

THE LETTERS OF CATHERINE OF SIENA

Volume I

Translated with
introduction and notes
by

Suzanne Noffke, O.P.

Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies
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Letter TZ 73

§

In the name of Jesus Christ crucified^a and of gentle Mary.

Very loved and dearest father and my dear son in^b Christ Jesus,

I Caterina, servant and slave of the servants of God,^c send you my greetings^d in the precious blood of God's Son.^e I long to see you engulfed and drowned in the sweet blood of God's Son,^f which is permeated with the fire of his blazing charity. This is what my soul desires: to see you in this blood—you, Nanni, and Iacomo.¹⁴ Son, I see no other way of our attaining the most basic virtues we need. No, dearest father, your soul could not attain them—this soul of yours that has become my food. Not a moment passes that I am not eating this food at the table of the gentle Lamb who was slain in such blazing love. I am saying that unless you are drowned in the blood you will not attain the little virtue of true humility, which is born from hatred as hatred is from love,¹⁵ and so come forth in the most perfect purity as iron comes out purified from the furnace.

So I want you to shut yourself up in the open side of God's Son, that open storeroom¹⁶ so full of fragrance that sin itself is made fragrant.¹⁷ There the dear bride rests in the bed of fire and blood. There she sees revealed the secret of the heart of God's Son.¹⁸ *Oh tapped cask, you give drink and fill to drunkenness every loving desire. You give joy and illumine all our understanding. You so fill all our remembrance that we are overcome and can neither hold nor understand nor love anything other than this good gentle Jesus, blood and fire, ineffable^g love!*¹⁹ Once my soul has been blessed

¹⁴ Neither of these has been certainly identified. Nanni has been variously identified (by Burlamacchi) as Frate Giovanni Piccolomini or (by Taurisano) as the Bavarian friar Giovanni Simmons. Since Raimondo is in Pisa, the two are almost certainly disciples of Catherine who are in that city.

¹⁵ Cf. *Dial.* 63, p. 118: "Every perfection and every virtue proceeds from charity. Charity is nourished by humility. And humility comes from knowledge and holy hatred of oneself, that is, of one's selfish sensuality."

¹⁶ The It. *bottiga* can be a hostelry, as in *Dial.* 66, 77, 27. There the hostelry, situated on the bridge which is Christ, is the Church, where pilgrims are sacramentally refreshed with the blood of Christ. But here the word clearly denotes a shop or storeroom for spices. In some instances the two senses seem to overlap, as in *Dial.* 126, pp. 245-46: "I let them open his side. . . . I set him like a hostelry [or a storeroom] where you could see and taste my unspeakable love for you."

¹⁷ Cf. 2 Cor. 5, 21: "For our sakes God made him who did not know sin, to be sin, so that in him we might become the very holiness of God."

¹⁸ Cf. Bernard de Clairvaux, *In Cantico sermo LXI* (PL CLXXXIII, 1072): "The secret of his heart is opened up through the opening up of his body." The imagery of fire and blood is also developed in *Dial.* 75, pp. 137-138, and Prayer 12, pp. 100-101.

¹⁹ Cf. Let. T136/DT37, to Bishop Angelo Ricasoli (in this volume): "Bleeding from every member, he has made himself cask and wine and cellarer for us. Thus we see that his

with seeing you so drowned, I want you to act like a person who draws water with a pail.^h I mean, with a boundless desire pour the waterⁱ over the heads of your brothers and sisters who are our members bound together in the body of the sweet bride.

Watch that you don't pull back because of the devil's illusions (which have, I know, caused you difficulties, and will) or because of people's talk. No, whenever things seem most cold to you, always persevere until we see blood shed with sweet loving desires.²⁰ Up, up, my dearest father, and let's sleep no longer, for I'm hearing news that makes me no longer want either bed or pillow!²¹ I've already begun by receiving a head into my hands. It was sweeter to me than the heart can imagine or the tongue speak or the eye see or the ear hear.²² My desire for God went on along with the other mysteries that have happened earlier,²³ which I won't recount because it would be too long.

I went to visit the one you know²⁴ and he was so comforted and consoled that he confessed his sins and prepared himself very well. He made me promise for love of God that when the time came for the execution I would be with him. This I promised and did.

