

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA “MATER ET MAGISTRA”

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ABSTRACT: *«Medita, o lettore, di quanto merito fosse questa vergine, se la Regina del cielo si degnò di assisterla nel fare il pane per i suoi figlioli! Con ciò la madre del Figlio di Dio volle farci capire che mentre per mezzo di Caterina ci aveva dato un pane materiale così buono, voleva anche portarci il pane spirituale della parola di salvezza. Noi tutti di conseguenza chiamavamo mamma la vergine, perché lei era davvero per noi la mamma, che, senza pianti e senza affanno, ci partoriva giorno per giorno dal seno della mente, finché non si fosse divenuti esemplari di Cristo, e ci nutriva assiduamente col pane della sana ed utile dottrina».*

With a suggestive paradox, friar Raimondo of Capua describes Catherine of Siena. She who remained a virgin and built her identity in contrast with the role that her mother wanted for her, would in turn become the “divine mother” par excellence, or simply “la mamma”, as her disciples used to call her. My talk is divided in two sections. First of all, I focus on the meaning that the spiritual motherhood of saint Catherine of Siena had for her first biographers. This aspect that had very important historical implications and helped to redefine the pastoral perspectives of the Dominican Order and its location within the project of reform of the Church and of the civil society of its time. Afterwards, reflecting on Catherine’s writings, I try to focus on what terms she lived her maternal role in ways that will deeply innovate both the content and the form of spiritual direction. In fact, her motherhood is not a construction of her biographers and disciples, but corresponds to Catherine’s conscious assumption of a task which is the result of a precise mystical and theological intelligence of the Christian message.

Introduction

Talking about saint Catherine of Siena’s actuality is not an easy task for a historian, who is to reconstruct the *Sitz im Leben* of a text, a problem, a figure, trying to avoid ideological leaps forward. And more, what echo can find the words of this mystic in a post-Christian time,

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when the theological categories by which the medieval men measured themselves, the world and the history now appear worn out and meaningless?

Anyway, if the Middle Ages belongs to the past, the same holds either for the centuries of the modernity or the great ideologies of the twentieth century. The Europe of the third millennium is striving for a unity which, as the pandemic has taught us, cannot be exclusively based on economic principles, but also on the values of cooperation and solidarity, which are necessary to build a house for all.

Basically, Catherine faced a similar problem, i.e. the breakup of the ancient religion of unity, the shattering of the common horizon hardly earned over the long medieval centuries. Catherine was born in 1347, in the lead up of the Black Death, which changed the Latin West background, even though the demographic collapse was basically just one of the several factors, political, economic and cultural ones, that contributed to the decomposition and deconstruction of the ancient *Christianitas*. There, the great daughter of Siena was the witness and the voice of this transition, a terrible crisis that Catherine everyhow tried to avert, offering her own life as a holocaust for the *renovatio Ecclesiae*.

She did so by inviting the popes, the kings, the Italian cities, in short, the great powers of her time, to a political action aimed at the common good, therefore neither a clientele nor a particularist one. This was the Catherine's mission. As she wrote to the Florence priors and gonfalonier [1]:

«I signori naturali sono fatti tiranni. Al petto del Comune non si nutricano i sudditi con giustizia né carità fraterna; ma ciascuno con falsità e bugie attende al bene proprio particolare, e non al bene universale. Ognuno cerca la signoria per sé, e non il buono stato e reggimento della città»³.

She was not listened to and her political project did not find a fully fledged realization, but these words of a shocking actuality remain,

³ «Natural lords are tyrants. At the breast of the Commune the subjects are not nourished with justice or fraternal charity; but each one with falsehood and lies waits for his own particular good, and not for the universal good. Everyone seeks Lordship for himself, and not the good state and regiment of the City».

as well as her burning desire for a new and different world, a world of peace, guided by the transforming power of love.

Here I want to wonder where the virgin of Fontebranda drew the superhuman strength to fulfill her mission, and thus become the teacher and the mother of many souls, challenging the Church and the society conditionings of her time against a female power. I will briefly examine the theme of the Catherine’s motherhood in the memory of her spiritual children and, afterwards, in the writings of the Sienese mystic.

