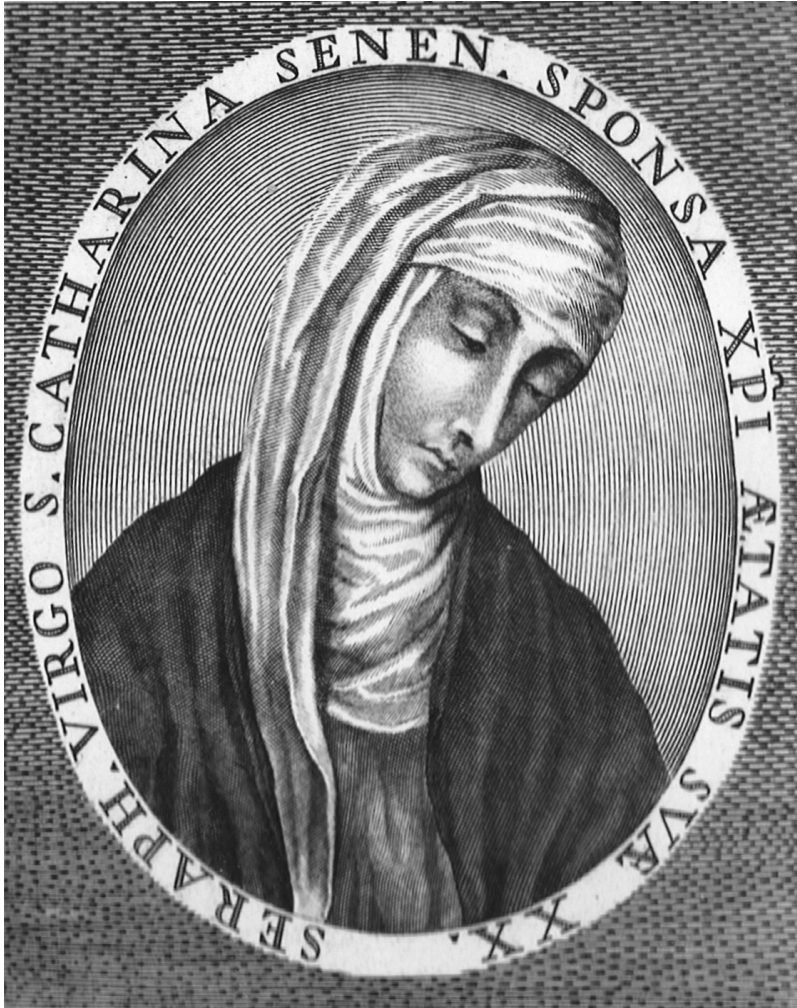


THE  
ROAD  
TO SIENA

*The Essential Biography of St. Catherine*



St. Catherine of Siena, from an engraving

THE  
ROAD  
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*The Essential Biography of St. Catherine*

EDMUND G. GARDNER

EDITED WITH FOREWORD AND ANNOTATIONS BY  
JON M. SWEENEY



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*The Road to Siena: The Essential Biography of St. Catherine*

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## FOREWORD

Edmund Garrett Gardner's classic work on St. Catherine of Siena was groundbreaking in its day, and it is still one of the most important biographies ever written of a medieval saint. It was originally published in 1907 under the title *Saint Catherine of Siena: A Study in the Religion, Literature and History of the Fourteenth Century in Italy*, by J. M. Dent & Co. in London, and E. P. Dutton & Co. in New York. In the bibliography published at the back of her own classic work *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1911), Evelyn Underhill referred to Gardner's book with the following special, short sentence:

(The best modern biography.)

In fact, it was really the *only* modern biography of St. Catherine. But Underhill rarely made that sort of comment about the biographies of other saints; in conversation, she was known to advise people to read Gardner's *Saint Catherine of Siena* if they wanted to see how a biography of a saint *should* be written.

Edmund Gardner was the first to uncover and examine original documents related to the life of St. Catherine, left largely untouched for five centuries. Like any modern historian, he practiced textual criticism and historical criticism, and insisted on not simply retelling the legends of the saint for a new generation. As he explains in his Introduction, "I have been aided greatly by the manuscripts still preserved of Catherine's letters, manuscripts full of unpublished matter that has been unaccountably neglected, having apparently escaped the notice of all of

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her previous biographers and editors. This material throws light upon every aspect of the saint's genius and has enabled me, at many points, to correct erroneously accepted ideas about the events of her life and the order of her writings."

