

SIENESE DIALOGUE

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The Time: Late evening in the spring of the middle years of the fourteenth century.

The Place: A rather small palazzo in the better section of Siena in Tuscan Italy.

The Characters: Carlo, a distant star in the bright constellation of the Bellanti family; he flickers occasionally in the political sky of Siena.

and Stefano, a twig from the great oak of the Visconti clan of Bologna; he thrives better in soil not shadowed by the mighty branch of his cousin Bernabò.

Carlo: The situation becomes more intolerable each day!

Stefano: Ah! You exaggerate, as always. You have not changed, my friend.

Carlo: Exaggerate! You call it an exaggeration when I tell you that I saw her with twenty of them, with my own eyes, mind you, near the city gate? And she was chattering away as if nothing were wrong! Talking with lepers; She'll infect the whole city!

Stefano: I doubt that there were twenty. You do not see very well as it is. Where other people see one, you see two! . . . No interruptions! She was undoubtedly going to San Lazzaro, to the hospital. The lepers stay there; not at the city gates. She was talking to a few beggars.

Carlo: Beggars! I saw them; they were lepers. You could smell the disease a mile away. But we will let that go. Even if she were only going to the hospital, still the first thing she did when she

came back into the city was to go to a private home to visit a sick child! Right into the home of one of Siena's better citizens—it was Donna Chiara's house—after being with lepers! It is a wonder that the whole house is not infected.

Stefano: Come now, Carlo. This was unworthy of you. Following a young woman whose whole life seems to be dedicated to the sick, and only to get some information you might use against her.

Carlo: I was not following her. Heaven knows that I should be happy to be rid of the sight of her. But civic duty requires that someone take an interest in this matter. Please, Stefano; do not mistake my meaning. I am as good a Christian as the next man in Siena. But prudence, man, prudence is a virtue. I may say the highest virtue . . .

Stefano: Farewell, sweet charity . . .

Carlo: Be serious! You know what I mean.

Stefano: Yes, Carlo. I know just what you mean. You are the most prudent man I have ever known—except, perhaps for my dear cousin Bernabò.

Carlo: You mention me in the same breath as that tyrant! I am hurt, Stefano.

Stefano: I am truly sorry. But it seems to me that you make too much of this thing. I do not hear you ranting against the Sisters who care for the sick at La Scala.

Carlo: Ah! That is the difference! Those Sisters live at the hospital. I know that the Benincasa woman has a room there, also. But she insists on running around to people's homes. God forbid that I be against the care of the sick. But there are places for them. We have good hospitals here in Siena. If she wants to care for the sick, let her do it in the customary way. As the situation is now, Caterina Benincasa has become a public nuisance; I go further, she has become a public enemy!

Stefano: You had better not say that to the public. They have other ideas about the matter. For the public, she is a saint.

Carlo: O Stefano! Do not mix religion with the common good. Who cares if she is a saint or not? A saint can infect you with leprosy or cancer as well as a sinner. And who cares about the public? Most of the people in Siena do not know what is good for them

anyway. They must be educated. The place for the sick is in a hospital. But let us look at the business rationally.

Stefano: Pray, let us do so. But first, will you kindly refill this goblet? You are excitable, Carlo, but you do know wines.

Carlo: Yes, yes. This is a good vintage. . . . Is that enough? . . . But to the point. . . .

Stefano: To the point.

Carlo: Let me approach the subject in this way. We have hospitals in Siena; the sick belong in hospitals; those who take care of the sick should see to their work in the hospitals. What could be easier?

Stefano: I see what you mean. But have you ever been to the hospitals? The Sisters at La Scala are veritable angels, but what can they do with all the crowded wards they must care for? And the atmosphere! People crying in agony. Sleep in a place like that is the sleep of exhaustion, not the sleep of rest! The hospitals fulfill a necessary task, I grant you that. But how many leave them alive? That is a thought, Carlo.

Carlo: People who are that sick will die anyway, in a hospital or not. But the fact is that in a hospital they do not inflict their ills on the healthy members of the community. If we allow this Caterina to move from house to house, as she does every day, we run the risk of spreading disease from house to house. She carries sickness on her black cloak, and those Friars on the hill, who are her superiors and should tell her to stop this suicidal practice, praise her. What can one do against such a situation?

Stefano: I could agree with you, if it were true that Caterina carries sickness with her. But such does not seem to be the case. In the first place, she spends much of her time cleaning in the homes that she visits. The demons of sickness do not have the opportunity to breed. You know as well as I that filth is the fertile soil of disease. It would seem that Caterina is doing a public service by cleaning the homes of the sick. She should be given a medal!

Carlo: You are hopeless! She can clean from now to doomsday, but how can she rid herself of the breath of the sick which mingles with her own? The very air festers where she walks.

Stefano: Are there any cases yet among the places that she has visited of disease? Or is it not true that she seems to cure?

Carlo: I am not worried about whether she has actually carried some sickness into any home yet. That is not the point. The point is that if what she does catches the public fancy, we will have hundreds of do-gooders running around the city following her example. And can we be sure that all of them will be as careful as you say she is?

