

# Catherine of Siena

## Vision Through a Distant Eye

*Suzanne Noffke, O.P.*

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Little remains to be seen of the original Benincasa house, though its basic structure is here under all the bricking and paintings of the present chapels. Catherine's father, Iacopo di Benincasa, and later his son Benincasa, rented the building from the Arte di Lana, the wool guild. Here, in the lower level, was the *tintoria*, the dyeshop, and in the two levels above lived the family and apprentices. Less than five years after Catherine's canonization (1461), on the petition of the local citizens, the Commune of Siena purchased the site and began to make of it a sanctuary in memory of their *santa*.<sup>1</sup>

The *tintoria*. The first part of the building to be remodeled as a sanctuary was the dyeshop on the lower level opening on the street (earlier, Via dei Tintori, now Via di Santa Caterina) that leads up from Fonte Branda (described below). In the process, repeatedly held up for lack of funds, the low ceiling was vaulted, depriving the story above of its original floor level, and the building was given a more churchlike façade (the latter restored in 1877). The adjoining house was purchased to build a sacristy and provide a separate entrance for the Confraternity of St. Catherine, which had meanwhile contracted to establish a sanctuary in the upper levels of the house.

What had been a dyeshop was now an oratory. Benches along the walls served for seating. Above the altar stood a statue of Catherine executed by Neroccio di Bartolomeo. The walls were over time frescoed with scenes from Catherine's life: friars rescued from thieves by Catherine's clairvoyant prayer, Catherine kissing the raised foot of St. Agnes of Montepulciano, and the cure of Matteo Cenni (all by Girolamo del Pacchia); the attack on Catherine in Florence (Ventura Salimbeni); Catherine's stigmata (Sodoma); Catherine's mission to Avignon, the reconciliation of the Florentines, and Catherine's return to Florence (all by Bastiano Folli). Other

<sup>1</sup>Sources for data on the Casa: Andrea Busiri, *La Casa di S. Caterina in Siena ed il nuovo prospetto della Chiesa di S. Maria sopra Minerva in Roma* (Siena: Tipografia editrice all'insegna di S. Bernardino, 1880); Domenico Tondelli, *La Casa di Santa Caterina a Siena* (Rome: Desclée, 1909); Timoteo Centi, *The Catherinian Basilica of San Domenico and the House of St. Catherine of Siena* (Rome: Scuola Tipografica Missionaria Domenicana, 1965).

paintings have since disappeared, probably destroyed by humidity and salt in the walls.

In a second chapel adjoining the dyeshop stands a statue in wood by an unknown artist of the Valdambresesco school. The statue was probably made between 1420 and 1430, thus before Catherine's canonization (1461).<sup>2</sup> Eighteenth-century alterations added paint and a plaster veil and coif to the statue, which had originally had these in cloth. Restorations were made in 1968. It is not known where the statue stood before it came to the Santuario, but it is not listed in the inventory of the site in 1862-65.

A small stairway leads down into the wine cellar, which served both dyeshop and family. It has recently been restored to its original state, with the cask said to have been the one from which wine was drawn at Catherine's prayer after she had given away its contents.

In the first centuries of its existence as a sanctuary the dyeshop was administered by the friars of San Domenico, but bitter disputes between the friars and the commune in the early seventeenth century led finally to the lower oratory's being separated from the rest of the sanctuary, a situation that persists today, with the lower oratory remaining the property of the *Contrada dell' Oca*. I have found it all but impossible to gain access to the dyeshop chapel, which has been under renovation since before 1980. One can only hope that when these renovations are complete there will at least be regular hours during which one can visit this part of the sanctuary.

The *upper sanctuary*. The Benincasa house was built into the hillside, with a door into the upper living quarters leading into the middle level from Vicolo del Tiratoio. That door is no longer generally used; it can, however, still be seen from the outside

<sup>2</sup>Maurizio Giammarioli, in Lidia Bianchi and Diega Giunta, *Iconografia di Santa Caterina da Siena* (Rome: Nuova Città, 1988) 293-94. Michèle Flusin, "Art, société et dévotion: les Dominicains et la première statue de Sainte Catherine de Sienne," in *Symbols de la Renaissance* 2 (Paris: n.p., n.d.) 149-67, sees in the heart in Catherine's hand a reflection of the Dominican-Franciscan controversy over the blood of Christ around the time of Catherine's canonization and therefore places the statue about 1461. M. Giammarioli refutes this argument.

on Vicolo del Tiratoio. An inscription has been placed above it: SPONSAE KRISTI CATHARINAE DOMUS (home of Catherine, spouse of Christ).