The original edition's advertisements, included by the publisher at the back of the 1907 book, included this intriguing sentence: "Much of the book is based upon hitherto unpublished documents in the Secret Archives of the Vatican, and in the libraries of Rome and Florence." The way that "Secret Archives" is capitalized might make you think that the publishers were attempting to be salacious, but it is true that Gardner was the first historian to uncover documents relating to Catherine's story, and there is indeed a room in the Vatican by that name! Today, the Vatican Secret Archives even has a website, and makes many texts available online.

But Gardner's were the days when Catholicism was still seen as somewhat suspect and a bit exotic and dangerous in England, where he lived and taught his university students. Even today, the 1701 Act of Settlement, which states that any royal descendent who is Catholic or married to a Catholic is "for ever" excluded from the line of succession, still stands. Members of the royal family still renounce their Catholic faith, or convert to the Church of England, in order to maintain their position. This happened as recently as May 2008, when the *Catholic News Agency* reported: "A woman engaged to a member of the British royal family has renounced her Catholic faith to maintain her fiancé's position in the line of succession. *The Times Online* reports that Autumn Kelly, 31, was received into the Church of England. She is to be married to Peter Phillips, Queen Elizabeth II's eldest grandson, on May 17."<sup>1</sup>

## FOREWORD

Edmund Gardner was a professor of Italian at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He wrote many books over a long career, including books on Dante, English mystics, the city of Florence, the city of Siena, Arthurian legends, and Italian Renaissance painters. He also wrote many articles for the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (now easily accessed on the Web at [newadvent.org](http://newadvent.org)), which was at the height of its groundbreaking compilation from 1907–14, the years of Gardner's most creative activity.

Throughout all of his books, Gardner was most fascinated by Christian mystics, and he tried to understand their unusual sort of knowledge and intuition. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in Gardner's early work—a study of the third part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the *Paradiso*. He summarizes the theme of Dante's *Paradiso* thusly: "the mystical union of the soul with the First Cause in vision, love and enjoyment, and the comprehension of the most sublime and secret things of the celestial mysteries."<sup>2</sup>

One of Gardner's most reprinted essays, which first appeared in 1913 and is titled "The Science of Love," is also about the mysticism in Dante's *Paradiso*. Gardner begins in this way, by quoting Thomas Aquinas: "'Man,' writes Aquinas, 'has three kinds of knowledge of divine things. The first of these is according as man, by the natural light of reason, ascends through creatures into the knowledge of God; the second is in so far as the divine truth, exceeding human understanding, descends to us by way of revelation, not however as though demonstrated to our sight, but as set forth in words to be believed; the third is according as the human mind is elevated to the perfect intuition of the things that are revealed.'"<sup>3</sup> It was this third form of knowledge that most intrigued him.

## THE ROAD TO SIENA

It only remains—before turning to Gardner's remarkable recounting of the life of St. Catherine—to say a few words about the way in which Gardner's original work has been re-edited for the present edition. It was common a century ago for biographers to describe and display all of their tools before proceeding with the actual building of the building. The original preface to Gardner's masterwork does just this sort of thing, describing the dating of primary source materials, textual variances from one manuscript to another, and so on. I have removed most of this detail for two reasons. First, much of it has been superseded by subsequent scholarship over the century since it was first written. And second, because today's reader tends to have less interest in it; the reader who wants to delve into such subjects today will usually consult the scholarly journals that are read only by specialists.

Similarly, it was once the practice of biographers to leave most of the conclusions to the end. Today's reader of biography and history expects more of the information up front, and throughout. For this reason, I have re-edited what was Gardner's penultimate chapter on Catherine's literary legacy, and moved some of his conclusions to his Introduction, instead.

For those curious to compare, I have intentionally shortened Gardner's long narrative of the travels and many correspondents of Catherine, particularly between chapters 9 and 11. The title for chapter 10 is, in fact, my own, as I have combined some of what was in Gardner's original chapters 10 through 12. I have also rephrased many of Gardner's sentences, making the language more suitable for today's reader. In the process, some phrases have been deleted and others reworked. On occasion, a phrase or sentence has been deleted altogether, either because it is information that takes today's general reader into too much

## FOREWORD

detail, or, because it tends to divert into the more sentimental sort of biographical writing—even in modern scholarship such as Gardner's. Most of the quotations from Scripture have been converted to the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), used by permission; and quotations from *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri in the sidebar notes are from the famous Henry Wadsworth Longfellow translation.

