

## FRIARS' BOOKSHELF

### DANCING WITH SAINTS

Grazia Mangano Ragazzi, *Obeying the Truth*. New York: Oxford, 2014.

What is “Dominican spirituality,” and where does one find it? In St. Dominic’s *Nine Ways of Prayer*? In St. Thomas’s Eucharistic hymns? What about in the Carmelite mystics directed by Dominicans through the ages? Or perhaps in Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange’s *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*? With no satisfactory solution, one might ask in despair: Is there even such a thing as “Dominican spirituality” at all? Rather than giving rise to aimlessness or identity crises, I argue that this ambiguity allows for a certain freedom in spirituality; and at least with respect to the female saints of the Church, this freedom takes the form of a dance. Not an exclusive, prom-type event, mind you, but more like a friendly dance class where partners are chosen and changed throughout the night. Nevertheless, there are always some partners more desired than others, depending on the skill level and natural tendencies of the male dancer.

In my experience of the Dominican life this means that friars tend to have their favorite partners, female saints frequenting the friar’s prayers, homilies, lectures, and writings. Many waltz with St. Thérèse of Lisieux to her “Little Way,” others prefer the company of Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity. For the more philosophically inclined, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) offers sapiential steps. Of course St. Teresa of Avila is not alone on the dance floor, and I have even seen a brother hoping one day to take a turn with Dorothy Day! I myself favor fox-trotting with St. Faustina, however difficult it is to keep up with her multifarious movements of Mercy.

But there is one saint that is never without a Dominican partner: St. Catherine of Siena.



EDGAR DEGAS - DANCE CLASS AT THE OPERA

#### A GUIDE TO ST. CATHERINE

Why is St. Catherine such a solid spiritual guide for Dominicans? Grazia Mangano Ragazzi's new study, *Obedying the Truth: Discretion in the Spiritual Writings of Saint Catherine of Siena*, gives the answer up front: St. Catherine is a mystical theologian of the Truth. St. Catherine offers a particularly potent spirituality of truth in her fundamental virtue of discretion. Mangano Ragazzi's excellent work explicates this unifying virtue of St. Catherine in four acts: first, by discussing the authenticity and context of St. Catherine's main works; second, by closely studying these texts with an eye toward discretion and its synonyms; third, by tracing both the historical antecedent and contemporary influences on St. Catherine's notion of discretion; and fourth, by offering conclusions and applications of Catherine's understanding of discretion for

today. All of this is marvelously and brilliantly achieved in fewer than 200 pages! Upon completion, one gains not only a solid grasp of St. Catherine's key idea, but also St. Thomas's understanding of prudence, St. Augustine's notion of self-knowledge, and Cassian's spiritual asceticism, all of which form a key background and inspiration for Catherine's account of discretion.

#### CATHERINIAN DISCRETION

The dance image is more than a rhetorical ploy to interest readers; it also highlights the two aspects of discretion for St. Catherine: knowledge and action. In dance one must both *know* certain steps and patterns and *execute* these moves on the floor. So too for discretion: "Catherine's discretion may therefore be defined as knowledge and love of the truth *in action*" (179). Unfortunately, according to Mangano Ragazzi, this unity of knowledge and action in discretion is missed by the usual translation of the Italian *discrezione* as "discernment," bringing out only the theoretical or knowledge-based aspect of the term. Likewise, prudence, although almost synonymous with discretion in the tradition, is generally understood today as referring solely to action. St. Catherine's discretion offers the synthesis of both parts: knowing the truth and acting on it. But what exactly is discretion for St. Catherine? Discretion has three moments: (1) knowledge of God; (2) knowledge of self; and (3) virtuous action. Mangano Ragazzi summarizes these stages:

With the light of faith, the soul discovers that it is nothing in itself, given that its being and all the goods given to its being come from God. Knowledge of its nothingness and the depravity of sin, on the one hand, and of the infinitude of God, on the other, leads the soul into the valley of humility and love of God. Once the soul is immersed in this love, it experiences hatred and aversion toward its wrongdoings and yearns to pay its debt to God. Discretion

intervenes at this point in its guiding role, indicating how the soul should pay its debt to God, to itself, and to its neighbors (74).

**I**n the *Dialogue*, St. Catherine offers an image of a tree: the soul is a tree planted in a circle of true self-knowledge; the soil is humility which feeds the roots, and the branches are the good works done under true discretion. The subterranean part corresponds to knowledge of God and self (in humility), while the visible aspects are the “many-fragranced blossoms of virtue” (*Dialogue*, §10).

**S**t. Catherine’s discretion is a Christocentric account of prudence. This is not to say that prudence in St. Thomas lacks reference to Christ, but only that in St. Catherine’s understanding, the very person of Christ governs the discussion. St. Catherine counsels the soul to cultivate humility through knowledge both of one’s sinfulness and of redemption in Christ. This knowledge, namely truth about oneself and about God, at once hurts and heals and subsequently directs loving action.

#### LEARNING HOW TO DANCE AGAIN

**A**nyone attending a wedding realizes that the art of dancing has been lost to the modern world. Few know how to dance at all, and those who do certainly do not do it well, making many receptions less than they should be. So too the modern world lacks discretion. Moral action is often done without reflection, and the best moral reflection often fails to lead to any action. In a world that too often separates truth from life and theory from action, St. Catherine’s guiding principle of discretion, the unity of knowledge and deed, offers salutary wisdom to all:

Knowledge of the truth, which leads to love of the truth, becomes by extension that discernment that leads to its concrete application as practical knowledge in virtuous

action. In this way, discretion—as knowledge and love of the truth in action—emerges in the fullness of its role in guiding moral and spiritual action along that path that alone can lead to salvation: the path of Christ-the-bridge leading to union with God. (186–187)

**D**iscretion becomes the touchstone to recovery of true action in moral, political, and spiritual realms. In the moral realm, discretion discerns the shortcomings and sinfulness of many of our actions, while also directing our good works offered to God through our neighbors in thanks for Christ’s saving work. In the political realm, discretion “permits man to acquire his true freedom” (188), a freedom tied to a notion of the objective Good and a normative conception of human nature. Thus Fr. Tomáš Týn, O.P. (a beloved teacher of Mangano Ragazzi), reminds us that “in ethics freedom and obligation belong to each other” (*Dominicana* 56.2, 80). And in the spiritual realm, discretion “unites the mystical understanding of God as the true and good Being with man’s ethical understanding of the wretchedness of sin and the need for moral action in view of salvation” (186). Understood eschatologically, discretion invites us to join in the dance that is the divine life of the Trinity. But, before this great wedding reception of glory, we all need lessons, and there are few better instructors than St. Catherine, nor many better introductions to her thought than Mangano Ragazzi’s book, for Dominicans and all those seeking the ecstatic life of God.

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