Chapter V

THE WINNER OF SOULS

WHEN we turn from the history of Siena, compact of revolts, hatreds, terror, violence, conflicts, assassinations and executions, to go back to Catherine's cell, it is like leaving the noise and whirl of a vast city to enter a cloister. We seem to cross the threshold of a mysterious realm of silence and peace. The trim lawns, so freshly green, the few rose trees that often bear but one solitary rose each, of dreamlike colour and form, the harmony of the arches, whose columns stand out like silver Byzantine arabesques against the green and gold background, the huge grey and russet pile of the church beyond the cloister, and above it, the bell-tower that soars as if built of sighs, prayers and light—all this makes us forget our work and worry for the things of this world, and even forget also the passing of time and the anguish of the spirit.

Catherine's ennobling words had the same fascination for men as the thought of health for the sick man, of freedom for the captive; both the inner cell of her spirit and the outer cell of her room offered the weary in soul and body an oasis of peace. In the commotions of the life of her city she was not an arbitrator, as some writers, far from understanding her soul, would have us believe; she was the friend of God, and sought no contact with politics or politicians. If the politics of the Republic had exercised any attraction over her, what better chance could she have found to make her voice heard than in the years between 1368 and 1372, years of continual revolts, unrest, and civil strife? She might have recalled the citizens and governments to a closer observance of Christian precepts; she might have denounced the deceits, falsehoods, treacheries and innumerable political crimes that were perpetrated before her eyes every day, and that must have shocked her deeply. If she had been a woman inclined to political life, as

she has often been represented, she would in those years have made known her views as to how the Republic should be ruled, and have prescribed the remedies she thought necessary for the numerous ills that afflicted the city. She did not do so, because she felt no inclination for political life, knowing only one sort of life, that of Christ. Absorbed in Him, she was entirely preoccupied with saving individual souls. She may have thought, perhaps, that by converting the citizens she might in this way succeed in setting up a government of love. Probably she distinguished sharply between the two cities, the city of God and the city of this world, and took no interest in the latter—for she was only concerned with the city of God, as we see in the letter she sent to Madonna Mitarella* wife of the Senator Vico da Mogliano, on the occasion of a revolt that took place about the middle of the year 1373, against the application of a sentence pronounced by the Senator.

In 1368 and 1369, as the early biographers tell us, she was entirely taken up with her loving care for the sick in mind and body, alleviating their distress and distributing food and clothing. In 1370 she began her work among the greatest sinners, and we hear of spectacular conversions. Most of these can be placed, approximately, between 1370 and 1374. The series opened with the sudden death-bed conversion of Andrea di Naddino de' Bellanti, who belonged to the party of the Nine, 'rich in family and temporal substance, but poor in virtue—in fact, a gambler, blasphemer of God and the Saints, obstinate in sin and in wishing to die unshriven. Salvestro de' Manzii, in the Annali di Siena, calls him 'a rare rascal'. Catherine was asked to pray for him, and did so with such fervour that Andrea was converted, and, on the 16th of December, 1370, died a Christian death.

Then we have the conversion of various members of the Tolomei family, most surprising of all the sudden conversion of Giacomo Tolomei, 'a strange and very terrible man'. When he heard that his sister Ghinoccia had become a Tertiary through Catherine's influence, he 'came back to the city in a great fury, cursing not only the Sisters but the Friars also, and threatening to tear the habit from his sister's back'. Informed of this by Rabe, the mother of the Tolomei, Catherine at once sent Fra Tommaso

*Letter XII. Dupré-Theseider, ed.

della Fonte to speak with Giacomo. The somewhat timid Fra Tommaso took with him Bartolomeo Dominici. It was not a cordial encounter and soon became an unpleasant dispute. Fra Tommaso had lost all hope of succeeding in his intent when Fra Bartolomeo came to his help. The conversation at once began to take another turn, and Giacomo gradually calmed down, and at last consented to give way, and to go to confession. The two Dominicans were astounded. What had taken place in his soul? Later on they learnt that Catherine, in an ecstasy, had been praying to God for him all the time they were talking, and that her prayer had been powerful enough to touch his heart, and so to 'make the wolf a lamb, and the lion a puppy'.

