

THE HISTORY OF
ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA

AND HER COMPANIONS

WITH A TRANSLATION OF HER TREATISE ON
CONSUMMATE PERFECTION

BY

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Meanwhile the election of a new General of the Order of Friar Preachers was proceeding at Bologna, where on the Feast of Pentecost, according to Catherine's prediction, Raymund of Capua was nominated to the vacant office by the *Motu Proprio* of the Sovereign Pontiff. He made every effort to escape from so heavy and responsible a charge, but was at length constrained to accept it by obedience, as well as by the urgent solicitations of the Chapter. He determined in his mind that as soon as he should return to Rome he would cause the head of St. Catherine to be sent to the convent of St. Domenico at Siena, both as a token of affection to his brethren there, and also that this, the chief relic of her holy body, should repose in the city so dear to her in life, and which had been illustrated by so many of her most admirable actions. As soon therefore as he had entered on his office, and happily completed the visitation of the Ultramontane Provinces, he returned to Rome as would seem in the October of 1381; and once more took up his residence at the Minerva, where his first visit was to the sepulchre of her who, while she lived, had been at once his spiritual daughter and his Mother. He caused it to be opened, a thing easily done, as in point of fact it was not actually buried beneath the ground; and found that the clothes had suffered somewhat from the dampness of the place where the body was deposited, and where it was much exposed to the rain. He therefore resolved immediately to transfer the remains to a stone sarcophagus, and to deposit them in a safe place on the right hand side of the high altar of the church. When he had done this, he remembered, not without tears of tenderness, what Catherine had predicted to him on the eve of St. Francis, when they were

together at Voragine on their journey back from Avignon;¹ namely, that he should on that same day, in a future year, cause such a translation of her body to be made; a prediction which was thus fulfilled in every particular.² As to his further design of sending her head to Siena, he could not venture on so important a step without obtaining the consent of the Sovereign Pontiff. He therefore solicited the necessary permission from Urban, who willingly consented, charging him, moreover, to omit nothing that could make known to the world the merits and glory of the Saint. Having received this permission, he once more visited the sacred body, and first prostrating on the ground and asking her assistance, he then with generous resolution separated the head from the body, enclosed it in a reliquary of gilded copper, and consigned it to the care of two friars of the Order, of whom one was F. Thomas della Fonte, and the other was F. Ambrose di Luigi Sansedoni, both Sienese by birth. F. Ambrose was a man of great learning, and *Socius* to the General, who reposed the utmost confidence in him, and on that account selected him for this business. The two Fathers performed their journey with the utmost secrecy, and succeeded in depositing their precious charge in the convent at the Campo Reggio, without its being known by the people; and as the holy relic could not be exposed to public veneration before the canonisation of the Saint, it was laid up in a chest, and placed in the sacristy, where the intention was carefully to conceal and guard it until such time as the decision of the Church should authorise their rendering it befitting honours.

But it was not destined that the head of St. Catherine should long remain in this obscurity. A few years later, Raymund was ordered by his physician to repair to Siena for the purpose of recruiting his health in the medical baths of that vicinity. According to the Carthusian biographer of Stephen Maconi this visit

¹ See p. 7.

² The account which follows is abridged from the rare little memoir, entitled "*Breve Relazione del modo come fu portata da Roma a Siena la Sacra Testa di Santa Caterina* (Siena, 1683). It does not bear the name of its author, but Carapelli informs us it was the work of F. Tommaso Angiolini.

