."⁶⁸ As Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner shows, what Caffarini presented as the Order of Penance was in fact a later conception of an *orationes* "not as a rule for an order but as a set of guidelines originally for a [different] group."⁶⁹ This matters, for as F. Thomas Luongo argues, Raymond deployed the term to describe Catherine in a "retrospective invention of a regularity status of the

⁶⁶ For a critical study of Raymond's *Legenda Maior*, see Silvia Nocentini, "The *Legenda Maior* of Catherine of Siena," in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, Brill's Companions of the Christian Tradition vol. 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 339-359. Raymond finished his vita of Catherine in 1395, fifteen years after Catherine's death.

⁶⁷ Luongo., 37.

⁶⁸ Luongo., 36.

⁶⁹ Luongo, 38; specifically citing Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, "Writing Religious Rules as an Interactive Process - Dominican Penitent Women and the Making of Their *Regula*," *Speculum* 79 (2004): 660-87.

mantellate” that was not understood in Catherine’s lifetime.⁷⁰ In other words, while Luongo does not focus on Catherine’s mystical theology as it related to her constituents, his work has led us to see the efforts of Raymond to place Catherine in a community associated with the Dominicans.

Catherine, however, was not just a figure in the hands of male clerics who sought to bolster their own authority. As shown in the letter to the nuns, Catherine was interested in pursuing her own agenda and vision for both the Church and Italy.⁷¹ Through seeing the community in the letter sent to the women religious, we can better understand how Catherine conducted political advocacy and performed her spiritual agendas.

To elaborate on the ways in which Catherine created community, I have designed a figure that shows the relationships between Catherine and the letter’s participants. First, by inviting the nuns to “get drunk” on Christ’s love, we see that Catherine performs a saint’s role, where she has private access to Christ and His blood. This relationship is expressed through Catherine’s invitation, where through her, the nuns are able to access Christ’s blood and experience a heightened religious experience facilitated and mitigated by Catherine’s own sanctity. Such a performance of sanctity is mirrored by Raymond, who in his hagiography of Catherine, provides a figure of living sainthood. In this sense, Catherine collaboratively validates her own sanctity by replicating the model of holiness to the nuns themselves. For this reason, Catherine and Raymond are in alignment within the model.

⁷⁰ Luongo., 38.

⁷¹ Suzanne Noffke, “The Writings of Catherine of Siena: The Manuscript Tradition,” in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, Brill’s Companions of the Christian Tradition vol. 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 295. See John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University, 2006), particularly Chapter 9: “Managing Holiness: Raymond of Capua and Catherine of Siena.” pp.170-93.

Catherine then calls for the sisters to pray for Urban. In such calls for behavior, Catherine aligns the nuns with Urban, who himself drew the pardon from the treasury of Christ's blood and ultimate death. In providing Catherine with a model for holiness and sanctity that she mirrors onto the nuns, I have placed Raymond and Catherine alongside one another. In

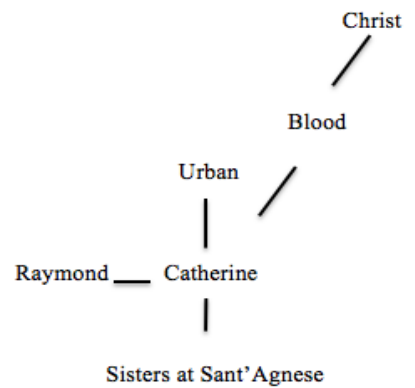


Figure 1: Relationships in Letter to the Nuns

this letter, both the saint and her confessor collaboratively create a community through blood, enabling these monastic nuns to have access to a transformative experience of Christ's forgiveness in Catherine's community. Despite this collaborative effort, Catherine represents the center through which all spiritual transactions go through.

Chapter 5: *Catherine and the Prisoners*

Catherine's creation of community depended on the saint placing herself at the community's center. In analyzing letters written about two different prisoners, I argue that it is Catherine's understanding of her own authority that came to embody the strength and power of her imagined community. By authorizing her followers to act on her behalf or by offering them spiritual counsel, Catherine mobilized her imagined community around rallying support for Urban VI.

This section analyzes two different letters. One, Catherine sent to her spiritual confessor Raymond of Capua shortly after June 13, 1375, before Pope Gregory XI's death. The other she sent to two of her followers, Bartalo Usimbardi and Francesco di Pipino. The letter sent to

Raymond describes Catherine's interaction with an individual who was accused of disturbing the political peace of the Sienese government and who was eventually executed for the crime sometime before June of 1375.⁷² The second letter responds to questions regarding Catherine's plenary indulgence posed by two of her followers written post schism, and was a key part in Catherine's attempts to shore up support for Urban. Significantly, the later letter also orders the two male addresses to comfort another disciple, Giannozzo di Benci Sacchetti, who had been imprisoned for debt.

By analyzing both letters in conjunction with one another, we are able to view Catherine actively constructing community on the ground. The earlier letter sent to Raymond showcases Catherine's placement of herself at the center of her community, where she uses her persona and authority to attract individuals to her mission. The later letter demonstrates Catherine directing her followers to benefit her existing community, equipping them with specific instructions.

In writing to Raymond, Catherine described how she converted and accompanied Niccolò di Tuldo before he was executed at the Piazza del Campo, or the principal public square in Siena. According to Sienese magistrate records, Niccolò was "captured by the Lord Senator and his court because of the discord sowed by him in the city of Siena, pernicious and deadly to the state of the present government and against the manifest of honor and good reputation and legal authority of the present Lord Senator."⁷³ Niccolò's arrest occurred during increased tensions between the Florentine government, pope Gregory XI, and competing political factions from various city states. Sienese authorities interpreted Niccolò's presence in Siena as an attempt to

⁷² Luongo, *xxi* for a simple chronology. However, Suzanne Noffke notes on vol. 1, p. 84, that "there is no proof, however, of the man's...execution."

