



CATHERINE OF SIENA'S ADVICE TO RELIGIOUS WOMEN¹

CONSEJOS DE CATALINA DE SIENA A LAS MUJERES RELIGIOSAS

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Abstract: This essay begins with the paradox that Catherine of Siena, perhaps the most famous uncloistered religious woman in the Middle Ages, became after her death an authority and model for cloistered monasticism for women during the Dominican reform movement. But the dissonance in the idea of Catherine as a model for cloistered religious women is heightened by false assumptions or oversimplifications of Catherine's religious status, and of what it meant for Catherine to be a model for this or that form of religious life. This essay surveys Catherine's letters to religious women, including letters to penitents or *mantellate* and letters to abbesses and nuns in monasteries. While Catherine's letters to penitents and other women living in the world focus on the challenges of living without a formal religious rule, her letters to nuns focus on the importance of their maintaining claustration, following their rule,

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and on the dangers of wealth—a recognition of the generally higher social and economic standing of monastic women. Catherine seems also to identify certain kinds of prayer with monastic life. It is important to remember that Catherine herself founded a monastery, and while it remains unclear what precisely her intentions were for this community, it is another sign of Catherine's interest in and commitment to cloistered religiosity. The essay concludes by arguing for a more nuanced understanding of what it might have meant for Catherine to be a model for specific forms of religious life.

Keywords: Catherine of Siena, women's religious life, Dominican reform movement, lay penitents, female monasticism.

Resumen: Este ensayo comienza con la paradoja de que Catalina de Siena, quizás la religiosa no enclaustrada más famosa de la Edad Media, se convirtió después de su muerte en una autoridad y modelo para el monaquismo enclaustrado para mujeres durante el movimiento de reforma dominicano. Pero la disonancia en la idea de Catalina como modelo para las religiosas enclaustradas se ve acentuada por las suposiciones falsas o las simplificaciones excesivas del estatus religioso de Catalina, y de lo que significaba para Catalina ser un modelo para una u otra forma de vida religiosa. Este ensayo examina las cartas de Catalina a mujeres religiosas, incluyendo cartas a penitentes o manteladas y cartas a abadesas y monjas en monasterios. Mientras que las cartas de Catalina a las penitentes y otras mujeres que viven en el mundo se enfocan en los desafíos de vivir sin regla religiosa formal, sus cartas a las monjas se enfocan en la importancia de mantener la clausura, seguir su regla, y en los peligros de la riqueza—un reconocimiento de la posición social y económica generalmente más alta de las mujeres monásticas. Catalina también parece identificar ciertos tipos de oración con la vida monástica. Es importante recordar que la propia Catalina fundó un monasterio, y aunque no está claro cuáles eran sus intenciones precisas para esta comunidad, es otra señal de su interés y compromiso con la religiosidad de clausura. El ensayo concluye abogando por una comprensión más matizada de lo que podría haber significado para Catalina ser un modelo para formas específicas de vida religiosa.

Palabras clave: Catalina de Siena, vida religiosa femenina, movimiento de reforma Dominicana, laicos penitentes, monacato femenino.



In 1377, Tora Gambacorta, a 15-year-old widow and the daughter of the *signore* of Pisa, Pietro Gambacorta, rejected her family's insistence that she remarry and secretly entered a Franciscan convent; her family rejected her decision and had her forcibly removed. But her resolve was strengthened by, among other things, letters of support from Catherine of Siena, whom Tora presumably had met in 1375 when Catherine visited Pisa at the invitation of Pietro Gambacorta. Eventually, Tora—now with the religious name Chiara—obtained her father's permission to enter the Dominican convent of Santa Croce in Fossabanda, just outside the walls of Pisa; when she found the religious life there too lax, Pietro Gambacorta built a new convent for her, in 1382, called S. Domenico. According to Ann Roberts, Chiara was “inspired by the example of Catherine of Siena” to make her convent a leader in the Dominican reform movement, and cultivated the convent's connection to Catherine through artistic commissions².

This relationship between Catherine and Chiara is consistent with a genealogy of Dominican female leadership cultivated by Tommaso Caffarini and Giovanni Dominici as they spearheaded the Dominican reform movement from the late 1390s, a cause to which Catherine's cult was closely linked³.

But we know that while Caffarini appropriated the cult of Catherine of Siena and other saintly women to the cause of Dominican reform, his genealogy was largely a retrospective fiction. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, for example, has shown that the Dominican “Order of Penance” to which Catherine of Siena supposedly belonged was in fact an invention of Caffarini, who thereby revamped the status of Dominican laywomen in order to bring Catherine, in particular, more securely into the Dominican family as an authority for refor-

² Roberts (2008, p. 9). Chiara was also influenced by a visit from Alfonso of Jaen, the former confessor of Birgitta of Sweden, who gave Chiara a copy of some of Birgitta's writings (probably a manuscript of the Revelations, which he was in the process of “publishing” from Naples). Birgitta—another conspicuously uncloistered saint—was also a model and authority for Chiara; Chiara also commissioned images of Birgitta for San Domenico. On Catherine's relation to religious life in Pisa and on Dominican reform, see Duval, 2015 and 2020.

³ This process is represented visually in an altarpiece by Andrea di Bartolo commissioned by Caffarini for the reformed female Dominican community of Corpus Domini in Venice, showing Catherine and four other Dominican mantellate (Freuler, 1987).



med Dominican female monasticism⁴. And anyway there is something fundamentally dissonant in the claim that Chiara Gambacorta founded S. Domenico “inspired by the example of Catherine of Siena.” Chiara was so determined to preserve the seal of the cloister that, during the political uprising in which Pietro Gambacorta was assassinated in 1392, when her brother sought refuge in S. Domenico, Chiara refused to allow him to violate their strict claustration. He fell into the hands of the enemies of the Gambacorti and died shortly thereafter. Catherine on the other hand was the most conspicuously uncloistered religious woman of her age, matched only by her predecessor, Chiara’s other avowed model, Birgitta of Sweden. What could Catherine (or Birgitta, for that matter) have to do with cloistered religiosity?

This question raises a larger one about how models and influences work in the religious life: what did it mean for Chiara to invoke the uncloistered Catherine as a model for cloistered religious life? In what remains of this essay I will try to address that question indirectly, by sketching in most basic terms, and mostly from her letters, Catherine’s take on various forms of religious life for women.