Catherine's little group of companions, which already included the Tertiary Francesca Tolomei, was now joined by her sister Ghinoccia; the youngest brother, Matteo, became a Dominican. So a branch of one of the great families of Siena was completely won over to Catherine's cause.

About this time occurred the conversion of two malefactors. They were being drawn to execution on a cart, and on the way the hangmen were torturing them with hot pincers. Catherine was at the house of the Saracini, and her fellow Tertiary, Alessa Saracini, told her that under the windows of the house was passing a cart bearing two criminals, who were horribly blaspheming against God and the Saints, while their torturers burnt their flesh with red-hot pincers. Catherine came forward 'to the middle of the room, and hearing and understanding their desperate cries, at once went into an inner room and cast herself on her knees before a picture of Our Lady, praying: "You who are appointed advocate for sinners, intercede now for these, and, if you will, lay all their torment upon me". When the cart arrived at the place of execution, Christ appeared to the two evildoers, and at once their cursing and defiance ceased. They made their confessions, and then fell to praising God and "in a loud voice accused themselves, saying they had deserved this punishment and a much worse fate too"; so, devout and contrite, they were both hanged.'

As Catherine's fame and authority grew, so other Mantellate came to live with her: Caterina de'Ghetto, Caterina dell' Ospedaluccio, Monna Raniera, Giovanna di Capo, Agnola di

Vannino and others. These were as faithful as her earlier followers, and assisted her day and night, sometimes acting as her secretaries, accompanying her on her journeys, or receiving her visitors when she was in ecstasy, or away. Unlike the first companions of St Francis, they were not endowed with any great intellectual gifts, nor were they noteworthy in character. None of them stands out distinctly from the others, we know nothing of their spiritual traits, and if any of them wrote any Memoirs of Catherine, none of these, so far, has come to light. They were good, worthy women, following Catherine about as if fascinated by her, asking her to guide and support them in the difficult way of spiritual perfection. She was their teacher and their mother too.

They had no Rule, beyond that of the Third Order of St Dominic, to regulate their daily life, and they were only held together by Christian love and their admiration for the Saint. They passed together many hours of the day, ate and prayed together, but without a fixed timetable, remaining a small free congregation, whose life depended on the religious ardour that Catherine imparted to them all.

The Saint was glad to be with these Sisters, and interested herself in their spiritual life and in their external activity—but their company could not suffice for her. Her charity was all-embracing and she felt an urgent need to extend her range of action; she wanted to learn from those who knew more than she did, and could teach her.

Her cell, besides being a place of prayer and ecstasy, gradually became a centre for theological and ecclesiastical conversations, and even for Papal politics, which for her meant Christian politics. Her visitors became more and more numerous, and often had fresh news and information to impart; they reported current events, speculated on the future of Siena and its territory, or on that of the Florentine Republic, the Papacy, the Visconti, or the Companies of Fortune. When not rapt in ecstasy or prayer, she listened eagerly to the arguments of the learned Religious who came to her cell, begged for explanations, tried to understand and make her own the thoughts of St Thomas that the Dominicans expounded to her, and did not fail to reconcile them with Augustinian and Franciscan conceptions, so that her intellectualism was coloured with Franciscan feeling, as we see in the 'Dialogue' and her letters.

