

THE LIFE OF
ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA

BY

BLESSED RAYMOND OF CAPUA

HER CONFESSOR

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Nihil Obstat

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Preface

Though saints have sometimes been at loggerheads—for instance, you would trust St Jerome on St Augustine no more than you would Manning on Newman—a special authority invests one saint when he does bring himself to write the life of another.

Not that literary skill is guaranteed, but that, in the first place, informed sympathy with the heart of the matter can be expected, a response to what holiness is about, some account of the essential business which does not reduce it to the terms of a psychological case-history or substitute for it merely a natural, if unusual, reaction to the conditions of environment. Next, when the two have lived and prayed closely together, have followed the same daily round and undergone the same weather, have shared friends, acquaintances, and critics, have belonged to the same religious family and engaged in common enterprises, and, finally, have kept no secrets from each other, then you rightly look for an appreciation of the individual embodiment of holiness, together with the moods, the cast of countenance, and even the quirks that went with this falling and remaining in love with God.

Such is the recommendation for this biography, the translation of the *Legend* of Blessed Raymond of Capua (1330-1399) which is the main source for what we know about St Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). He sprang from the nobility of the *Regno*, being descended from Peter delle Vigne, the famous chancellor of Frederick II, and was reader in theology at Siena when he took over from Thomas della Fonte, a fellow-member of the Dominican community there, the direction of Catherine Benincasa, the dyer's daughter, a woman of twenty-seven already remarkable for her religious devotion and independent ways.

Thomas, who may have felt that she was proving too much of a handful for him to manage, was self-effacing and made no fuss; later he supplied many of the recollections which were worked into the story Raymond had to be pressed to compose. Catherine herself was convinced that it was Our Lady who had sent this well-trained priest to be her confessor.

Presently he found that she was almost a full-time job, not only because of the spiritual questions she opened out, but also because she was a public figure, soon to move at the centre of international politics: her fame spread to England, and a century later Caxton printed the *Lyf of St Katherin of Senis*. She had a profoundly theological habit of mind, and could not find enough time to dwell on the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. Always while she was acting as a welfare-worker at everybody's beck and call, fighting corruption, civil and ecclesiastical, pleading for peace, bringing back the Pope to Rome from his exile at Avignon, she yearned for the solitude where she could have occupied herself with meditation. It would have been an escape, for on taxing him whom she loved above all, "Oh where were you. Lord," for seeming so terribly distant when she was disturbed by what she regarded as worse than distractions, his answer came, "There was I, daughter, in the midst of them."

Raymond was to Catherine both father and son. Always obedient to him as a priest, sometimes impatient with him as a man, she might scold him and he in revenge might take advantage of his status and rap out orders like a pettish drill-sergeant. But she valued his advice and usually he was gentle with her and defended even her gaucheries. "Oh Lord God," she once burst out, "what kind of spiritual father is this you have given me, who finds excuses even for my sins!" They were devoted to one another.

Their temperaments were very different. For she was like the Sienese wine—very red. High-spirited and fearless, used to getting her own way where others were concerned, not one of a family of twenty-five with a bustling mother for nothing, devoid of human respect, generous in her loving and sometimes tart in its expression, it was remarked of her that she looked everybody in the face. One of the redoubtable women of history, she can be compared to St Teresa among the yogis and Catherine of Russia among the commissars. Whereas one fancies that Raymond in appearance was a mousy little man. He suffered from ill-health, was constitutionally timid, somewhat prim and sensitive to scandal; occasionally he was puzzled by her behaviour and her projects could catch him lagging behind. Yet he was a reliable man of affairs, circumspect, a good negotiator, and he grew in stature from his friendship with her, and was ready to beard the fierce John Hawkwood, the Essex man turned condottiere, or to undertake risky journeys through the enemy lines. Prior of the Minerva at Rome when she died, he was afterwards elected Master General of his Order, in which office he died at Nuremberg during a visitation of the Germanies: some of his brethren judged that his reforming provisions neglected academic standards.