1. CATHERINE’S RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND THE QUESTION OF MODELS

Regarding Catherine’s relationship to the leadership of female Dominican reform, to survey her comments on religious life is to explore the question of religious reform at a moment in which the lines were not institutionally drawn, when at least formally the distinction between reformed and unreformed was not so clear, and when the project of a distinctly Dominican reform had yet to take shape. It is important to note that we do not know very much about Dominican female monastic communities in Italy before the reform movement; while the study of Dominican women in the German lands in the late Middle Ages has focused on communities of nuns, Italian scholarship has focused exclusively (or

⁴ Lehmijoki-Gardner (2004) has also drawn attention to the way in which Dominican women and not just the friars promoted the authority of Dominican saintly women as patrons (Lehmijoki-Gardner, 2007). On the question of Catherine’s religious status and its hagiographical representation, see also Luongo (2006).



nearly so) on the penitents—an effect probably of Catherine’s fame and of the success of Caffarini’s religious genealogy in tracing a direct line from Catherine to Chiara. We have therefore tended to assume the penitential model as a norm to an extent that it was not in practice. Even more basically, Catherine’s take on the religious life is interesting in part because she lived so decidedly outside the norms of any religious structure. She was of course a leader, but not the leader of an institution or a community with rules and so on. We need to take account of Catherine’s distance from the daily life of cloistered religion, for instance, when we read her response (Letter 30) to the complaints of the Abbess of the Sienese monastery of S. Marta about the more mundane burdens of her office: “things are only as temporal as we make them”⁵. Catherine of course knew well the weight of temporal things on a grand scale—relations between the Papacy and the Italian cities, for instance—but she had no experience of the mundane burdens of office. Indeed, from this perspective we might understand if the Abbess found Catherine’s advice presumptuous. But as I will show here, it really was not unusual for Catherine to give advice about cloistered religious life, and just as Chiara saw Catherine as a model it seems likely that the Abbess found Catherine’s letter edifying, or at least useful, despite Catherine’s distance from the cloister—or perhaps because of it.

A couple of preliminary points. First, scholars of Catherine’s spirituality often stress that her message was universal: she encouraged all her correspondents and followers to pursue lives of perfection in Christ, regardless of their status, and her understanding of religion in a deeper sense transcended distinctions between specific forms of religious life. I am not disagreeing at all with this point. Catherine’s main emphasis in her spirituality is on the interior cell as an ontological condition, not the actual cell as a form of religious life. This does not however mean that she did not understand or take interest in

⁵ “E se mi diceste le cose temporali, tanto sono temporali quanto le facciamo; e già v’ò detto che ogni cosa procede da la somma bontà: dunqu’è ogni cosa e buona e perfetta. Sì che non voglio col colore de le cose temporali schifiate la fadiga, ma voglio che sollecitamente e con occhio dirizzato secondo Dio siate sollecita: singularmente siate sollecita dell’anime loro.” The text of Catherine’s letters quoted in this essay is from the critical edition in progress by Volpato (2002, Letter 30), obtained through the website of the Centro Internazionale di Studi Cateriniani: <https://cutt.ly/aAomXmk>



the distinct way of life of those who inhabited actual cells, as well as of those who lived religious lives outside of cells⁶.

The ultimate universalism of her message does not mean that Catherine made no distinctions at all. Catherine addressed men and women, lay and religious, differently, depending on their situations. What I am interested in here is not her universal message, but the particular interest she showed in different forms of women's religious life and what she had to say about them.

Second, it is important not to oversimplify Catherine's own religious vocation or self-understanding. She was certainly influenced by a variety of monastic practices very different from the course of life she embraced eventually as a *mantellata* or penitent, including different forms of female monastic practice. According to her hagiography, Catherine as a child desired to be a hermit and sought solitude by hiding herself in a grotto outside the Porta di Sant' Ansano—in fact, an area that was in the fourteenth century inhabited by communities of female hermits, of whom Catherine was apparently aware (Thurber, 2012).

Catherine was certainly influenced by the English Augustinian hermit William Flete, who resided in community of Lecceto, outside of Siena; she may not have met him before 1376, but she certainly knew of him through the friars in her circle. It is not clear when Catherine first met cloistered women. She had an epistolary relationship with the Augustinian convent of Santa Marta within the walls of Siena, and the Benedictine convent of Santa Bonda, outside the walls, but her first significant encounter with female monasticism may have been when she visited the Dominican community of Sant' Agnesa in Montepulciano, probably in early 1374, and there is evidence in her letters from Montepulciano that this visit was a transformative experience.

And while Catherine was (obviously) not a cloistered religious devotee, it is also true that during the public phase of her career she was not in any usual sense a layperson. There is a sense in which any *mantellata* or *pinzochera* or penitent lived on the boundary between religious and secular states, but Catherine was much less of a layperson than the typical *mantellata*. And while Catherine is often referred to as a layperson, this designation oversimplifies her actual status. From 1374 she moved through the world under the protection of

⁶ On this point, see Bartolomei Romagnoli (2020, p. 145); Piatti (2020, p. 77), on Catherine's call for a "monachesimo commune," directed to laypeople as well as religious.



the Dominican Order and the papacy, and she occasionally identified herself as a member of the Dominican order—for instance, writing to Raymond of Capua about “our holy order” in letter 272.

A typical Dominican *mantellata* of Catherine's day would have had a relationship with the local Dominican church, but it seems unlikely that she would have thought of herself as a member of the Dominican Order in the way Catherine did. Catherine was of course not a typical *mantellata*, and it does not make sense to think of her as having a vocation to the *mantellate*, as such. In this context it is interesting to note that there actually was a community of Dominican nuns, the monastery of S. Caterina, inside the walls of Siena during Catherine's lifetime, where several of the friars in her circle served as chaplains and to which some members of the *mantellate* made bequests, but there was apparently no suggestion that Catherine might join that community; the monastery of S. Caterina is never even mentioned in Catherine's writings or her hagiography⁷. Vauchez has suggested that Raymond of Capua and Catherine's other Dominican advisors might have wanted her to become a *mantellata* rather than a nun as part of a strategy to use her sanctity and authority to reform Dominican monasticism from the outside (Vauchez, 2018, p. 22). And in her study of lay sanctity in medieval Italy, Doyno views Catherine's role in the creation of a monastic Third Order as the culmination of a process of regulating the independent penitential life out of existence that began before her (Doyno, 2019, pp. 242-81).

Perhaps Catherine's Dominican superiors saw her, from the start, as contributing to that process. Whether Catherine understood herself as advancing the transformation of the *mantellate* or Dominican monastic reform more generally is not clear. What is clear is that Catherine did not, except in rare circumstances, present her own mode of religious life as a model for others. I do not think there is any real contradiction between saying that Catherine's

⁷ The monastery of S. Caterina has never been studied, as far as I know; it seems that few are aware that there *was* a female Dominican convent in Siena during Catherine's life. Part of the reason is that the documents connected to S. Caterina are mislabeled in the archives as connected to the (later) cloistered Order of Penance—a misunderstanding in part a result of the pervasive influence of the Dominican genealogy invented by Caffarini, and in part an effect of the tendency to identify Dominican female religious life with the penitents.



message was universal and that she knew that she and her specific way of life were exceptional. Catherine's letters to religious women recognize the distinctness of different forms of religious life, including her own.

