

# *Caput Mundi, Caput Italiae:* The idea of Rome and *patria* in St. Catherine of Siena

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**ABSTRACT:** Co-patron saint<sup>1</sup> of Italy, the fourteenth-century saint Catherine of Siena enjoys a primary place in the canon of religious literature. She is equally important to the cultural and literary history of Italy; indeed, she was the first woman to have “written”<sup>2</sup> extensively in an Italian dialect.

Catherine desired to be a peacemaker, and her mission was intimately tied to an idea of *patria*.<sup>3</sup> Two of her stated goals stand out in this regard: the call for a crusade to unite Western Christendom; and the plea for the papacy to return to Rome from Avignon.

During this historical period of intense political instability, Catherine preached that a crusade would unite fractured Italy, and focus the nation’s collective energy outside of itself, thereby eliminating the ever-present civil wars. Her supplication to the popes in Avignon to return to Rome reflects this desire for a unified homeland.

Through Catherine’s letters, we glimpse ideas about identity—provincial, Italian, and as a woman—during a time when few women were actively engaged in any arena outside the home or convent. Her rebukes to male pusillanimous leaders (to act more manly, *virile*) reflect her strength and confidence in her female identity; and her passionate mission for peace and unity resonates today.

*Keywords:* Catherine of Siena, patriot, Rome, patria

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The following paper is an article in progress. Any and all comments and suggestions are welcome: [vitaleL3@southernct.edu](mailto:vitaleL3@southernct.edu).

“Se sarete quello che dovette essere, metterete fuoco in tutta Italia.” (S. Caterina da Siena, Letter 368, p. 923). So writes Catherine of Siena in a letter addressed to her disciple Stefano Corrado di Maconi, rebuking him for his lukewarmness. Italia: the land of Rome, historically the center of the western world. It may seem anachronistic to consider an “Italia” during a period where Italy was no more than a loose collection of city-states, provinces and kingdoms, especially from a post-unification point of view; and yet, clearly an idea of Italy persisted from the earliest of times—as far back as the first century BCE, when the word Italy was used to refer to the entire peninsula (Pallottino).

Moreover, there are those that may be considered early patriots of Italy, among them the three fourteenth-century contemporaneous letter-writers Francesco Petrarca, Coluccio Salutati, and the Sieneese Caterina Benincasa, or saint Catherine of Siena. Her devotion to

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<sup>1</sup> Together with Francis of Assisi, both named as such in 1939

<sup>2</sup> The word “written” is used loosely, since most, if not all, of her works were dictated to a number of scribes.

<sup>3</sup> Inasmuch as there was an idea of national consciousness at the time.

homeland is palpable, especially in her letters, and her role as uniter of Italy still resounds today, having been named co-patron saint of Italy alongside St. Francis of Assisi in 1939—a point to which I will return towards the end of the paper. There are three ways in which Catherine is a patriot: through her efforts at unification and peacemaking among towns; as an integral force in persuading the papacy to return to Rome; and as conveyer of culture and the Italian *volgare*.

Catherine's most important theological work is the mystical treatise *Dialogo della divina provvidenza*. A collection of a few dozen *orazioni* join with almost 400 letters to complete the extant works. The letters span from a period of about ten years (1370-1380), when she became active in society.

Central to her mission was peace, beginning with peace among families and within towns, spreading out beyond Siena and into the rest of Italy. One anecdote related by is the healing of the rift between the Maconi family and the wealthy, noble Tolomei family in Siena. Catherine arranged to have Mass heard by both families at the same church. The Maconi came, but the Tolomei didn't arrive. Catherine fervently prayed, and when the church doors opened, who should be there but the Tolomei family. Upon this meeting, the families made peace.

Catherine was not always successful in her mission of peace. A well-documented instance in which Catherine played an integral role was during the conflict between Florence and the Papacy. With the Pope no longer in Italy (the papacy had been transferred to Avignon early in the fourteenth century), a cardinal legate managed the pontifical states; and, just like some other states, they became poorly organized, and interferences interrupted regular governance. Florence rose up at this point, believing she could increase her power and break bonds with the pontifical state. The Florentines formed the *lega toscana*, and tried to collect all of the various autonomous towns in order to go against the Papal states. Catherine went to Pisa and Lucca to try and convince them not to join Florence, but she did not succeed. In response to Florence's uprising, the Pope closed all the churches in Florence, and Mass could not be celebrated there. In retaliation, the Florentines deduced that they were no longer Catholics, and no longer had to abide by pacts made with pope, and debts did not need to be paid.

It was an unsettled time, and Catherine offered to serve as an ambassador of peace for Florence in April 1376. The Florentines sent her to Avignon to plead their case before the Pontiff, Pope Gregory XI. While she was there, Florence sent new ambassadors to Avignon, saying that Catherine's mandate was no longer valid; yet they later blamed her for not making peace.