⁷³ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 93; specifically quoting: *Concistoro* 76, f. 16r (printed in Laurent, ed., *Documenti*), 31.

politically damage the city government and believed him to be acting as an agent of Gérard du Puy. Puy was the nephew of the pre-Schism pope Gregory XI, whom Catherine had urged to return the papacy to Italy. Gérard du Puy was more importantly the French papal governor of Perugia, which was both a rival city of Siena and Niccolò's hometown. His execution thus represented a convergence of papal and interregional politics, subsequently making Catherine's involvement deeply political.⁷⁴

In order to create her community, Catherine needed to navigate city factionalism which was the organizing principal in medieval Italy and largely, in Europe.⁷⁵ In Siena, these internal issues were exacerbated by and made more sensitive to the regional ambitions of the neighboring and more powerful city state of Florence, which sought to expand its influence and generate a unified front against the then, French controlled church led by Pope Gregory XI.⁷⁶ The Florentine Signoria, or civic government was deeply divided about whether to cooperate or combat French church power.⁷⁷ It was eventually, however, the dominant families in the city who managed to shift public opinion against the pro-papal leader, mainly by arguing that church sympathizers oppressed and subverted Florentine political autonomy.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Luongo, 95.

⁷⁵ Tom Scott, *The City State in Europe, 1000-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17; Carol Lansing, *The Florentine Magnates: Lineage and Faction in a Medieval Commune* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), *A Comparative Study of Thirty City State Cultures: An Investigation Conducted by the Copenhagen Polis Centre*, ed. Mogens Herman Hansen (Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2000), specifically see Stephan R. Epstein, "The Rise and Fall of Italian City-States," pp. 277-295.

⁷⁶ F. Thomas Luongo, 5.

⁷⁷ Marvin B. Becker, "Church and State in Florence on the Eve of the Renaissance (1343-1382), *Speculum* vol.37, no.4 (October., 1962), 517.

⁷⁸ Becker., 520.

While Siennese officials remained wary of having a dominant city so close to its borders, Siena remained in contact with Florence over their efforts to ward off papal governors from intruding into the cities' municipal governments. As public opinion moved towards a more anti-papal attitude, the Florentine league was formed, where leaders in the Signoria sought to rally competing city states to ward off papal aggression. After several months of hesitation, the city of Siena joined the Florentine league against the church in 1375 before the death of Gregory and the beginning of the Schism. It is within this context of both city state competition and cooperation that Catherine went to visit Niccolò di Tuldo who was arrested sometime around the year before in 1374, for political subversion to the state of Siena.

The letter that Catherine sent to Raymond reported her time with Niccolò, describing how she offered Niccolò spiritual counsel before his scheduled execution. In the letter Catherine informs Raymond that she “went to visit the one you know,” being Niccolò di Tuldo.⁷⁹ Catherine then recounts how Niccolò was hesitant to accept his impending death, but by offering counsel and agreeing to be present at his execution, Catherine was able to convince the prisoner to accept death and to be eager to meet God in paradise. The letter ends with Catherine's proclaimed jealousy of Niccolò, for as he ascended to heaven, she remained on earth and unable to be a martyr.

Scholars have interrogated the Niccolò di Tuldo letter, offering different perspectives as to its content, meaning and its rhetorical nature.⁸⁰ Joan P. Del Pozzo has approached the letter

⁷⁹ As to the relationship between Raymond and Niccolò, Suzanne Noffke argues Raymond knew of the prisoner and may have sent Catherine to Siena to see him.

⁸⁰ Recent analysis of this letter has been found in Daniel Bornstein, “Spiritual Kinship and Domestic Devotions,” in Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, eds., *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Routledge, 2014), Joan Pozzo, “The Apotheosis of Niccolò di Tuldo: An Execution ‘Love Story,’” *Modern Language Notes* 110 (1995), 164-77, F. Thomas Luongo in “Catherine of Siena: Rewriting Female Holy Authority,” in Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor, eds., *Women, the Book, and the Godly: Selected Proceedings of the St. Hilda's Conference, 1993*,

from a literary perspective, likening the events leading up to Niccolò's beheading as an "epistolary romance...framed by exhortations of spiritual heroism."⁸¹ Pozzo interrogates the letter's value for its ability to demonstrate Catherine's literary voice, where her re-telling of the time before, during, and after Niccolò's death allowed Catherine to fashion herself as a woman torn by grief, and a saint devoted to saving and converting Niccolò's soul.⁸²

F. Thomas Luongo has brilliantly used the Niccolò di Tuldo letter to demonstrate Catherine's political trajectory and how the letter "script[ed] her in a public and political drama whose denouement demonstrates boldly her authority in the world."⁸³ Luongo however makes two overarching arguments about the letter that deserve increased attention. First, Luongo claims that in writing to Raymond about her role in Niccolò's execution, Catherine called Raymond to join in a social movement which was deeply political in nature. Luongo argues that this call to Raymond was a pathway to generate unity and lay the groundwork for the "political trajectory of the mission of Catherine and Raymond."⁸⁴ Luongo interprets Catherine's visit to Niccolò as being a part of Catherine's establishment of her own authority, where "Catherine act[ed] as a saint should act, and Niccolò [became], literally nothing more than an object in the saint's hands."⁸⁵

vol.1 (1995), 89-104; and the "Evidence of Catherine's Experience: Niccolò di Tuldo and the Erotics of Political Engagement," in Mario Ascheri, ed., *Siena e il suo territorio nel Rinascimento* (2001), 53-90.

⁸¹ Pozzo., 173.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ *Saintly Politics of Catherine of Siena*, 91.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 120.

The meaning of Luongo's assertion is that as a result of Catherine's network of shared political goals, both with city states and her religious order, the saint went to visit a political prisoner during a heightened moment of civic tension. Throughout his interrogation of the Niccolò di Tuldo letter, Luongo presents Catherine at the center of a political community with shared interests; however, I contend that this community held spiritual facets that made this political network a heightened mystical community. It is Catherine's communal understanding of her own religious experiences that define her community as well as my departure from Luongo's work.

My contention for a heightened mystical community is visible in the beginning of the Niccolò letter. Before she recounts her time with the prisoner, Catherine directs Raymond explicitly to increase his own devotion and that of the other Dominicans. She writes: "I want you to do as one who draws water with a pail, the water that is holy desire, and pour the water over the head of your brothers, which are our members..."⁸⁶ Such "holy desire" should be understood as the longing for Christ's blood as emblematic of the devotion and celebration to Christ. This excerpt shows Catherine ordering Raymond to encourage their "members" towards a communal act of witnessing and consuming Christ's blood as obtained by Catherine. This language of individual religious experience in a communal environment represents the epitome of Catherine's community building project.

