

**SAINT
CATHERINE
OF SIENA**

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OF SIENA**

ALICE CURTAYNE

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HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

CATHERINE BENINCASA's lifetime (1347–1380) covers that interval of change, during which the true and splendid Middle Ages merged into the definite period of their decline and decay.

Before she was a year old, a cataclysm swept over Europe in the form of a monstrous epidemic. Under the high, dappled sky of January 1348, three trading vessels from Caffa, on the Crimea, sailed into Genoa. They had fled before the plague, but brought it with them: something more sinister on board than a dead albatross. When it was discovered, they were chased out of port again, but not before they had thoroughly infected the city. Six sevenths of the population were swept away, almost wiping out that great maritime republic. The stricken ships sailed out of the Gulf and at least one of them put in later at Marseilles, thus providing Europe with another source of death. Venice, too, harbored suspect ships about the same time. All of Italy was ravaged by the disease. Then the malignant tongue of infection forked, darting across the Adriatic, to Hungary, Austria, Germany, Poland, and striking north into Switzerland. By the Spring, Spain too was full of the poison. Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and the Balearic Islands were devastated. From Marseilles, the pestilence raced up the Rhone valley, through the Languedoc, to Flanders and Holland. It was in England by July, devouring

London, almost depopulating Oxford and Cambridge. When the Scots heard of it, they thought it a convenient judgment of God on their enemies and invented a new oath: "Be the foul deth of Engelond." But it swept over the Border too, bringing ruin to Scotland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

The effects of this catastrophe came slowly, of course. The immediate survivors did not perceive any great change in the world about them. It was at least a quarter of a century before the results began to tell. They were, therefore, becoming obvious when Catherine Benincasa was grown up. Change was then apparent everywhere. After the Black Death, the feudal system was no more; the vernacular languages sprang up (England emerged from it, speaking English). Dante and Boccaccio illustrate the transition: On one side of the bridge of death, Dante almost apologizes for using the vernacular; he has to defend the novelty. But in Catherine's day, Boccaccio takes such use for granted. The Renaissance began to stir, making tense this epoch of transition. Doubt disturbed the serene faith of the true Middle Ages and spoke through every medium of expression: the more realistic painting, the complex and ornate architecture, the thousand foppish fashions.

The effect on the Church concerns us most. The Black Death shook it at a moment when it was ill-prepared. The papacy had already lost prestige. The dissolvent of plague completed the evil begun by Philip IV of France. This monarch, whose cold, empty stare used to unnerve his courtiers, had been absorbed all through his reign in his quarrel with Pope Boniface VIII. Without entering into the details of this historical struggle, it is certain that the closing scene of it had a profoundly depressing effect on the Christian world.

Emissaries of Philip (this queer grandson of St. Louis), one William de Nogaret and Sciarra Colonna, with a mob of hired soldiers, invaded the papal palace of Anagni where the pope was residing. The somewhat intransigent Boniface bore himself with great dignity. A Florentine chronicler tells us that he waited impassively for the intruders, wearing all the pontifical insignia and seated on his throne. Colonna burst in first and is said to have struck the pope with his mailed hand. Dismayed despite himself by the tiara, keys, and cross, De Nogaret restrained his companion. Boniface was kept a close prisoner for three days. He was then permitted to return to Rome, where he died a month later of high fever brought on by the outrage. Philip may be said to have won. Boniface's successor, Benedict XI, died within a year and then the French king succeeded in having elected a friend of his own, Bertrand de Got, who was crowned at Lyons in 1305 and took up his residence at Avignon under the name of Clement V. The papacy then became and remained for seventy years more or less an instrument in French hands, a fact which continued to exasperate the rest of Christendom. This Philip the Fair was extraordinarily tenacious in his hates. It is remarkable how he pursued the dead pope beyond the grave. He pestered Clement for *six* years to have Boniface condemned as a heretic and an immoral priest, and to have his body exhumed and burned. Clement, so compliant in all else, resisted this stubbornly enough. But Philip did not cease until angry mutters began to rise against him throughout Europe and three Catalan knights made a general challenge that they would defend the name of Boniface with their swords.

When the residence of the popes in Avignon had become an established fact, the Black Death further injured the Church, by making impossible the continuance of its best traditions. In order to exist, monasteries and religious communities everywhere had to make up their numbers hastily by curtailing their usual careful training and selection of religious. The evil effects of this were lasting. Most of these groups never again recovered their former numbers and a great part of the new members, hurriedly gathered in, proved unsuitable and thus sapped discipline and impaired the perfection of community life. The same happened in the ranks of the secular clergy. In order that public worship might continue, very young and often uneducated clerics had to be ordained. At the same time, the old Church revenues were kept in force and this brought about a great growth in the already existing abuse of pluralities. Priestly prestige was lowered through this forced abandonment of the traditional standards and through irritation over the question of revenues.