2. LETTERS TO RELIGIOUS WOMEN IN THE WORLD

While the *ad status* organization of Tommaso Caffarini's important manuscript collection of Catherine's letters groups separately letters to cloistered nuns and letters to "donne spirituali nobili e popolari di stato e abito secolare," the letters to "secular" women include several who lived in semi-formal or quasi-religious situations. Catherine's letters to these women address directly the unstructured and informal, or semi-formal, nature of their lives and communities or associations. Central themes are the importance of perseverance on the religious course these women have chosen. For example, to "Gianetta and Antonia, Caterina and others from Vercelli, those who have turned to Christ" Catherine writes "with the desire to see you continue to desire, with perfect perseverance, the virtue you have begun to desire, like the deer that desires running water"⁸.

Subsequent references to Mary Magdalen and language about her correspondents having turned from sinful lives—"recall to your memory the many efforts you have made in service of the devil"—suggests perhaps that these women might be converted prostitutes⁹. Other letters sent to women in Lucca all around the same time use similar language and are open to a similar interpretation: for example, letter 162 to Monna Franceschina, Monna Caterina, and two other spiritual companions in Lucca; letter 163 to Monna Franceschina

⁸ "A voi, carissime e dolcissime figliuole mie in Cristo Gesù, io Caterina, serva e schiava de' servi di Dio, scrivo e confortovi nel prezioso sangue del Figliuolo di Dio, con desiderio di vedervi, e così desidera l'anima mia, di vedervi con perfetta perseveranzia desiderare la virtù cominciata, come 'l cervio desidera l'acqua viva con desiderio di vedervi, e così desidera l'anima mia, di vedervi con perfetta perseveranzia desiderare la virtù cominciata, come 'l cervio desidera l'acqua viva" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 383).

⁹ "Recatevi nella memoria le molte fadighe che avete portate in servizio del dimonio; consolazione molto maggiormente ora doviamo sostenere ogni pena e fadiga, e dare el corpo nostro ad ardere e a cento mille migliaia di morti per lui" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 383).



alone; and letter 165 to Monna Bartolomea in Lucca. Perhaps all these women were members of a community of *convertite*?

Some her letters reveal how difficult it can be to draw the line between formal and informal religious associations. For instance, Catherine sent two letters (144 and 97) to “Monna Pavola da Siena” and her disciples, in Fiesole. The letters make it clear that Monna Pavola has authority over some other women, but in what kind of community?¹⁰ Caffarini places these letters in the “secular” group, not the monastic, and there is nothing in Catherine’s address to Monna Pavola to suggest that she is a nun. Catherine’s advice in letter 144 to “as much as is possible for you, cultivate the cell of the soul and of the body,” suggests that Monna Pavola was something like a penitent, whose “cell” in her own home could not be a permanent or constant dwelling place¹¹. What follows makes it even less likely that Monna Pavola and her followers were nuns:

What is more, my most sweet daughters, together as a splendid brigade [*bella brigata*], let us run and join ourselves to this Word. I invite you to the wedding of this joining, that is of shedding our blood for him, as he has shed his blood for you—that is, at the Holy Sepulcher, there to give your lives for him. The Holy Father has sent a letter with his seal to our provincial and to that of the Friars Minor and to Fra Raimondo, that they should enlist all who have a desire and will to go to retake the Holy Sepulcher and die for the holy faith. He wants them to send him a list of names, so I invite you to get ready¹².

¹⁰ On this question see Noffke (2000-2008, I, pp. 109-10).

¹¹ “E così vi prego, quanto sarà possibile a voi, di studiare la cella dell’anima e del corpo: ine vi studiate, per amore e per santo desiderio, di mangiare e parturire anime nel conspetto di Dio” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 144).

¹² “Or oltre, carissime figliuole: tutte di bella brigata corriamo e inestiamoci in su questo Verbo; e io v’invito a le nozze di questo inesto, cioè di spandare el sangue per lui, come egli l’ha sparto per voi, cioè al santo Sepolcro, e ine lassare la vita per lui. El Padre santo à mandata una lettara, con la bolla sua, al provinciale nostro e a quello de’ Minori e a frate Ramondo, ched eglino abbino a fare scrivere tutti quelli che àno desiderio e volontà d’andare ad acquistare el santo Sepolcro e morire per la santa fede: vuole che tutti se li mandino per scritta, e però v’invito che v’apparechiate” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 383).



It seems unlikely that Monna Pavola could have been a nun if she had the freedom of movement to join Catherine on Crusade, even hypothetically¹³. Does Catherine's reference to *provinciale nostro* mean that Monna Pavola is also connected to the Dominicans, perhaps a prior of a community of *mante-llate*? If so it is striking that whereas in her letters to cloistered women (see below) Catherine emphasizes obedience to their rules and the structure of their lives, her letters to Monna Pavola make no reference to the specific norms of her way of life, possibly because Monna Pavola's way of life had no formal norms.

Other letters to penitents and other pious women living in the world emphasize the importance of perseverance—important for those living outside the structures and supports of the cloister—as well as the dangers of mixing in society. For example, she warns the Sienese *mantellata* Alessa dei Saracini against wandering in public when not necessary, and against socializing: “The first thing we need to do to order our lives is to flee from interaction (*conversazione*) with all creatures, unless it is not called for as an act of charity: love many, but converse with few”¹⁴. As in her letter to Monna Pavola, Catherine dwells on the importance of the cell of self-knowledge:

My daughter, make yourself two dwelling places. One actual dwelling place, which you should not leave to wander around from place to place, unless out of obedience to the Prior or out of charity. And the other a spiritual dwelling place, which you can carry constantly with you; that is the cell of true self-knowledge, where you will find the awareness of God's goodness in you. These are really

¹³ Noffke (2000-2008, I, p. 110) notes that Catherine seems to have invited on Crusade a young nun named Domitilla, who was under the supervision of the Vallambrosian abbot Giovanni dalle Celle; Giovanni wrote to Domitilla criticizing the plan and noting that while Catherine's uncloistered life was licit, it was the exception—and in any case Catherine had gained the spiritual strength to live such a life only after a long period of seclusion in her own home (Giambonini, 1991, pp. 305-310). There is at least some ambiguity about Domitilla's status, since both Catherine's proposal and Giovanni's arguing against it seem to presuppose that Domitilla had freedom to travel.

¹⁴ “E a volere venire alla perfezione dell'amore, ti conviene ordinare la vita tua. El primo ordine sia fuggire la conversazione d'ogni creatura, per conversazione, se non secondo che richiede l'atto della carità; ma amarne assai, e conversarne pochi” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 49).



two cells in one, for while you are in one you must at the same time try to be in the other, for otherwise your soul would end up in confusion or presumption¹⁵.