Catherine's community was however more than just an imagined experience, facilitated by word in a letter. Rather, this community is in fact a traceable movement particularly shown during Catherine's interactions with Niccolò di Tuldo, where she recounts to Raymond that:

⁸⁶ Ibid., 97.

His only fear was of not being strong at the final moment [of death]...He said, “stay with me; don’t leave me alone... [if you do] I’ll die happy.” [After agreeing to stay with him] ...All the fear in his heart disappeared; the sadness on his face was transformed into gladness. He was happy, exultant... [Niccolò] accepted his painful death in obedience to the Father for the welfare of the human race. And the hands of the Holy Spirit locked him in.⁸⁷

In describing the events leading up to the execution, Catherine demonstrated her ability to counsel a condemned man back to God in his final days. With her help, Niccolò became transformed from an adamant defender of papal interests into a child of God ready to receive the divine grace in his transit to heaven. Through offering consolation to the prisoner, Catherine enabled Niccolò to participate in Christian performances “which he hadn’t received for a long time.” For those who were sick or dying, the religious comfort was meant to give spiritual comfort and strength, enabling them to make the journey into eternity. Niccolò’s participation in these performances of the Christian community— that very community that Niccolò had been in isolation from—represents a reconciliation brokered by Catherine. Almost in a similar fashion to Christ being greeted by the angels during his isolation in the wilderness, my reading of the letter leads me to argue that Niccolò was approached and ministered by Catherine during his time of a similar moment of spiritual darkness.

Interestingly, Catherine’s letter to Raymond reveals a critical aspect of how Catherine situated her figure of authority and mitigated both the light and the dark.⁸⁸ As Catherine writes, it is only “through his love for me,” that Niccolò’s fear dissipates and acceptance of a painful death materializes.⁸⁹ Placing this detail in the letter can be seen as Catherine alerting that it was God

⁸⁷ Noffke: 1., 88

⁸⁸ Julia Barrett and A.A. Lukowski, “Wedded to Light: The Life, Letters, and Legend of St. Catherine of Siena, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 41, no. 1 (Spring, 2008), 2.

⁸⁹ Noffke, vol. 4., 87.

who used *her* to prepare Niccolò for death and ultimate transit to heaven. Catherine's insertion and withdrawal from the drama of Niccolò's death demonstrates how Catherine's vision of community required agility with deliberately choosing when to place herself at the center.⁹⁰ Catherine's understanding that God enabled her to convert Niccolò allows her community to separate itself from a cult of personality, for while Catherine's personality enabled her to garner support, her community was always in service of God and the hierarchical church.

Both the structure and ethics of her community relied on cultivating individuals' steady obedience to Catherine, Christ, and the church. Through reinforcing this model with Niccolò, Catherine successfully explains to Raymond that she alone facilitated the movement of Niccolò from the community of the present to the heavenly community of the saved. I argue that this is a clear example of Catherine extending her own authority beyond her male confessor Raymond, where the sheer will of Catherine's personality helped serve as the chief authority. While the Dominicans sought to create a cult around Catherine's sanctity to boost the Order's own authority, it is Catherine who herself forged a community by providing individuals a heightened religious experience through her sanctity.

To make sense of how community became constructed in the Niccolò letter, I have devised a web to visually demonstrate the points of connection Catherine created throughout her letter. As the figure demonstrates, Catherine remained at the center through which all were connected, or the focal point in which all rays of community originated from and refracted through. As far as the letter is concerned, Catherine wrote to Raymond about her giving Niccolò spiritual counsel. This connected Catherine with both Raymond and Niccolò. In offering Niccolò

⁹⁰ Joan Pozzo has argued that in the letter's rhetorical structure, to fully create the erotic love story between Catherine and Niccolò, she had to place herself at the heart of the narrative.

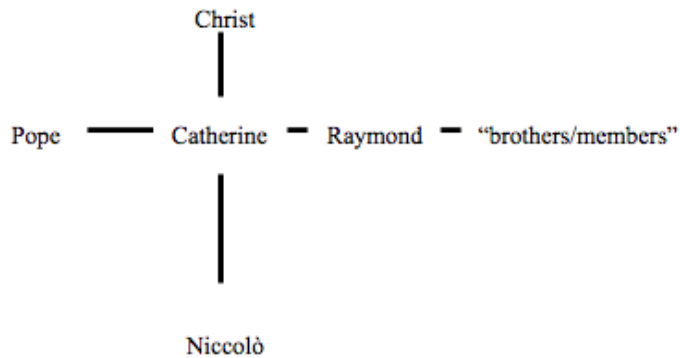


Figure 2: Relationships in Letter T273

instructed Raymond to “shut yourself up in the open side wound of God’s son.” This then connects Raymond, Catherine, and Niccolò to Christ’s bloody wound, and via the doctrine of the trinity, to God. The key significance of these connections is that they are all return back to Catherine.

Now that these connections have been expanded upon, it is useful to return to the beginning of the letter, where Catherine instructs Raymond to “pour” holy desire onto the heads of “your brothers, which are our members,” thus connecting Catherine to every mentioned person and member *with* God. While the letter is a clear example of Catherine’s saintly politics, it also demonstrates the reality of Catherine’s mystical praxis and how it affected the lived experience of her followers. Additionally, the letter is rife with offers of inclusion, assembled by invitations of connected religious experience. In placing various individuals in dialogue with one another, Catherine authorizes herself to facilitate Raymond’s treatment of fellow Dominicans. It is primarily through Catherine’s use of blood that she forges connections to her readers. It is with Catherine’s special access *to* Christ’s blood through which Catherine consolidates individuals under her authority, where she embodies the power and strength of her own vision for community.

council, Catherine recounted that she told him he would be “bathed in the sweet blood of God’s son” during Niccolò’s death. This shows Niccolò being connected to God through Christ’s blood *via* Catherine. Furthermore, Catherine

Unifying individuals separated by geography and removed from Niccolò's cell allows Catherine to place herself in multiple places at once, allowing her to place her authority wherever the situation required. Despite the letter's central drama of Niccolò's imprisonment and death, when we consider how Catherine instructed Raymond to act with the brothers; we see that Catherine both embodied her community and ensured that the communities' boundaries (or places where she could not be physically present) were maintained by a follower, in this case, her confessor Raymond.