took place in 1384 or 1385.¹ Raymund was at that time engaged in compiling the life of the Saint, commonly known as the Legend; a work to which he devoted such intervals of leisure as he could secure in the midst of his heavy official duties. He took occasion of his visit to Siena to resume his labours on this book, and it was whilst thus occupied that his heart reproached him with having sent away from Rome the most noble of her relics in so secret a manner, and permitted it to have remained concealed so as to receive no signs of respect and veneration. He was aware that in Venice the custom had been at once established of celebrating the anniversary of her death, and causing her praises to be published from the pulpit; and reproaching himself for his own negligence, he resolved to repair it without loss of time, by taking measures that the sacred relic of her head should in future be treated with greater honour. He therefore took counsel with the Fathers of the convent, and with several of the Saint's most intimate friends who were still resident in Siena; among others with Master Matthew of the Misericordia, Neri di Landoccio, and Ser Christofano di Gano. Stephen Maconi, then a professed Carthusian living in the monastery of Pontignano, about five miles out of the city, received a supernatural intimation to join them, as they were assembled in consultation in the church of San Domenico; and it was through his influence that the consent of the bishop was obtained for the plans which they proposed and laid before him. It was agreed that Raymund should then present himself to the Consistory of the republic, and make known to them in what manner the head of their glorious fellow-countrywoman had been brought to the city, and hitherto preserved concealed. The Magistrates at once resolved that a grand public solemnity should be ordered, to be preceded by a week of spiritual exercises, during which time the most eminent preachers, whether

¹ Capecelatro, and some other writers, give 1385 as the date of Raymund's *first* translation of the body, in ignorance of the fact that this translation and the sending to Siena of the head of St. Catherine preceded by some years the public reception of the holy relic by the citizens, and the honours then rendered to it. F. Gregorio Lombardelli even assigns to this latter event so late a date as 1388.

natives or foreigners, should be invited to proclaim the glories of St. Catherine.

This part of the festival Raymund made it his business to arrange. On the evening of Saturday, the 23d of April, the bells announced the commencement of the great *predica*, which was opened next morning by Raymund himself. We shall not weary our readers with the list of all the preachers, but only notice the names of F. Bartholomew Dominic, F. Massimino of Salerno, F. Thomas Nacci Caffarini, F. John Piccolomini (son of the honest Gabriel), F. George of Naddi, whom the Saint had delivered from the thieves, and F. Bartholomew Montucci. On the following Sunday, May 1st (on which day was then kept what was called the "Solemnity" of the holy Virgin), the whole city flocked to San Domenico, and it was announced to them that on the following Thursday (May 5th) they should again repair to receive the head of their beloved fellow-citizen and protectress, Catherine Benincasa. Meanwhile, the fame of so many illustrious preachers who were collected in the city had drawn thither a great number of visitors from other parts. The Consistory moreover had written to all the bishops, abbots, and other prelates of the republic, inviting them to assist at the great procession which they had determined to celebrate on the following Thursday.

On the night, then, of the preceding Wednesday, Raymund took the relic with all possible privacy to the Hospital of St. Lazarus, outside the Porta Romana, where the procession was to begin, and where, says our historian, "St. Catherine was well known, and had worked many miracles." He placed it in a rich tabernacle, and prepared everything for the solemnity of the morrow. At dawn of day—A May day in the most delicious of Italian climates—the people, full of joyful devotion, came out into the streets, scattering flowers and sweet-smelling herbs, and burning perfumes in every place where the procession was to pass. When all was ready, the great bell of the Palazzo gave the signal from its lofty tower, and at that sound, as by magic, all the other bells of the churches rang out as by one consent, and continued doing so the whole time until the procession had reached its

destination. It would seem that the Porta Romana had been chosen as the gate by which the procession was to enter, in order that thus they might traverse the entire length of the city; so they set forth at last, chanting with a thousand voices, and making the air resound with so many musical instruments, "that," says Angiolini, "you would have thought the gates of Paradise had been thrown open." First came two hundred girls and as many boys, all selected of equal heights, dressed in white, and adorned with gold, silver, and jewels. They carried in their hands huge bunches of roses, lilies, and other flowers, "in memory," says F. Angiolini, "of Catherine's words; for she was accustomed to say that every one should wear white garments, and carry flowers in their hands; meaning thereby that they should be pure and innocent in life, and adorned with virtues." Then came representatives chosen for each one of the *Contrade* of the city, and of the different arts, bearing lighted torches. The various Companies and Confraternities, both of the city and of the country for five miles, in like manner sent their deputies; and each of these societies represented in a kind of *tableau vivant* in the procession some mystery of the Saint's life, the dresses being provided at the public expense; while before each Company was borne its own banner and a vast number of torches. Then followed all the Hermits of the Sienese States, of whom there were great numbers, all supported by the republic, to the end that they might with less distraction pray, meditate, and afflict their bodies; and before them was borne the Crucifix. Next came the different religious communities, each with their cross. Then the secular priests of the diocese, followed by the canons, all carrying wax candles. Then the gentlemen, magistrates and officials, two and two according to their rank, and clad in robes of office. Then the illustrious Consistory, in their richest dresses of state; after them the abbots and other dignitaries; followed by the bishops, in their pontificals, all with their pastoral staves in their hands. Last of all came a Baldachin of gold brocade adorned with jewels, borne over the sacred relic, which was carried in a magnificent tabernacle of gold, adorned with pictures of St. Catherine's life,