In the morning, before the bell,²⁵ I went to him and he was greatly

humanity is the cask that encased the divine nature. The cellarer—the fire and the hands that are the Holy Spirit—tapped that cask on the wood of the most holy cross.”

²⁰ It.: *ogni otta che vedeste la cosa piu fredda*. Tommasò (n. 4) says, “She is referring to the subject-matter of the letter; and what she did for the soul of the condemned man she recommends should be done for all and always.” Giuliana Cavallini (personal correspondence with the author) sees in the sentence a reference to the hardened state of the criminal whose blood is to be shed. Or the coldness may refer to some aspect of Raimondo's ministry.

²¹ The second principal clause (“for I'm . . . pillow”) has, according to Dupré Theseider, a proverbial tone, but he was not able to document it in any other author. “Pillow” translates *testi*, which is of uncertain meaning. Dupré Theseider would interpret it here as a “cushion” or “coverlet,” from the Lat. *textum*, or would read *stato* for *testi* and interpret it as “rest.” S2 has *stati*, which Dupré Theseider considers a probable emendation based on another frequent Catherinian expression, *i diletti e gli stati del mondo*, “the pleasures and conditions (or status) of the world” (*Dial.* 27, p. 67, and elsewhere).

²² Cf. 1 Cor. 2, 9.

²³ It. *Andò el desiderio di Dio, tra gli altri misterii fatti inanzi*. The sense of the verb *andò* (literally, “went”) is unclear. It is even unclear whether *el desiderio di Dio* refers to Catherine's desire for God or God's own desire. “Mystery” (here in the plural, *misterii*) is a precious reality to Catherine, encompassing all that embodies God's intimacy with humanity, in a sense that is clearly sacramental for her. But again, it is unclear to which mysteries she is referring.

²⁴ Raimondo, then, knows about Niccolò. It may even be he who has sent Catherine to intervene.

²⁵ The bell in the Mangia Tower in the Piazza del Campo of Siena, which rang the curfew every night and its end in the morning.

consoled. I took him to hear Mass and he received holy communion, which he hadn't received in a long time. His will was in accord with and submissive to God's will. His only fear now was of not being strong at the final moment. But God's measureless and burning goodness tricked him, creating in him such affection and love through his love for me in God^{26;} that he could not do without God! He said, “Stay with me; don't leave me alone. That way I can't help but be all right, and I'll die happy!” His head was resting on my breast. I sensed an intense joy, a fragrance of his blood²⁷—and it wasn't separate from the fragrance of my own, which I am waiting to shed for my gentle Spouse Jesus.

With my soul's desire growing, and sensing his fear, I said, “Courage, my dear brother, for soon we shall reach the wedding feast. You will go forth to it bathed in the sweet blood of God's Son,²⁸ with the sweet name of Jesus, which I don't want ever^k to leave your memory. I shall wait for you at the place of execution.” Just think, father and son! All the fear in his heart disappeared; the sadness on his face was transformed into gladness! He was happy, exultant, and he said, “What is the source of such a grace for me, that my soul's sweetness will wait for me at the holy place of execution?” (He had become so enlightened that he called the place of execution a holy place!) And he said, “I shall go all joyful and strong, and when I think that you will be waiting for me there, it will seem a thousand years until I get there!” And he said such tender words as to make one burst at God's goodness!

I waited for him at the place of execution. I waited there in continual prayer and in the presence of Mary and of Catherine, virgin and martyr. Before he arrived I knelt down and stretched my neck out on the block, but I did not succeed in getting what I longed for up there.²⁹ I prayed and

²⁶ Cf. *Dial.* 144, p. 302: “I even make use of a holy trick, just to raise her up from imperfection: I make her conceive a special love for certain people, beyond a general spiritual love. . . . And with this well-ordered love I have given her she chases out the disordered love with which she had loved creatures in the beginning.” For a record of other commentaries on the sentence, cf. Gambirosio, “Nota su una frase della lettera su Niccolò di Tuldo,” in *S. Caterina da Siena, creatura dello Spirito*, ed. Giacinto D'Urso (Florence: Rivista de ascetica e mistica, 1980), pp. 145-149.

²⁷ Cf. *Dial.* 124, p. 239: “I let you commune in the body and blood of my Son. . . . And as you know, it pleased my goodness to let that fragrance of the blood remain wonderfully present in your mouth and your bodily taste for several days.”