Catherine's embodiment of her community is also present at the time of her second letter. In 1379, the time during the second epistle, Catherine went to Rome with a group of followers to advocate and support church reform and unity under her ally, Urban VI. While she was there, Catherine sent a letter to two disciples Bartalo Usimbardi and Francesco di Pipino, enclosed with the documentation for the plenary indulgence that Urban had given her and to her spiritual network of followers and mutual supporters. After explaining the plenary indulgence in her letter, Catherine directs the two men to visit an imprisoned supporter, asking them to visit and console him as if they were Catherine herself. The aspect of the letter I aim to highlight is Catherine's *authorization* for the two men to act on *her* and the community's behalf. I argue that this letter showcases that the saint controlled her elaborate network of followers by placing her authority at the center, where individual followers were allowed to act on her behalf when Catherine was unable to be physically present. In analyzing how Catherine issued explicit orders to her supporters, it becomes clearer how Catherine maintained a diverse synergy amongst her broad network, where through their shared desire to participate in a heightened religious experience, individuals from varying backgrounds and agendas remained loyal to Catherine.

Such loyalty was demonstrated through the act of receiving and sending letters. The recipients of the letter from Catherine were two disciples who lived in Florence: Bartalo Usimbardi and Francesco di Pipino. Throughout her life, Catherine sent a total of five letters to Bartalo and his wife Orsa. These two Patrician Florentines both became disciples of Catherine probably by the time of Catherine's stay in their city in 1378. Catherine's visit to Florence occurred before tensions erupted between the Italian city-states and supporters of Gregory XI, leading up to Catherine's ultimate renunciation of the papacy in Avignon.⁹¹ During this time, Catherine remained in good graces with Gregory, who sent her on a mission to Florence to reconcile the tensions between Italian families *before* the Schism.

The second recipient of the later letter was Francesco di Pipino. Francesco was a tailor from San Miniato al Tedesco (modern day Pisa in central Italy) and became highly respected in Florence, particularly with members of the Signoria, or civic government. Both Francesco and his wife Agnesa became Catherine's disciples around the same time as Catherine's stay in Florence in 1378. During the final days of her stay that year, Catherine lived with Francesco and Agnesa, remaining in correspondence with them until the end of her life. Both couples were important political followers for Catherine, and it is her relationships with them that helped allow her to remain aware of the developing political situation in Florence as she continued her spiritual and political work abroad.⁹²

⁹¹ For an important study on the Avignon papacy, see Joëlle Rollo-Koster, *Avignon and Its Papacy, 1304-1417: Popes Institutions, and Society* (New York and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). For an important study on Catherine and her relationship to the Avignon Papacy, see Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested: An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); see specifically chapter 6: "Catherine of Siena and the Mystical Body of the Church," pp. 146-173.

⁹² Indeed, the notion of Catherine of Siena's success was, as Luongo justly argues, in part because of her connections with powerful people. However, what Luongo does not address is that it is through Catherine's use of political allies which enabled her to deploy her mystical theology for a wide chain of individuals, held together through their belief in Catherine's supernatural and political abilities.

Around the time of the second letter, the University of Paris which had proclaimed its neutrality amongst the competing claims for church authority, received a letter.⁹³ In effect, the correspondence ordered that the University accept French papal claimant Clement VII and the continuing Avignon papacy, which the university did in over a week after receiving the correspondence. While emblematic of the larger phenomenon of the government using its authority over university faculty, the political action demonstrates the immediacy in which the French government sought to consolidate support.⁹⁴ Similarly in Italy, the Signoria attempted to sway neutral parties in order to present a unified front against religious rivals.

Despite the heightened political context surround the letter, the epistle sent to Bartalo and Francesco in May of 1379 has not been analyzed by Catherinian scholars, despite its rich offerings. This letter importantly presents an opportunity to interrogate how Catherine generated a community around her unique spiritual persona and her political vision. In the beginning of the letter, Catherine writes to the men recounting her happiness in receiving various letters:

In response [to your question sent in the previous letter] regarding the cost of the indulgence: the blood of Christ crucified has paid for everything, and so no money is needed. But I'd like it to cost you heartfelt tears and prayers [to the] holy church and for Christ on earth.⁹⁵

From this brief excerpt, it becomes clear that the supporters actively reinforced the community through the mention of a previous letter the recipients had sent to Catherine. Furthermore,

⁹³ Philip Daileader, "Local Experiences of the Great Western Schism," in *A Companion to the Great Western Schism (1378-1417)* eds. Joëlle Rollo-Koster and Thomas M. Izbicki, *Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition* vol. 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 116.

⁹⁴ Nancy McLoughlin, *Jean Gerson and Gender: Rhetoric and Politics in Fifteenth Century France* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), *Genders and Sexualities in History*, see particularly "Chapter 1 – Gender, University Authority, and the French Royal Court pp. 19-39; see also R. N. Swanson, "Universities, Academics, and the Great Schism," *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought* third series (Book 12) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979).

⁹⁵ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Susanne Noffke, 4 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-08), 4: 178.

Catherine's correspondence emphasizes the "cost [of] heartfelt tears and prayers" which is the same requirement Catherine issued in her letter to the nuns. The dialogic nature of the negotiation around the indulgence is one that allows Catherine to strengthen the relationships between her followers as well as advocating for their support of Urban.

While Catherine notes that Christ's crucifixion and death have covered the accumulated spiritual debt for the indulgence, Catherine issues an order of her own. In asking for "heartfelt tears and prayers" from the men, the saint provides opportunities for the recipients to perform solidarity and alignment during a political crisis, while simultaneously showcasing that the recipients were accepting of Catherine's authority to do so. This directive can best be understood if considered during the increased tensions between French and Italian claims for church authority, where Catherine sought to ensure that her disciples remained obedient as she sought to create unity in Italy.