To reach the door of her parish church, Sant'Antonio Abate, which stood with the length of its nave along Vicolo del Tiratoio and its apse just kitty-corner from the above-mentioned back door of her house, the young Catherine would have walked up the narrow alley from that door to the steep street that joins Via Santa Caterina and Vicolo del Tiratoio, Costa Sant'Antonio. There she would enter the tiny piazza that stood before the front door of the church. That church was torn down in 1937 to make room for a new main point of entrance to the upper parts of the sanctuary, the present Portico dei Comuni d'Italia. Crossing this portico just about where Catherine would have gone into the parish church, one now enters an enclosed loggia, where on one's right is the entrance to the Oratory of the Crucifix, and to one's left the kitchen oratory, the gift shop, and the stairway leading down to the two lower levels. (The loggia was actually built after the Oratory of the Crucifix to connect that chapel with the older part of the sanctuary.) In the loggia stands a replica of the statue erected by the Sienese on Viale XXV Aprile to honor the naming of Catherine as Doctor of the Church in 1970 (see description below).

The best place to start one's exploration of the Casa is the kitchen oratory. During the construction of the dyeshop oratory (about the time Columbus was preparing to sail west), two confraternities (all men), devotees of Catherine, used to meet in the kitchen above for prayer and penitential discipline. They eventually formed the benevolent Confraternity of St. Catherine of Siena and pursued plans to transform that room into an oratory of their own. The room was enlarged with new entrances, and a tribune was built in the extended end for the governors of the confraternity. The walls were divided into equal panels, to be filled later with paintings, and yellow walnut stalls were built along the side walls.

The paintings are as follows: The altar panel is by Bernardino Fungai, with Catherine's stigmatization in the center, flanked by SS. Dominic and Jerome. On the altar steps are scenes from Catherine's life by Bartolomeo Neroni (ca. 1570); on the left wall, criminals converted by Catherine's prayers

(Buonastri di Lucignano, 1587), Catherine's miraculous communion (Cristoforo Roncaglia di Pomarance, ca. 1583), Catherine liberating a possessed woman (Pietro Sorri, 1589); on the right wall, Catherine inducing the Romans to loyalty to Urban VI (Alessandro Casolani, 1587), Gregory XI returning from Avignon (Roncaglia di Pomarance), Catherine's mystical espousals (begun by Bartolomeo Neroni, finished by Arcangelo Salimbeni, 1582). The two paintings near the altar are said to be by Sodoma, and Francesco Vanni painted the canonization of Catherine in the tribune, flanked by portraits of Bl. Bernardo Tolomei (an Olivetan monk) and Bl. Nera Tolomei (a Dominican nun), both relatives of Calonio Tolomei, who funded the decoration of the oratory.

Not much evidence of the old kitchen remains, but there is a bit of the fireplace behind a grate under the altar. The flooring protected by ropes in the center of the oratory is the work of Girolamo di Marco, completed in the late sixteenth century.

Ideally, one should go next to the level below the kitchen oratory to visit Catherine's cell, the small room she was given as her own when her father freed her from the kitchen duties imposed on her after she had cut her hair in defiance of her parents' wish that she marry.

The chapel one enters first, at the bottom of the stairs, occupies a space part of which belonged to the family's living quarters. I say "part of which" because the original space (however it might have been divided originally) was extended slightly on the doorway side when the partition between the Benincasa house and the neighboring house was removed to allow for the construction of the sacristy below. On the opposite side, however, it was reduced in size by more than half its entire original width when its floor was broken out to make room for the vault of the dyeshop oratory. In the sixteenth century the brothers of the Confraternity of St. Catherine petitioned the commune to have this unused middle level (including the bit under the stairs that had been Catherine's cell) be given them as a place where their sons who aspired to membership in the confraternity could be instructed. The room fell into greater and greater disrepair until 1812, when it was decided that Catherine's cell should be restored. What greets one first now on this level is the oratory outside her cell, which

was decorated only after the cell itself had been restored. At the far end from Catherine's cell is an altar surmounted by a sixteenth-century painting of Catherine's stigmatization. The walls are frescoed with scenes from Catherine's life, executed between 1891 and 1896 by Gaspero Olmi and Alessandro Franchi.