In her cell she heard talk about the Pope's return to Rome, and then of his departure once more for Avignon, about the possibility and necessity of new Crusades against the infidels, or the urgency of a moral reform of the clergy. So the first seeds of ideas, that were to be so fruitful later on in her life, were probably sown in her mind during some of these general conversations, or commentaries on recent events. It has been asked how it was that Catherine got her ideas of the Crusades, to which the reply has been given that she 'must have known that Gregory XI was a fervent promoter of the Crusades', and that she was influenced by the thought of Raimondo da Capua.† This is true, but most probably Catherine was thinking about the Crusades and following their fortunes even before the pontificate of Gregory XI. She was always in close touch with the Dominicans, who were most enthusiastic supporters of the Crusades, and in the pulpit or in private always boasted of the Crusaders' exploits and preached the necessity for the campaign. Moreover, in June 1368, when Catherine had already begun her social activity, there arrived in Siena Pietro the First, King of Cyprus, with three hundred knights, all guests of the Friars of San Domenico in Camporegio, 'and there were many fine people, and the most honourable Prince, with the best horse, and the most wonderful possessions, that ever entered Siena'. He stayed some days in the city and distributed gifts to those who went to visit him.

Pietro the First was tall, with blue eyes and brown skin and hair. He was of majestic appearance and bearing. His knights in their sumptuous garments accompanied him everywhere. He was admired by all who saw him. There is no contemporary Chronicler of any city where he stayed, were it only for a few hours, but sings his praises. When Pietro came to Siena he already enjoyed an extraordinary fame. Urban V had praised him warmly, he had been victorious in battle, all Europe considered him as great a Crusader champion as Godfrey of Boulogne, and he was called the defender of Christianity in the East. No one yet knew that in Rome the Pope, busied with more immediate and more pressing problems, had refused him the help he had hoped for. In Siena Pietro was the illustrious champion of Christendom, who had won glory

† Dupré-Theseider: *'Cronologia delle Lettere Politiche di Caterina e la Critica Moderna'* Studii Cateriniani I, 1924, No. 3, pp. 123-4.

warring against the Mahomedans, admired by all, beloved by the Church, and specially by the Dominicans. The Preachers of Camporegio must have been proud to receive him as their guest.

In Siena, as everywhere else, the king certainly spoke in favour of a new Crusade against the infidels, and with his eloquence aroused enthusiasm among the Dominicans and other faithful for the 'santo passaggio', or holy expedition. Catherine, who spent several hours a day in the church of San Domenico, and was in continual contact with the Dominican Fathers, must have heard about the glorious exploits of the King of Cyprus and his plans for the defence of Christendom. We have no document to prove or disprove this, but in all probability King Pietro's visit to Siena brought the whole conception of the Crusade more vividly into Catherine's mind.

Now that the longed-for champion had arrived, a guest of her own city, she was strengthened in her belief that to take part in the Crusades was the bounden duty of all Christians. During this period also she must have heard a great deal of talk about Urban V. When William of Grimoard was elected Pope in 1362, a fresh confidence in the Papacy was aroused throughout Europe. After half a century of decadence the glorious days of Boniface VIII, of Innocent III and Gregory VII seemed about to return. Urban V was a man of strong character, of clear and precise ideas; '*modo habemus papam*' had exclaimed Talleyrand de Périgord at his election, an election greeted enthusiastically by all, including the poet Petrarch.

A hardy Benedictine, he was learned, swift to plan and prompt to act. No one could deter him from undertaking what he had in mind to do for the good of the Church. He considered his duty as a Christian and as Pope to be sacred, and would have courted death rather than neglect it. Moral standards at the Papal Court and among the clergy were low: they must be corrected and reformed. European politics were slipping away from the control and authority of the Church: the power of the Papacy must be re-established over kings and political leaders. He was a reformer; he obliged the high dignitaries of the Church to give up abusing their power; he opposed their simony, pomp and avarice, usury and worldliness; he punished immorality among the clergy; he forced the bishops to reside in their dioceses; forbade plurality of benefices; demanded the restoration of illicit gains; protected

studies; rebuilt churches and convents; did all he could to promote virtue among the clergy.

Politically, by means of Cardinal Albornoz, he strengthened the temporal power of Italy, curbed the extending might of Bernabò Visconti, tried to re-establish a European equilibrium, preached with great fervour the Crusade against the infidels, and returned to Rome as the natural seat of the Papacy.

