

Catherine the Dominican

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'Look (said the Eternal Father to St Catherine) at the ship of your father Dominic, my beloved son, and see how perfectly it is rigged. He wanted their sole concern to be my honour and the salvation of souls by the light of true knowledge. This light was to be his main object, but he did not neglect real voluntary poverty. He observed it himself, and as a sign of this and his disapproval of the contrary he left as his last will and testament to his sons his own curse, and mine, upon any who might have private possessions. But he took as his particular aim the light of true knowledge, for the uprooting of the errors of the times. He assumed the office of the Word, my only-begotten Son, . . . he was a light, which by means of Mary I placed in the world within the mystical body of Mother Church, as an uprooter of heresy. Why did I say "by means of Mary"? Because Mary gave him the habit . . . And he wants them to be obedient, to do what they are told. And because impure living obscures the eye of the mind . . . and because he wants them to receive most perfectly the light of true knowledge, he gave them the third vow of chastity, to be observed with perfect obedience. Today indeed these things are badly observed; the light of true knowledge is turned into darkness by the darkness of pride . . . and where there is pride there is no obedience . . .

'So there is his ship, so well rigged with the three ropes of obedience, chastity and true poverty. But he took account of reality and did not bind his sons under pain of mortal sin . . . he made provision for the less perfect among them, for although all in the Order are in a way perfect, yet in this life some are more perfect than others, and there are both perfect and imperfect in the crew of this ship. . . . It is like a wide and gay and fragrant garden, all delight in itself, but there are in the Order unhappy ones who are not observant and break the rule, and they have turned the garden into a wilderness (*l'hanno tucto insalvaticito*) . . . , but in the beginning it was not so'.

Thus St Catherine in the *Dialogo* (c. 148); and in the *Legenda* we also read how God drew for her a parallel between his Son, the eternal Word, who 'preached to the world the things I commanded him to preach and gave testimony to the truth, as he said to Pilate', and his adopted son, Dominic, who 'preached the truth of my words to the

world . . . not only by himself, but also through others; not only while he was alive, but also through his successors, by means of whom he went on preaching and still goes on preaching today' (*Legenda*, part II, c. 6: tr. George Lamb p. 184).

These are witnesses to St Catherine's exalted view of the vocation of the Dominican Order, but also to her awareness of the failure of many in the Order at the time to fulfil that vocation. She had joined the *Mantellate* at Siena, the group of Tertiaries engaged on good works in the city under the direction of the Dominican Fathers, in 1364 at the age of 17, and during the next ten years had begun to attract attention through her active apostolate. Her first journey outside her own city was in 1374, when at the command of the Master General of the Order, Elias Raymond of Toulouse, she came to Florence during the General Chapter of the Order being held there, to give an account of herself. Elias Raymond had become Master General in 1367 and already from the Chapter of 1370 had been concerned with making stricter the personal poverty of the friars, and he pursued this more strenuously at the Chapters of 1376 and 1378.

It was about this time (before 1376) that a rumour was spreading that Master General Elias was about to be made a cardinal. The rumour was in fact unfounded, but it would have meant his relinquishing his post as Master General. Catherine was writing to Pope Gregory XI at Avignon, and besought him, if the rumour were true, to appoint 'a good and virtuous man as our vicar' (i.e., until a new Master General were elected by the Order), 'since the Order has need of it, having become too much of a wilderness (*tropo insalvaticito*)' (Ep. 185 ed. Misciattelli); and urging a recommendation of the same matter to the Archbishop of Otranto she adds: 'Our present need is for a fearless surgeon who will wield the straight steel of holy justice; so much ointment has been used so far, that the limbs are nearly all rotten' (Ep. 183), and similarly to a prelate at the papal court, adding that 'our need is very great' (Ep. 181). In fact Elias Raymond continued as Master General, and when the schism came after the death of Gregory in Rome in 1378, Elias in common with most of the French chose to support the Avignon pope, and the Order, together with the rest of the Church, was split into two allegiances. The 1380 Chapter of the Avignon obedience, held under Elias Raymond at Lausanne, formally excommunicated those who rejected the authority of Clement VII or of Elias.