One endearing characteristic was a sense of humour about himself. Ingenuous and not given to self-esteem, he does not hesitate to tell a story against himself. Thus when he was Catherine's impresario at Avignon he confesses how the affectation of piety by the ladies of that sophisticated court hoodwinked him because of their fine dresses and good looks. He leaves the impression of having been a truthful man, incapable of inventing stories or straining the evidence. On the other hand, he was no critical and detached observer. The dear reader he still takes into his confidence will be aware that his memories come stamped with conventions and clichés many of which have passed with the late Middle Ages. No doubt they were shared by his heroine,

nevertheless one feels they are stiffened and stylized in his editing.

He was no Boswell, and perhaps in portraying the saint he forgot the woman. As, after her death, he dismembered the loved body in accordance with the piety of the time, sending the head to Siena where it might be venerated, but discreetly for fear of the Roman populace, so also he seems to have tried to cut her personality to the cloth of the virtues. He did not succeed, for she speaks out of turn and, like a character in Shakespeare, breaks out of the part assigned to her; shedding the panoply, she gives a lift and a lilt to the lines of his catalogue.

This can scarcely be called prosaic, for it is full of odd happenings; Catherine's own poise was not that which a humdrum psychologist would ascribe to a well-balanced personality—she was too extravagant a giver for that. Here it is well to keep in mind the classical distinction drawn by theologians between sanctifying grace, the friendship with God taken to the pitch of holiness, and the miraculous gifts, *gratiae gratis datae*, which may or may not accompany it. These do not make a saint, though they may help towards canonization. They are given for the sake of others, for profit, *ad utilitatem* says the Vulgate, a means to an end says St Thomas Aquinas; they are meant to draw attention to something else that really matters, the loving union of human beings with God.¹ Since few hagiographers can feel that they have the knack of making holiness itself look interesting on paper, it is not surprising that they turn to the preternatural. Raymond does better than most, for the wonders he narrates always remain tributary to the main stream of his discourse.

¹ 1 Cor. 12:7. See *Summa Theologica*, ia-2ae. CXI, 1, 3, 4.

The miracles worked by Our Lord himself did not appeal to people not prepared to welcome his message; they led on those who were ready to follow, as the miraculous feeding of the crowd in the desert prepared them for the revelation of the *living bread which came down from heaven, which if any man eat he shall live for ever*.² Similarly any prodigies in the lives of the saints are subsidiary to their principal witness. Moreover, although Christ's Church endures in faith in his resurrection, and divine interventions above the course of nature are perennial, individual miracles in the main are manifestations of God's tender and particular providence and are accommodated to circumstances. If, then, they are meant to commend themselves to men of the time rather than to future students of the curious, is it not likely that many of them will be period pieces or examples of regional style?

Charity itself begins at home, and is racy of its immediate scenes and occasions. Grace makes nobody an anachronism, and it can seize on current imaginations, emotions, manners and fashions. Catherine and Raymond were children of a culture where spiritual forces could be readily materialized in the odour of sanctity and the stink of sin. The truths of faith were vividly pictured, the following of Christ was a challenge to a temper at once chivalrous and evangelical, the impact of his humanity was empirically real, and the Devil was your adversary on the prowl and no mere generalized heading for evil. The stage was better set than now for such phenomena as levitation and the stigmata.

It may be that we take to Catherine despite some of the signs and wonders her contemporaries thought so admirable. We may believe them, without finding them attractive, and have to

² John 6:31

remind ourselves that she is our model for the general design of her desire, not all the details. But if we cannot applaud—we are under no obligation—let us at least be civil and tolerant, if only from a sense of history and anthropology. Take, for instance, her vow of virginity: was it so precocious when girls of twelve were of a marriageable age? When we treat the saints with flat utilitarianism, it is not they but we who look absurd, and priggish too. Take the self-inflicted punishments: are they not a hatred of selfish indulgence put in very concrete form, the effort to be purged of the dross and to be conformed to Our Saviour? What generous heart waits for suffering to come, but instead goes out to meet it? Catherine may not be everybody's favourite saint; all the same the receptive reader of this work will exemplify the truth of what the Pope who knew her remarked, "that none ever approached her without going away better."