The importance of the cell of self-knowledge is a central theme in Catherine's spirituality, but here she applies it with particular attention to those who are obliged, as the *mantellate* would have been, to leave their domestic "cells" from time to time. A theme that Catherine applies exclusively to women living religious lives outside of the cloister is the spiritual risks of shopping for spiritual advice, as for instance in a letter to three unnamed women in Florence—perhaps penitents, apparently not nuns:

One thing I beg of you: that you do not look for many different advisors, but pick one that seems to advise you sincerely, and follow that one. For running after many different advisors is a dangerous practice. Not that any advice that is grounded in God is not good, but since the servants of God are different in the modes [in which they serve God], even if all are moved by charity, in the same way they offer different teachings. Anyone who seeks after many of them will want to conform to the teaching of all of them, and then will come to find that she has received nothing from any of them. And so it is better and it is necessary that the soul is grounded in one, and in that one strives to be perfect, even if the teaching of each one is pleasing. Not that you should go searching for the sake of searching, but at the same time you ought to be pleased by the different and diverse ways that God has with his creatures, and hold them in reverence, seeing that that house of the Father has so many rooms¹⁶.

¹⁵ "Fa', figliuola mia, due abitazioni: una abitazione attuale della cella, che tu non vada scorrendo e' molti luoghi se non per necessità o per obediencia della priora o per carità. E un'altra abitazione fa' spiritualmente, la quale porti continuamente teco; e questa è la cella del vero cognoscimento di te, dove trovarai el cognoscimento della bontà di Dio in te: che sono due celle in una, e stando nell'una, ti conviene stare nell'altra, però che in altro modo verrebbe l'anima a confusione o a presunzione" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 49).

¹⁶ "D'una cosa vi prego: che voi non andiate per molti consigli; ma pigliatene uno el quale vediate che vi consigli schiettamente, e quello seguite, ché andare per molti è cosa pericolosa. Non che ogni consiglio che è fondato in Dio non sia buono, ma come i servi di Dio sono differenti in modi - poniamo che tutti sieno nell'affetto della carità -, così differentemente danno la dottrina: se assai ne cercano, con tutti si vorrebbero conformare, e quando venisse a vedere trovarebbersi vòto d'ognuno. E però è il meglio ed è di bisogno che l'anima si fondi in uno, e in quello s'ingegni d'essere perfetta; e nondimeno le piaccia la dottrina di ciascuno. Non che



This is practical advice, indeed, for people whose religious choices were to a large extent, or even entirely, self-directed.

Catherine's extraordinary letters to the penitent Daniela da Orvieto, whom she apparently looked on as a kind of protégé, deserve special attention here. We have four letters Catherine wrote to Daniela, all from late in Catherine's career, 1378 or 1379. Some of Catherine's advice to Daniela is similar to what she writes to other religious women in the world, with the same sense of the challenges of a religious life lived outside the cloister, but in these letters (65, 213, 308, and 316) she goes deeper into the spiritual life in way that suggests that Catherine recognized in Daniela a kindred spirit and someone with profound spiritual gifts similar to her own (Tylus, 2009, p. 221). For example, Catherine's letter 65 to Daniela in autumn 1378 repeats sections of letter 64, sent evidently at the same time to William Flete, the English Augustinian hermit who resided in a community of hermits at Lecceto, near Siena.

Flete was author of very influential spiritual texts and an early spiritual advisor to Catherine who became one of the most prominent members of her spiritual *famiglia*. Both letters reflect some of Catherine's most sophisticated spiritual writing, based significantly on the section on Truth in Catherine's *Libro* or *Dialogo*, which perhaps she had finished or was working on at that time. As she does in several other letters to Flete and others to Lecceto, in the common section of the letter Catherine emphasizes the dangers of reliance on one's own will in the spiritual life and warns against imitating people who focus more on taming their bodies than their wills, and who seek both spiritual consolations and penance in their own ways, rather than accepting what God gives them—advice applicable to the relative independence of both the eremitical and penitential lives. In the sections of the letter to Daniele that diverges from the letter to Flete, Catherine begins to take a more personal tone, although much of the content of her advice still borrows from her *Libro*, as she counsels Daniela to be wary of presuming to judge others when she perceives their sins:

le vadi cercando per sé; ma debbale piacere e' differenti e diversi modi che Dio tiene con le sue creature: averli in reverenzia, vedendo che nella casa del Padre nostro à tante mansion'' (Volpato, 2002, Letter 82).



But listen, dearest daughter and sister: I have been speaking to you and to me in general, but now I will speak to you and me in particular. I want us to do two specific things, so that ignorance does not impede us in the perfection to which God is calling us, and so that the Devil under the mantle of virtue and charity towards our neighbor does not plant in our souls the root of presumption, so that we fall into false judgments, so that it seems to us we are judging rightly when we are judging wrongly. And if we go by our own perception, the devil often will make us see many truths in order to lead us into falsehood, so that... we might make ourselves the judges of creatures, of which God alone is judge. When God has expressly shown to our mind, not one time or twice but many times, the defect of our neighbor, we should not say anything about the particular thing revealed, but in general correct the vices of ones who come to visit us and lovingly and kindly plant the virtues, and add harshness to the kindness if needed. And if it seems that God many times shows us the defects of someone else—unless it is by a clear revelation, as I have said—let us keep to the safer path, which is to flee the tricks and malice of the devil, for he would catch us with the hook of desire [for someone else's good]... Know that we should not trust everything we see, but we should put it behind our back, so that all that remains is our vision and knowledge of ourselves¹⁷.

¹⁷ “Ma attende, figliuola e suora carissima: io ò parlato a te e a me in generale, ora parlerò a te e a me in particolare. Io voglio che due cose singolari facciamo, a ciò che l'ignoranza non c'impedisca la nostra perfezione a la quale Dio ci chiama, e a ciò che el dimonio col mantello de la virtù e de la carità del prossimo non notricasse dentro nell'anima la radice de la presunzione: però che da questo cadaremmo ne' falsi giudicii, parendoci giudicare dritto, e noi giudicaremmo torto; e andando noi dietro al nostro vedere, spesse volte el dimonio ci farebbe vedere molte verità per condurceri ne la bugia, e perché noi ci facessimo giudici de le menti de le creature - la quale cosa solo Dio l'ha a giudicare [...] che se già Dio <spressamente, non pur una volta né due, ma più, non manifesta el difetto del prossimo ne la mente nostra, noi nol doviamo mai dire in particolare a cui elli tocca, ma in comune correggere e' vizii di chi ci venisse a visitare, e piantare la virtù e caritativamente e con benignità; e ne la benignità l'asprezza, quando bisogna. E se paresse che Dio spesse volte ci manifestasse e' difetti altrui - se non fusse già <spressa rivelazione, come detto è -, attenti a la parte più sicura, a ciò che fuggiamo lo inganno e la malizia del dimonio, però che con questo lamo del desiderio ci pigliarebbe. . .E sappi che d'ogni vedere noi non ci doviamo fidare, ma doviamceli ponere doppo le spalle, e solo rimanere nel vedere e nel cognoscimento di noi” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 65).