Catherine's cell, fortunately, has not been overlaid with decoration. It is still a tiny space beneath the stairs that lead from the door on Vicolo del Tiratoio up to the kitchen. The window looking out onto Vicolo del Tiratoio has been bricked up except for a tiny opening, and the cell has, at least since 1812, been enclosed behind a locked iron grate. On the wall above is an inscription: VIRGINES ENIM SUNT ("For they are virgins"), which may have been put there in reference to the young aspirants to the confraternity or in reference to Catherine. The stone Catherine is said to have used as a head-rest is still to be seen, covered with a grate. On the wall is a glassed case in which are displayed the head of her walking stick, her lantern, her flask of smelling salts (all of these used in her rounds to care for the sick), bits of her veil and other clothing (said to be the woolen garment she wore when she scourged herself), and the silk pouch in which her head was carried to Siena from Rome (see notes on Santa Maria sopra Minerva). More recently a statue of Catherine at prayer has been added.

Back upstairs, the final place to visit is the Oratory of the Crucifix, a transitional point into Catherine's more active life away from this house. This oratory is built where the family's kitchen garden supposedly once spread. (The garden must have been terraced into or up the hillside, and probably adjoined the grounds of the parish church. If you have a room on the side of the Casa that faces toward Valle Piata and the *duomo* (the cathedral), you can see similarly terraced gardens.) The centerpiece of the oratory, now also the chapel used for Liturgy, is the crucifix before which Catherine was praying in the Church of Santa Cristina in Pisa in early April of 1375 when she experienced the wounds of the Crucified (the stigmata) in her own body.

The Sienese and Pisan versions of the acquisition of the crucifix are, not surprisingly, quite different. According to the

Sieneese version, it was an amicable gift, fully agreed to by the Pisans. According to the Pisans, it was a theft perpetrated by night under other pretexts, their treasure carried off by an armed Sieneese guard. In any case, in 1565 the crucifix was brought from Pisa to Siena, where it was displayed first in the kitchen oratory, then for a time in the chapel outside Catherine's cell until an adequate setting could be built for it. The area which had been the Benincasa garden was at this time partly the property of the Arte di Lana (the wool guild) and partly within the gardens of the parish church of Sant'Antonio. A purchase was negotiated, and in 1623 the new oratory was completed.

The crucifix itself is a late twelfth-century Pisan work, influenced by the style of neighboring Lucca. At its installation in its present place it was enclosed in a case with hinged doors painted with the figures of Catherine and St. Jerome (by Bartolomeo Neroni, called Riccio). Other works depicting incidents in Catherine's life adorn the walls of the chapel.

The gift shop adjoining the kitchen oratory and loggia sells mementos and displays souvenirs of Catherinian devotion. Also to be seen on its wall is the bull of Pope Gregory XI, by which he gave Catherine permission to have her chaplains celebrate Mass at any time of day and in any place, including places under interdict. (There is a copy of the same bull near her chapel in the Church of San Domenico.) There, too, is the 1970 document declaring Catherine to be a Doctor of the Church.

### *Monument to Catherine [3]*

Under the walls of the Piazza della Libertà, up Viale dei Mille from San Domenico, stands the statue the Sieneese erected to honor their saint when she was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1970. The sculptor, Bruno Buracchini, has portrayed her as she describes herself in a visionary experience of April 1376 (Letter T219, Noffke, p. 207f., to Raimondo da Capua and the others who had preceded her to Avignon):

The fire of holy desire was growing within me as I gazed. And I saw the people, Christians and unbelievers, entering the side of Christ crucified. In desire and impelled by love I walked through their midst and entered with them into Christ gentle

Jesus. And with me were my father Saint Dominic, the beloved John, and all my children. Then he placed the cross on my shoulder and put the olive branch in my hand, as if he wanted me (and so he told me) to carry it to the Christians and unbelievers alike. And he said to me: "Tell them, 'I am bringing you news of great joy!'"

The inscription reads, To St. Catherine Benincasa, Daughter of Siena, Patroness of Italy, Doctor of the Church. If you walk a little way down the hill on Via Bruno Benci, to your left as you face the statue you will have a great view across the valley to the Church of San Domenico and beyond to the Torre Mangia and the cathedral.