The weakening of the Holy See's independence and the harm wrought in the Church by the Black Death, explain—sufficiently for our purpose—the state of ecclesiastical affairs which provoked the action of this story.

Catherine Benincasa, when hardly more than a girl, set out on the amazing venture of trying to restore to the Church some part of what it had lost. Before she died, she had become one of the most-discussed women of her day. All the crowned heads of Europe knew her. It was debated whether she was a fanatic, a witch, an impostor, or a saint. She contrasted sharply with all the women of her epoch who had provoked anything like the same general discussion. Therefore, to seize

the rare novelty of her position, one must visualize these contemporary women who had won fame or notoriety, and see them grouped on the stage of history behind her.

The only one who the least resembled her in type and action was St. Bridget of Sweden. It would be impertinent, as well as invidious, to attempt a comparison in sanctity, but one may point out the material difference in the position of the two women. St. Bridget worked in a far more restricted sphere and not until she was of mature age, the mother of a large family. Further, she had the advantages of great rank and means and, as her marriage was most happy, she was helped by her husband. In her case, there was none of the sheer audacity, the harebrainedness which distinguished Catherine, who fought alone, with no weapons, save the spiritual.

There was no other woman whose name could be coupled with hers. Occasionally an ordinary woman distinguished herself by prowess in war: in a siege, or some such extremity, rising to physical heroism. Of course under the influence of the troubadours, of the first poets of the Renaissance, and in imitation of Dante's idealization of Beatrice, there was a large group of women famous as the Inspirers of Great Love, like Laura, Fiammetta, Becchina, and the rest.

Last in the scale were the notorious for immorality. *Their* number was legion, but three principally were of European fame. Philip IV of France had a daughter, Isabella, who inherited all his ruthless vindictiveness. She became the protagonist in the most odious episode in English history. She was married to Edward II before she was sixteen, and her hatred of her husband was remarkable. One of the king's rebellious

nobles, Roger de Mortimer, was her lover. He had been imprisoned in the Tower by Edward, but escaped to France, where the queen joined him. This pair returned to England as invaders in 1326. Edward fled with his favorite, but he was caught and asked to surrender the throne. He refused. He was, therefore, moved about from prison to prison, at his wife's pleasure, for nine months, exposed to every manner of hardship. His health withstanding the treatment, he was finally murdered. When Isabella's son attained his majority, he had his mother imprisoned. She was still alive in her manor in England, when Catherine Benincasa, at the age of fifteen, was already mapping out her course.

This Isabella had a young relative in Naples, Queen Joanna, who was a kind of twin soul. (It was a bad strain of blood.) She was beautiful. All these women were, more or less. Since they devoted their lives to the cult of the body, it would be odd if they had not succeeded in *that*. This queen of Naples was particularly seductive and had the distinction of shocking the European courts, which were not easily scandalized. She, too, had been married at sixteen to her cousin, Andrew of Hungary. She detested him. One of her most notable intrigues was with Louis of Tarente, another cousin. The affair was made abominable by the fact that the mother of this Louis fostered it to the extent of her power, thinking it a good idea to get Andrew out of the way and make her own son king of Naples. This was done. One night, Andrew was strangled by one of his courtiers. Joanna thereupon married Louis and was later publicly (though never popularly) absolved from complicity in her first husband's murder. She had four husbands before her career was ended and

no children. Finally, she was killed by her nephew, Charles; smothered in a feather bed, it was said. She was at the height of her notoriety when Catherine was already famous. Their action conflicted and they resisted each other in a prolonged and formidable struggle.

Spain provided a similar example in Doña Leonora, the mistress of Alfonso XI. People whispered about the awful patience of his wife, Queen Maria of Portugal. Not an inspiring patience though, but repellent, like that of an animal, who squats and waits. Unfortunately for Leonora, Alfonso died first and then the queen swooped on her rival. She got her son to murder her. The hatred of these two lived on in their children. It was the motive of the wars waged by Peter the Cruel, who was ultimately assassinated by his step-brother. When Catherine was a child, Leonora was busy spinning this amazing web of evil. For generations afterwards there seemed to be no end to it.

Isabella of France, Joanna of Naples, Doña Leonora: an unpleasant group. Consider them long and one is almost ready to applaud John Knox's famous *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. They would have understood one another perfectly. The influence of their type was enormous. They were securely entrenched.

On all counts, therefore, Catherine's fame was unprecedented and unique. To make Truth even audible in that confusion of voices meant to prevail most powerfully. And around her a silence fell. This preeminence made her final defeat all the more spectacular. Subsequent history of course has reversed this verdict of failure and vindicated her action. But the judgment of later centuries must not obscure the

truth that in her own day, in the general view, she failed disastrously. Her real story is one of overwhelming disgrace and disappointment.