Catherine here identifies the spiritual risks to those, like Daniele and Catherine herself, whom God has gifted with insight into the states of others' souls. And where Catherine in other letters might counsel her correspondents to flee the world and embrace penance, in this and other letters to Daniele she urges her to pay more attention to taming her will than her body, and in any case not to judge others: "penance is good and beating down one's body is good, but not as a rule for everyone, since bodies are not all the same"¹⁸. In another letter, Catherine responds to Daniele's complaints that other "servants of God"—presumably clerics, most likely her Dominican advisors in Orvieto—are opposing spiritual directions to which she feels God is calling her. Catherine compassionately and clearly identifies with her dilemma: "I do not know anything more difficult than this... a soul cannot resist God, and yet wants to comply with the will of God's servants, trusting in their light and knowledge more than her own—and all the same she cannot"¹⁹. Catherine urges Daniele to be steadfast in the path to which she feels God is calling her: "So work, my daughter, in the field that you see that God is calling you to work, and do not be pained or troubled in your mind by what they say to you, but carry on manfully [*virilmente*]. Fear and serve God selflessly, and do not worry about what is said by creatures, except to have compassion for them"²⁰.

¹⁸ "Buona è la penetenzia e 'l maciarare del corpo, ma non mel ponere per regola ad ognuno, però che tutti e' corpi non so' aguegli" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 65).

¹⁹ Tu mi scrivesti e, secondo ch'io intesi, ne la lettera pare che tu sia passionata; e non è picciola, anco è forse maggiore che veruna altra, quando da l'uno lato ti senti chiamare ne la mente tua per nuovi modi da Dio, e' servi suoi si pongono al contrario, dicendo che non è bene. Io t'ò compassione pur assai grande, perché non so che fadiga sia simile a quella, per la gelosia che l'anima à di sé medesima: che a Dio resistenza non può fare, e la volontà de' servi suoi vorrebbe compire, fidandosi più del lume e cognoscimento loro che del suo; e nondimeno non pare che possa" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 316).

²⁰ "Lavora adunque, figliuola mia, in quello campo che tu vedi che Dio ti chiama a lavorare, e non pigliare pena né tedio ne la mente tua per quello che t'è detto, ma porta virilmente; teme e serve Dio senza te, e non curare poi el detto de le creature, se non d'aver lo' compassione" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 316).



3. LETTERS TO CLOISTERED WOMEN

While Catherine identifies very closely with the challenges of Daniele's religious calling, her letters to cloistered religious often express a keen sense of the distinctness of monastic life, and sometimes its differences from her own. An early letter that Catherine wrote to the *mantellate* in Siena during what was probably her first visit to the Dominican monastery of Sant' Agnesa of Montepulciano, shimmers with a sense of excitement, even of discovery: "it seems like a paradise to be with these very holy virgins"²¹. The postscript, by Catherine's fellow *mantellata* and scribe in this case, Cecca di Clemente Gori, cheerfully acknowledges the cultural distance between the religious improvisations of the widows who made up the ranks of the *mantellate* and the education and cultivated prayer life of the nuns, at least from the perspective of Cecca: "I Cecca am almost a nun, because I am beginning to chant the office forcefully along with these servants of Jesus Christ"²².

With respect to the perception of this cultural distance—of the refinement of monastic spirituality—it is intriguing to find that some of Catherine's letters to cloistered religious women appeal dramatically to the visual imaginations of her correspondents in a way that she almost never does in letters to non-cloistered religious women, and she never does in letters to men²³. For example, Catherine wrote a letter in or around 1377 that was copied and sent to two communities: the Augustinian nuns of San Gaggio near Florence and the Benedictine nuns of Monte San Savino, outside of Arezzo. The letter reads as an extended instruction on the monastic life, in which Catherine calls on the sisters to follow their bridegroom and seek union with Christ by climbing the ladder of Christ's body on the cross:

²¹ "Sappiate che ci viene voglia di dire: «Facciamo qui tre tabernacoli!», ché veramente ci pare lo paradiso con queste santissime vergini; e son sì inebriate di noi che non ci lassano partire e piangono sempre la partenzia" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 61).

²² "Io Cecca sono presso che monaca, ché comincio a cantare di forza l'offizio con queste serve di Gesù Cristo" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 61).

²³ Even the letters of this sort to non-cloistered women are to young women apparently considering the cloister or make some other connection to the subject of monastic devotion.



To make it possible for the soul to climb to this perfection, our savior made his body a staircase, and on it he made steps. If you look at his feet, they are nailed fast to the cross to form the first stair, since in the first place the affection of the soul is stripped of its own will, for just as feet carry the body, affection carries the soul. Reflect that the soul can never have any virtue if she does not climb this first stair. Once you have climbed it, you will arrive at deep and genuine humility. Climb the next one and do not delay any longer, and you will arrive at the open side of the Son of God. There you will find the fire and the abyss of divine charity. At this second stair of the open side, you will find an open storehouse filled with fragrant spices. There you will find God and Man. There the soul is so sated and drunk so that she cannot see herself. Just like a drunkard, drunk with wine, the soul can see nothing but blood, shed with such a fire of love. Then she rises with burning desire with desire and arrives at another stair, that is the mouth, and there she rests in peace and quiet; there you enjoy the peace of obedience. She does like a man who is really drunk, when he is full, he falls asleep, in that sleep he feels neither prosperity nor adversity. So too the bride of Christ, full of love, falls asleep in the peace of her Bridegroom. Her feelings are also asleep, so that if all sorts of troubles befall her, they do not bother her at all. If she has worldly wealth, she feels no disordered pleasure in it, since she has already shed affection at the start. This then is the place where she finds herself conformed in union with Christ Crucified²⁴.

