LETTER 9 (Dupré XXXI; Tommaseo 273; Gigli 97).

To: Fra Raimondo of Capua, OP. 1

Date: Probably June 1375 (though Gardner (p.210) suggests a date two years later), from Siena.

Beloved father and dearest son in Christ Jesus,

I, Catherine, servant and slave of the servants of Christ, write and recommend myself to you in the precious blood of the Son of God, desiring to see you plunged and drowned in that sweet blood, all aglow with his burning charity. Yes, this I desire for you, and for Nanni and Giacomo.<sup>2</sup> I see no other way for us to come to those basic virtues we all need, my son. Nor can your soul acquire them otherwise, that soul which has become my food (and not a moment passes without my partaking of this food at the table of the sweet Lamb who bled to death with such burning love). As I say, unless you are drowned in his blood, you can never acquire the little virtue of true humility born of self-hatred which, in turn, is born of

O pierced Wine-cask, with the wine you offer you intoxicate every loving desire; you fill the understanding with joy and light and so flood every memory that endeavours to find you as to leave it incapable of remembering, understanding or loving anything other than yourself, good sweet Jesus, Blood and Fire, ineffable Love!

So that my soul may indeed exult to see you drowned in this way, I want you, like one who draws water in a bucket, that is, in your boundless desire, to pour the water over your brethren who are all members with us in the one body, the sweet Bride. And be sure you keep at it, whatever trick the devil may play (and I know you have been and will be troubled in this way), until we actually see their sweet and loving desires flowing like blood.

Come, father, this is no time for sleep. The news is such that I simply cannot rest. Already I have taken a man's head in my very hands, and been so deeply moved that my heart can hardly conceive it or my tongue relate it and I am sure no eye has seen or ear heard the like.<sup>4</sup>

God's will was at work (as it had been in the mystery of what went before) but I will not go into all the details as it would take too long. Well! I went to see the person you know about<sup>5</sup> and my visit helped him so much that he went to confession and made a good preparation. He made me promise, for the love of God, to be with him at the end. I gave him my word, and kept it. So, early that morning before the bell rang, I went to him and he was much consoled. I took him to hear Mass and he received holy communion, which he had never done before. His own will was conformed and subject to God's, but he was still fearful that he might not be strong when it came to

the point. However God, in his boundless and burning goodness, deceived him, as it were, by instilling into him such love and affection for me (in God) that he did not know how to be without Him. He kept saying: 'Stay with me and don't leave me; then I shall be all right and die happy' - and all the time he leaned his head on my breast. I was aware of sudden joy, of the odour of his blood in some way mingled with that of my own, which I hope to shed for sweet Jesus my bridegroom. As my own yearning increased and I sensed his fear, I said to him: 'Courage, dearest brother. We shall soon be at the wedding. You will be going to it bathed in the sweet blood of God's Son and with the sweet name of Jesus [on your lips]. Don't let it slip from your mind for an instant. I shall be waiting for you at the place of execution.' Think of it, father (and son). At that, his heart lost all fear, the sadness on his face turned to joy and he kept rejoicing and exulting and saying: 'How have I been given so much grace that my soul's delight will be waiting for me at the blessed place of my execution?' (He had reached the point of being able to call the place 'blessed'!) Then he said: 'I shall go with joy and courage and the time in between will seem like a thousand years, thinking that you will be there waiting for me.' He said such lovely things that one could almost burst at the goodness of God.

So I waited for him at the place of execution. All the time I waited I was praying and sensing the presence of Mary and of Catherine, virgin and martyr. Before he arrived, I lay down and placed my own head on the block, but I did not quite have what I wanted. So I begged, indeed forced Mary to get me the grace I wanted, which was that I might give him light and peace of heart at the moment of death, and then see him going to God. I was so absorbed in the assurance I received that my prayer would be granted that I saw no one in the crowd around

At last he arrived, as meek as a lamb. When he saw me, he began to laugh and wanted me to make the sign of the

Then I saw the God-Man as one sees the light of the sun. His side was open to receive into his own the blood that had just been shed; a fire of holy desire, which his grace had poured into and concealed in that soul, was now received into the fire of his own divine Charity. After receiving the blood and the desire, he received the soul itself and plunged it into the mercy-filled storehouse of his open side. Thus did the First Truth show that his reception was due entirely to God's grace and mercy and to nothing else. How indescribably moving it was to see God's goodness; to see the gentleness and love with which he waited to welcome that soul - with the eyes of his mercy fixed on it - as it left the body and was plunged into his open side, bathed in its own blood that now possessed merit through the blood of God's Son. When he had been thus received by God in his almighty power, the Son, who is wisdom and incarnate Word, gave him a share in the crucified love with which, in obedience to the Father, he himself had endured his own painful and shameful death for the benefit of all mankind. Then the hands of the Holy Spirit sealed him into that open side.

But he did such a lovely thing – one last gesture that would melt a thousand hearts (and no wonder, seeing that he was already experiencing the divine sweetness). He looked back, like a bride who pauses on the bridegroom's threshold to look back and bow her thanks to her escort.

When he had gone, my own soul was serenely at peace, and so impregnated with the scent of blood that I could not bear to remove the blood itself that had splashed onto me. Alas, poor me, I can say no more. I was so envious, seeing myself left behind.

The first stone really does seem to have been laid, so don't be surprised if I lay on you only my longing to see you, too, plunged into the blood and fire flowing from the side of God's Son. No more carelessness, my beloved children, for the blood has begun to flow and receive life.8

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> A learned, cautious and experienced Dominican who had already been Prior of the Minerva in Rome and chaplain to the Dominican nuns at Montepulciano for some years when he was assigned as Lector to the Studium in Siena shortly before (or, possibly, after) the General Chapter of 1374. At this chapter, he was officially appointed confessor and director to Catherine and her Mantellate companions. See T.M. Centi, 'Un processo inventato di sana pianta', in S. Caterina tra i dottori della Chiesa, ed. T.S. Centi OP, Florence, 1970.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Unidentifiable.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. letter 18, note 5.

Gf. I Corinthians 2:9, yet another text that rings like a refrain through Catherine's letters.

The person in question seems to have been a young Perugian nobleman, Niccolò di Toldo, who had been condemned to death in Siena for speaking disrespectfully of the Sienese government.

The curfew bell – it was illegal to be on the streets before it rang.

<sup>7</sup> Italian: per potentia fu potente di poterlo fare – an almost untranslatable play on the words potentia/potente (power/powerful) and potere (to be able).

Not clear. Catherine may mean Christ's blood, flowing from the fountain (cf. par.2) in the form of sweet and holy desire, and receiving back into it the re-awakened spiritual life of all over whom it flows.