The appendix to the original Gardner volume reproduced portions of six letters of St. Catherine, and two of them in total; and throughout Gardner's work (both in the original, and in this edition), he makes more use of Catherine's letters to tell her story than any other textual evidence. Gardner wrote in the original preface to his biography of his hope that a scholar in Italy would soon compile an authoritative, critical edition of the letters of St. Catherine in the original Italian. And then, as a footnote—the sort of footnote one might add when one's book is already in page proofs when a new and important piece of evidence comes to light—Gardner added: "An excellent selection from the letters, based on Gigli's [Italian] text, has been published in English by Miss Vida D. Scudder (London, 1905)." The Scudder edition, in fact, quickly became a spiritual classic in its own right. In what follows, I often quote from Scudder to further illuminate the ideas and progression of them in Gardner's account.

Despite its excellent reputation, as often happens, Gardner's great work on St. Catherine of Siena is hardly ever read today. We tend to value what's new much more than what is old, almost regardless of the quality of both. My own copy of Gardner's original work, with which I have labored to create this new edition, was borrowed from the rare book library of a nearby college. Sadly, but commonly, many of the book's pages,

although more than a century old, had remained uncut (meaning also, unread) until the book passed into my hands. If you have never handled a book with uncut pages, this means that I had to literally use a knife to carefully remove the fore-edge of some of the pages in order to read them. This struck me as an apt symbol of why I work to create new editions of books such as Gardner's: my sincerest hope is that this new edition of Gardner's masterwork of a master saint will bring a large, new audience to the study of Catherine of Siena.

<sup>1</sup> *Catholic News Agency*, May 2, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund G. Gardner, *Dante's Ten Heavens: A Study of the Paradiso* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1970), 1–2.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund G. Gardner, "The Science of Love," in *Dante and the Mystics* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1968), 298.

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St. Catherine of Siena, by Andrea di Vanni

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## INTRODUCTION

In this book I have not attempted to write the conventional biography of a canonized saint, but a study of Italian history centered in the work and personality of one of the most wonderful women that ever lived. While devoting my attention mainly to Catherine's own work and influence upon the politics of her age, I have endeavored at the same time to make my book a picture of certain aspects, religious and political, of the fourteenth century in Italy. In this undertaking, I have been aided greatly by the manuscripts still preserved of Catherine's letters, manuscripts full of unpublished matter that has been unaccountably neglected, having apparently escaped the notice of all of her previous biographers and editors. This material throws light upon every aspect of the saint's genius and has enabled me, at many points, to correct erroneously accepted ideas about the events of her life and the order of her writings.

From the very beginning, the biographical and historical value of Catherine's letters has been, to a considerable extent, impaired by copyists (and editors who followed them) omitting or suppressing passages that appeared to them to be of only temporary interest, or not tending immediately toward edification. A certain number appear to have been deliberately expurgated, in cases where the writer's burning words seemed likely to startle the susceptibilities of the faithful. This process seems to date back to the generation that immediately followed that of Catherine's original disciples.

A striking instance of this editorial suppression is seen in a certain letter that Aldo Manuzio (the editor of the second

edition of Catherine's letters, published in Venice in 1500) introduces with the rubric: "To one whose name it is better not to write, because of certain words used in the letter. Let not whoso reads, or hears it read, wonder if the sense seems to him broken; for where *et cetera* is written, many words are passed over, which it is not meet that every one should know, nor even the name of him to whom it went." Both these words and the omissions were not made by Aldo himself. And the same heading then occurs in every manuscript containing this letter that I have examined and evidently dates back to the end of the fourteenth century.

Catherine was one of the greatest letter writers of her century. Nearly four hundred of her letters have been preserved. They are written to men and women in every walk of life and every level of society. Her varied correspondents include a mendicant in Florence, a Jewish banker in Padua, and two sovereign pontiffs and three kings. Leaders of armies, rulers of Italian republics, receive her burning words and bow to her inspired will, just as often as do private citizens seeking her counsel in the spiritual life, or simple monks and hermits in their cells striving to find the way of perfection. She was able to warn a queen: "Instead of a woman, you have become the servant and slave of nothingness, making yourself the subject of lies and of the demon who is their father," while she

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An Update on Catherine's  
Letters

*Vida Scudder was in the process of editing St. Catherine's letters for English publication, simultaneous with Gardner's writing of this biography. Publication of the two books, within two years of each other, gave birth to the renaissance of St. Catherine scholarship that continued throughout the twentieth century. Scudder begins her introduction this way: "The letters of Catherine Benincasa, commonly known as St. Catherine of Siena, have become an Italian classic; yet perhaps the first thing in them to strike a reader is their unliterary character. He only will value them who cares to overhear the impetuous outpourings of the heart*

## INTRODUCTION

*and mind of an unlettered daughter of the people, who was also, as it happened, a genius and a saint. . . . Her letters were talked rather than written. She learned to write only three years before her death, and even after this time was in the habit of dictating her correspondence, sometimes two or three letters at a time, to the noble youths who served her as secretaries" (Scudder 1, 1). More recently, another scholar has clarified, "Catherine's Letters amount at present, to 381. But it is not impossible that more might be found in old convent libraries or elsewhere" (Cavallini, 7).*

---

bids the wife of a tailor, "Clothe yourself in the royal virtues." Her wonderful, all-embracing and intuitive sympathy knows no barriers, but penetrates into the house of shame as well as into the monastery.