Catherine and Raymond of Capua

The starting point of my analysis is the *Legenda maior* by Raymond of Capua, confessor and hagiographer of the saint, as well as master general of the Preachers’ order [2]. Her biography, composed between 1385 and 1395, can be read as the exemplary novel of the transformation of a natural body into a Christic body, a “*passage ritual*” [3, 4, 5]. Its narrative structure is crystalline. Like any transitional rite, according to the formulation of the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep [6, 7], the development of the story is in fact spelled out into three phases:

1. The initiation, characterized by practices of self-denial and procedures of separation and self-exclusion, such that Catherine’s body, once removed from the natural and social order, can experience the state of “mystical death”, preparatory to her rebirth and new life as a Christic body;
2. The liminal phase, the real passage where the creature, once disintegrated, is left into an ambiguous condition, she is now devoid of attributes and is therefore capable of being completely remodeled.
3. The transfiguration of the body which, already transformed, can fully attain its supernatural fecundity.

At the beginning of the story, the daughter of the dyer Benincasa is a child well fed by her mother’s milk and very much loved – indeed she is her favourite –, and everybody admires her piety, wisdom and language precocity. But, when she is six years old, she has a vision of Christ that challenges her: «*What are you doing? Don’t you come to me?*». Catherine accepts this seduction and gets lost. The initial situation gets reversed. She gradually renounces food up to becoming unable to eat regularly, deprives herself of sleep, wears a cilice and whips herself to a

pulp with a chain. Her body, from the great and strong one that it was, shrinks and contracts. Eventually it comes to a standstill, in a symbolic immobility, neither alive nor dead.

Even her space is marked by a progressive retreat. At first, she locks herself up into her house, afterwards into her room, and eventually walls herself into the inner cell to deny herself even the word: she becomes mute. Between her and the Absolute, at this point, the last obstacle, the (dia-bolic) principle of division, is her family. Then Catherine replaces her carnal kinship with divine figures. She cuts her hair to set forth the irrevocability of the pact. Dividing, cutting: this is the path towards the union which, in the case of the Absolute, is drawn by what is subtracted.

In the anger of her brothers and in the desperation of her mother, guardian of the authority and of the tradition, we can see the clear awareness of an outrage, of a transgression. Catherine refuses the place that she is entitled to into the social order, she rejects its symbolic identification. She takes upon herself the humblest bodily functions, behaving as a servant in her own house, she disagrees to marry her brother-in-law, to fill the void left by her dead sister, to let her live again, according to the clan code [2].

At this point, Catherine has become a liminal creature: she has nothing, she is nothing. She has no *status*, property, rank and, therefore, no rights. Even her choice to join the Dominican 'mantellate' culturally remains an ambiguous one. Physically present, she makes herself structurally invisible. A paradoxical condition, source of scandal, so much that this family shame is also materially confined and removed from sight.

Her social unclassifiability – the result of a transgression to an order that does not abate in joining another Order, an institution that can guarantee identity and belonging – is also confirmed and strengthened in the achievement of her sexual unidentifiability. She would have liked – according to the hagiographer – to hide her femininity under men's clothes, retracing the footsteps of the heroines of the first monasticism. Her research of anonymity leads her to a no man's land, beyond the boundary of the original male/female distinction – neither one nor the other – because, as Christ explains to her: «*In front of me there is neither man nor woman, neither rich nor poor, all are equal*» [8]. The nudity, the silence, the poverty of the liminal condition are the com-