²⁸ The wedding feast is eternity, as in the parable of the wedding banquet (Mt. 22), the garment for which Catherine sees as the blood of Christ and, by participation, the blood of the martyr. Cf. also Rev. 19, 7-8.

²⁹ According to Dupré Theseider, Catherine probably intends to say that, with her head on the block, she did not succeed in so concentrating her attention in prayer at such a moment as to arrive at the ecstatic communion with the Divinity necessary to constrain him to mercy; but later this would be done for her (“my soul was so filled”). This seems a bit

pleaded with Mary that I wanted this grace, that at his last moment she would give him light and peace of heart¹ and afterwards see him return to his destination. Because of the sweet promise made to me, my soul was so filled that although a great crowd of people was there I couldn't see a single person.³⁰

Then he arrived like a meek lamb, and when he saw me he began to laugh and wanted me to make the sign of the cross on him. When he had received the sign I said, "Down for the wedding, my dear brother, for soon you will be in everlasting life!" He knelt down very meekly; I placed his neck [on the block] and bent down and reminded him of the blood of the Lamb. His mouth said nothing but "Gesù!" and "Caterina!" and as he said this, I received his head into my hands,³¹ saying, "I will!" with my eyes fixed on divine Goodness.

Then was seen the God-Man as one sees the brilliance of the sun. [His side] was open and received blood into his own blood—received a flame of holy desire (which grace had given and hidden in this soul) into the flame of his own divine charity. After he had received his blood and his desire, [Jesus] received his soul as well and placed it all-mercifully into the open storeroom of his side.³² Thus First Truth showed he was receiving him only through grace and mercy and not for anything he had done. Oh how boundlessly sweet it was to see God's goodness! With what tenderness and love he awaited that soul when it had left its body—the eye of his mercy turned toward it—when it came to enter into his side bathed in its own blood, which found its worth in the blood of God's Son! Once he had been so received by God (who by his power was powerful enough to do it), the Son, Wisdom and Word incarnate, gave him the gift of sharing in the tormented love with which he himself had accepted *his* painful death in obedience to the Father for the welfare of the human race. And the hands of the Holy Spirit locked him in.³³

stretched. I would think it more probable that what she was longing for "up there" was her own martyrdom, a desire that was always with her. Such an interpretation is further suggested by Catherine's symbolically placing her own neck on the block.

³⁰ Caffarini reports (*Leggenda minore*, ed. Grottanelli, p. 94): "She said afterwards to her confessor as well as to us others that, although there was a great crowd of people there, she saw no one."

³¹ Caffarini, who says he was present, continues (*Leggenda minore*, ed. Grottanelli, p. 94): "With her holy hands she took and received his head, keeping her eyes raised and fixed on heaven, never blinking or closing them for a long time. Everyone marveled at this." He concludes his account by remarking, "We have a beautiful letter about this matter."

³² The same "storeroom" with which she opened the letter.

³³ Catherine follows the traditional Trinitarian attributions: power (the Father), wisdom (the Word), and the hands of mercy (the Spirit).

As for him, he made a gesture sweet enough to charm a thousand hearts. (I'm not surprised, for he was already tasting the divine sweetness.) He turned as does a bride when, having reached her husband's threshold, she turns her head and looks back, nods to those who have attended her, and so expresses her thanks.

(Now that he was hidden away where he belonged, my soul rested in peace and quiet in such a fragrance of blood that I couldn't bear to wash away his blood that had splashed on me.)³⁴ Oimé! Poor wretch that I am, I don't want to say any more! With the greatest envy I remained on earth! It seems to me that the first stone is already laid.³⁵ So don't be surprised if I impose on you only my desire to see you drowned in the blood and fire pouring out from the side of God's Son. No more apathy now, my sweetest children, because the blood has begun to flow and to receive life!^{36,m}

Textual Notes

- a. P2: [*crucified*].
- b. B, P2 add *the gentle*.
- c. B, P2: *of Jesus Christ / God*.
- d. B: *I commend you*; P2: *commending you / send you my greetings (racomandomivi)*.
- e. *b*: *his blood / blood of God's Son*.
- f. *b*: *blood of this sweet Son of God / sweet blood of God's Son*.
- g. B, P2: *immeasurable / ineffable*.
- h. *b* adds *who pours it out over some other thing (pours it out uncertain because partly cut off beyond margin)*.

