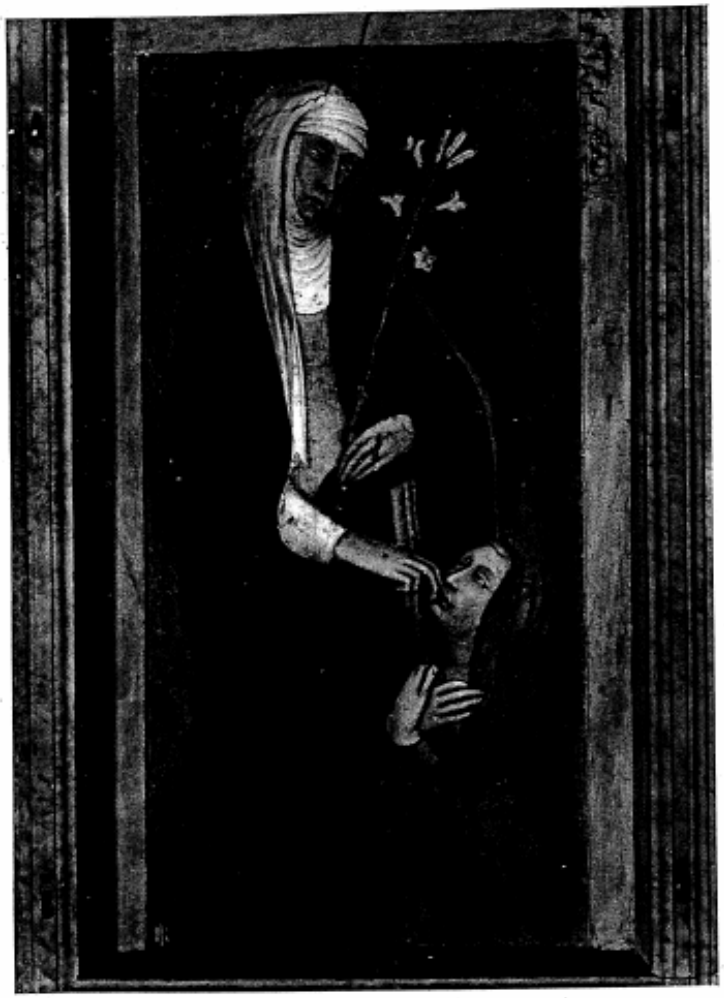

St Catherine, by Andrea Vanni. Siena, San Domenico. c. 1385

MY SERVANT, CATHERINE

by

ARRIGO LEVASTI

Translated by

DOROTHY M. WHITE

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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

This is the English translation of Arrigo Levasti's book, *Santa Caterina da Siena*, which was published in Turin in 1947. It has already been translated into French and German, and acclaimed as a work of outstanding scholarship and profound piety. Only the translators can know how arduous has been the attempt to render in another language something of the sober elegance of the author's Italian prose.

Arrigo Levasti was born in Modena in 1886 and at an early age wandered on foot over the countries of Western Europe, an eager student of the art and culture of the various peoples he visited. He studied at the University of Bologna, where he attended the lectures of Carducci, and at the University of Florence.

Consistently anti-Fascist from the beginning to the end of the Fascist era, he could take no prominent position in Italian public life, but was well known as a student and teacher of religion and philosophy, with a specialised knowledge of subjects connected with mysticism. He has contributed to various Italian, French and German religious and philosophical journals, and to the Dominican Review *The Life of the Spirit*. For twenty years he was Director of the Philosophical Society of Florence, and he still lives in Florence, as Librarian of the American Library.

Among his published works are: *I Mistici*, an anthology of mystical writers of the world (Florence 1925); a new edition of a 14th-century text of the *Leggenda Aurea* of Jacopo da Voragine (Florence, 1926); *Sant' Anselmo* (Bari 1929) and *I Mistici del Duecento e del Trecento* (Milan 1935), an anthology of Italian mystics of the 13th and 14th centuries, with Introduction and Notes.

Santa Caterina is the creation of a lifetime of devoted study, and was completed during the most critical years of the last war, when the author was living in hiding in a Villa near Siena. In the Introduction he speaks with gratitude of his wife, who succeeded in preserving around him 'a serene atmosphere, in moments of anxiety and danger'.