plex and symbolic transcription, in external and visible form, of the awareness achieved: «*You are the one who is not*» [2]. But positively, the disintegrating and dissolving processes bring with them the opening to all the possibilities, to the change of being, to a radical ontological transformation. At the peak of her work of subtraction, like a sculptor, Catherine in fact obtains a body that is no longer regulated by the biological order, but works according to the will of the Absolute. She comes out completely transformed and remodeled, because Christ imposes another nature on her. After the mystical wedding [2], He gives her a blood robe, a new heart and the crown of thorns. Catherine eats another food, the Eucharistic one and drinks the blood that flows from the Crucifix ribs. She completely identifies with him and takes on his physical connotations, stigmata, wounds. Her senses of spiritual perception are amplified: she sees and smells the sins and the virtues of the souls. She assimilates the extraordinary and saving power of the glorious body: levitation, superhuman strength, invulnerability to fire, stillness, gift of working miracles. Her movements are no longer a closing and a withdrawing one, but an opening and a going outward. Her body, until now held, controlled, contracted, expands, she comes out of it, in ecstasy, and spreads outside, into the world. Catherine leaves the cell, then the house, eventually Siena, and becomes a fertile mother of souls. By depriving the body of food, not accumulating, taking upon herself the physical and spiritual abjection of the others, Catherine returns her body to the sacred and re-establishes the redistribution of material and spiritual goods. Finally, by divine investiture, she also acquires the privilege of the word:

«The salvation of many souls demands that you return! You will no longer live the life that you have led up to now; the cell will no longer be your usual home; indeed, for the health of souls, you will also have to leave your city. I will always be with you: whether you leave or come back; and you will bring the honor of my name and my doctrine to the young and the old men alike, be they laymen, clerics or friars. I will put such a wisdom in your mouth, that no one will be able to resist it. I will lead you before the popes, the heads of the churches and the Christian people so that, by means of the weak people, as is my way of doing, I humiliate the pride of the strong ones» [8].

Catherine in the memory of her disciples

The *Legenda maior* builds up the founding image, the icon of Catherine. After her death, few years later, between 1411 and 1416, in Venice a process is opened to gather evidence of her holiness. Twenty-three witnesses come before. With the exception of two lay people, the rest belongs to the regular clergy, fifteen of them are Dominicans. They are fathers and, at the same time, sons of the “mother”, educated at her «*divine school*».

Thirty years after her death, the memories of her come back: the warmth of the bread and of the cakes that she kneaded and baked, the scent of the flower crowns that she wove for her sons, a note of serenity that breaks the sadness of the loss. Catherine fasted and nourished, suffered and served, above all she took upon herself the sins of everyone. The familiar gestures of ordinary life took turns with sensational miracles: the multiplication of bread, that of wine. The memory of the sons, now orphans, takes the place of the presence which they have been deprived of. With moving words, the Carthusian Stefano Maconi tells of her «*affectionate maternal charity*», of the power of her intercession, but also of an authority that no one was able to resist⁴ [9].

In the background there is also the urgency of a frontier for spaces to be strictly circumscribed. On the eve of the council of Constance, that will challenge saint Bridget’s charisms, the masters of the University of Paris, with the grand chancellor Gerson, bring up for discussion the question of *discretio spirituum* [10, 11]. At the heart of the testimonies, the urgency of defining the function and the modalities of transmission of the charism comes out, as well as that of justifying, at the ecclesiological level, Catherine’s apostolic mission and her work serving the community. At stake, there is also the question of the reform of the Dominican Order and that of the Church after the forty-year rift of the Schism.

⁴ *Processo Castellano*, pp. 230-242. Stefano Maconi (1350-1424) had become a disciple of Catherine since 1376: he had followed her on the occasion of the trip to Avignon and had been present at the time of transit. She played an important role in Catherine’s life, becoming her scribe and secretary. He became a Carthusian under the explicit command of Catherine and became prior of the Certosa di Pontignano, then of that of Pavia, where he died. He wrote his deposition at the request of Tommaso Caffarini.

The learned Preacher Friars refer to two founders: the holy mother Catherine and the blessed father Raymond. But the Mother prevails over the Father, in the name of a structure that assigns to women the transmission of the *mysteria Dei per scientiam infusam*, the femininity of the divine revelation and of its dwelling in the world. It is through the mother that the word comes and becomes body and discourse.