²⁴ “Drittamente, affinché l’anima possa salire a questa perfezione, lo nostro salvatore ha fatto del corpo suo scala, e su v’ha fatti gli scaloni. Se riguardate i piei, essi sono confitti e chiavellati in croce, posti per lo primo scalone: poichè in prima die essere l’affetto dell’anima spogliato d’ogni volontà propria, perché, come i piei portano lo corpo, così l’affetto porta l’anima. Pensate che già mai l’anima ha nessuna virtù, se non sale questo primo scalone. Salito che tu l’hai, giogni alla vera e profonda umilità; saglie all’altro e non tardare più, e tu giogni al costato aperto del Figlio di Dio: ine troverete lo fuoco e l’abisso della divina carità. In questo secondo scalone del costato aperto vi troverete una bottega aperta, piena di spezie odorifere. Ine troverete Dio e Uomo; ine si sazia e inebria l’anima, per sì-fatto modo che non vede sé medesima: sì come l’ebbro, che è inebriato di vino, così l’anima allora non può vedere altro che sangue, sparto con tanto fuoco d’amore. Allora si leva con ardentissimo desiderio e giogne all’altro scalone, cioè alla bocca, e ine si riposa in pace e quiete; gustavi la pace dell’obbedienza. E fa come l’uomo che è bene inebriato, che, quando è ben pieno, si dà a dormire; e quando dorme non sente né prosperità né aversità. Così la sposa di Cristo, piena d’amore, s’adormenta nella pace dello Sposo suo. Adormentati sono i sentimenti suoi, ché, se tutte le tribulazioni venissero sopra di lei, punto non se ne cura; se ella è in prosperità del mondo, non sente per diletto disordenato, però che già se n’è spogliata per lo primo affetto. Or



The image of Christ's body as a stairway is developed in several places in the *Dialogo*, and there are echoes of the language of the *Dialogo* here, but Catherine deploys the image in a distinct way in this and other letters to nuns, as something involving looking at Christ's body—as if she imagines the nuns praying before the kind of painted crucifix we might expect to have been present above the altar in a monastic chapel. It is interesting too that Catherine assumes that the nuns she is writing to might be well off, a theme Catherine focuses on letters to convents—as we will see. Catherine here appeals to a late-medieval tradition of image-based meditation and visionary practice, a practice associated especially with monastic women²⁵. Perhaps Catherine associated this kind of imaginative visualization with nuns. There are other examples in letters to nuns where Catherine exhorts them to see their cells as the wound in Christ's side, and to meet Christ their spouse on their beds. The only place where Catherine appeals to visualization of this sort in a letter to a man is the exception that proves the rule: a letter probably from early 1376, to the Dominican friar Niccolò di Montalcino. Not only was Niccolò at the time of this letter in Montepulciano and likely there as a chaplain to the community of cloistered women of Sant' Agnesa, but unlike in her letters to nuns Catherine does not invite Fra Niccolò himself to engage with the image of Christ on the cross, but rather reports to him her own experience of dialogue with the crucified Christ—perhaps as a model for the nuns under his care (Volpato, 2002, Letter 74). It is certainly possible that Catherine associated meditative and visionary prayer of this sort with monastic culture, perhaps from her own knowledge of the kinds of vernacular texts popular among female monastics or from her experience at Sant' Agnesa in Montepulciano or one of the Sienese convents. And when Catherine was given a crucifix by the Vallambrosian Abbot Martino of Passignano in early 1376, Catherine in turn gave the crucifix as a gift to the nuns of the monastery of San Pietro in Monticelli a Lignaiia, in Florence (Letter 79).

questo è el luogo dove ella si truova conformata con l' unione di Cristo crucifisso” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 75).

²⁵ This is the tradition connected, for instance, to the influential Pseudo-Bonaventuran text, *Meditationes Christi* (Flora, 1987). On the image in monastic devotion, see the classic essay by Hamburger (1989). On tensions raised when this practice moved outside the monasteries, see Newman (2005).



One cannot help also but think of the experience Catherine is supposed to have had in Pisa in April 1375, when in ecstatic prayer before a crucifix she received the stigmata. It is worth considering, too, that Catherine's more theologically complex use of the image of Christ's body as staircase in the *Dialogo* might have been something she developed from the kind of meditation on the crucifix she recommends to nuns as a means of unity with Christ.

In her letters Catherine repeatedly encourages women—particularly widowed young women—to resist family pressure to remarry and instead become brides of Christ in the cloister. (While Catherine's espousal to Christ is a central feature of her hagiographical reputation, in her letters when she discusses brides or uses bridal images she is usually referring to nuns and cloistered religious life)²⁶. Indeed, she never encourages women to enter religious life as penitents²⁷. In letter 112, to Bendeçça Salimbeni, sister of the Salimbeni head Agnolino di Giovanni Salimbeni and a widow whose new fiancée had also died, she argues: "Other husbands die and pass like the wind, and they are often the cause of our death. You have experienced how much firmness they have, for in a short time the world has given you two kicks; Divine Goodness has permitted this to make you run from the world and run to him as your father and bridegroom"²⁸. And in 1378 Catherine wrote to Tora Gambacorta after her family had removed her

²⁶ See Ann Roberts' interesting comments on painting of the mystical marriage of Catherine of Siena commissioned by Chiara Gambacorta for S. Domenico in Pisa, and its possible evocation of the bridal imagery of the Dominican ceremony of profession (Roberts, 2008, pp. 75-77). See also Lowe (1998).

²⁷ Perhaps an exception is letter to Isa (or Lisa) di Giovanni' d'Agnolino Salimbeni, in which Catherine seeks her help in encouraging Bendeçça, Isa's sister, to enter Catherine's new monastery at Belcaro. While Catherine does encourage Isa to become a "steadfast and faithful bride" and to persevere in her holy resolve, she does not propose explicitly that Isa herself enter the monastery. In the following year Isa is found on the list of Sienese Dominican *mantellate*, so it is possible that becoming a penitent was in fact the intention to which Catherine was exhorting her. Catherine encourages her on her path despite her devotion to St. Francis, which suggests that Isa was also contemplating becoming a Franciscan *mantellata* or nun, and strengthens the sense that Catherine was encouraging her to take a Dominican habit in some form (Volpato, 2002, Letter 115).

²⁸ "Ama questo dolce e glorioso Sposo che t'à data la vita, e non muore mai; gli altri sposi muoiono, e passano come el vento, e spesse volte sono cagione de la morte nostra. E tu à provato che fermezza egli à, ché in picciolo tempo due calci t'à dato el mondo: questo à



from the Franciscan convent of San Martino, to support Tora's "holy desire" to stay true to Christ, whom she had espoused by entering the convent. Tora's husband had died in 1377 and her family wanted her to remarry: "Would not a woman be a senseless fool if she could be free and a bride, and she makes herself a servant and a slave by selling herself back to the devil and an adulteress as well"²⁹. It seems as well that Tora had confided in Catherine some doubt or question about her choice of convent; Catherine's response seems to play on the colors of the habits of the Franciscans and Dominicans to make the case for Tora to enter a Dominican convent rather than return to the Claresses at San Martino: "Dress yourself not in brown—that is, in the dark colors of selfish love and worldly pleasure—but in whiteness of purity by preserving your mind and body in the state of continence"³⁰.