Some of the letters are purely mystical, ecstatic outpourings of Catherine's heart, the translation in ordinary speech of the conversation of angels, overheard in suprasensible regions. Others are

nearer to familiar domestic correspondence, in which the daily needs of life become ennobled and even the innocent japery of her friends and followers isn't neglected.

Catherine's earliest letters were written for her by her women companions: Alessa, Cecca, and occasionally Giovanna Pazzi. During the heat of her greatest involvement in political affairs, she had three regular secretaries, three young nobles whom we will meet in the chapters to follow: Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi, Stefano di Corrado Maconi, and Francesco di Messer Vanni Malavolti. Francesco Malavolti has left us a delightful picture of Catherine's method of composition at that time. We see her dictating simultaneously to these three young men three letters: one to Pope Gregory, another to Bernabo Visconti, and a third to a certain nobleman whose name Francesco doesn't remember. She dictates first to one, then to another. At times, her face is covered by her hands or veil, as though she is absorbed in thought; at other times with clasped hands and head raised up to heaven; and at intervals she seems rapt in ecstasy, but

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nevertheless goes on continuously speaking. Then suddenly, all three of the scribes stop writing, look puzzled, and appeal to Catherine for help. They have all taken down the same sentence, not knowing for whom it was intended. Catherine reassures them, saying, "Dear sons, don't trouble over this, for you have done it all by the work of the Holy Spirit. When the letters are finished, we will see how the words fit in with our intentions, and then we'll arrange what had best be done."

It was during a brief interval, between her leaving Florence and going to Rome during the late summer and early autumn of 1378, that Catherine had a few months of comparative peace in Siena and completed her great literary work, *The Dialogue of Divine Providence*. "When the peace was announced," writes Fra Raimondo (the book's compiler, and the author's spiritual director), "she returned to her own home and set herself with diligence to the task of composing a certain book, which was inspired by the supreme Spirit, and dictated in the vernacular. She had asked her secretaries to observe attentively at those times when she was rapt out of her corporeal senses, and to carefully write down whatever she would then dictate. They did this faithfully, and compiled a book full of high and salutary doctrines that had been revealed by the Lord and dictated to her." In her last letter, Catherine refers to it simply as *il libro nel quale io trovava alcuna recreazione*, "the book in which I found some recreation," even though her friends describe her as dictating it to the secretaries while "rapt in singular excess and abstraction of mind." It is not clear that Catherine herself would have made any claims of supernatural authority for the *Dialogue*, or would have regarded it as anything more than the pious meditations of a spirit "thirsty with great desire for the honor of God and the salvation of souls"—one who (in her own characteristic phrase)

## INTRODUCTION

"dwells in the cell of knowledge of self in order to better know the goodness of God."

The *Dialogue* was first published in the original Italian in Bologna in 1472, at Naples in 1478, and then in Venice in 1494. The *Dialogue* was translated into Latin by 1496 and then English by 1519.

The book is concerned with the whole spiritual life of a person in the form of a prolonged dialogue, or series of dialogues, between the eternal Father and the impassioned human soul, represented as Catherine herself. It opens with a striking passage on the essence of mysticism, the possibility of the union of the soul with God in love:

When a soul lifts herself up, thirsty with great desire for the honor of God and the salvation of souls, she exercises herself for a while in habitual virtue and dwells in the cell of knowledge of self in order to better know the goodness of God. For love follows knowledge, and when she loves, she seeks to follow and to clothe herself with the truth. But in no way does the creature taste and become illumined by this truth as much as by means of humble and continuous prayer, based on knowledge of self and of God. Prayer exercises the soul in this way, by uniting her to God as she follows the steps of Christ crucified—and thus, by desire and affection and union of love, she is transformed into him. This seems to be what Christ meant when he said, "Those who love me will keep my word," and again, "those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" [Jn. 14:23, 21]. And in many places we find similar sentiments, by which we can see how the soul becomes another Christ, by affection and love.