The *Legenda maior* thus becomes the narrative foundation of the Dominican Observance, it is the mythos of the origins. Above all, it is Tommaso da Siena Caffarini, who takes it upon himself, with a clear awareness. Looking at the franciscan friar Bartolomeo da Pisa, he develops the theme of the Catherine’s perfect conformity to Christ [9]. To crush the objections of the Franciscans, who claim for their founder the monopoly of the stigmata, he uses their own categories. He recalls the Catherine’s relationship with the other great mother of the fourteenth century Church, saint Bridget of Sweden. He also points out that Catherine, as a model of holiness, is superior to her being a virgin and a martyr, because she sacrificed herself giving her life for the pope and the Church. A very important point of his argument concerns the exercise of a female authority and, linked to that, a solution of the issue regarding the relationship between the female *magisterium* and the ordained priesthood, either in terms of the *munus docendi* or its sacramental level. Catherine prophesied and preached

«wherever and in every occasion, when it was possible for her to talk about heavenly things, she always did for her listeners, by recommending, preaching, arguing, explaining, dictating, traveling, persuading, exhorting, admonishing, correcting, praying, affirming, and praising».

She did all this – Caffarini specifies – in obedience to a precise divine command. What she said and wrote was learned by her in a supernatural way, *«miraculously and through prayer»*, and as much she communicated in the state of ecstasy, *«while she was alienated from the senses»* [9]. To cut off any potential tension and equivocal interpretation, Caffarini emphasizes that the work of maternal direction carried out by Catherine was actually aimed at strengthening the directorial roles of the fathers, thus resulting in a form of privileged apostolate for them. After all, the work of spiritual guidance, within some given parameters,

was allowed to women and considered of great utility and certainly encouraged [12].

At the end of the Middle Ages there is no confusion or overlapping between the charism and the institution: they are not alternative, but complementary. Anyway, as Stefano Maconi recalls, it was Pope Gregory XI himself who «*granted her the right to be helped by three confessors at the same time, equipped with every faculty*» [9].

The Venetian process confers a singular foundation license to the experiences of the female consecrated life, laying the premises for the flowering of the saints alive and of the Dominican tertiary women who, between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, will refer themselves to the Catherine's prophetic model. From Giovanni Dominici to Antonino Pierozzi, the Observant fathers will engage in training the new generations of mothers and teachers, women capable of intervening, advising, exhorting with their «*spiritual conversations*», whose effectiveness is strengthened by the peculiar feminine gift of knowing the hearts secrets.

The spiritual motherhood

So far we have focused on the reception of the Catherinian charism and on its historical repercussions. I would now like to take a step back to reflect on how Catherine herself internalized her own directorial and maternal role. In the *Legenda maior* there is a wide mention of Catherine's tormented and extremely difficult relationship with her mother, who is even given the role of a negative teacher in the process of her daughter's formation. Catherine's spiritual motherhood seems to be constituted precisely as an opposition to the exceptional biological fecundity of *monna* Lapa.

The historiographic operation can be carried out in establishing an etiology of behaviors. Using the theoretical model of the psychoanalysis, Catherine's fasting, her «*holy anorexia*» [13, 14], has been read as an expression of an unresolved relationship with the cumbersome maternal figure, the refusal of marriage as a result of childhood and adolescence traumas: the death of her twin sister when still breastfeeding and that of the beloved sister Benvenuta during her delivery. A sociological analysis has instead emphasized the growing constraint that the new marriage strategies of the late medieval family imposed on women,

sacrificed on the altar of the lineage interests and less and less owners of their bodies and of their goods [15].

These are plausible and rational explanations, but they have a symptoms value. They get stuck at the threshold of the horizon of meanings within which Caterina reformulated her own experience, thus risking to hide her essential purpose. Catherine addressed four letters of her enormous epistolary to her «*disconsolate mother*», few perhaps, if measured against the anguish of Lapa Benincasa. But she reassures her: she is not to think of having been «*abandoned neither by God nor by me*». The distant daughter knows her suffering, her difficulty to understand: «*All this happens because you love more that part I took from you, than that which I have drawn from God, your flesh, with which you dressed me*». She then begs her mother to abandon «*every disordered tenderness*», to deprive herself of her «*sensitive love*», and to let her go, in order to finally become «*mother not only of my body, but of my soul*». She asks her to follow the example of the Virgin, who «*gives herself and her children, and all her things, and her life for the honor of God*», and not to be afraid to remain «*alone, hosted and pilgrim*» like her [16]. The solitary grief of the Mother of God at the foot of the cross is a strong moment in the spirituality of Catherine, who, in the Dominican sign, has a profound devotion for the Virgin.