Towards the end of the letter, Catherine urges the two men to "be virtuous for *me*, and try to grow in such a way that *I* can notice it." This portion of the letter makes it clear that Catherine *is* the authority to whom the men are to respond. What is essential is that Catherine alone places herself as the source of authority that will be closely monitor the two men's' behavior. By calling the men to act in a way that Catherine can observe and approve of, she reinforces herself as the community's leader, whose primary goal is to facilitate the spiritual development of her supporters, and unify members for the benefit of the larger Christian community. Despite Christ's bloody crucifixion paying for the indulgence, Catherine translates her authority into the letter, making her presence and authority known.

Further down in the letter, Catherine provides a crucial detail about Giannozzo who was another disciple she met during her stay in Florence from 1378. As Suzanne Noffke points out,

“Giannozzo di Benci Sacchetti was a converted poet and minstrel whose hymns and songs were sung throughout Florentine churches.”⁹⁶ Due to the tensions between the Florentine league and Gregory XI pre-schism, Florence had been placed under an ecclesiastical ban which outlawed religious music in churches, thereby impoverishing Giannozzo.⁹⁷ In Spring, Giannozzo was arrested for indebtedness, prompting Catherine to write to Bartalo and Francesco:

*So I am ordering you in the name of Christ crucified to visit him very often; encourage and support him in whatever way you can...tell him for me to be a good knight, now that God has placed him on the battlefield...Encourage him mightily for me and for the whole family, all of whom feel great compassion for him.*⁹⁸

The “family” that Catherine cites represents her spiritual *famiglia*, or those throughout Italy who held a shared identity through their belief in Catherine’s sanctity and relationship to God.

Striking in this letter is that Catherine uses community as a ministerial technique, ordering Francesco to act on the behalf of God. Catherine taps into the power of the church, and uses her own authority to direct individuals to behave per Catherine’s directions. By ordering the men to visit Giannozzo “in the name of Christ crucified,” Catherine’s taps into her own network, composed of those who ascribe spiritual and political authority to the saint.

Despite rhetorically co-opting church authority, Catherine clearly differentiates her own wishes with phrases such as, “tell him for me,” and “encourage him mightily for me.” By demanding her followers to act on her behalf, Catherine’s authority remains present through the mention that the men are to act on behalf of the “whole family,” or Catherine’s broader community of supporters. I argue that it is the authorization Catherine grants for the two men to

⁹⁶ Noffke, 4: 178, footnote 10.

⁹⁷ Luongo, 172.

⁹⁸ Noffke, 4: 179.

visit Giannozzo as a primary example of Catherine mobilizing members of her community to support its linkages of co-religionists. Although she is unable to be physically present, she manages to write herself in the jail cell with her followers.

Chapter 6: *“It is human to sin, but diabolic to persist in it:” Two Letters to the Queen of Naples*

The letters that have been analyzed thus far have demonstrated Catherine’s envisioning and mobility of community, particularly through offers of inclusion and invitations to shared religious experiences. It is through these invitations that Catherine self-activated her own spiritual authority and mobilized her community around issues Catherine saw as significantly. However, Catherine’s letters were not merely intended to invite individuals into her unique vision of community, but to also regulate those who lay beyond its borders. By analyzing letters sent to Catherine’s opponents, a different aspect of Catherine’s community becomes visible: that the saint and mystic fashioned her community as one never completely inaccessible to her detractors. Modeling her community on Christ’s forgiveness, Catherine modeled her community after the kingdom of heaven in order to attract as many followers as she could. By exploring this alternative facet to Catherine’s community, we can better trace how she sought to strike unity in a time of political and religious separation.

This section analyzes two letters that Catherine sent to Giovanna d’Angiò, Queen of Naples over a three-month period. Following letters sent to the same addressee rather than interrogating various letters to different opponents better allows us to see exactly how Catherine presented her community *over time*. Furthermore, it enables us to track how Catherine constructed her community to never fully exclude individuals from her offers of inclusion. An

examination of two letters sent to the Queen of Naples also showcases how Catherine navigated the political dramas of fourteenth-century France and Italy as they continued to develop around her.

The two different letters span between early May and December of 1379. During this time, the queen of Naples continued to consolidate her control over one of the “liveliest and most splendid courts in the Italian peninsula.”⁹⁹ Before the French town of Avignon became the seat of French church power with its decadent papal palace in 1309, Giovanna owned the town as Countess of Provence. In brokering a deal for her innocence in the murder of her husband Andrew of Hungary, Giovanna sold the rites to the land to the anti-pope, Clement VI in 1347.¹⁰⁰ As Giovanna continued her reign, she remained in alliance with the Avignonese pope, eventually being excommunicated by Italian papal claimant, Urban VI in 1380.¹⁰¹

In Catherine’s effort to consolidate secular support for Urban, Catherine wrote various letters to the Queen warning her of the repercussions of supporting Clement. While there is no longer any extant correspondence the Queen of Naples may have sent in return, scholars know that the letter Catherine sent to high profile individuals were not meant to be private.¹⁰² Quite the opposite. In fact, Catherine’s followers made copies of her letters and circulated them amongst each other, participating and maintaining a web of vibrant epistolary exchange. With a wide circulation and copying of her letters, Catherine’s supporters throughout Italy were keenly aware of the saint’s political and spiritual actions, especially letters written to kings and queens, which

⁹⁹ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Susanne Noffke, 4 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-08), 4: 383.

¹⁰⁰ Noffke, 383.

¹⁰¹ Luongo., 78.

¹⁰² F. Thomas Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 77.

supporters had a heightened interest in reading. In examining Catherine's correspondence to queen Giovanna, we catch a rare glimpse into how Catherine imagined her community and how she articulated her vision for multiple audiences. This should not surprise us though, for during this time Catherine sought to consolidate power for the Urban and the Dominican order she belong to.

