

F. Thomas Luongo. *The Sainly Politics of Catherine of Siena*.

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“In restoring Catherine to her own history, I hope I have begun to return the pen to her hand” (208). The sentence with which F. Thomas Luongo ends his book is a good starting point for illustrating the dual objective of his research: to describe the saintliness of a person and the historical context in which she revealed herself, using her writings as the main source for reconstructing her story, and to interpret female saintliness by constructing models of figures assembled from different histories regardless of political or social context.

Following this objective, Luongo sets forth an innovative reading of Catherine of Siena and an analysis of her environment. He takes into account the political

climate as well as the religious and ecclesiastical conditions of the time in which she emerged as a public figure. Had it not been for the War of the Eight Saints between Florence and the papacy, the career of Catherine as a saint would not have taken off as it did. That event enabled Catherine and her followers to emerge as peace-brokers and as supporters of the papacy and the Guelphs. After fruitless attempts to prevent the alliance between Siena and Florence, Catherine went to some lengths to dissuade other cities such as Pisa and Lucca from entering the league and, finally, wrote to such rulers as Louis d'Anjou, Elizabeth of Hungary, and Joan of Naples, asking them to come to the aid of the Church. The best-known issues associated with Catherine — the exhortation to resume the Crusades against the Turks and the return of the papacy to Rome — gained strength because of the entry of Catherine and her *familia* into the political fray.

The author proves his central thesis of the book convincingly. He develops his ideas over five chapters: the first on Catherine's family and on her choice of life as a nun; the second on Catherine Benincasa and her disciples, and their entrance into ecclesiastical and political life after 1374 when Bridget of Sweden, Catherine's role model, died; the third looks at Catherine's non-political letters; the fourth examines the political movements afoot in Italy at the time of the War of the Eight Saints; and the fifth shows the political overtones of Catherine's emerging saintliness and how her rhetoric of saintliness gave her credibility and visibility for her entrance into the political scene.

In addition to pinpointing the specific moment at which Catherine of Siena stepped forth as a political figure and constructed herself as a saint, Luongo's book contributes new material to our knowledge of the Benincasa family. It shows that the family's origins were not as lowly as the common hagiography would have us believe, but were near the highest echelons of Siena society at the time. As regards Catherine's choice of life, Luongo clearly takes into account Maiju Lehmijoki Gardner's recent research about the rules and *formae vitae* of fourteenth-century Dominican tertiaries. Luongo's book is based on a broad, carefully selected bibliography and new documentary research, such as the assessable value registers of the city of Siena, and the rulings and the letters of the community and of the various councils. It also makes good use of a new reading of the literary and hagiographical sources on Catherine, such as the *Miracoli* and the *Processo Castellano*, and of the letters of Catherine herself. A review of other texts, such as the Florence chronicles by Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, would have helped to confirm Luongo's thesis.

Luongo's use of the vast output on female saintliness produced in the last two decades is interesting. In this, Luongo notes that these writings have been strongly influenced by the ideas of Caroline Bynum, which, though solid and original, shift the political aspect of medieval saintliness to the background. This leads me to note that such a stance appears more in the scholarly literature of the United States than of Europe, and Luongo himself often seems to rely more on reading the sources on Catherine *al femminile* (from the female standpoint). A case in point is his interpretation of Catherine's letter on the conversion and death of Niccolò di Toldo as

the erotic side of political commitment, but, in my view, he pushes the interpretation further than the text itself allows. Catherine's language, as is well-known, can be earthy. It is also at times metaphorical and allegorical, but is based on sacred texts and spiritual literature, and the letter must be read in relation to the works that Catherine used. As Luongo points out, there is no doubt that Catherine's description of the conversion and death of the condemned man reveals much about Catherine herself and her entrance into public life, but I find the interpretation of his death as a mystical marriage unlikely. The presence of the Virgin Mary and Catherine of Alexandria at the scene, which led Luongo to this conclusion, could be explained differently. Conversion of sinners was a recurring topos among the Miracles of the Virgin from the fourteenth century: furthermore, conversion is a miracle that entitles its practitioners to be apostles and missionaries. Catherine of Alexandria was the patron saint of Catherine of Siena and a martyr, and Catherine of Siena described the execution of Niccolò di Toldo as a martyrdom that inspired her commitment to reforming the church.

These remarks notwithstanding, this work makes a significant contribution both to studies about Catherine and to those regarding female saintliness as a historiographical category.

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