These were intentions and deeds that aroused the admiration and confidence of his contemporaries. Today, when we consider the results achieved by Urban V, we find them very slight. It is true that he brought about a higher standard of morality in the Curia and in the dioceses, but at his death the way of life in ecclesiastical circles was very much the same as before his election; the Crusades failed, and he himself, towards the end of his life, supported them but feebly; he had poor success in his efforts towards European peace; when Albornoz died the Papal States revolted, and he was unable to suppress them; he tried to get rid of the scourge of the French mercenary bands by sending them to fight in the Holy Land, but failed in this also; he forced the Cardinals to obey him, but without their full consent; after three years of residence in Italy, the greater part of the time not in Rome but in Viterbo and Montefiascone, he returned to Avignon. He did not succeed in his principal aims, and this may be due to his own insufficient sanctity, which was never of the sort to arouse consciences and sway peoples; moreover, his policy could not succeed because it was dictated by human wisdom, grafted, it is true, on Christian principles, but with these latter too carefully weighed and measured; his plans failed because he lacked the constancy to press through to the end with every single undertaking, and because he was too apprehensive for himself and for the Church. Nevertheless, his political experiments and his moral reforms served to prepare the ground for the future, and his insistence on the Papacy's return to Rome was particularly effective, even if this return, in his case, lasted only for a few years. It was a triumphal return, longed for and welcomed in Italy with hymns of joy, such as Petrarch's 'Epistole'. All the Italian states congratulated Urban V, and Siena sent her representatives, with many other of her citizens, to welcome him at the port of Talamone, with gifts of wax and confectionery.

Among the Religious of Siena the chief topic of the day in 1367 was the meeting of Colombini with the Pope when he disembarked at Corneto on the 3rd of June. In that year Catherine was leading a very secluded life, but the echo of this event may have reached her through the Dominicans, or she may have learnt of it later from the nuns of Santa Bonda with whom she was on friendly terms. Giovanni Colombini had written some epistles to these nuns, describing what had happened.

The Pope, surrounded by his imposing and luxurious court, had deigned to notice Giovanni and his band of sixty ragged and filthy companions, and so they gratefully sang the praises of their spiritual Father. One wonders whether Urban felt in these Poverelli a saintly purity and an enthusiasm worthy of Heaven. Colombini himself says: 'And then as the hour of his coming approached we went to the sea shore, where great preparations were being made to receive the Holy Father and the Cardinals, and by God's grace, to the best of our power we worked and helped to prepare the Holy Father's room, and we got ready his bed, and the beds for the Cardinals, and we received many thanks for this. Then, when the Holy Father came, we stood on the bridge or at the side, where almost everyone was embraced. Then we saw him come, and with him seven Cardinals, and it was the most beautiful devout thing ever seen. And we saw him stepping out of the ship, looking really holy. We all had olive branches round our heads and in our hands, and we cried out all the time: "Christ be praised, and long live the Holy Father!" and we were singing his praises and rejoicing, and by the grace of God room was made for us everywhere; all thanks and all glory to the supreme God! And mark you, all the princes of the world were there, and with such devotion that it was a wonderful thing to see. Francesco and I, and Giovanni di Piero kissed his feet, as did likewise other Poverelli, and two of them helped to support his canopy, that was held over his head. Then when he got to land he rode in the midst of festive rejoicings to the Brothers of St Francis; we, bearing our olive branches, kept as near to him as we could, and when he was told about us, he said he wished to see us and to help us. But such was the press of foreigners and ambassadors and other nobles about him that this was not possible.'

The recognition of the Poverelli's orthodoxy, the help they

received from the Pope, and their kind reception at the hands of the Cardinals and prelates, filled Colombini and his followers with joy, and the nuns of Santa Bonda, with the many friends and admirers they had in Siena, shared in their joy.