However, her mystical experience of motherhood finds its first reason in the Christology. In Catherine’s vision, fully included in the Scholastica theological framework, Christ is, above all, the Redeemer, since only his being God makes the salvation possible for men; his sacrifice cancels the sins, his blood – of an absolutely innocent victim, as required by the law of sacrifice – buys back humanity by paying the ransom. It is therefore both an act of justice and an act of love⁵ [17].

But in the Incarnation, the mystery of the human-divine union is also fully realized: «*man is made God and God has become man for the union of the divine and human natures in Christ*» [18], she writes in the *Dialogue*. This is why the fundamental image of Christ in the Catherine’s

⁵ Claudio Leonardi wrote: «*Il suo vedere profetico è anche un vivere mistico: la sua immedesimazione in Cristo è nella linea di Francesco e di Geltrude; Caterina considera Cristo come il salvatore dal peccato, ma anche come chi inonda con il suo sangue vitale l’umanità ferita e la rende così divina: la sua cristologia è insieme soteriologica e unitiva*» (C. LEONARDI, *Il Cristo: V. Testi teologici e spirituali da Riccardo di San Vittore a Caterina da Siena*, Milano 20064, p. XXII).

writings is that of the body of God who dies so that men can nourish themselves and live:

«*It is convenient for us, dearest mother, to do as the child does, who, wanting to take the milk, seizes the breast of his mother and puts it in his mouth, so that by means of the flesh he draws the milk to himself; and we have to do the same, if we want to nourish our soul: we must cling to the breast of Christ crucified, that is the mother of charity*» [19].

The image of Christ as a nanny, his nursing breast recalls the painful and terrible fecundative power of the mother, who gives birth with the sacrifice of her own flesh in the shedding of her blood, and nourishes with her own milk. Similarly, the adored body of Christ is habitable and is a container, an open and vulnerable space, each time a cave, an open small shop, a gushing river, a little barrel that continually leaks water, milk and blood.

The theology of the motherhood of God was deeply rooted in the medieval thought [20]. The issue had been opened in the twelfth century by Hildegard of Bingen, who had seen in the Incarnation almost a second creation, and in Christ both the father and mother of the new humanity. Therefore Christ, as a new Adam, shares a common trait with Eve, since her birth, *non ex semine, sed caro ex carne*, presents similarities with that of his progenitor: not having had a human father, the flesh of Christ is taken from his mother⁶ [21].

For this reason, in the *Liber divinorum operum*, Hildegard had come to explicitly affirm that «*man truly means the divinity of the Son of God, and the woman his humanity*» [22]. If the Father is the sign of the power

⁶ HILDEGARDIS, *Scivias*, ed. by A. FÜHRKÖTTER, A. CARLEVARIS, Turnholti 1978 (CCCM, 43), III, Visio 3, 8, p. 380: «*Et sicut mulier suavior est viro, sic est misericordia suavior rabida insania criminum in insania peccatoris, priusquam cor eius visitetur a Deo; sicut et eadem virtus in muliebri forma apparet, quondam in femminea castigate causa virginea materia surrexit in ventre Mariae suavissima misericordia, quae sempre erat obumbrata in Patre, donec Pater eam visibilem ostendit per Spiritum Sanctum in utero Virginis [...]. Per viscera paternae misericordiae salvatio est; quia absconsum in corde Patris erat, ut viscera manent in nomine, quod Filius eius in fine temporum incarnaretur, ubi visitavit Deus homines. Quomodo? Celesti scilicet pane qui Filius eius est, natus in carne ex Maria Virgine, qui veniens ex alto, id est de corde Patris exiens, praebeuit maximam quaerentibus se misericordiam*».

of the divine, in the Incarnation, lived with the acceptance of the human weakness, the mystery of his love and mercy becomes present and visible⁷ [23, 24].