And perhaps Catherine had in mind the possibility of Tora becoming a penitent, in addition to the prospect of her remarrying, when she urged her to seek the safety of religious life: "Entrust yourself to Christ crucified, and he will help you cross this stormy sea and arrive at the calm sea where there is peace and no war. To lead yourself completely safely to the port of eternal life I advise you for your benefit that you board the little boat of holy obedience, for this is a more secure and perfect way, and lets the soul sail her way across this sea not with her own strength (*le braccie sue*), but with the strength of the order"³¹.

While it is often forgotten in the emphasis on Catherine's "lay" status, Catherine herself founded a monastery. A possible first reference to this project comes

permesso la divina bontà perché tu fugga dal mondo, e refugga a lui sì come a padre e sposo tuo" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 262).

²⁹ "E non sarebbe bene matta e stolta quella anima che può essere libera e sposa, ed ella si facesse serva e schiava - rivendendosi al demonio - e adultera?" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 262).

³⁰ "E vesteti non di bruno, cioè de la nerezza dell'amore proprio e del piacere del mondo, ma de la bianchezza de la purità, conservando la mente e il corpo tuo ne lo stato de la continenza" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 262).

³¹ "Confidati in Cristo crucifisso, ed elli ti farà passare questo mare tempestoso, e giugnarai al mare pacifico, dove è pace senza veruna guerra. Unde, a conducerti bene sicura al porto di vita eterna, ti consiglierai per tua utilità che tu entrassi ne la navicella de la santa obediencia, però che questa è più sicura e perfetta via, e fa navigare l'anima per questo mare non con le braccia sue, ma con le braccia dell'Ordine" (Volpato, 2002, Letter 262).



in a letter probably from 1376, to the Abbot of Sant'Antimo—the monastery near Montalcino—Giovanni di Gano da Orvieto, who was one of Catherine's network of *servi di Dio*, and someone she considered a leader of monastic reform³². In the postscript to that letter, Catherine refers to the plans of one Monna Moranda, the wife of a prominent Sieneese jurist, to place in a monastery a young girl with a resolve “to do God's will.” Catherine is not happy about Monna Moranda's choice of monastery for her protégé, and asks that Abbot Giovanni together with Monna Moranda find a suitable place in which to found a “true and good monastery”³³. She eventually found that place in the castle of Belcaro just outside Siena, given to her as the location for a new monastery by the Sieneese banker Nanni di ser Vanni Savini, and got Abbot Giovanni's help in receiving papal permission and a donation for establishing a monastery there³⁴. Catherine petitioned the Sieneese government for permission to transform the fortress into a monastery on 25 January 1377, and the monastery was founded in April 1377³⁵. Raymond of Capua in the *Legenda maior* reports that the foundation was approved by Pope Gregory XI as a monastery for women, that it was given the name S. Maria Regina degli Angeli, and that Abbot Giovanni officiated at its consecration (Nocentini, 2013, p. 291).

³² In a Letter 95 from 1377 to some Florentine young men who were spiritual sons of Giovanni dalle Celle, Catherine recommends that they seek out Sant'Antimo and Giovanni di Gano if they are dissatisfied with the religious orders that have declined and are looking for a good monastery with a “buono capo” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 95).

³³ “Mando a voi costui che vi reca la lettara: ragionaravi di monna Moranda, donna di misser Francesco da Monte Alcinò, che ha per le mani alcuna giovana e fanciulla che ha uno buono desiderio di fare la volontà di Dio, per la quale cosa ella vorrebbe rinchiudarle per modo che a me non piace troppo. Per la qual cosa io vorrei che voi ed ella fuste insieme; e quanto fusse la vostra possibilità di poterlo fare, di trovare uno luogo ordenato, affinché si potesse fondare uno vero e buono monasterio, e mettervi dentro due buoni capi, ché de le membra n'abiamo assai per le mani” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 12). There is something puzzling about Catherine's use of the body metaphor here and her request that Giovanni put “two good heads” inside the monastery. Obviously, a monastery doesn't have two heads any more than a body has two heads. Noffke (*Letters of Catherine of Siena* I, p. 234) bypasses this problem by translating *due buoni capi* as “a few good leaders.”

³⁴ On Nanni, see Luongo (2006, pp. 132-35). His donation to Catherine came after his fortress had been razed by the Sieneese government in punishment for his participation in a Salimbeni-led coup attempt.

³⁵ Catherine's petition to the Sieneese government to turn Belcaro into a monastery was approved on 25 January 1377. See Laurent (1936, pp. 41-43).



Catherine and her *famiglia* spent time at the monastery—several of her letters are addressed from there—but we know remarkably little about it: what rule was followed there, or what women entered it, if indeed the community ever really developed at all. It seems that it did not outlive Catherine for long. In the letter to Bendeçça Salimbeni mentioned above (Letter 12), Catherine encourages her to enter her monastery; indeed, her trip to the Salimbeni fortress of Rocca d'Orcia in Autumn 1377 seems in part to have been a recruiting trip for S. Maria Regina degli Angeli. But we do not know whether Bendeçça entered the monastery. There is nothing to suggest that it was intended to be a Dominican foundation, or that Catherine herself intended to reside there—and no hint that, as its founder, she expected to be its prioress or abbess.

What *is* clear is that Catherine was seeking to promote monastic reform, and that Catherine had definite ideas about what constituted a “true and good monastery.” From her perspective outside the cloister, she did not hesitate to share those ideas with nuns, abbesses, and prioresses in convents living according to various rules³⁶. Most of the themes in her letters to female communities appear also in her letters to monks and are standard in discussions of monastic virtues and vices. For example, she emphasizes the importance of the cloister, of not mixing with the world and the worldly, of prayer, of community, of obedience, of the role of the abbess or prioress. In her letters to female monastic communities, Catherine typically at some point directs her advice to the abbess or prioress, usually urging her to careful discipline of her nuns; for example, Catherine urges the Abbess of S. Marta in Siena to “not be negligent in correcting faults, and whether small or big, that they are punished according to what each person can bear”³⁷. There is nothing unconventional in such advice, but the confidence

³⁶ Santa Marta in Siena, Augustinian; Santa Bonda (formally Sant'Abondo e Abondanzio), just outside Siena, Benedictine; Sant'Agnesa in Montepulciano, Dominican; Monte San Savino, near Siena, Benedictine; S. Stefano, outside Pisa, Vallambrosian (?); San Gaggio, near Florence, Augustinian; San Pietro in Monticelli a Lignaia in Florence, Benedictine; S. Mariae delle Vergini in Monteluca, Clarisses; San Giorgio in Perugia, Dominican; an unnamed monastery or monasteries in Bologna; Santa Maria degli Scalzi, outside Florence, Clarisses.