Thomas Gilby, O.P.

Blackfriars

Cambridge

Ascension Day, 1960

PART I

PART ONE

Chapter 1

CATHERINE'S PARENTS

In Tuscany, in the city of Siena, there once lived a man called Giacomo, whose father, according to the custom in those parts, was commonly known as Benincasa.

Giacomo was a man honest in all things, without deceit or guile, free from evil, fearing God. Having lost both his parents, he had taken to wife a girl of his own city, a certain Lapa, who, though she may have lacked the shrewdness of the people of today, was quite capable of looking after a home and family. Lapa is still alive, and those who know her can vouch for this. This couple, joined in matrimony and united in the simplicity of their life, were of the people; nevertheless they belonged to a highly respectable class and enjoyed a considerable degree of comfort.

The Lord blessed Lapa and made her fruitful, and she was as an abounding vine in the house of her husband Giacomo; for almost every year she gave birth to a son or a daughter, and sometimes even to twins.

I should consider myself guilty of an injustice if I kept silent about Giacomo's exceptional qualities, all the more so as by now, as is piously to be believed, he has already arrived at the gates of eternal bliss.

Lapa has told me that his character was so strong and his speech so moderate that whenever he was faced with any trouble or disturbance he would never break out into unseemly language, and whenever the people in his house were annoyed and expressed themselves violently he would at once say to them, with a smile on his lips, "Now then, God bless you, don't get excited, and don't

start using words that are unfitting on human lips!” Lapa also told me that one of his fellow citizens once tried quite unjustly to extort a sum of money from him which he falsely claimed was owing to him, and with the help of friends and calumny he caused so much harm to the good man that he brought him to the brink of ruin; but despite all this Giacomo could never bear to hear any complaints made against his calumniator or any evil to be said against him; and when Lapa herself began to do this he gently reproved her, saying, “God bless you, dearest, let be! God will show him the error of his ways and be our defender.” Which subsequently happened, for the truth came out as though by a miracle, and this man learned to his cost how much he had erred in his unjust persecution.

This Lapa has recounted to me in all seriousness, and I believe it absolutely, for, as is known by everyone acquainted with her, despite her eighty years she is so far from being capable of duplicity that she could never manage to tell a lie even if she wanted to. Moreover, all who came into contact with Giacomo say that he was a man of the utmost integrity, upright and free from human vices.

Finally I must add that the restraint shown in his manner of speech by this husband and father was so great that no one who lived in his house and was brought up by him could ever use indecent or unseemly talk or bear to hear it spoken, especially if they were girls.

It came about that one of his daughters, whose name was Bonaventura (about whom we shall have more to say later), married a young man of her own city called Niccolo. This young man was an orphan and he fell into the company of young men of his own age who were not merely loose in their language but sometimes absolutely foul-mouthed. Bonaventura was so upset by this that it made her ill; indeed, she lost weight before his

very eyes and became quite weak. After a few days, on being asked by her husband what was the cause of her illness, she said stoutly, "In my father's house we never used to hear some of the words that I hear being used here every day; my parents did not bring me up in that way. And you must realize that if you do not stop using these words you will soon see me dead." Niccolo was struck with admiration at this and was so edified by such behaviour on the part of his wife and her family that he forbade his companions to use unseemly language in her presence; and they obeyed him. Thus the modesty and decency that were to be found in Giacomo's house drove licence and indecency from the house of his son-in-law Niccolo.

Giacomo practised the art of making and mixing dyes for dyeing linen or woollen cloth, and both he and his sons were by reason of their trade known throughout the city as "the dyers". This led to the marvel, as we shall show later, that the daughter of a dyer should have been deemed worthy to become the bride of the King of Heaven, he himself helping her, as will be shown below.

Of the information given in this chapter, part is known to the whole city, or at least to most of the citizens; part I have learned from the holy virgin herself and from her mother Lapa; and the rest I have gleaned from religious and lay folk living in the neighbourhood, friends or relatives of Giacomo.

Chapter 2

CATHERINE'S BIRTH AND INFANCY

While Lapa, as the result of her frequent confinements, was filling Giacomo's house with sons and daughters like a fruitful bee, heaven willed that towards the end of her productive period she should conceive and bring into the world twins, who by eternal predestination were to be presented before the eyes of the Lord; as in fact happened.

Lapa gave birth, then, to two daughters. Though meek in their physical constitution, they were strong in the sight of the Lord. Looking lovingly upon the creatures she had brought to birth, she realized that she would be unable to feed them both herself and decided to put one of them out to nurse, keeping the other to herself and bringing it up on her own milk. It was the will of God that the one she kept to herself should be the one whom from eternity the Lord had chosen as His bride.

When they received the grace of holy baptism, although they were both to be numbered among the elect, the favoured one was called Catherine and the other Giovanna. Giovanna, who with the grace of baptism had also received the name "of grace", in that same grace ascended into heaven; for in fact she was in a short space of time taken out of this world, Catherine herself remaining at the breast of her own mother to draw subsequently a whole chain of souls to heaven.

Lapa fed the child with great care and diligence, especially in view of the fact that she had chosen her in preference to the one who had died; and for this reason, as she has often told me, she was more fond of Catherine than of any other of her children.

She also told me that because of her continual pregnancies she had never been able to bring up any of her children on her own milk, but that in this case she was able to do so right to the end because she did not become pregnant again until it was time for the child to be weaned; as though it had been appointed that there should be a pause in her childbearing and that she should approach the end of childbirth with one who was to strive after and achieve the end of all perfections. It is clear indeed that what was intended from the beginning by the Prime Mover was ultimately realized in fact.

Lapa produced one more child after Catherine, and the new arrival was given the name of Giovanna in memory of the dead sister. She was Lapa's twenty-fifth child and her last.

When the time came, the child dedicated to the Lord was weaned. She was taken off the milk and began to eat bread, and when she began to walk everyone found her so pleasing and so sensible in the things she said that her mother had difficulty in keeping her at home, because all the friends and neighbours used to carry her off to their own homes so that they could enjoy her wise little sayings and the comfort of her delightful childish gaiety.

It came about that in one such burst of delight they changed her name from Catherine to Euphrosyne, but how I cannot say.

In the course of time, as we shall see, she herself discovered the hidden significance of this name—when she proposed to imitate Saint Euphrosyne. But I rather like to imagine that in her childish prattle she tried to imitate other people's words, and that when she tried to join them up together they sounded like the word "Euphrosyne", and the grown-ups delightedly repeated these early stammerings and finally gave her that name.

However that may be, it is quite clear that there was already germinating within her that which was to bear its fruit when she

was fully grown up. But no tongue or pen could ever adequately describe the wisdom and sense of what she was to say or the sweetness of her holy company; only those who were ever with her can have any idea of it.

And here I feel compelled by the love I bear her to say that when she spoke she communicated something by which in a way beyond all description the minds of those who heard her were so strongly drawn to good and took such delight in God that every trace of unhappiness disappeared from their hearts. All their private troubles vanished, all their burdens were forgotten, and so great and unusual a tranquillity of mind fell upon them that, amazed within themselves and delighted with the new kind of pleasure they were enjoying, they would think to themselves, "It is good for us to be here ... let us make here three tabernacles."¹ Nor is this to be wondered at, for without doubt there was hidden invisibly within the breast of this His bride, One who when He was transfigured upon the mountain constrained Peter to utter those words.

Let us return to our story.

Catherine was meanwhile growing up and becoming more and more robust, and she was soon to be filled with the Holy Spirit and Divine Wisdom.

When she was about five she learned the Hail Mary, and repeated it over and over again as often as she could, and, as she frequently told me in confession when she had occasion to speak of the matter, she was inspired by heaven to address the Blessed Virgin in this way whenever she went up and down stairs, stopping to kneel on each step as she did so. And so, as she had offered words pleasing to men, she now began to proffer devout words

¹ Matt. 17:4

pleasing to God, endeavouring thereby to rise from the things that are seen to the things that are unseen.

Now that she had embarked upon these acts of devotion and was increasing them every day, the Lord in His Mercy willed to reward her for them with an astonishing vision of grace, to encourage her to receive greater graces and at the same time to intimate to her how, like a little plant tended and watered by the Holy Spirit, she was to grow into the tallest of cedars.

One day—she must have been about six at the time—she had to go with her brother Stefano, who was a little older than she was, to see her sister Bonaventura, who, as has been explained, was married to Niccolo. She may have been going on some errand from her mother, for mothers often go and see their married daughters or get someone else to go, to make sure that they are getting on all right. Having accomplished their mission, the two were coming back down a certain lane (commonly called the Valle Piatta), when the holy little girl happened to look up, and there, hanging in the air in front of her over the roof of the church of the Friars Preachers, she saw a most beautiful bridal chamber decked out in regal splendour, in which, on an imperial throne, dressed in pontifical attire and with the tiara on His head (that is to say, the monarchical papal mitre), sat the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. With him were the Princes of the Apostles Peter and Paul and the holy Evangelist John. At the sight of all this the little girl remained rooted to the ground, gazing lovingly with unblinking eyes upon her Lord and Saviour, who was revealing Himself to her in this way in order to captivate her love. Then, gazing straight at her with eyes full of majesty, and smiling most lovingly. He raised His right hand over her, made the sign of the cross of salvation like a priest, and graciously gave her His eternal benediction.

The grace of this gift was so immediately effective upon the little girl that she was taken right out of herself and entirely into Him she lovingly looked upon, and although she was very timid by nature she stood there in the middle of the street, filled as it was with men and animals, looking upwards with her head quite motionless, forgetting not only her journey but all her other concerns; and she would have remained there as long as the vision lasted if she had not had her attention distracted and been interrupted.

While the Lord was performing these marvels, with Catherine standing there motionless, brother Stefano had wandered on by himself, imagining that his sister was still with him. After a little while he realized that he was alone, and when he turned round and saw his sister standing there gazing up to heaven he began to shout to her, but when he saw that she made no reply and paid no attention to him he had to go back, shouting all the way; and as all this achieved nothing he got hold of her hand and pulled her, saying, "What are you doing? Why don't you come along?" Catherine seemed to come out of a deep sleep; lowering her eyes she said, "If you could see what I can you would not be so cruel and disturb me out of this lovely vision." With these words she raised her eyes again, but the vision had vanished. He thus willing it who had appeared to her; whereupon Catherine, unable to endure this without feeling a sharp sting of sorrow, burst into tears, upbraiding herself bitterly for having allowed her eyes to stop looking up towards heaven.

From that moment it became clear from Catherine's virtues, the gravity of her behaviour, and her extraordinary wisdom, that under her girlish appearance there was hidden a fully formed woman. Her actions, indeed, had nothing childish, nothing girlish, about them, but showed all the signs of a most venerable maturity. From now onwards the fire of Divine love burned within her,

enlightening her mind, kindling her will, strengthening her power of thought, and enabling her external acts to conform to the laws of God.

To me, unworthy as I was, she revealed in all humility in confession that at this time, without the aid of teachers or books and taught entirely by the Holy Spirit, she had come to know and value the lives and way of life of the holy Fathers of Egypt and the great deeds of other saints, especially Blessed Dominic, and had felt such a strong desire to do what they did that she had been unable to think about anything else.

This knowledge was the cause of certain innovations in the young girl's life which filled all who witnessed it with amazement. She would seek out hidden places and scourge her young body in secret with a special rope. She gave up all childish games and devoted her time to prayer and meditation instead; unlike most children, she became increasingly silent, and took less and less food to sustain her—a thing unheard-of in the case of growing children.

Inspired by her example, a number of other little girls of her own age gathered round her, eager to hear her talk about salvation and to imitate her as best they could. They began to meet secretly in a corner of the house and scourge themselves with her, repeating the Our Father and the Hail Mary as often as she told them to. These things, as we shall see, were a sign of things to come.

Special graces from God often accompanied these acts of virtue. In fact, as her mother has often told me, and as Catherine herself was unable to deny when I asked her for confirmation of it in secret, frequently, indeed more often than not, when she was going up and down stairs she felt herself being lifted up into the air and her feet no longer touched the stairs. Her mother assured me that she used to go up the stairs so quickly that

it made her quite frightened. This generally happened when Catherine wanted to avoid other people, especially men. I rather think that the repeated miracle of going up and down stairs in this way was due to the habit she had formed of saying the Hail Mary on each step.

To bring this chapter to an end, I must add that Catherine, having, as has already been explained, come to know by pure revelation the lives and deeds of the holy Fathers in Egypt, felt a strong inclination to imitate them. She confessed to me that when she was small she had felt a burning desire to become a solitary, but she had never found the way to do this. It was not, in fact, the will of heaven that she should lock herself away in solitude, but on this point she was for some time to remain in her illusion.

Being unable to restrain her desire any longer, in fact, she decided one morning to go in search of solitude. With true childish forethought she armed herself with a loaf of bread, and went off on her own in the direction of her married sister's house near the St. Ansano gate. Having gone through the gate (a thing she had never done before), she went down a steep lane, and finding that there were no houses decided that she had come to the edge of a desert. She went on until at last she found a cave under a crag; this suited her, and into it she went delightedly, convinced that she had found at last the solitude of her dreams.

God, who accepts all good and holy desires, and whom she had already seen from afar smiling at her and giving her his benediction, had not ordained that His bride should lead this kind of life; nevertheless He was not going to let this action of hers go unrewarded, and so, no sooner had she set herself to fervent prayer than she gradually began to rise into the air, as high as the cave would allow, and there she remained until the

end of None.² Catherine imagined that this was all the Devil's work and that he was using these tricks to try to stop her from praying and from wanting to be a solitary; so she tried to pray more firmly and fervently than ever; but it was not until the time was approaching at which the Son of God completed the work of our salvation upon the cross that as she had risen so she came down again. Then by divine inspiration she realized that this was not the time for afflicting her little body for the Lord or for leaving the paternal roof, and in the same spirit as she had set off she turned back towards home. When she came out of the cave she found herself all alone, and there was all the way back to go—too far for a child of her age. Afraid that her mother and father would think she was lost, she once again commended herself to the Lord and suddenly (as she told her sister-in-law, Lisa, afterwards) she felt herself raised aloft by the Lord, to be deposited a few minutes later near the city gate, none the worse for the experience.

She hurried home, and her mother and father thought that she was simply coming back from her married sister's; and what had really happened was never known until she was grown up and revealed it to her confessors, amongst whom, though unworthy and the lowest of them all both by election and in merit, am I.

The episodes contained in this chapter have for the most part been related to me by Catherine's mother, Lapa; the others, especially the later ones, I learned from Lisa and the holy virgin herself. But of all that I have said, with the exception of the final episode, I have had further confirmation either from her first confessor, who was brought up as a child in her house, or from

² None lasted from midday until three in the afternoon

absolutely reliable women who were relatives or neighbours of the holy virgin's own parents.

The rest of the pages have been removed from this preview..