The first letter sent to the queen begins in a similar manner as her other correspondence. First, the letter states Catherine's desire for Giovanna by explaining that "I long to see you b[e] compassionate to yourself, body and soul."¹⁰³ This statement of longing for the queen is standard of the saints letters, where, after establishing the thematic goal of the epistle, Catherine elaborates on its importance. For the earlier letter to Giovanna, Catherine makes use of the this formulaic practice by discussing that there are three chief enemies Giovanna needs to be aware of: the devil, "the world and all its prestige and pleasures," and "our own frailty."¹⁰⁴ In exploring these themes, Catherine articulates her overture to the queen, stating:

It seems to me that you have no compassion for yourself...Because I love you, I grieve over your sad state, body and soul...It is human to sin, but diabolic to persist in [it].¹⁰⁵

It is primarily through this affection that Catherine situates and voices her opinion of the queen. It is through such "love" where Catherine asserts that "if I look at your soul, I see that it is dead because it is separated from its head."¹⁰⁶ Such separation re-articulates a central theme found in

¹⁰³ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Susanne Noffke, 4 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-08), 4: 166.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁰⁶ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Susanne Noffke, 4 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-08), 4: 168.

the latter letter: distance from God, Christ's blood, and Urban. But this concern for the queen's soul increases as the threat of excommunication, or the ultimate distancing from the Holy See, draws near. This form of Catherine's theology offers Giovanna little room for reconciliation and represents what's at stake for the saint. Because Catherine represents has a communal understanding of her own religious praxis, a detractor does not only come in between the saint and her community, but between Catherine and her own experiences.

In expressing Catherine's disappointment in the queen's behavior, the letter states that "I can see no human body (*corpo di creatura*) that can undo your damnation, because you yourself will have to give an account before the supreme Judge."¹⁰⁷ This statement accomplishes several crucial points in relation to Catherine's community. First, Catherine mentions that no "human body can undo" Giovanna's damnation. However, as from a young age Catherine's body has been the site for a form of female theology in which she was able to discern consecrated hosts by corrupt clergy members. This should be understood as strategic positioning of Catherine's own saintly authority to intervene into Giovanna's corrupt ways. Additionally, while Giovanna will have to "give account before the supreme judge," Catherine has direct access to the forgiving blood of Christ enthroned. From this excerpt of the letter, Catherine presents through her own holiness a unique and expiring pathway to God and His mercy.

After framing her community as an exclusive route for the queen to access God, the letter then warns the queen of a possible excommunication. It is Giovanna who has erred, and "all that is left for you is to receive the ultimate sentence of actually being deprived...and declared a

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

heretic.”¹⁰⁸ This threat of excommunication allows the letter to finally present its full vision of community, for when the queen is:

...[A]t the moment of death, you have to give an account before God. *We* in fact have the remedy; *we* have time to return, and [the pope] will receive you very graciously.¹⁰⁹

Catherine presents her community as one that includes the favor and graces of the Italian pope. Through accepting Catherine’s offer, the queen has access to “the remedy” which Catherine’s network can provide. Similar to the letter recounting her experience with Niccolò, Catherine emphasizes her authority and persona lie at the center of her community, where she and Urban can reverse the sad condition of Giovanna’s state, body, and soul. The letter’s design is therefore to inform and present the queen’s eternal state, as well as to place Catherine as the spiritual link who alone can re-connect Giovanna with God and the Italian church.

Additionally, the letter creates deliberate asymmetry in the approaches to addressing the queen. In various instances, Catherine approaches Giovanna in familial terms, where Catherine claims “I love you, and I grieve over yo[u].” However, in other places Catherine mentions that “I can see no human body [who] can undo your damnation.” This balancing act between caring sentiments and harsh condemnation creates tension in a deliberate manner. Using such uneven tones, Catherine sets the terms of emotional instability for Giovanna. I contend that this deliberate epistolary strategy reveals Catherine’s abilities to incorporate and exclude individuals from her community. This juxtaposition of spiritual closeness and affection paired with distance and separation also demonstrates Catherine’s dynamism as a theologian. It is through Catherine’s spectrum of saintly authority that she foreshadows the full effects of either joining or remaining

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Susanne Noffke, 4 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-08), 4: 169. Emphasis, my own.

outside of Catherine's community. Despite the tone in the earlier letter, the community is never completely inaccessible.

In the second letter, Catherine displays a different strategy. While the first is based on Catherine's proclaimed love and care for the queen's soul, the second letter clearly seeks to devalue the queen's subversive political power and influence. In such a move, Catherine re-articulates what it is that defines her community. Instead of an offer that includes Catherine and the pope, the second letter only presents Catherine and place her as the singular figure who can provide the "remedy" for the queen's soul. The second letter eliminates Urban's presence completely, where Catherine's invitation for community revolves around the saint's authority to provide access to Christ's blood directly before the queen's eventual excommunication.

Written around early May 1379, the second letter was sent around the time that Catherine and her supporters tried to orchestrate a visit to Naples to speak in person with the unrelenting Giovanna. However, as a result of the political climate, Catherine's supporters feared the potential threats surrounding the saint's trip. These concerns lead to the in person trip being cancelled. Shortly before the planned visit, forces in support of the Italian papal claimant Urban VI defeated forces in support of the anti-pope, Clement VII. Known as the victory of San Marino, the Italian defeat of French supporters limited the French influence within the Italian peninsula. At this time for roughly two weeks, the queen of Naples declared a position of neutrality between Italian and French claims for church authority. However, the Queen quickly fell in alignment with Clementine forces as the French sought to regain their footing in Italy.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Luongo., 77.

The second letter itself strongly condemns the Queen for not following her duties to the church as both a Christian and a secular ruler. In issuing stern critiques of the queen, Catherine utilizes various familial terms to indicate the tone of the subsequent section. When Catherine addresses the queen as “daughter,” she is often speaking in an authoritative manner over Giovanna. When the saint refers to Giovanna as “dearest mother,” the letter cushions critique alongside acknowledgement of the queen’s authority. Such language is not rhetorical slippage, but rather, deliberate attempts on behalf of Catherine to manipulate her own authority alongside the queen, where Catherine both acknowledges Giovanna’s authority, as well as blatantly dismisses it. In addressing the queen as both “mother” and “daughter,” the letter pivots between terms of endearment and disparagement. This effectively seeks to distance Giovanna from Catherine and her community while maintaining the possibility of reconciliation for the queen.