Meanwhile in the same year 1380 Catherine was dying in Rome on April 29th. Raymond of Capua, whom she had first met at the General

Chapter of Florence in 1374, who had then become her confessor and friend and who afterwards wrote the *Legenda*, was not present at her deathbed: he had been elected Provincial of Lombardy in 1379 and was at the time at Genoa; but another Father from Siena, Bartholomew Dominici, was there at the end, and it is from him that we learn that Catherine said that Raymund of Capua would soon be elected Master General. Indeed she had already hinted at this in her last letter to him, when she wrote of the need of humility especially 'if God should give you some exalted position', urging him to constant prayer and daily celebration of Mass. 'Fly from idle or useless conversation', she adds, 'be mature in your speech and behaviour, cast away all tenderness towards yourself and all servile fear, for the Church has no need of people like that: she needs people who are cruel with themselves but gentle with her' (Ep. 373, ed. Misciattelli). Exactly a fortnight after Catherine's death the General Chapter of 1380 was held by those of the Roman obedience at Bologna. Elias Raymond, who had gone over to the Avignon allegiance, was declared deposed, and Raymund of Capua was elected Master General in his place.

The schism had saddened the last two years of Catherine, who had worked so strenuously for the *santo passaggio* or transfer of the papacy back to Rome and had supported so keenly the Roman Urban VI. But now her spirit would live on in her friend Raymund, whom she used to call *padre e figliuolo dolcissimo* and who was now at the head of the Order. What was he going to do to bring the Order back to its former glory from being 'too much of a wilderness'?

To answer this we must go back to the time when he first became her friend. She met him the first time, as we have seen, in 1374, when Master General Elias also appointed him to be her confessor. It was in the following year, 1375, when they were both at Pisa, that she met several people (apart from that remarkable English adventurer, Sir John Hawkwood, whom she tried to persuade to turn his warlike energies to the crusades—Ep. 140, ed. Misc.), who were to have an important place in later Dominican history. First there was John Dominici, who must have been very young at the time, but who wrote to his mother of seeing Catherine at Pisa. As a Dominican he played a leading part in Raymund's reform of the Order, and as a cardinal at the Council of Constance in 1415 he had a principal share in the termination of the schism. And then there was Piero Gambacorta, a prosperous merchant who at the time was head of the Republic of Pisa, and who had invited her to Pisa the preceding year, but she had declined (Ep. 149, ed. Misc.).

Gambacorta had a daughter named Tora, whom he had given in marriage at the age of twelve to a noble and wealthy young man, in 1374. Tora and Catherine became friends and corresponded afterwards particularly in 1377 (Ep. 262, ed. Misc.), when she had become suddenly widowed. Catherine suggested she should remain a widow and enter the cloister: 'I should advise you for your own advantage to enter the ship of holy obedience, because this is the safest and most perfect way, since one can sail without pulling the oars oneself: it is the Order that pulls the oars'. Tora's voyage was none the less a stormy one. She ran away to a convent of Poor Clares and took the name of Clara, which she always kept afterwards. But her father brought her back by force and shut her up for five months. Eventually she was released, and in 1382 she entered the Convent of Holy Cross, of the Dominican nuns at Pisa. About the same time another young widow entered the same convent. This was Catherine Mancini. By 1375, when she also met Catherine at Pisa, she was about 24 and already twice a widow. She joined a group of *Mantellate* at Pisa, and St Catherine subsequently wrote to her and her friends to encourage them (Ep. 153, ed. Misc.). She took the name Maria when she entered at Holy Cross and became a friend of Clara Gambacorta. Observance was slack at this convent, as it was in many at the time, and these two young nuns began a movement towards perfect observance within their own community. The 'common life', that is, complete absence of personal possession, was to be restored; the question of the *camera*, or a room in the house to which one laid a special claim, was renounced; the law of enclosure was strictly observed, and attendance in choir and the practice of silence were to become normal and regular.

Thus the reform of the Order is sometimes dated from 1382, with Clara Gambacorta and Maria Mancini at Pisa deliberately striving after the ideals of observance of the early days of the Order. In 1385 those desirous of full observance decided to move to a new convent, with no prejudice to those who preferred the ways to which they had grown accustomed. Clara Gambacorta's father, now quite reconciled, built them a new convent which was called St Dominic's, and seven nuns moved there to start a life of perfect observance. The first prioress was one Suor Philippa, her successor was Clara, and the third was Maria. Various Fathers of the Order were watching the new experiment with interest, not least the Master General Raymund of Capua who recognized the beginning here of the realization of Catherine's hopes, through the work of her two young friends of Pisa.