If Catherine knew of Urban's visit to Italy she must also have known about his intentions and his achievement. From the pulpits and in conversations the Dominicans certainly expounded and commented on the Pope's various Bulls in favour of the 'Holy Expedition'. The reform of the clergy also was pleasing to the Dominicans, who had worked hard to that end; and the Pope's plans for European peace, which met with the approval of all peoples, must have found perfect comprehension in Catherine's heart. From that time on she adopted as her own message the preaching of the Crusades, the promotion of peace in Europe, and the reform of the clergy. Her own personal observations, and what she herself had suffered at the hands of several wicked Friars and nuns, besides what she heard reported in the city, must have convinced her that amongst the clergy it was necessary to extirpate covetousness, envy, vanity, malice, the love of soft living and high office, sensuality, jealousy, violence, uncharitableness, and the neglect of their religious duties, and to form a body of exemplary priests and friars who should tend the poor and the afflicted, be spiritually united to God, and live for the good of their fellows. She approved of all Urban's work, and shared the enthusiasm of the Religious for his return to Rome. Everyone rejoiced when the Emperor passed through Siena in 1368 on his way to the Eternal City, and re-entered Siena on October 21st, holding the bridle of Urban's horse, and later, on the Feast of All Saints, served the Papal Mass on the occasion of the crowning of the Empress. But on September 5th, 1370, it was learnt that the Pope had embarked at Corneto and set sail for Provence. On the 10th of December of the same year Urban died at Avignon. As soon as the news reached Italy the people said it was God's punishment, without reflecting that the Pope, who was very ill, would have died as soon in Rome as anywhere else. The prophecy of Brigid of Sweden was at once believed. She had urged the Pope not to leave Italy, and had sent him a written description of the awful vision she had had concerning him. Generally speaking, prophecies are exact *post rem*; that is, in later events we see only those facts,

very often fortuitous, that correspond more or less to the terms of the prophecy; in this case, however, there were precise indications *ante rem* which were indeed remarkable.

The Blessed Virgin had appeared in a vision to Brigid and had told her that Pope Urban had returned to Rome, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that she, the Blessed Virgin, had watched over him during the long voyage from Avignon, shielding him from all harm. She went on to say that she was surprised at the way in which the Pope was now behaving towards her. 'He does not look at me; he turns his back on me, and is forsaking me to go where the wiles of the devil lead him, and the counsels of his worldly friends, who care more for their own pleasure and their own will than for God's will and the salvation of souls. But if he insists on returning at all costs to the land where he was elected Pope, soon after he arrives there he will receive such a blow and buffet that his teeth will chatter. . . .' She added that after death, on the day of judgment, he would have to render an account to God not only of what he had done as Pope, but of what he had omitted to do.

One can understand that in an age when prophecies were much believed in, the death of Urban V, coming little more than three months after embarking at Corneto, left people thunderstruck. The popularity enjoyed by St Brigid contributed to spread the belief that Urban had been punished by God. How was it that Urban, who knew St Brigid's virtue, her selflessness and holiness, and the truthfulness of some of her earlier predictions, had paid no heed to the grave prophecy that concerned himself?

He may have considered the prophetess to be somewhat ingenuous, as all prophets are, and perhaps he listened with rather ironical patience to the long account she had given him one day of a vision she had had of the ills of the Church and the remedies necessary—all described in a sententious and highly pictorial style—although he must have known that the facts were true and the remedies needful. The Church was certainly corrupt in the laity, clergy and Papal court; Urban had known that for a long time, and the knowledge had pained him. He had done all he could to bring about reforms, but the evils were still great, and it was therefore necessary to bring the Church back to evangelical purity and poverty: a hard, almost impossible task, given the nature of man.

Genuine religious reforms spring from men's innermost souls, and are not imposed from without. In those years most of the clergy and laity felt no inner urge to purify themselves; hence the impossibility of a thorough and general reform. But as far as his own efforts went Urban had been an example of priestly virtue since he became Pope, and to the best of his powers had compelled Cardinals, bishops and abbots to lead a less worldly life. What more could he have done? He would willingly have transformed the Papal court into a cloister, but who would have stayed with him there, except a few ascetics and Saints, who were already leading a strict and pure life? In all probability, by so doing and by disregarding the political and diplomatic role exercised by the Papacy in the world, he would have weakened its moderating influence, and diminished or destroyed the power of the Papal State. A Pope of the Middle Ages, even if a monk and a reformer, could hardly conceive of Christendom without some temporal power for the Holy See. Although he considered Brigid of Sweden's immediate and drastic remedies impracticable, Urban admired her greatly, recognised the holiness of her life, and had so much faith in her visions that, shortly before he left Italy, he sent his own confessor to her to ask for a revelation of God's will with regard to the Church. It is therefore surprising that he chose to ignore the Saint's dreadful prophetic threat, as well as the entreaties of friends like Petrarch, and saintly bishops such as Alfonso di Valdaterra.