The rest of the book is a practical expansion of the revelation that Catherine had in a vision after receiving Holy Communion on a feast of the Blessed Virgin in the autumn of the previous year. It is, as it were, a gathering together of the spiritual teachings scattered through her letters. On the whole, it reads somewhat less ecstatically, as though written with more deliberation than the letters, and is in parts drawn out to considerable length, sometimes moving slowly. The effect is of a mysterious voice from the cloud, talking on in a great silence, and the result is monotonous because the listener's attention becomes over-strained. Here and there, it is almost a relief when the divine voice ceases, and Catherine herself takes up the word. At other times, however, we feel that we have almost passed behind the veil that shields the Holy of Holies and that we are hearing Catherine's rendering into finite words the ineffable things she has learned by intuition.

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**Summary of the "Publication"  
of the  
Life of St. Catherine**

*Gardner offers the most succinct version of how Catherine's life came to be known in this paragraph from his original Catholic Encyclopedia article about her: "Among Catherine's principal followers were Fra Raimondo delle Vigne, of Capua (d. 1399), her confessor and biographer, afterwards General of the Dominicans, and Stefano di Corrado Maconi (d. 1424), who had been one of her secretaries, and became Prior General of the Carthusians. Raimondo's book, the 'Legend,' was finished in 1395. A second life of her, the 'Supplement,' was written a few years later by another of her associates, Fra Tommaso Caffarini (d. 1434), who also composed the 'Minor Legend,' which was translated into Italian by Stefano Maconi. Between 1411 and 1413 the depositions of the surviving witnesses of her life and work were collected at Venice, to form the famous 'Process.' Catherine was canonized by Pius II in 1461. The emblems by which she is known in Christian art are the lily and book, the crown of thorns, or sometimes a heart—referring to the legend of her having changed hearts with Christ. Her principal feast is on the 30th of April, but it is popularly celebrated in Siena on the Sunday following. The feast of her Espousals is kept on the Thursday of the carnival."*

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## INTRODUCTION

In dealing with the two great political struggles in which Catherine was engaged, I am indebted to the scholarship of Alessandro Gherardi, and to the masterly work of M. Noel Valois. I have, however, in many cases preferred to go directly to the original documents that deal with the Great Schism, still existing in the Archivio Segreto of the Vatican, by which I am able to give a somewhat full account of the origin of that extraordinary event. My grateful thanks are due to the authorities and officials of the Vatican Archives and Vatican Library, the Biblioteca Casanatense and Biblioteca Vittorio Emanuele at Rome, the Biblioteca Nazionale and Biblioteca Riccardiana of Florence, and the Biblioteca Comunale of Siena, for their kind assistance and courtesies.



CHAPTER ONE  
*Catherine's Hidden Life*

Caterina Benincasa, whom we now call St. Catherine of Siena, was born on March 25, 1347—the Feast of the Annunciation, the first day of the new year as it was reckoned in those days in Italy. It had been 120 years since St. Francis had died at Assisi in the arms of Lady Poverty, his mystical bride, and a quarter of a century since Dante had passed away in exile at Ravenna. These two men are Catherine's elder brothers in the spirit. The seraphic father of Assisi, standard-bearer of the Crucified, as the voice in the high vision on Mount Verna had hailed him, is her predecessor in the mystical life. And Catherine is the *literary* successor of the poet of the *Divine Comedy* in the history of religious thought in Italy.

Among her famous contemporaries, Francesco Petrarca, or Petrarch in English, was nearly forty-three years old when Catherine was born. Crowned as poet laureate six years earlier, he was then the literary dictator of Italy. It was probably in the year of Catherine's birth that he finished the first part of his *Canzoniere* (Song Book) for Madonna Laura, and began the second, nobler, and more spiritual series of lyrics with, "For, with death at my side, I seek a new rule for my life, and I see the better but cling to the worse."

Meanwhile, Giovanni Boccaccio was thirty-four years old, and not yet the author of the *Decameron*. He had written his early prose romance and poems, had deserted or been deserted by his Fiammetta, and was now either at Florence or, more likely, in Rome.

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**What Was Happening  
in Avignon?**

*Gardner mentions Pope Clement VI and the misrule of the church from Avignon, a city in southeastern France. This was the period known as the Avignon Papacy, when a succession of seven popes, all Frenchmen, ruled the church away from Rome during the fourteenth century; and then, in the early fifteenth century, "anti-popes" ruled from Avignon, during periods of time when there were actually more than one man claiming to St. Peter's throne. This era is generally known as the Great Western Schism. Catherine's life and influence had much to do with the problems of the papacy during her lifetime, and what happened in Avignon will play a large role throughout Gardner's telling of her story.*

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Geoffrey Chaucer, according to most of the theories of dating his birth, was a little boy of four to seven. King Edward III of England had won the battle of Crecy in the previous year. Charles of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia, had been elected Holy Roman Emperor as Charles IV. From Avignon, Pierre Roger de Beaufort misruled the Church of Christ and profaned the throne of the Fisherman, under the title of Pope Clement VI.