Stefano: That I do not know. But it seems to me that you have been screaming about this one woman doing what she does; about what is happening now in Siena, not about what will happen later. I also think that it would take a great deal of courage to do what she does, so I do not think that you will see hundreds running around doing the same thing.

Carlo: Yes, but the precedent will be there. And besides, she is against the progressive measures of our city government. The hospitals, you must admit, are a step forward in the care of the sick.

Stefano: I concede that. But sometimes hospitals can be cold places. It does happen, my dear Carlo, that men and women with the best of intentions become so overburdened with their work that routine strangles their humanity. And there is another thing. The poor are actually afraid of the hospitals. Maybe they are wrong; I do not pretend to judge them. But Caterina takes men as they are, with all their fears, and she helps them in the surroundings that will best aid their recovery.

Carlo: Such a position as you have just enunciated does not destroy the substance of my argument. So the poor are afraid. Let them be educated. We must move forward.

Stefano: But do we move forward when we forget men are creatures, even better, children of God? You cannot treat them like broken chairs that are taken to a carpenter for mending. That is not progress. Caterina has found the way that is best, it seems to me: she goes to the hospital and spends days and nights there with those who are not afraid of such places. But she also has care of those who do not go to the hospitals. She takes care of all sides of the problem.

Carlo: You do not seem to understand me. Perhaps I am prejudiced against the woman. But that is not the point. She has made a

virtue of imprudence. God does not want us to act as if He had given us no common sense.

Stefano: I should agree with you, if you could give me even one instance of a case of disease that could be traced to her. But you have none. Moreover, you talk of imprudence! What about the imprudence that fails to grasp the fact that dying men must meet their Creator after death. You know as well as I that people will hide, rather than go to a hospital. They refuse to let anyone, except members of their family, know that they are sick. And as a matter of course, since we are all optimists as far as death is concerned, nothing is done to provide such poor wretches with the Last Sacraments. The wife says: "Oh, Lorenzo will not die tonight. Time enough to call the priest tomorrow." And Lorenzo dies while his family dozes by the bedside. Caterina has devised a means for discovering who is in need of the Church's consolation. It is taken for granted in the city that she will visit the homes of those who are sick; they are not afraid of her, as they would be of the doctors who prescribe the hospital. And her experience with the sick gives her the opening that is necessary to any approach concerning death. It is a hard thing, Carlo, to tell a man that he is dying.

Carlo: I think that you will become one of her followers, you are so eloquent in her defense. But I am not concerned with emotional tirades. She does not follow the accustomed path in her dealings with the sick. She appears in public places after being with them. She talks to little children in the streets, her words fetid with pestilence!

Stefano: You go too far! You must respect her courage, if you do not like her methods. But I say again that her methods have proven themselves. No, they are not the customary way of dealing with the sick; but if we follow what is implicit in your main argument against her, we should call in my cousin Bernabò with his mercenaries and kill off all those in the hospitals and in sick-rooms. Then there would be no danger of infection—and so there would be no people. I cannot believe that you are serious, Carlo. The whole city proclaims her a saint; the government sends her on ambassadorial missions to settle wars. Do you think that their intention is to wipe out other city states by sending a dangerous animal foaming at the mouth to infect the leaders of these states? Of course not. It is just that there are some men in the government intelligent enough to recognize that this woman is from

God, a sanctifying gift to our people, and they are wise enough to use the gift of God. And if she demonstrates her holiness in the political realm, why should you think of her as a devil in the commonwealth of the sick? I am ashamed of you, my friend.

Carlo: Of course! I am the villain! But you mark my words, Stefano. When we grow out of our scholastic ways, when the New Learning has finally attained its zenith, when men do not swim against the tide of progress, then we shall have no more Caterina Benincasa and those of her type, who insist on endangering the health of the republic with outrageous schemes of private hospitalization, with diabolical methods of spreading disease. She is a plague, worse than the Black Death. I am one who awaits the end of the Plague!

Stefano: You are now the emotional one. Get back to reason. And listen closely to me. If there should ever come a time when the world does not possess such heroic souls as Caterina Benincasa; when there are no more people left to care about the woes of humanity in a human, and divine, way; when men are collected into hospitals like animals herded into a compound; when no one remains to supply for human ignorance and fear with methods of ingenuity and kindness, then is the time for the Plague to embrace the whole world in its pestilent arms. I am not against the growth of the hospitals; I do not disparage the work of women like the Sisters at La Scala. But I emphatically thank God for someone with the genius of Caterina Benincasa who has willingly become all things to all men, even in the agonizing weariness and sadness of the sick-room. Think about this tonight, Carlo. I shall pray that you come to your senses and see the truth of what I say.

EPILOGUE

During the reign of His Holiness, Pope Pius XII, Caterina Benincasa, better known to the world as Saint Catherine of Siena, was declared Patroness of Women Nurses throughout the whole of Italy.