In order to achieve her mission of unity and peace, Catherine, paradoxically, preached a crusade. During this historical period of intense political instability, Catherine preached that a crusade would unite fractured Italy, and focus the nation's collective energy outside of itself, thereby eliminating the ever-present civil wars between factions and city-states. As she was trying to heal the divide between Florence and the Pope, she wrote a letter urging the Florentines to end their rebellion (Letter 207, p.405):

Aprite aprite gli occhi del cognoscimento e non andate in tanta cecità, però che noi non siamo giudei né saracini, ma siamo cristiani batteggati e ricomprati del sangue di Cristo... ma dobbiamo fare questa contra li infedeli, che ci fano ingiuria, però che possegono quello che non è loro, anco è nostro.

The idea of a crusade is important to Catherine because she sees it as the only way to unify the west. Her plan, if you will, is to send the west on a crusade against the east, whose people

will become fervent converts to Christianity, and will in return cause the west to become re-evangelized and reformed.

Catherine's ecclesial mission was intimately tied to an idea of *patria*. Two of her stated goals stand out in this regard: the call for a crusade to unite Western Christendom; and the plea for the papacy to return to Rome from Avignon.

Similar to the early humanists Coluccio Salutati and Francesco Petrarca, Catherine addressed political letters to many individuals, criticizing the papacy of Avignon and advocating for a renewal of the city of Rome. Petrarch, who praised epistles as a literary form of conversation, one that could emulate live speech, had previously chosen in 1341 to be crowned poet laureate in Rome instead of the fashionable Paris. His nostalgia for the unity of the ancient Roman republic underscored his support for the return of the pope to Rome. Petrarch's critical book of letters to the papacy, the *Liber sine nomine*, was compiled between 1347, Catherine's birth year, and 1354. The "Babylon on the Rhone" is portrayed as the reason for the renewal of a Roman republicanism and imperialism.

Petrarch's earliest letters in 1347 show a vision of "the renaissance of a constitutional Roman republic" united under the tribune Cola di Rienzo.<sup>4</sup> In December of that same year, Cola di Rienzo's candidacy as reformer and uniter failed. Disappointed, Petrarch turned to monarchy as only logical form of government that could save Italy.

Around the same time that Catherine was acting as ambassador for the Florentines, Coluccio Salutati writes a letter to the Romans in which he urges Italians to unite in opposition to a foreign prelate: the French king, and French papacy: "How sad to see noble Italy, whose right it is to rule other nations, itself suffer slavery! What a sight to see this abject barbarism seize upon Latium with ferocious cruelty, creating havoc and preying on the Latins! Therefore arise...and expel this abomination from Italian territory, and protect those who desire liberty. Do not allow these Gallic devourers to oppress your Italy with such cruelty!" (Brucker 300).

Catherine's supplication to the popes in Avignon to return to Rome reflects Salutati's desire for a unified homeland, although Rome, for Catherine, does not have the fascination of the myth. It is a city made of "pietre vive," as the Catherinian scholar Giuliana Cavallini writes, of a life that radiates outside of its walls: it is the "giardino di Cristo benedetto e il principio della nostra fede." (Letter 347, p. 361)

To Gregory XI in Avignon in 1376, in response to a letter he purportedly received from a holy man warning him of poisoning if he should return to Rome, Catherine writes: "Più che seguitare il semplice consiglio di questo giusto uomo, che vi pone, che meglio vi sarebbe, a voi ed altri ministri della Chiesa di Dio, abitare fra gl'infedeli Sarraceni, che fra la gente di Roma o d'Italia". (Letter 239, p. 94) As she unveils Gregory's cowardice, she clearly identifies Rome and Italy as the pope's true home. Later in the same letter, she begs the pontiff to be strong and do what is right: move back to Rome: "E io vi prego di parte di Cristo crocifisso, che voi non siate fanciullo timoroso, ma virile." She uses the word "virile" to express the idea of courage and action.

Gregory XI did return to Rome, despite his fear of being poisoned, but died soon after. The next pope, Urban VI, former Archbishop of Bari, was gruff and unpersonable. Soon after his election, another group of cardinals held that the election had been illegitimate, and put forth another choice: Robert of Geneva, who would become known as the antipope Clement VII. The Western Schism had begun.

Catherine composed an acerbic Letter to three Italian cardinals on this occasion (Letter 310, p. 195): Pure naturalmente parlando (chè, secondo virtù, tutti dobbaimo essere

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<sup>4</sup> Coogan, Petrarch's *Liber sine nomine* and a Vision of Rome in the Reformation, Renaissance and Reformation vol. 7, no. 1, feb.1983 pp1-12.

eguali), ma, parlando umanamente, Cristo in terra italiano, e voi italiani, non vi poteva muovere la passione della patria, come gli oltramontani: cagione non ci veggo, se non l'amore proprio.”

This letter invites comparison to Dante's letter to the Italian cardinals upon the death of Clement V, and the impending papal conclave. Dante, patriot like Catherine, “appealed to the cardinals on behalf of Rome and of Italy: his plea, that they put an end to the Babylonian Captivity in Avignon and return to the Seat of Peter.” (Scudder) In Catherine's time, the urgency to return the papacy to Rome was only greater.