#### *Church of San Domenico [4]*

Though the church now brings to mind primarily Catherinian memories, it is to be noted that it was an early center of Dominican preaching and that this is precisely what seems to have attracted Catherine to the Dominicans. Dominic himself is said to have visited here a few years before the foundation was made. The church was completed between 1262 and 1265. (At one point in the construction, when the friars appealed to the Commune of Siena for financial aid, they were told to claim it from those who owed the commune restitution, promising the latter deliverance from their sins if they paid!)

There is a small window beneath the stained glass window in the apse from which one can have a marvelous view of Siena. But, alas! entrance to the sanctuary is now prohibited, and the friars will not take it kindly if you violate that rule!

The first place to visit here is the Cappella delle Volte (Chapel of the Vaults) at the rear of the church. This was the space created for the Mantellate (the female Dominican tertiaries) to pray and to come for religious instruction. Here Catherine prayed and assisted at Liturgy often. Here the sisters were to stay whenever they came to assist at the Divine Office. The chapel had been shored up with protective walls after the earthquake of 1793 and was restored to its original state only in 1962, after over twenty years of renovation.

The steps by which Catherine and her contemporaries went up into this chapel are now covered with glass, and only a bit

of the original floor is visible, also under glass (because both were being chipped away by pilgrims as relics). The walls are covered with paintings of scenes from Catherine's life: Catherine praying the Divine Office with Christ, Catherine's death (Crescenzo Gambarelli); St. Rose of Lima contemplating Catherine in a vision (Burburini); Catherine giving her clothing to Christ (sixteenth century).

Above the small altar is mounted Andrea Vanni's fresco of Catherine, originally painted on the wall near the bell tower, probably soon after Catherine's death. For years it was debated whether the *devota* at Catherine's feet and the portrayal of the stigmata were original, but a restoration in 1950 answered both questions in the affirmative.<sup>3</sup> Is the painting a true likeness of Catherine? Diega Giunta<sup>4</sup> sees a correspondence between the characteristics of the face and the X-rays made in 1947 of Catherine's head (see below) that go beyond Vanni's usual iconographic style. As in the X-rays, the face is small but elongated, the nose strong, and the lower jaw fine but prominent. And the artist adds a dimple to the chin, which is not characteristic of his other saints. So the painting is probably strongly iconographic but with some fidelity to Catherine's actual appearance as Vanni remembered it. While there has been a good deal of speculation as to who the young *devota* is, it is probably pointless to see her as a particular historical individual.

The brick pillar at the top of the present stairs is said to have been a favorite leaning place for Catherine as she prayed.

Just to the side of these same stairs, under the spot where Vanni's fresco was originally painted, is the tomb of one of Catherine's disciples, Gabriele di Davino Piccolomini (d. 1399).

The central relic in San Domenico is Catherine's head (*la Sacra Testa*), displayed above the altar of a small chapel on the right side of the nave. A dubious document of 1593 asserts that Raimondo da Capua at first sent the relic from Rome to Siena secretly with two friars and that it was brought in solemn procession to San Domenico only later. Whatever the case, there was eventually such a procession, in which both Raimondo and Catherine's mother, Lapa, participated. After the

<sup>3</sup>Lidia Bianchi and Diega Giunta, *Iconografia di Santa Caterina*, 156.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 157.

procession the head was placed in a gilded copper reliquary bust (now in the Biblioteca Comunale of Siena) and kept in the sacristy. Sometime between 1467 and 1475 it was transferred to the side chapel built for it by Nicola Benzi.

In 1468 the friars transferred the relic to a silver reliquary shaped to fit the head exactly. It could not be displayed, however, until the following year, since funds sufficient to fashion a base for it were only then granted by the magistrates of the city. Giovanni Antonio Bazzi (Sodoma) was commissioned to paint the walls with scenes from Catherine's life. Paintings of Raimondo da Capua and Tommaso di Antonio da Siena (usually called Tommaso Caffarini) were added by Francesco Vanni. The relic was rescued when fire broke out in San Domenico the night of December 4, 1531, but it did sustain some scorching in the incident in spite of its silver encasement. Each year at the feast of St. Catherine, the relic was carried through Siena in solemn procession. During the procession of May 3, 1609, certain citizens attempted to take possession of the relic, resulting in a great tumult and subsequent legal action to assure the Dominicans' possession of it in perpetuity.