³⁴ Simone da Cortona reports the same detail in his deposition for the *Processo Castellano* (Laurent, *Fontes*, IX): "Thus did the compassionate mother call lost souls back to the very Christ who is way and truth and life. And this happened often. Even more, she accompanied them along the way to the very place of execution. And when they reached the torment, she would kneel down and receive their head in her hands, and rejoice when she saw her white clothes spattered with their heart's blood." But Simone may simply be reflecting Catherine's own account as he had read or heard about it. There is no evidence that she accompanied any other condemned person to execution.

³⁵ Cf. Let. T295 (1378): "... the glorious martyrs, who were ready for any sort of witness, ready to suffer torture and death for the truth. With their blood, shed for love of the blood, they form the foundation walls of holy Church." Also T333 (1379): "How happy my soul would have been, and yours as well, to see that you had with your blood cemented a stone into the wall of holy Church for love of the blood!" (Both of these letters, too, are addressed to Raimondo.)

³⁶ In Let. T295 (1378), also to Raimondo, Catherine writes: "I didn't deserve to have my blood give life or enlighten blind minds or make peace between father and son or with my blood cement a stone into the mystic body of holy Church." There seems to be a sense, in the present instance, of the mutual giving and receiving of life between the blood of Christ and the blood of the martyr, all for the life of the Church.

- i. *that is . . . water* erased in Mo; *b*: *so pour the water of holy desire / pour the water.*
 j. This reading from S2. Mo, B, P2: *love through his desire for God.*
 k. I follow *b* in inserting *ever*.
 l. B, P2: *true light and peace / light and peace.*
 m. B, P2 add *Gentle Jesus! Jesus love!*

LETTER T225/G121¹

To Frate Lazzarino da Pisa

After 1 April 1375, perhaps shortly after Pentecost, 10 June

Lazzarino da Pisa, a learned Franciscan friar, and a popular preacher and lecturer, first made Catherine's acquaintance shortly after she had begun to minister in the neighborhoods of Siena. He had in fact been vilifying her and her followers in public and had come to visit her only to trap her in her speech and gather further ammunition for his campaign. Concluding from their conversation that though she was a good woman she certainly did not deserve the reputation she enjoyed in the city, he left promising to return. Fearing to look disrespectful, he asked for her prayers as he departed.

The next day he was mysteriously overwhelmed by tears as he prepared his usual lecture. Returning to Catherine, he begged to be received as her disciple. After some protest concerning his superior knowledge, she advised him to begin to follow Christ and Francis "in nakedness and humility." His life was never the same again.²

In the present letter Catherine reiterates the counsel she gave him at the time of his conversion. The letter is, Gardner observes,³

probably in answer to one of Lazzarino's to her, of which a mutilated fragment is preserved in the *Biblioteca Comunale* of Siena.⁴ In that letter, as far as any connected sense can be made out of what is left, he appears to be complaining of the persecution he is receiving from his fellow Franciscans. It is dated "*in Firenze lo dì dela Pentecoste*," [no year specified] and addressed to "*Chaterina da Siena sposa di Jesu Cristo et serva de sui servi et madre de sui fedeli devoti, in Pisa.*"

Gardner would place both Lazzarino's letter and Catherine's in 1375. Such a placement is reinforced not only by the linguistic evidence,⁵ but also by Catherine's reference (unique here) to God wounding her soul—very

¹ MSS: Mo-a, P4, Pa; translation based on Mo-a, corrected by *b*, with other variants based on unpublished transcription by A. Volpato.

² Bartolomeo Dominici tells the story in *Processo Castellano* (Laurent, *Fontes*, IX, pp. 331–334).

³ *Saint Catherine of Siena*, p. 59, n. 2.

⁴ MS. T.III.3 (not among those published by Grottanelli).

⁵ Every one of the four letters sharing eleven or more patterns with this one's forty-eight is dated before April 1376. Also, there is a significant presence of non-standardized protocol elements. There are also significant concentrations of several individual patterns in this early period (with GUSTATE and SERVINUT occurring only there). On the other hand, four of this letter's patterns (FANTAS, PERMANENT, PUNICORP, SALM) do not otherwise occur at all before 1377 (though none of them is *heavily* concentrated thereafter)!