The condition of Italy had altered little since Dante wrote his famous lament in the sixth canto of the *Purgatorio*. She was not yet again "lady of provinces."

"O wonderful poet," writes Catherine's contemporary, Benvenuto da Imola [author of a commentary on the *Divine Comedy*], "I wish that you would now come to life once again! Where is peace, where is liberty, where is tranquility in Italy? You would readily see, O Dante, that in your time certain particular evils oppressed her, but these, indeed, were small and few; for you enumerated among the woes of Italy the lack of a monarch and the discord of certain families, but now worse things oppress us." The Italian cities either groaned beneath the heavy yoke of sanguinary tyrants, or, if they still ruled themselves as free republics, were torn by internal dissensions and harassed by fratricidal wars with their neighbors. And the anarchy of the country was intensified

by the presence of the wandering companies of mercenary soldiers—Germans, Bretons, English, Hungarians—sometimes in the pay of a despot, at others in the pay of a republic, but always fighting for their own hands, levying large ransoms from cities as the condition of not devastating their territory and exposing the country people to the horrors of famine.

The moral state of the land matched the political. The absence of the popes from Rome, the example of the evil lives of the ministers of the church, the growing immorality of high and low, were bringing religious life to a standstill in Italy. The Franciscan revival was a thing of the past, while the encyclical letters of the generals of the Dominicans testify to the deplorable degeneration of the Friars Preachers. There is abundant evidence in the *Revelations* of Bridget of Sweden and in the *Dialogue* of Catherine herself that moral corruption was rampant in the convents and monasteries, among men and women alike. Many of the secular priests openly kept concubines, others were usurers; and many followed the example of that bishop recorded by Dante in canto fifteen of the *Inferno* and did worse. The spirit of worldliness, of wickedness in high places, stalked unabashed through the church, while the three beasts of Dante's allegory made their dens in the papal court.

In the year after Catherine's birth, 1348, the great pestilence swept over Italy, Provence, France, and Spain, and in the following year spread to England and the rest of Europe. It was said that the Black Death was brought to Europe in the galleys of two Genoese ships. The scourge did not rage throughout Italy with equal violence; Milan and other cities near the Alps suffered comparatively little, while Florence and Siena endured its worst horrors. For the five months that it devastated these two cities, from April or May until the beginning or end of September,

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**Blessed Bernardo Tolomei**  
(1272–1348)

*One of the more fascinating characters of the early fourteenth century, Bernardo (he took the name in honor of St. Bernard of Clairvaux) was from a wealthy family, educated early by the Dominicans but not formally received by them, spent time as a soldier for the Germans, and worked in the Sieneese government, before praying to the Blessed Virgin to improve his eyesight. He was miraculously cured and then dedicated himself to an ascetic and monastic-style life. He moved about ten miles out of town, began living according to the Rule of St. Benedict, and quickly gained followers. An abbey was formed by 1313, known as the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore. It is still one of the largest in Tuscany.*

---

all civic life was suspended, and about four-fifths of the population perished. Peculiarly appalling is the account given by the Sieneese chronicler, Agnolo di Tura. Men and women felt the fatal swelling and suddenly, and while they spoke, would fall dead. Without any ecclesiastical ceremony, the abandoned dead were thrown indiscriminately into great trenches hastily dug in different parts of the city, and covered up with a little earth to keep them from the dogs. "And I, Agnolo di Tura, called Grasso, buried five of my sons in one trench with my own hands."

People said, in those days, that the end of the world had come. Bernardo Tolomei, the founder of the Benedictines known as Olivetani, came down with his white-robed monks from the security of secluded Monte Oliveto to labor among the sufferers in the streets of Siena and other Tuscan cities; with many of his brothers, he died in the work. Bernardo had fewer imitators in his own city than among the Florentines. Matteo Villani tells us that in Florence many who devoted their lives to the service of the plague stricken either escaped entirely or, if they took the infection, recovered, and their example encouraged others to similar efforts. To him it seemed like a second universal deluge, sent as a divine punishment for the sins of the world. During the decade preceding the pestilence, the population of Florence was between

120,000 and 125,000; the survivors numbered not more than 30,000. It was indeed a black flood of some sort, severing the Italy that had been Dante's from the Italy that was to be Catherine's.

