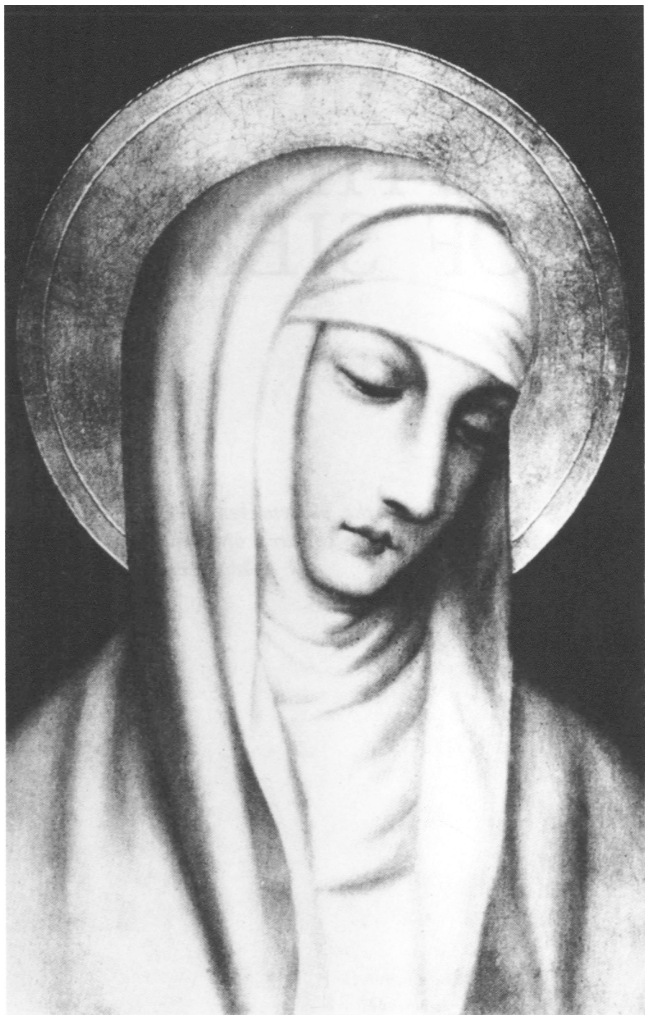


SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA

*“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they
shall be called the children of God.”*

—Matthew 5:9



Saint Catherine of Siena

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA

1347–1380

By

F. A. Forbes

*“Who shall find a valiant woman? Far and
from the uttermost coasts is the price of her.”*

—Proverbs 31:10

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Cover illustration: The young St. Catherine cutting her hair in order to avoid betrothal. Fresco by Alessandro Franchi. Photo: B. N. Marconi, Genoa, Italy.

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“Thanks be to the Highest God Eternal,
who has placed us in the battlefield as knights
to fight for His Bride with the shield of holiest faith.”

—Letters of St. Catherine of Siena



Photo: Alinari

St. Catherine of Siena praying for the soul of a criminal about to be executed. (Detail from a painting by Sodoma, 1477-1549, in the Church of St. Dominic, Siena).

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Photo: Alinari

Famous portrait of St. Catherine of Siena painted by
Andrea Vanni (1332-c.1414), one of Catherine's disciples.
(Portrait in the Church of St. Dominic, Siena).

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA

“She glorifieth her nobility by being conversant with God: yea and the Lord of all things hath loved her.”

—Wisdom 8:3

Chapter 1

THE SUNSHINE OF FONTEBRANDA

“By a certain excess of joy they took from her her proper name, calling her not Catherine, but Eufrosina, nor know I by what instinct.”
—*Fra Raimondo of Capua*

TOWARD the south of Tuscany, enthroned on her three hills, her quaint old towers soaring into the blue Italian sky, stands Siena, the city of the Virgin. Few of the cities of Italy have changed so little in the course of the centuries as she. The frowning walls of a medieval stronghold still surround her, broken here and there by great gates on whose brick arches the blue and crimson and gold of the fourteenth century painters yet linger. Her old palaces, her gorgeous cathedral, her noble churches, her steep and narrow streets have changed but little in the last six hundred years.

The very name of Siena seems to bring with it a fragrance of lilies. It is the city of the Virgin Mother of God, solemnly dedicated to her

in the year 1260, on the eve of the great battle of Montaperti, when the citizens of Siena won a glorious victory over the rival republic of Florence.