For more detailed information the reader is referred to the *Dizionario della Letteratura Italiana* (Paravia, Turin, 1951) compiled by Renda-Operti, pp. 624-625.

D.W.

Chapter I

THE FAMILY OF GIACOMO DI BENINCASA

As far as we know, Catherine was born in 1347. She was the twenty-third child, and a twin. A twenty-fifth and last child, also a girl, was born about two years later. We know very little about this enormous family.

The father, Giacomo di Benincasa, earned quite a good living as a dyer, was a peaceful and pious man, and exercised a sober and serene influence over his family. Understanding both the good and evil aspects of life, he always tried to find reasonable solutions for problems in dispute, was ever ready to forgive offences, mindful of God, and eager to deserve his place in Paradise. In 1346 he took his son Benincasa into partnership, and in 1368 he died and was buried in Camporegio.

The mother, Lapa, was daughter to Nuccio Piacenti, a quilt maker and poet. If the poems attributed to him are authentic, nothing of the melancholy that inspires them, nothing of their preciosity, was inherited by his daughter; but we may find the impulsive nature of Lapa, or even more, of Catherine herself, in the following lines:

> E sento amor che fuor di me s'avventa
> Per sí gran forza che mi vince tutto,
> Che nol posso tenere . . .
>
> [And I feel love breaking out of me,
> With its strength overwhelming me—
> So that I cannot hold it in . . .]

Lapa was born in 1306, was married, according to Laurent, between 1322 and 1325, and up to the year 1349 had such a succession of annual childbirths that she could only feed one of her children, and that one was Catherine. A woman of the people,

she often reproached her family violently and offensively, but she was a worthy hard-working woman. Immersed in her own daily round, she did not waste time in abstract discussions; she saw the world as a perpetual breeding-ground of numerous, prosperous and well-regulated families. She had common sense, a modest piety and a commonplace morality. It never occured to her to try to control herself or to improve her nature. She was a creature of instinct, sad or gay, scolding or blessing as she suffered or rejoiced. An excessive talker, she was extravagant in feeling and her enthusiasms were as facile as her rages. Even when in her old age she became a Tertiary, she was neither patient nor detached from worldly considerations. She loved her children according to the flesh and 'took little things for big ones'. Her tenderness for her own children was extravagant, as Catherine was to tell her. In her impatience she was subject to depression and grief; she always wanted everything her own way. She would put up with her children's absence if they had left home to pursue wealth, but not if they had gone in search of spiritual activity. But she was good at heart, and succeeded in understanding others in the end, even if tardily and with difficulty, and, after grumbling, gave way to their wishes. That is why she became devout, and as an old woman, entered the Order and followed her holy daughter, whom she admired and revered. She survived Catherine and, according to Raimondo da Capua, lived to be eighty-nine.

In Catherine's life her brothers and sisters play a very minor part and, except for her sister Bonaventura, they move in the background as colourless figures who seem to have no influence over her, and do not help us to understand her. We do not even know the names of some of them, either because they died in infancy, or because no document records them. Of some the names only survive—of others we know a few facts.

Benincasa was the first born. He was a dyer too, and in 1346 was taken into partnership by his father. Unlike his brother Bartolo, he belonged to the 'popolo minuto'. For political or economic reasons he moved to Florence, and, with his brothers, was granted citizen's rights, by seventy-eight favourable votes to twenty-eight adverse. We do not know the name of his wife, who bore him several sons and daughters, but we know that one daughter died of the plague in Siena on August 5th, 1374. Three sons,

Sandro, Jacopo, and Andrea, were admitted to the Guild of Wool Workers in Florence on May 17th, 1391.

Bartolo was a follower of the Twelve, and according to the Comtesse de Flavigny, was one of the defenders of Siena in 1370, and later on in the same year we hear of him in Florence, where he was granted Florentine citizenship with his brothers Benincasa and Stefano. He also was a dyer, and worked with his brothers and their partner; but his affairs went so ill that in October 1373 the Commune of Florence demanded from Siena the payment of 875 florins, 6 soldi and 10 denari for his creditors. He died of the plague in Siena shortly before his children.