which had long before been prepared by Raymund. He himself, as Master-General of the Friar Preachers, walked on the left hand of the relic, while on the right appeared the Bishop of Siena.

It was a grand and solemn spectacle, but its most touching feature has yet to be described. Closely following the Baldachin came a long line of figures, walking two and two, clad in white robes and black mantles, on whom the eyes of all the citizens and of those who had come from distant parts rested with a peculiar interest. They were the Mantellate of St. Dominic, St. Catherine's own religious Sisters, many of them her chosen friends and companions in life. And their appearance recalled to every mind the days when she, too, clad in the same habit, went about those very streets on her missions of charity, ministering to the wants whether of soul or body, and diffusing around her the sweet perfume of her angelic presence.

And there, in the midst of them, assisting at this magnificent solemnity, wearing the habit of the Sisters of Penance, and walking in their ranks, appeared one venerable woman in extreme old age. *It was Lapa*, the mother of the Saint, who at eighty still survived to take part in the honours rendered to her beloved child. At the sight of her the beholders could not contain their tears, and many, breaking through the ranks of the procession, crowded round to look at and congratulate her, exclaiming, "O happy you, who with your own eyes have beheld the glorious triumph of your daughter!" The procession having at last reached the Church of St. Dominic, at the further extremity of the city, and the *Te Deum* having been sung, Raymund delivered a brief discourse; the Bishop bestowed his benediction on the people; and the sacred relic was deposited in a becoming chest made for the purpose, and placed in the sacristy. Stephen Maconi bore his part in this procession, "and for many days afterwards," says his biographer, "he could not cease from weeping, and speaking of his blessed Mother." On the same day that her head was deposited in the Church of St. Dominic, he himself received from Rome the finger on which had been placed the ring of her mystic espousals, and which had remained stiff and erect, whilst all the other fingers were

perfectly flexible. It was preserved at Pontignano with great veneration, and some years later Stephen received the cure of a malady of his eyes by touching them with this precious relic.

We do not know what the reader will think of the devotion of the Sienese, when we add that not content with the Octave of preparation they celebrated another "*predica*" of fifteen days, after the conclusion of the solemnity, and the names of the preachers of each day are faithfully given by F. Angiolini. One of them was F. Matthew Tolomei, the brother of Master James, and the same who had accompanied the Saint to Rocca dell' Orcia; another was F. Augustine of Pisa, who had been in the Church of St. Christina when Catherine received the stigmas; another was F. Gregory of Cescena, whose discourse was so magnificent as to stupefy his audience with admiration. But I shall pass over other more illustrious names of Fathers gathered from every convent of the Order in Tuscany, as well as from Venice, France, and Spain, and only add the consoling fact that among the distinguished foreign Dominicans who during that fortnight filled the pulpit of San Domenico, are to be found the names of F. Peter Martyr of Ireland, and F. John of England, the first of whom was "a great Doctor of Paris," and the second "a man greatly renowned as learned, holy, devout, exemplary, and full of faith."

It is thus that the true narrative of this celebrated procession is carefully given by F. Thomas Angiolini; and we have quoted it here, both because his little work is extremely rare, and because the facts have been related by other historians with many variations from the truth. The procession is very commonly represented as having been made by command of the Magistrates of Siena, in order to receive the relic when first sent from Rome by Raymund; ignoring the fact that its original transmission to Siena had been made privately, and at least five years previous to the public reception above described.

Probably no such honours were ever decreed to any other servant of God within so short a time of their decease, and prior to their canonisation. They were rather civic than religious honours, for these last could not, strictly speaking, be permitted,