At about this same time, Boccaccio was apparently in Naples, where he began his *Decameron* with the rhetorical description of the pestilence at Florence, the details of which he had not personally witnessed. The horrors had no good effect on people's minds, and those who believed that a great renovation of the world would come were quickly disillusioned. Restraint and convention were cast off; what followed was riot and excess among the survivors. The deserted streets rang with the shout of revelers or echoed to the fierce grasp on people's souls. "Without any restraint," writes Matteo Villani, "almost all our city plunged into evil living, and the same and worse did the other cities of the world." Scarcity and famine followed in many places, and work was kept at a standstill. Dissensions and quarrels arose over questions of heritage and succession. The cynical and shameless stories of the *Decameron* paint the corruption of the following years with a master's hand. There is surely exaggeration, and there is the writer's hatred of the priests and their allies, but the reader of certain terrible chapters of Catherine's *Dialogue*, written only thirty years later, will find a striking confirmation of Boccaccio's testimony.

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#### The Black Death in Siena

*Gardner offers numbers to illustrate the effect of the Black Death on the city of Florence. Estimates for Siena are even more dire. "Suddenly during the summer months of 1348 more than half the inhabitants of Florence and Siena died of the bubonic plague. . . . Siena was reduced from around 42,000 to 15,000. Never before or since has any calamity taken so great a proportion of human life. The plague struck again in 1363 and once more in 1374, though it carried off far fewer people than in the terrible months of 1348. The survivors were stunned. The Sienese chronicler Angolo di Tura tells of burying his five children with his own hands. 'No one wept for the dead,' he says, 'because every one expected death himself'" (Meiss, 65).*

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The house in which Catherine was born still stands, even though it has been transfigured, not irreverently or impiously, by generations of worshipers. It stands on the side of the third of Siena's hills that rise opposite the Duomo over the deep and fragrant Vallepiazza, the hill that is crowned by the great red-brick church of the Friars Preachers, San Domenico. Catherine's family belonged to the class and faction known as the *Dodicini*, the people that then ruled and governed the city of Siena. Her father, Giacomo di Benincasa, was a dyer, a simple and God-fearing citizen, pure in heart and gentle in speech, such a one as Giotto or Simone Martini might have painted. Her mother, Lapa di Puccio di Piagente, was the daughter of a citizen of the same class of life who seems to have also been a poet.

At the time of Catherine's childhood, her father was a fairly rich man and the family all lived together in the house where his workshop was located. That part of Siena is still redolent with the aroma of the dyers' and tanners' labors, and the strange, pleasant

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**Who Was Friar Raimondo?**

*This is the second instance where Raimondo and his Legenda are mentioned. Raimondo delle Vigne (ca. 1330–99) and Catherine were good friends. He was one of her confessors and confidantes, as well as her first biographer. Of noble birth, Raimondo (often anglicized to Raymond of Capua—the place of his birth) became a Dominican while a law student in Bologna. Gardner quotes from the Legenda—also known in English as The Life of Saint Catherine of Siena—throughout his biography.*

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smell links the past and present of the people of the city. Lapa bore Jacomo a very large family of children. We have the names of five sons: Benincasa, Bartolomeo, Sandro, Niccolo, and Stefano; and five daughters who were older than Catherine: Niccoluccia, Maddalena, Bonaventura, Lisa, and Nera. Such was the refined purity of the atmosphere of the dyer's house that when Bonaventura, the third daughter, married, she was so appalled by the

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licentiousness of the conversation of her husband and his young friends that she fell seriously ill and was only restored to health by her husband's conversion. This Bonaventura was Catherine's favorite sister. A twin sister, christened Giovanna, was born at the same time as Catherine, but died shortly after. From her birth, Catherine—who was the only one of her younger children that Lapa was able herself to nourish—was the chief darling and most beloved of her mother out of all the family. She is usually stated to have been the youngest, but Raimondo's *Legenda* states: "After Lapa had brought forth Catherine, she gave birth to another girl who was called Giovanna, to renew the memory of the departed sister of Catherine; and this was the last, after she had given birth to twenty-five children." This second Giovanna, or Nanna, died when Catherine was sixteen years old, in April 1363.

As she grew up, the young Catherine became the darling of her district. "Truly," writes Friar Raimondo, "the wisdom and prudence of her talk, the sweetness of her holy conversation, no tongue or pen could easily describe. Those alone know it who experienced it. Not only her speech but also her whole bearing had a strange power, whereby the minds of people were drawn to good and to delight in God, that all sadness was excluded from the hearts of those who conversed with her, and every mental weariness was driven out; even the memory of all troubles departed, and so a great tranquility of soul took its place, so that each one, marveling at himself, rejoiced with a new sort of joy, saying in his mind: It is good for me to be here, let me make three tabernacles." Many in Siena felt such delight in Catherine's childish wisdom and in her company.