But Hildegard still remains within the monastic tradition. When this theological datum is transferred to the experience level, it gives shape to the new language of female mysticism, where total intimacy with Christ is sought as participation to his suffering. This is also the great problem of Catherine: the possibility of repeating the event of the Incarnation in every man, as a historically tangible reality as it is in the Eucharistic flesh.

It is no longer, via contemplation, the overcoming of this finite and changing world to reach the eternal and immutable Being, because what her life and her writing testify is the attempt to leave always open the possibility that the Being happen. In other words, we could say that it is a way of posing oneself, towards the Being, in a maternal relationship, of generating it, of making it come to light. The attention shifts from knowing, or contemplating, to doing [25].

It is no news: similar expressions may be found in Hadewijch of Antwerp, who feels the love growing in her womb, in Gertrud of Hef-

⁷ In an important study on Hildegard's theology, Barbara Newman has emphasized a dichotomy in her thought. According to this scholar, on the one hand, Hildegard exalts femininity (it is the flesh of the woman who saves the world), on the other hand she reaffirms the social and ecclesiastical subordination of women. See B. NEWMAN, *Sister of Wisdom. St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*, Berkeley 1987. In fact that position appears perfectly consistent with Hildegard's christology. If, in the person of Christ, the divine part is masculine, it follows that only men can represent God. Hildegard, in fact, is absolutely opposed to the female priesthood: «*Sed femina non per semetipsam, sed de viro infantem concipit, sicut nec terra per semetipsam arare non potest, ita nec femina in officio consecrationis corporis et sanguinis Filii mei sacerdoti comparanda est, quamvis in laude creatoris sui sonare possit, ut et terra omnem fructum profert, ita etiam et in femina omnis fructus boni operis perficitur [...]. Et quondam femina virili habitu vestiri non debet, ideo etiam ad officium altaris mei non accedet, quia virilem personam nec in capillis nec in vestitu suo demonstrabit*» (HILDEGARDIS, *Scivias*, II, *Visio* 6, pp. 290-1). But since Christ as a human being shares the feminine values (gynecomorphic humanity), it follows that a man can really imitate him only doing the same. These assumptions are internalized in the late Middle Ages Western spirituality. Female writers motivate the privilege of their visions and revelations by appealing to God's instrumental use of their weakness to manifest themselves. On the other hand, Hildegard does not question the priestly power: it is precisely the common devotion to the Eucharist that places women in a condition of dependence on the priests who administer it.

ta, who, on Christmas Eve, feels to be pregnant of the divine Child. But Catherine goes further: the singularity of her experience is that of having brought to its extreme consequences the mystical intuition of God's complete involvement in the history and of having transferred the theme of the spiritual motherhood from a personal moment to a collective one. If Christ, as Thomas Aquinas had taught, is the man «for the others», come into the world for the men redemption, Catherine assumes the same role of Christ to obtain the salvation of the souls⁸ [18].

The identification, the complete christification of Catherine implies, as a necessary consequence, the commitment to the co-redemption of the world [26]. In this sense, she integrates the mystical experience, as the life of the person in God, with His presence in the history. This is the prophetic sign that Catherine left.

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⁸ Catherine's christology is in perfect continuity with the Thomist doctrine: «*Il Cristo è dunque [per Tommaso] soprattutto un uomo per gli altri, piuttosto che un uomo per sé. È appunto uomo per la redenzione dell'uomo, non uomo per la gloria di Dio. Per questa ragione Tommaso pone un nesso molto forte tra teologia sacramentale e cristologia, che occupano il medesimo terzo trattato della Summa. La Chiesa assume lo stesso ruolo di Cristo per ottenere la salvezza degli uomini. Tommaso intravede l'assoluta identità tra la Chiesa e Cristo, e ciò ha una grande importanza, indipendentemente dai modi in cui storicamente si è tematizzata la sua ecclesiologia*» (LEONARDI, *Il Cristo*, p. 163).

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