Similar to Dante's *Commedia*, Catherine's works are in the *volgare*. She was the first woman to have “written” extensively in an Italian dialect. The word “written” is used loosely, since most, if not all, of her works were dictated to a number of scribes.

Girolamo Gigli, the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Sienese historian, philologist and playwright, and later scholar and editor of Catherine's epistles, argued for the literary value of her work. However, Gigli's purpose was polemical in nature: he wanted to assert the supremacy of the Sienese language over that of the Florentines including Petrarch whom, he argued to the Accademia della Crusca, did not actually spend much time in Florence, and hence, could not truly represent that city's language. Gigli's mission was to include the role of Siena in contributing to the Italian idiom, and to use spoken words in creating a written, literary language: an authentic reflection of the living language. To these ends, he issued the controversial work *Vocabolario cateriniano*, a dictionary of Catherine's language wherein he discusses the superiority of the Sienese tongue of Catherine and her contribution to literature.

More recently Jane Tylus specifically treats the issue of Catherine and writing in her 2009 book *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, which has as its the goal the reestablishment of Catherine as a key figure in Italian literature among the other canonical greats of Petrarch and Dante. She says, “Catherine may have been pivotal in the reassessment of the vernacular as she moved it from being a *lingua parlata* to a *lingua scritta* disseminated throughout Europe.” (p. ) New scholarship trends, she stresses, values the oral quality of medieval output, and does not view it as incompatible with literature.

To further bolster Tylus' argument, Edmund Gardner, the Dante scholar from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, judges Catherine's language to be the closest preserved form of Tuscan, as set against Petrarch's Ciceronian-style Latin. Gardner describes her as having a spontaneous eloquence and an enthusiasm for her subject that, “her thought outleaps the bounds of speech, metaphor follows close upon metaphor, one image has hardly been formed when another takes its place, until logic and grammar are swept away in the flood and torrent of impassioned words.” (Gardner, 376-7)

Thus, the orality of her work is what makes it seemingly more authentic and gives it a literary quality: a contrast to Dante and Petrarch's various writings which were composed, meditated upon, revised and edited by the authors themselves. Yet to separate the oral from the written is to make an arbitrary distinction, especially for authors from the Middle Ages. It was quite common for knowledge to be amassed by memorization and disseminated by recitation instead of by formal written compositions.

Catherine, therefore, is an pivotal figure for the development and conveyance of the earliest Italian language, and as such may be considered a true Italian patriot and saint. In fact, her role as uniter of Italy still resounds today, having been named co-patron saint of Italy during a politically intense period in history. One of Pope Pius XII's first acts during his papacy was to declare Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Siena a co-patrons. Pius XII ascended to the seat of Peter on March 12, 1939. A little over two months later, on May 22, 1939, Italy signed the ‘Pact of Steel’ with Nazi Germany. This was an open-ended commitment that required Germany and Italy to come to the assistance of the other in the event of war.

Less than one month later, on June 18, 1939 Pius XII in his “Licet commissa” named Francis and Catherine co-patron saints. Undoubtedly, the choice of Catherine sent a powerful message about desiring political peace during the upheaval directly before the second world war. Pius XII wrote,

Né altrimenti si adoperò S. Caterina, la fortissima e piissima vergine che valse efficacemente a ridurre e a stabilire la concordia degli animi nelle città e contrade della sua patria, e che, mossa da continuo amore, con suggerimenti e preghiere fece tornare alla sede di Pietro in Roma i Romani Pontefici, che quasi in esilio vivevano lontani in Francia, tanto da essere considerata a buon diritto il decoro e la difesa della patria e della religione.

Thus, two reasons that Pius XII named Catherine co-patron saint of Italy would also be reasons to consider her a patriot: her strenuous work as peacemaker in the Italian situation of her time; and her service as faithful servant to the church during the Avignon papacy to bring the pope back to Italy. A third reason exists: the importance of Catherine’s extant works on the Italian language.

Through Catherine’s letters, we glimpse ideas about identity—provincial, Italian, and as a woman—during a time when few women were actively engaged in any arena outside the home or convent. Her rebukes to male pusillanimous leaders (to act more manly, *virile*) reflect her strength and confidence in her female identity; and her passionate mission for peace and unity resonates today.

The Roman juridical tradition of each person, each family and each community having a patron extends to the idea of patron saints. In ancient Rome, patron and clients existed; clients could be freed slaves who would remain tied to their patron—just as the family, the community of Italy is tied to Catherine, so that she could intercede on the nation’s behalf for peace on the brink of war. Rome, the home of the Pope and the capital of the Roman Republic and Empire, was also where Catherine spent the last year of her life. At age 33, heartbroken over the state of Italy and of the Church, she died in the eternal city, close to where her body is today: in the Chiesa di Santa Maria sopra Minerva. There could be no more fitting city for the peacemaker’s final resting place.

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