³⁷ “Non siate negligente a correggiare e' difetti; e, piccioli o grandi, che sieno puniti secondo che la persona è atta a ricevere: chi fusse fatto a portare diece libre, non ponete vinti, ma tollete quello che potete avere” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 30).



with which Catherine, from outside the walls, lectures nuns on the virtues and vices of monastic communities is striking.

Certain points in these letters receive emphasis that takes them out of the realm of commonplaces. For example, when Catherine emphasizes the importance of preserving claustration she echoes the advice she gives *mantellate* about avoiding worldly *conversazione*, but with very specific application to monastic life. For example, in a to an unnamed monastery on Bologna—one that from Catherine’s letter seems to have been very lax in its observance of its rules--Catherine assails nuns who under the pretext of receiving visits from (lay?) devotees, spend their time “standing around gossiping and telling stories, wasting your time in lewd and useless talk [...] spending all day glued to the grille and to the parlor, under the pretense of devotion”³⁸. Her letters to monastic women also give special attention to the importance of poverty, a recognition no doubt of the generally higher social and economic status of nuns, and stress the corrosive effect on the religious life of possessions, which Catherine typically links to several other monastic failings, as for instance in writing to the abbess and nuns of the Benedictine monastery of San Pietro in Monticelli a Lignaja, in Florence:

Poverty is the glory and wealth of the religious devotee, and it is a great muddle [*confusione*] when they are found to have anything to give away. Do you realize how much evil comes from this? For if this [poverty] is let slip, everything else slips away. Those who place their affections in possessing, and are not united with their sisters—you who ought to live in common, so that the great have as much as the least, the least as much as the great—will fall into incontinence either mental or actual. And she thus falls into disobedience, which is disobedience to her Order, and she does not want to be corrected by her superior], and violates that which she has promised, whence come relations (*conversazioni*) with those who live in a disordered way... For the relationship that is not founded on God proceeds from nothing but whatever gift or enjoyment or pleasure

³⁸ “E vuo’ne reggere l’amistà e la conversazione dei tuoi devoti, notricandoli con presenti, ed lo di stare a cianciare e novellare, e perdere lo tempo tuo con parole lascive e oziose [...] e sta tutto di attaccata alle grate e al parlatòro sotto colore di devozione” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 215).



they may find. And the love and friendship will last only as long as the gifts and the enjoyment³⁹.

In several other letters Catherine similarly links the breakdown of all monastic virtues to possession. In the letter to the lax Bolognese convent mentioned earlier, Catherine is more specific, railing against nuns who have “decorative curtains and featherbeds and superfluous and scandalous clothes” and instructs the prioress to give away such things from her own possessions, to be an example to her monastic daughters⁴⁰.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude by returning to the question of how Catherine might have served as a model or influence for female monastic leaders: what was Catherine doing preaching to abbesses when she herself had no experience of institutio-

³⁹ “Debba la sposa essere povera volontariamente, per amore di Cristo crocifisso che l’ha insegnata la via: la povertà è ricchezza e gloria delle religiose; grande confusione è quando si trova che elle avesseno che dare. Sapete quanto male n’esce? che se passa questo, tutti gli altri passerà: colei che pone l’affetto suo in possedere, e non s’unisce con le sorella sì come voi dovete vivere - che dovete vivere a comune, e avere tanto la grande quanto la piccola, e la piccola quanto la grande -, se nol fa ne viene in questo difetto, che ella cadrà nella incontinenza o mentale o attuale. Cade nella disubidiencia, ché è disobbediente all’Ordine suo e non vuole essere corretta dal prelato, e trapassa quello che aveva promesso, unde vengono le conversazioni di coloro che vivono disordenatamente - vuoi secolari vuoi religiosi, vuoi uomo vuoi donna -. Che la conversazione non sia fondata in Dio non procede da altro se non per alcuno dono o diletto o piacere che trovassero; e tanto basta quello amore e amistà quanto basta lo dono e il diletto. E però dico che colei che non possede, sì che non ha che donare, non avendo che donare sarà tolto da lei ogni disordenata conversazione. Levata la conversazione, non ha materia di svagolare la mente, né di cadere nella immondizia corporalmente e spiritualmente; ma trova e vorrà la conversazione di Cristo crocifisso, e dei servi dolcissimi suoi - i quagli amano per Cristo e per amore della virtù e non per propria utilità -, e concepe uno desiderio e fame della virtù che non pare che se ne possa saziare” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 79).

⁴⁰ “E invitatele a votiare le celle, a ciò che non abbiano che dare, e l’adornamento delle cortine, e i letti della piuma, e i superchi e dissoluti vestimenti, se vi sono; ché temo che non ve n’abbi. E voi siate la primaia, carissima madre, a ciò che per esemplo di voi l’altre ci si dispongano” (Volpato, 2002, Letter 215).



nal leadership and no responsibilities for any formal community? It is worth keeping in mind that Catherine's correspondents often cultivated her, writing to her for advice and seeking her support. For example, for all that Catherine "spoke truth to power" in her occasionally harsh letters to Pope Gregory XI, it is good to remember that it was Gregory who recruited Catherine, and that the causes to which Catherine exhorted him—the return of the papal court to Rome, the crusade—were causes he wanted to follow. One way to read Catherine's epistolary relationship with the Pope was that, however much her letters might have criticized his inaction, it was criticism that he had invited—even if at times he might have received more than he had bargained for. Similarly, it is possible that Catherine's letters to nuns were intended as supportive responses to communities that desired to reform, or to specific members of the communities who were seeking the authority of *Caterina santa* for monastic reform they sought to instill in their convents. Perhaps the apparently beleaguered and possession-laden prioress of that Bolognese community had sought Catherine's help in creating a stricter devotion in her convent.

After all, Catherine never visited Bologna; someone must have told her about the nuns with their featherbeds, and that someone could have been the prioress herself. In any case, Catherine's letters to female religious show her attentive to the special challenges of different forms of religious life. And while Catherine does not discuss Dominican monastic reform as such, her letters to monastic communities make it at least plausible that she understood herself to be participating in same kind of reform movement that would be associated with Raymond of Capua, Tommaso Caffarini, and other friars in Catherine's orbit. As already has been suggested, for Catherine's Dominican superiors and followers, it might very well have been her position outside the structures of religious life that made her such a potent authority for reform of those structures. Along the same lines, the abbess of the monastery in Bologna and the other nuns to whom Catherine wrote might well have valued Catherine's view precisely for its uncloistered perspective. Catherine was a reformer of the religious life. And just as Catherine could be a model for monastic reform from outside the cloister, it should be obvious that Catherine can serve as a model for the lay vocation without our oversimplifying her way of life or making her anachronistically into a layperson.



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