There was a principle here at Pisa, which became a keystone of Raymund's whole scheme: here was a 'convent of observance', which no one was bound to go to, which no one was prevented from joining, and which existed with no prejudice to Holy Cross, where the old ways were preferred. In the First Order (of the Friars) there were already by 1387 some priories called 'reformed'. It was probably at the General Chapter (of the Roman obedience) at Vienna in 1388 (whose *acta* have perished) that the scheme was inaugurated, for it is reflected in the decree of Raymund of Capua in 1390 and the Bull of Pope Boniface IX of 1391, and it is from these documents that we learn how Raymund's scheme was to work. Each province of the Order was to have at least one 'priory of observance' numbering at least twelve men. None desirous of a life of perfect observance were to be prevented from going there; but none moreover were to be forced to go there. Among the Fathers, as with the nuns, the 'common life' was a key factor; but among the Fathers the *clausura* or enclosure had almost become a dead letter, and there was also the affair of the *camerae* (which we already find mentioned in the days of Elias Raymond). Special 'vicars' were sometimes appointed as superiors over a group of 'priories of observance': John Dominici became such a 'vicar' in Italy, and he had been a frequent visitor to the nuns at Pisa at the beginning. The movement spread quickly. Conrad of Prussia was the leader of the movement in Germany. Another visitor at Pisa had been Laurence of Ripafratta, who became the 'reformed' novice-master (surely a key-man in the scheme) at Cortona. Another visitor had been Frederico Frezzi, afterwards Provincial of Rome and then Bishop of Foligno. These were all people of influence. Raymund himself died while on visitation at Nürnberg in 1399, but the movement was well under way, and more and more priories throughout the Order were joining the reform. The first priory to be built as a reformed priory was Fiesole near Florence in 1406 where Antoninus of Florence was member of the new community, and a little later his friend Giovanni of Fiesole, better known as Fra Angelico.

Raymund's reform of the Dominican Order is an important phenomenon in monastic history. In all the older Orders there have been periods when the first fervour had declined, and it was humanly inevitable that this should be so. In most cases reformed branches or congregations began and frequently developed into juridically distinct bodies. But with the Dominicans the legal constitution of the Order from the beginning was such that any splintering from the juridical unity under the Master General (apart from the temporary division

during the schism) was unthinkable. Raymund's scheme was therefore essentially a reform from within; in most provinces the whole province gradually became 'observant', and the process was virtually complete within a hundred years. There are relics of the history in the titles of some provinces, such as *Utriusque Lombardiae*, i.e., both Upper and Lower Lombardy (further up or further down the River Po), one of which became wholly reformed before the other, until in 1531 they were united; and the *Provincia Sancti Marci* is a title dating back to the 'reformed congregation' including Fiesole and San Marco in Florence.

Another interesting feature is the part played by the nuns in Dominican history: St Dominic started the convent at Prouille before organising his men, Raymund's work can be seen beginning at Pisa, and in England Mother Margaret Hallahan began regular conventual life at Stone in the nineteenth century before Dominican monastic life was restored among the friars. And rightly she named her congregation after St Catherine of Siena.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the Order was at its lowest ebb in numbers since its birth, and it was Master General Jandel who had the task of rebuilding Dominican monastic life in the provinces described as *desolatae*. He used a method in 1850 not unlike that of Raymund of Capua: there were to be certain priories in the Order which were to be models of observance and through these the ideal should be gradually restored. Woodchester in England was one, Paris under Lacordaire was another, and Santa Sabina was under his personal care. And in the hundred years since then the features of regular observance, such as 'common life', have become the normal thing, so that monastic life without them seems unthinkable.

Thus the influence of St Catherine on the life of the Dominican Order, having spread throughout the Order under her immediate inspiration, is still at work in our midst. And one thing is certain: the Order of St Dominic would not be what it is today and what it has been for over five hundred years, had it not been for her.