In the beginning of the letter, Catherine takes an unusual step. Normally beginning her letters with, “*To Caterina, scrivo a voi nel prezioso sangue suo*” (I Caterina, am writing to you in his precious blood); Catherine opens by issuing Giovanna a scolding denouncement:

Dearest revered Mother—you will be dear to me *when I see you as a daughter* who is submissive and obedient to the holy Church, and *I will revere you* to the extent that you deserve reverence, when you abandon the darkness of heresy and follow the light.¹¹¹

The letter’s opening few lines positions Giovanna as a political agent who is both intractable and disobedient to the holy church, but more particularly, disobedient to Catherine’s most powerful political connection—Urban VI. The most striking aspect in this portion of the letter is the spiritual isolation Catherine creates between her and Giovanna. By claiming that “I will revere

¹¹¹ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Susanne Noffke, 4 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-08), 4: 222. Emphasis is my own.

you to the extent that you deserve reverence,” Catherine self-authorizes herself as one capable and qualified to judge and watch over others. Furthermore, such language showcases Catherine’s authority to speak on spiritual grounds for political actors who have fallen outside the boundaries of Catherine’s political wishes.

Julia Barrett and A.A Lukowski notably argue that Catherine’s political rhetoric utilized repetition and variations of words to create a grammar of biblically based political, and simultaneously religious, activism.¹¹² In describing such grammar and variations of words, Barrett and Lukowski posit that Catherine’s use of light and darkness represent important dichotomies of truth and error, grace and sin, love and hatred, [and] life and death.¹¹³ Catherine’s use of these dichotomies Barrett and Lukowski argue, allow the saint to construct her controlling metaphor, where the light for Catherine is “both Christ and his earthly representative, Urban VI.”¹¹⁴ In encouraging Giovanna to “abandon the darkness of heresy and follow the light,” Catherine presents Giovanna with a similar opportunity that she offered the Perugian prisoner, Niccolò di Tuldo. In both letters to Niccolò and Giovanna, Catherine provides a pathway for improving their spiritual relationship with the divine. With both activism and theology, Catherine presents a route for accessing a broader community of God and Christians.

In building her case for the Queen’s obedience, Catherine urges Giovanni to obtain true knowledge of herself and of God. Catherine argues that this knowledge is essential “for our salvation, because every virtue has its source in this knowledge.” For rhetorical purposes,

¹¹² Julia Barrett and A.A. Lukowski, “Wedded to Light: The Life, Letters, and Legend of St. Catherine of Siena, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 41, no. 1 (Spring, 2008), 2.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*,

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*,

Catherine uses this conception of self-knowledge as emblematic of knowledge of God and the ability to recognize God's chosen officials on earth. By rhetorically separating the queen from both Urban and the Roman papacy, Catherine demonstrates Giovanna's separation from God. Catherine's condemnation of Giovanna escalates. Giovanna's distance from God and self-knowledge reverses a central element to Christian scripture. Despite humankind being made in the image of the divine, Giovanna's isolation from heavenly truth and the light makes her "take on the existence of animals." In light of this separation from the recognizable, Catherine proactively asks:

...To what greater misery can we sink than to be brute beasts? ...[O]ur weakness is so great that we turn ourselves into [animals], and we don't take vengeance on the sensual appetite and selfish love for ourselves that makes us animals.¹¹⁵

This distancing technique also serves to undermine Giovanna's political and spiritual authority. By highlighting the Queen's separation from God and Urban, Catherine expresses Giovanni's isolation from Catherine's larger community. This rhetorical strategy enables Catherine to undermine Giovanna's authority as a Christian ruler by arguing that the weakness of sin has transformed Giovanna from regal authority to brute beast.

By citing transformations of beasts, Catherine makes use of classic humanist thought to attack the spiritual authority of the Neapolitan queen and her mandate to provide safety over the souls of her constituents. The letter continues, arguing that the Queen:

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 223.

[k]nows that the truth cannot lie...Oh, if you aren't concerned about your own salvation, be concerned about the people committed to your charge, your subjects...[because] of your opposition to this truth you see them desolate and put in a state of war. They are being killed off like animals...¹¹⁶

The intended purpose of Catherine's attack is to highlight the queen's inability to defend the lives and faith of her Neapolitan subjects. This however should not be unexpected considering Catherine continued to navigate factionalism amongst city states, where each city sought to consolidate power and swallow their neighbors. To have a supporter of French church authority who held a position of power in Italy represented an urgent matter for Catherine who was, at her core, Italian. The focus on community can be seen in two major areas: first, Catherine's community is emblematic of those who possess self-knowledge and recognize both God's love and agents. In pleas to persuade the Queen, Catherine distances Giovanna from her own political and social community, arguing that a Queen who cannot recognize her own salvation is not fit to protect the souls of her constituents.

After Catherine reinforces the clear distinctions between the queen and the saint's own community, Catherine abruptly changes the tone from terse condemnation to a welcoming grace, expresses the unique and profound offer characteristic of most of her letters. Instead of using the statement of authority in "daughter," Catherine acknowledges the Queen's authority, referring to her as:

Oh dearest mother! I long to see you grounded in this truth... That is why I said I long to see you coming to know yourself. *I invite you* to this truth, to come to know it so that you may be able to love it. And this is the truth that God has created for you in order to give you eternal life.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Susanne Noffke, 4 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-08), 4: 224.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

As she did with the nuns of Montepulciano, Catherine actively encouraged Giovanna to join in a shared, religious experience – an experience that Catherine regulated and maintained, but also an experience that allowed the queen to access Christ’s blood and eternal life. While some may argue that Catherine’s letter to Giovanna does not demonstrate community formation, I insist that in demonstrating the queen’s own isolation from Catherine’s network, a community is present by an articulation on what it is not.

What differentiates Catherine’s own community from a network of pro-Urban support is that Catherine presents herself as one who can vocalize the voice of God and make Christ’s blood available to supporters. Catherine’s invitation to God’s truth is best shown in the end of the letter, where Catherine fully articulates her position to the queen. The saint offers her invitation as a primary way for the queen to:

Respond to God, who in his mercy and devotedness is calling you. Don’t be slow to respond, but respond courageously so that these harsh words [from Him] will not be addressed to you, ‘you didn’t remember me in [this] life, and so I won’t remember you in death.’¹¹⁸

Catherine’s ability to serve as an intermediary, or the agent between the community of the present and the heavenly community of the saved allows the saint to fully make her case: without Catherine’s letter and call, Giovanna would have been damned and forgotten by God for eternity. In attempts at stirring the Queen’s soul for God and political support for Urban, Catherine

¹¹⁸ Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. Susanne Noffke, 4 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000-08), 4: 226.

collapses the community around her, where she is the lone figure who can offer a direct route to God.