A new silver reliquary in 1622 replaced the one damaged in the fire of 1531, and in 1683 this was in turn replaced by one of crystal. Finally, in 1711 it was transferred to a gilded and crystal-windowed tabernacle. Except for eight years while San Domenico was being repaired after the earthquake of 1798 (when it was kept at the *duomo*), and during World War II (1943-45, when it was secured in an excavation in the wall of the crypt beneath the church), and for processions and examinations, it stayed there until it was thoroughly reexamined and X-rayed in 1947, re-veiled, and placed in the reliquary that holds it today. That same examination revealed that the entire head, including the face, is covered with a fine textile, which is adhered to the skin and bones in such a way as to inhibit disintegration. It is this covering that gives the eye sockets an appearance of being still covered by eyelids.

The remains of Catherine's parents, Iacopo and Lapa, have been transferred to the foot of the altar, beneath the steps. A number of secondary objects associated with Catherine are displayed in the immediate vicinity of the chapel. Among them is Catherine's right thumb, removed shortly after her death.

There is one of her hairshirts (there are at least two more, one in Venice and one in the Church of Santo Spirito in Siena). There is also the portable altar stone she is said to have carried with her after she received permission from Pope Gregory XI in 1376 to have her chaplains celebrate Mass at any time of day and in any place, including places under interdict—though there is some question of the authenticity of the stone.

The original flooring of the chapel itself is an inlaid wood work attributed to Beccafumi. The portrayal (a young man with a mirror surrounded by wild animals) is probably of Orpheus. It has been pointed out that Clement of Alexandria (*Protreptico* 1.4) referred to Christ as the master of the universe, the delight of all creatures, and an analogy has been made with Catherine tempering the ferocity of warring human beasts.<sup>5</sup>

In the sacristy is preserved the manuscript of the *Processo castellano*, the collection of testimonies gathered by Catherine's disciple Tommaso Caffarini in 1411 in view of Catherine's eventual canonization.

Catherine's secretary, Barduccio Canigiani (d. 1382), is said to be buried beneath the picture of San Giacomo in the nave. (The only picture of San Giacomo now in the church is Benvenuto di Giovanni's *Madonna in Trono con il Figlio e Angeli, i Santi Gregorio, Giacomo, Girolamo e Sebastiano* at the center of the wall opposite the Chapel of St. Catherine—but this was painted only in 1483.) There is no marker, but the burial place is recorded in the Necrology of San Domenico.

The crypt below the church (created by the need to sink foundations to the very bottom of the valley at the edge of Camporegio) was originally used as a burial place for the friars and other prominent people connected with the priory. This is where Catherine's parents were originally buried. Possibly Niccolò di Toldo (the man whose execution Catherine attended) was buried here as well. Here the friars in times past prayed the Office of the Dead. Today it serves as a second church and contains a number of interesting art works, including its gorgeous slab windows. The crypt is entered either by a narrow

<sup>5</sup>Reginaldo Thorel, "Scoperta nuovamente il pavimento della Cappella di Santa Caterina," *S. Caterina da Siena* (198-) 30-31.

stairway from the church upstairs or from a door on the Camporegio side of the church outside.

*Fonte Branda [5]*

A short walk down the hill by way of Via di Santa Caterina from the Casa, or by way of Via Camporegio, following the stairway (Vicolo Camporegio) that branches off it, will take you quickly to Fonte Branda (spelled as two words for the fountain, as one for the district). Catherine must have trudged down the hill often to draw water here for the family, as this was the one source for this section of the city. Her father's dyeshop, too, depended on Fonte Branda as the source of its water. In fact, it was because this fountain was the most abundant in the city that the businesses of dyers and tanners and millers grew up nearby.

The origin of the name is disputed, but the fountain's brick superstructure dates at least as far back as 1081. (The lower inserts in the arches and the crenellation are later.) In Catherine's day, the fountain had three levels of use. The level at which the water emerged from the spring and collected in the sheltered pool under the arches was for drinking and food preparation. From here the water spilled over into a trough from which animals were allowed to drink. A third pool, fed by the first two, could be used for washing and industrial purposes.

For Catherine the fountain became a rich source of imagery. The waters from the spring were divine life, and so identified with the blood of Christ. The arched roof created a darkness that made the waters in the pool still and reflective (even more so when the arches were more open), the mirror in which we see ourselves reflected as we are. The low wall of the pool was the humanity of Christ, our place of access to the water and a place to lean as we reach for the water. And all of these images intermingled for Catherine.

So you should love people with moderation, according to your priorities, and spiritually. Take, for example, a jug that you'd fill in the fountain and drink from in the fountain. For although you might have drawn love from God, who is the fountain of living water, unless you drank from it always in God it would