"Follow me now," cried the leader of the Sienese army, fitly named Buonaguida, "let us surrender ourselves, our city, with all our rights, to the Queen of Eternal Life, to Our Lady and Mother, the Virgin Mary. Follow me, all of you, with purity of faith and freedom of will to make this offering." Three days of thanksgiving followed on the victory, and for centuries after the favorite subject of the painters of Siena was that "Lady and Mother" who had helped their city in her need.

Not quite a hundred years after the battle of Montaperti, in the year 1347, there was born to Jacomo Benincasa, a well-to-do dyer of Siena, and his wife Lapa, a little daughter who was destined to be the glory of her native city and one of the most remarkable women of her time. The child, who was the youngest of a large family of sisters and brothers, was christened Catherine; but the little maid was so sweet and lovable, her winning ways and innocent baby talk had such power to comfort and cheer those who were sad or in trouble, that the neighbors called her "Eufrosina" or "Joy." Monna Lapa would often miss her little daughter and find that she had

been carried off by someone who was feeling lonely or sorrowful, and loud would be the outcries when the mother appeared to take possession of her baby. The sunshine that played round the golden head of the little Catherine seemed to have found its way into her heart, so happy was she, so innocently wise her childish sayings and so gentle the touch of her tiny hand.

It was a matter of course in Siena that every child should love the Blessed Virgin, but Catherine seems to have had a special devotion from her earliest babyhood to the Virgin Mother of God. As soon as she could speak she learned the Hail Mary, and she would kneel to say it on every step as her little feet climbed up the steep staircase of her father's house.

We are told that Monna Lapa, watching from the kitchen below, would often see the child carried from the top to the bottom of the stairs by the hands of Angels and would tremble lest she should fall. The things of Heaven seemed already as familiar to her as the things of earth, and she was not yet seven years old when she saw the first of those wonderful visions which were to become so frequent in later years.

"Blessed are the pure of heart," said Jesus Christ, "for they shall see God." They see Him indeed, even in this life, by faith and by love, the two eyes of the soul. But to some of His

Saints, whose one desire is to preserve that purity of heart in the midst of the corruptions of the world, He "who feedeth among the lilies" reveals Himself in a more close and intimate manner. The veil that hides the spiritual world from the world of sense is for a moment withdrawn and the creature is allowed to hear the sounds and see the sights of Paradise.

Visions and ecstasies are hard things to understand, but they ought not to be hard to believe. God is the same in all ages—yesterday, today and forever. He who showed Himself to Paul on the road to Damascus, and in vision after vision to St. John on the Isle of Patmos, can show Himself and has shown Himself to His servants even in these days of ours when faith and love are weak. Some people will not believe the things they cannot prove and test by human methods, but to others the fact that the mysteries of the Infinite God are beyond their finite understanding is the strongest proof of the faith they cherish.

The little Catherine had been sent one day with her brother Stephen to the house of their married sister Bonaventura. As the two children on their way home passed the fountain of Fontebranda, Catherine, who was looking up at the Church of St. Dominic which stands on the opposite hill, saw in the heavens the figure of

Our Lord robed and crowned pontifically. He stretched out His right hand and blessed her solemnly with a smile of surpassing sweetness. The child stood rooted to the ground, knowing nothing of what was passing around her, her eyes fixed on the beautiful vision, rapt in wonder and joy.

Stephen, missing her at his side, turned to look for her. "Catherine!" he cried, but the child seemed not to hear him. "Catherine, Catherine!" he repeated, running to his little sister and pulling her by the hand with all his strength, "what are you doing? Why do you look up like that?" At this the little girl seemed to come to herself. She burst into tears, for at his touch the vision had vanished. "Ah," she said, "if you had seen what I saw you would never have pulled me away," but she did not tell her brother what had happened. It was not till years afterwards, when it had become a habitual thing for her to see and converse with Our Lord, that she told her confessor of this early vision of her childhood.

After this first glimpse into Paradise, Catherine became more silent and thoughtful. She had seen the King in His beauty, and He had drawn her young heart to Him forever. A short time afterwards she made a vow to the Blessed Virgin to consecrate herself to God. "Here I give my faith and promise," said the child aloud,