Through analyzing two letters sent to a powerful figure of opposition in Catherine's mission to bring unity during a time of separation, we are able to see how community was mitigated and mobilized over time. The earlier letter focused on joining Giovanna to both Catherine and the Italian pope, whose threat of excommunication would dissipate if Catherine's negotiations were successful. However, the later letter utilizes a different approach, employing a more personal appeal to the queen. In placing herself at the center of her community, Catherine adjusted the articulation of who was in her network, and what the community could offer its recipients. In issuing her invitation and voicing God's voice, Catherine operates independently of Urban in order to maintain her authority over her followers. In this light, Catherine's envisionment of community required the saint position herself at the center, as well as making it clear that she was the one who held the closest relationship to God.

Conclusion: Catherine and Her Community

In her youth, Catherine became recognized by her contemporaries as an extraordinary girl whose pious habits and devotional practices were something special. In an effort to guide Catherine and boost their authority against rival religious orders, the Dominicans shaped the Sienese girl's spiritual progression and scripted her as a saintly individual. Catherine's participation in the collaborative effort between saint and religious order enabled Catherine to develop a form of theology which centered around suffering for the benefit of others. It was Catherine's family connections which shaped her perspective, providing her with an enhanced

access to communication networks where she could articulate and disseminate her theology and forge a community held together by a spiritual principle.

Catherine of Siena's theology; however, was not purely a spiritual concern. As the Great Schism of the Western European church fractured ecclesiastical authority in Italy, France, England, and the Iberian principalities, Catherine grounded her theology in the political landscape around her. In order to express her spiritual and political goals, Catherine participated within the well-established grooves of medieval women's letter writing. It is through her use of letters that Catherine made herself present to her readers, imparting key messages at critical moments throughout the Great Schism. Even though Catherine used previous models for maintaining authority, she simultaneously invented her own strategies.

The letters explored in this essay have all centered around Catherine's active envisionment of community, where the saint imparted invitations to participate in a shared religious experience. Although Catherine offered these invitations during critical political moments, they nonetheless reveal how the saint and her interlocutors sought to foster political and spiritual unity and support. The letters discussed throughout each section have been used to demonstrate a particular facet to Catherine's creation of community.

The first section aims to demonstrate how Catherine attempted to generate support from the monastic sisters following a critical victory of Urbanist forces. With her letter, Catherine invited a micro-community of Dominican nuns to continue supporting both the Italian pontiff, and Catherine herself, who secured the indulgence for the sisters. It is from the letter's few lines - "to this I am inviting you" - that this project first transformed from a broad interest with the Sieneese saint, into a grounded interrogation of how she sought to unite co-religionists for a broader purpose beyond just politics.

By interrogating two different letters written about prisoners, this paper has attempted to show that Catherine's community building project was more than just a call to a female monastic house in Montepulciano. It has been the hope of this paper to demonstrate that in writing to Raymond about the Perugian papal activist Niccolò di Tuldo, Catherine made it clear that she alone had the authority and sanctity to prepare the political prisoner for death. While she alone visited Niccolò, she enabled him to access a connected network of believers whose shared belief in Catherine's sanctity created a community. Outside of her recounted interactions with Niccolò, Catherine used the letter to direct her confessor Raymond to pour water over the head of "our members."

As figure one demonstrates, the letter as a whole is best understood when we analyze how Catherine placed Raymond, Niccolò, the other members, and herself in dialogue. The epistolary strategy that I have attempted to prove is one of community building, where by placing all of these people in dialogue via herself, Catherine incorporated different individuals from various places into a vibrant community of belonging.

The epistle sent to Raymond was compared with another letter sent to two of Catherine's disciples in Florence for a primary reason: to show that Catherine mobilized her community around herself and her followers. In directing Bartalo and Francesco to visit Giannozzo in prison, she made her community clear, by expressing that they are the ones who are to comfort Giannozzo "as the whole family would." While Catherine is physically unable to be present, she mobilized Bartalo and Francesco to look after Giannozzo in a similar way that Catherine consoled Niccolò. Inside both prison cells, Catherine made herself present, alongside her vibrant community of followers.

As both of previous sections indicate, what kept the community together was Catherine's ascribed value of sanctity and the belief that she had a special connection with God. But more so, that that special connection could translate in ways that would improve the lives of her followers. The intended purpose of the final section was to show how Catherine developed her community with a detractor over time. With the first letter sent to Giovanna of Naples, Catherine presents her community alongside Urban, noting that "we have the remedy" for the looming threat of excommunication. Catherine grounds her invitation to join Urban through a personal concern for Giovanna's "sad state, body, and soul..." The earlier letter demonstrates that Catherine framed her community by including an offer to join Urban and the broader Dominican faction.

In the second letter written over a year later, Catherine's articulation of community change. Instead of placing herself alongside the queen's primary church adversary pope Urban, Catherine relied more on her own ability to offer the queen spiritual comfort. In taking a more spiritually-minded approach, Catherine appealed to the queen via the souls of her own subjects. While this was a highly political move and subsequently criticized the queen's ability to protect her subjects spiritually, it led to Catherine demanding the queen reply to God, and also, to Catherine. By ignoring Urban, Catherine made it clear that the queen has acted in direct opposition to God and Christ crucified. In positioning Giovanna in such a light, the letter ostensibly becomes a spiritual lifeline. Catherine threatens Giovanna that if she does not accept this lifeline, God "won't remember [her] in death." But, by joining Catherine who had received a plenary indulgence for her entire network of followers, all of one's sins could be forgotten and forgiven.

While scholarship has made meaningful strides at understanding Catherine the woman, writer, politician, saint, and center of a developing cult, it has been my aim to showcase how

Catherine formed a heightened mystical community with herself at the center *during her own lifetime*. With Catherine's use of letters, she mitigated the shifting boundaries of power in both civic and ecclesiastical politics, using various techniques to make herself present to her readers. While scholars have studied the figure of Catherine after the saint's death, this paper has primarily argued that in the letters composed during her lifetime, Catherine and her interlocutors actively sought to generate a community for both political and spiritual reasons. This community centered around Catherine's unique religious praxis and its communal theological nature that invited others to join her in making that most perfect community – the community of Catherine, Urban, and God; drunk on Christ's transformative and divine blood.

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