To such a child, in such an age, visions began to come as a matter of course. She was only six years old when she returned with her brother Stefano from the house of their sister

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Bonaventura, looked up, and saw over the summit of the church of San Domenico, Christ seated on an imperial throne, clad in the papal robes and wearing a tiara, attended by Sts. Peter and Paul and the beloved disciple, John. He smiled upon her and blessed her, and she was absorbed in ecstasy. She didn't know where she was until her brother, calling and pulling her by the hand, brought her back to Earth.

It was at this time that Catherine became more silent, and she began to abstain from food and to afflict her own flesh. She wandered in the woods and caves in order to imitate the ancient anchorites of the desert. She dreamed of entering the Dominican Order in the disguise of a boy. She gathered other little girls of the same age around her, to join in her prayers and discipline themselves together with her. Burning more and more with the fire of divine love every day, she consecrated her virginity to Christ. In later years, she told her confessors that all of this happened when she was only seven.

However, when Catherine had passed the age of twelve and was considered marriageable according to the customs of Siena, her sister Bonaventura, to whom she could refuse nothing, persuaded her at their mother's instigation to change her mode of life for a while. She dyed her hair and adorned her body, dressing becomingly, and conformed with the fashions of their little world. She complained bitterly about this later on, as a grievous sin, and did heavy penance for it, accusing herself of having loved her sister more than God. Even the comfortable exhortations of Friar Raimondo couldn't make her see it in any other light. Bonaventura died in August 1362, and Catherine immediately returned to her former mode of life. However, her father and brothers would have none of it, especially after the death of the elder sister, whose husband had been a man of

some importance. They insisted upon finding a husband for Catherine whose alliance would strengthen the position of their family in the city. But finding her obstinate and undutiful, they had recourse to a certain friar of San Domenico named Tommaso della Fonte. He had been brought up in their house and was probably a relation of one of Catherine's other sisters' husbands.

This Friar Tommaso is the first of those sons of St. Dominic that Catherine came to know. The Dominicans were a group of worthy men who, in the midst of all the ecclesiastical corruption that surrounded them, maintained their single-hearted faith and religious fervor unimpaired, and found in the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas sufficient answer for all the problems of those days. Friar Tommaso was Catherine's first confessor, and seems to have written some account of her life that was later incorporated into Raimondo's great *Legenda*.

Finding Catherine resolute, Tommaso encouraged her to follow her inspiration, and counseled her to cut off her beautiful hair as a sign to her family that her intention was fixed. The inevitable domestic persecution followed. Catherine's room was taken from her and she was compelled to do all the menial drudgery of the house, so that she would have neither the time nor place for prayer and devotion. They heaped abuse and reproaches upon her in order to break her obstinacy. But it was all in vain. Thrown back upon herself, the girl invented the refuge that she was later to urge upon her followers that they, too, should find—and that could never be taken from them: the cell of self-knowledge. According to the *Legenda*, "She made herself in her mind, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a secret cell, out of which she resolved never to go by reason of any external occupation." And, "She told me that she firmly pictured

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to herself that her father represented Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; her mother the most glorious Mother of God; and that her brothers and the rest of the household were the holy apostles and disciples. And because of this imagination, she served them all with great gladness and diligence. Everyone marveled."

She had more visions during this time, as well. In one dream she thought she saw St. Dominic holding in one hand a white lily, which burned and was not consumed like the bush seen by Moses; in the other hand, the saint was offering her the black and white habit of the Dominican tertiaries, the Sisters of Penance.

By this time, her father became convinced that his daughter's conduct had a higher sanction, and wasn't prompted by mere childish caprice. He had come upon her secretly one day as she prayed in the room of her brother Stefano (the only brother who was still unmarried), and had seen a snow-white dove hovering over her head. And so, when the girl, ordinarily bashful and silent, suddenly revealed to the family her vow and her unalterable resolution of having Christ alone for her Spouse, her father told her to follow the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for she would meet with no opposition from him. As Raimondo tells it, "Then, having obtained this full and long-desired freedom to serve God, the virgin, already entirely dedicated to Him, began zealously to order all her life in the divine service. She asked and obtained a small room separate from the others in which she could devote herself to God and afflict her body according to her desire. . . . In this little chamber were renewed the old works of the holy fathers of Egypt, and all the more wondrously, without any human teaching, example, or guidance."

In order to make this freedom still more secure, Catherine soon took the habit of the Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic,