

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA— GREAT AND GOOD WOMAN

URBAN CORIGLIANO, O.P.



OCASIONALLY the daily papers print long columns on the ten greatest women of history. It has become the journalistic vogue to eulogize the Virgin Queen Bess than whom no greater ruler ever was or ever will be. Cleopatra of the Egyptians, Sappho of the Greeks, Catherine of all the Russias, and lately even a contemporary American woman of notoriety have been exposed to the gaze of our reading public as the best in womanhood that our race can produce. Whom the gods would destroy they first make to falsify history. Greatness, surely, does not lie in the histrionic ability of religious attitudinizing nor in the efficiency of cursing like a trooper; Elizabeth of England was as much noted for her blasphemies as for her uncivil tongue and mendacious dishonesty. Cleopatra may lay a just claim to numerous amorous escapades. If that is greatness, she is welcome to the title. Now and then the name of Joan of Arc is mentioned and sometimes, though rarely, the name of Mary the Mother of Jesus somehow slips in amongst the great ones of history.

Of late years a rather extraordinary interest has been evinced concerning Catherine Benincasa, popularly known as St. Catherine of Siena. This interest is not merely hagiographical. Historians and literary critics have awakened to the fact that here was a woman who can truly be called great in many phases of human activity. She was a diplomat of the first water who told the truth and won her case. She turned the tide of history without the use of feminine wiles. Her face unlike that of Helen of Troy has not launched a thousand ships, but her life has initiated a spiritual endeavour which has been tested and not found wanting by six centuries of time. Her writings give her rank among the foremost Italian classicists. Her influence, very much alive in our own day, is directing the lives and ideals of thousands of women who see in her an example to be imitated, an ideal to be striven for, a ready counselor, a Saint.

Catherine of Siena was born on March 25, 1347; and thirty-three years later, after a mysterious agony of three months, she placed her racked body upon a wooden board and died. In those short thirty-three years she made history. If the tenacious love and admiration of her disciples, the enthusiastic veneration of Popes and peoples, the unstinted respect and praise of rulers, leaders and the great mass of Catholic and non-Catholic Christianity have any meaning in the light of historical greatness, then the Siennese Mystic is one of the greatest among the women of history. Her sanctity and her heroic greatness are all of a piece. Yet we are apt to overlook her great deeds by ascribing everything she did to that vaguely-sensed thing which, for want of a better name we call, mystic-mindedness. It is well to remember that she was intensely human and was raised to the mighty stature of sainthood because she performed great deeds in a spirit of magnanimity, directed by the proper motives of love of God and neighbor. True greatness is always human; and if it cannot bear to have its humanity exposed, if it cannot show its soul to mankind, then it is not greatness at all but something shallow, petty, insignificant.

Like all great persons Catherine has had her generous share of admirers down through the years. The distance of six centuries has not obscured her name in the minds of men but rather has cast greater lustre upon her nobility of soul and upon the works which that nobility inspired. We stand in mute admiration before one of whom men can still talk and write as if she were alive and very near. They study her, the religious-minded and the scholars. They meditate upon her and then busily ply the pen in her honor. Catherine Brégy, Augusta Drane, John Joergensen, Alice Curtayne and others have written well of Catherine Benincasa in English. Not the least among the present Italian writers are the late Piero Misciatelli, Padre Innocenzo Taurisano, O.P., and Pier Palumbo; and they may well glory in the knowledge that they have contributed their share of due praise and have aided in making St. Catherine a venerated object of study.

In the Royal University of Siena, the typical city of an age which helped to mould and impress Catherine's character, a Chair of Catherinian Studies has been established for the purpose of research into the life and works of this daughter of a wool dyer, this simple girl to whom Popes and rulers lent an eager ear even though her wise counsel ran counter to their

soft comfort. It is unfortunately true that her writings, penned in the melodious Tuscan dialect of the Quattrocento, have been sadly mutilated in the course of centuries. Time and the excessive zeal of disciples have been unkind both to the works of Catherine herself and to the writings which concern her. For this reason Père M. S. Gillet, the Dominican Master General, has placed at the disposal of the University, Père M. H. Laurent, O.P., a master in history, hagiography and letters. Père Laurent, together with Doctor Francesco Valli, a literary historian of note and the only Italian University Doctor who publishes hagiographies, has set himself the huge task of collecting and editing all historical and literary sources that have reference to St. Catherine.

That there is need for a critical edition of Catherinian sources is evident. The errors which have crept into the writings of Catherine, for example, have been a source of confusion to the many scholars who wish to study her letters because of their classic, historical and philological value. A series of twenty-two thoroughly annotated volumes under the general caption, *Fontes Vitae Sanctae Catherinae Senensis Historici* will be the result of the studies of Père Laurent and Doctor Valli. Their critical and scientific research, though a labor of love, entails minute and laborious work. But like all literary historians they feel amply repaid in the knowledge that they bring to life the great deeds of one who is worthy of honor, whose works still have a message from which lessons can be applied to the present and retained for the benefit of the future.

At the present writing four numbers of the series have been edited. The "Historical Sources of the Life of St. Catherine of Siena" comprises twenty-four documents, twenty-one written in Latin and three in Old Italian. It consists of Rescripts of Pope Urban VI and Gregory XI, and letters and lists of Dominican Tertiaries. In "Documenti," Père Laurent edits fifteen letters of Urban VI to various rulers and high ecclesiastics, and a fragment of the "Legenda Major" of Raymond of Capua. He prefaces the work with an historical introduction concerning the movements and letters of Catherine from November, 1378, to July, 1379. A complete list of the books being prepared for publication will be given at the end of this article for those who are interested in the Siennese Saint and the life of her times. Students in Mediaeval history, philology, literary history and criticism, politics, law, and mysticism would do well to look

into these valuable contributions emanating from the University of Siena.

From the pages of these editions emerges a powerful personality dominating the historical trend of world events for the incredibly long period of ten years (in such a short life), from 1370 to 1380. It may come as a surprise to some to learn that Catherine was practically illiterate until about the age of thirty. When she began to write, so surprised were her contemporaries that they did not hesitate to attribute the phenomenon to a direct intervention of God. Some old manuscripts and her first biographer call her late begotten learning, infused knowledge. This may well be. Today the writings of Catherine are looked upon as classics in Italy. Her *Dialogue* or *Treatise on Divine Providence* is a compendium of her revelations. A series of "Prayers" and a collection of about four-hundred letters complete the works which can justly be ascribed to her.

She has been called the Heroine of Love, an appropriate title, if one may judge by her writings. Reading her letters one is amazed at the passionate love of this frail girl. It was not a weak and watery sort of thing generally attributed to so-called mystic souls. It was strong and tender, combined of laughter and tears, breaking out and overflowing into the inexorable actions of one who knows her supreme desire and who permits no obstacle to block her path to its attainment. Hence her writings. Hence her diplomatic missions, her fearlessness in the midst of the plague, her extremely active life in the midst of the most profound contemplation. These were the inevitable results of that fierce love which granted no respite, which drove her to work while there was yet a spark of life in her frail body.

From this love sprang the Saint's Catholic Action which the world naively calls Social Action. It would be profitable to copy her manner of procedure for she always reaped satisfactory results. But it is not merely a question of methodology. The primary concern of the Actionist, Catholic or Social, should be to capture the spirit which animated her every deed and imprison it within the bounds of today's sociology. It would help solve the pressing problems that plague the relief worker and the socially-minded. And that spirit is love of God and neighbor.

Yet for all her love Catherine was extremely stern when the rights of justice were called into question. She may not have employed the term, "Social Justice," but she certainly practiced its tenets. For her, the return of the Papacy to Rome, the alle-

viating of God's poor, the return of peace to war-torn Christendom, were matters of justice, not of charity. "Be a man" she wrote to Gregory XI, "and do your duty as Christ's Vicar." At the same time she reminded those who seek only justice that it can be hard, unsympathetic, inhuman. By its very nature it is strict and uncompromising, always ready to enforce the *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye. Charity is wider, all-embracing, and makes the human family one. Join Justice to Charity, that is Catherine's advice, for the social structure of humanity is based upon these two virtues.

Catherine is not only an ecclesiastical heroine, a fact which Pius IX recognized when he named her secondary Patroness of Rome, but also a national heroine, an Italian to the core, standing eminent in the glories of her country. She is indeed a world figure, an international citizen, a giant in history. She was great as a diplomat, great as a writer, great in love, greater in sacrifice, magnanimous in all her deeds, this daughter of a hard working, middle class man of the Middle Ages. Perhaps some journal editor may yet see fit to include Catherine Benincasa as one of the ten famous women of history.

Fontes Vitae Sanctae Catherinae Senensis Historici:¹

- 1—*Documenti* (Laurent, published).
- 2—*Miracula perduti di fra Tommaso della Fonte* (Valli).
- 3—*Lettere di discepoli e di devoti* (Valli).
- 4—*Miracoli di Caterina di Iacopo da Siena di Anonimo Fiorentino* (Valli, published).
- 5—*Gli scritti Cateriniani di William Flete* (Laurent)
- 6—*I testi concernenti il transito della Santa* (Valli).
- 7—*Legenda Maior del B. Raimondo da Capua* (Laurent).
- 8—*Supplementum del Caffarini* (Valli).
- 9—*Processus Castellanus* (Laurent).
- 10—*Legenda Minor del Caffarini e versione contemporanea* (Valli).
- 11—*Framenti del Maconi e da Cronache* (Valli).
- 12—*Componimenti poetici* (Valli).
- 13—*Legenda e Sermo di fra Massimino da Salerno; Sermo di Anonimo* (Valli, in prep.)
- 14—*Epilogus in Vita b. Catherinae Senensis di fra Girolamo da Praga* (Laurent).
- 15—*Legenda di fra Antonio della Rocca* (Laurent).
- 16—*Dal Chronicon di San Antonio di Firenze* (Laurent).
- 17—*Registro del b. Raimondo da Capua* (Laurent).
- 18—*Documenti relativi al b. Raimondo da Capua* (Laurent).
- 19—*Documenti intorno ai discepoli* (Laurent).
- 20—*Necrologia di san Domenico in Camporeggi (epoca Cateriniana)* (Laurent).
- 21—*Tractatus de origine approbatione et confirmatione ordinis fratrum et sororum de paenitentia sancti Dominici del Caffarini* (Laurent, in preparation).
- 22—*Saggio di bibliografia cateriniana* (Laurent).

¹ G. C. Sansoni, Florence, Italy; publishers.