Stefano was not much older than Catherine. He also was a dyer, and belonged to the 'popolo minuto', and he too left Siena to become a Florentine citizen. He worked with his brothers, and endured the same hardships as Benincasa and Bartolo. In 1370 he was with them in Florence; in October of 1373 the Priors of the Guilds and the Gonfaloniere of Justice of the Florentine Commune declared him to be a 'deceased brother'. Perhaps he died in Rome, as Piero di Giovanni di Ventura tells us, during a pilgrimage to procure the indulgences attached to visits to the Basilicas and Sanctuaries of the City.

Not much is known of Catherine's sisters. Giovanna, her twin, died soon after birth, and another Giovanna, the last born, died and was buried in April 1363. Niccoluccia married a certain Palmerio di Nese delle Fonti, and Maddalena married Bartolomeo di Vannino. Nora is said to have died of the plague in 1374.

As far as Catherine is concerned, the most important figure is Bonaventura—the eldest sister, attractive, good, affectionate and pious. She married the dyer, Niccolò de' Tegliacci, and lived near the Gate of Sant' Ansano, remaining in constant touch with her old home. The author of the 'Miracoli' says that 'she had been vain and pleasure-loving like all young women', and represents her almost as a frivolous character. On the contrary, she was serious-minded. She nearly fell sick with dismay when she heard her husband's ribald jests with his men friends—for in her parents' house she had never heard such language. She said so frankly to Niccolò, adding that if this behaviour continued she would sicken, and might die of grief. No doubt she loved adornments and fine clothes—but in this she was within her rights. An excellent wife,

a loving daughter and sister—why should she not appear young and pleasing? Her religion did not forbid her to adorn herself, or to make herself beautiful. And she probably advised her younger sister to take pains about her person and adornments, to be graceful and charming—showing her how to gild her hair, and rouge her cheeks, how to appear agile and fresh and alluring. Catherine too was to be married—such was the natural order of things—then why not teach her to be pretty and elegant and pleasing? Such teachings could not fail to draw still closer the bonds of love between the sisters. Bonaventura and Catherine loved each other 'most tenderly'. Such was their mutual understanding and affection that when in August 1362 Bonaventura died in childbirth and was buried in Camporegio, her death left a blank in Catherine's soul—a sense of loss great enough to cause a profound religious crisis.

The biographers give us no account of the family life of the Benincasa, but we can imagine their way of life was orderly, hard-working, honest, prepared for some sacrifices, ruled by a sense of justice and some piety, but also a natural anxiety for material welfare.

Nothing outstanding or unusual about them. One of those numberless families of whom, once gone, no one ever speaks again, unless, as in this case, some extraordinary being is born in their midst.

Chapter II

'CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH'

ST CATHERINE OF SIENA was born in no happy time for her native city. The year 1338, the 'peaceful and happy year' of the Sienese Republic, declined and ended. The next year the rising cost of living, together with an epidemic, drained the city of men and resources. 'In Siena there was not a single good man left', remarks Angelo di Tura sententiously. But from then onwards, until the great 'Death' of 1348, misfortunes, destruction, famine and pestilence followed one another. The seasons were adverse and the crops poor, the farmers left the fields untended, the mercenary 'Companies of Fortune' overran and laid waste the countryside, right up to the gates of Siena; the citizens chose to pay them ransom money rather than fight. In the city the famished populace revolted, but their clamours and rebellion were of no avail. Trade shrank, industry was at a standstill; the excellent Government of the Nine tried to help, to direct, to control where necessary, but it had no longer its old energy or political wisdom, and had only a few more years to live.

When, in April 1348, there was a violent outbreak of the black plague within the city itself, death came to almost every door, and those who were unscathed were 'stupified' with grief at the endless succession of deaths, and whenever possible fled terrified from parents, children, brothers, sisters, friends.

When we read in the Chronicles the brief vivid descriptions of this scourge in Siena, or in other cities of Italy, we shudder with fear even more than when reading the pages of Boccaccio: fear of fear itself, because the survivors were so terrified that they committed the most cowardly acts. No affection or sense of duty prevailed with men who seized upon any excuse to leave their next of kin a prey to their sickness, and escaped from the