If we study the motives that led Urban to return to Avignon we find ourselves agreeing with those who consider he was fully aware of his own grave illness and, knowing his end to be near, desired that the new Conclave should be held in a land where, as he thought, there was more freedom than in Rome. He gave no thought to himself and was persuaded neither by the French Cardinals nor by any other personal reason. During his sojourn in Italy he had come to believe that a free Papal election could not be held in Rome, and it was for the sake of the Church of the future that he paid no heed to counsels, appeals, tears or threats.

In our day we can see that if Urban V had stayed in Rome the schism that broke out eight years later with Urban VI would have occurred during the pontificate of his own successor—with perhaps even direr consequences, but in the Italy of 1370 no one

could realise this. It was thought, instead, that Urban, old and sick, was a weakling in the power of the French Cardinals. He was called by some a sentimentalist, who could not live far away from his own country, and some even declared him a traitor.

What Catherine thought we do not know, nor how she judged him. Probably she refrained from any judgment, as she would have thought it sinful to think ill of the Vicar of Christ. In fact, between 1373 and 1374 she was writing to Bernabò Visconti: 'Even if the Vicar of Christ were a devil incarnate, I must not raise my head against him, but always humble myself'.

If she refused to judge the Pope because he was the Vicar of Christ, all the more would she have refrained from pronouncing judgment on Urban V, whom she must greatly have admired for his moral reforms, and for his advocacy of the Crusades. We get a glimpse of her admiration for him in a letter she wrote to Gregory XI in 1376, urging him to follow the example of his predecessor who, when he was in doubt about anything, consulted his Cardinals, but when his mind was made up 'he paid no heed to their counsels, but followed his own, and cared not that they were all against him'.

No document reveals her thoughts about Urban's departure from Italy. She must have grieved over it, and probably at this time there began to form in her mind the definite idea that it was the Pope's duty to reside in Rome. This was not the right moment for her to seek a solution of this problem; other cares were pressing upon her. Her days were full; in the cause of God not a minute could be wasted. She was in ecstasy, wafted to the Heavens, seeing wondrous creatures, hearing the music of angels, rejoicing in the infinitudes of the divine spirit, or praying with irresistible fervour for the welfare of her friends or the salvation of sinners; or she was succouring the unfortunate, gathering in her cell old and new acquaintances, reading their hearts with wonderful insight, counselling and admonishing, soothing passions, reconciling hostile families, working in their souls through the love of God. Her sphere of action spread further every day; her fame travelled beyond Siena and its province, and soon reached Rome, Florence, Milan and Avignon, diffused chiefly by the Dominicans. Enriched with ever-new experiences, she formed a still clearer conception of the great misery of mankind, and the immense social signifi-

cance of the Christian message. The ardour which she drew from continual contact with the divine was transfused into whoever approached her; she had her own standards of judgment; hardly anyone could resist her smile, and those who entered her cell 'attracted by her very sweet words', could not tear themselves away from her. She was always ready to make any sacrifice, took no rest in her service for others, and faced with fortitude whatever difficulties or sufferings her apostolate brought her.

In these years, perhaps in 1372 or 1373, the Dominican Fra Simone da Cortona became her favourite 'little son'. Fra Simone was as shy as a young girl, and very easily hurt. His heart overflowed with love, and he was given to violent outbursts, which he managed to control because he was ashamed to let them be seen. When there were other Friars in Catherine's cell, who were obviously quite at home there, he would not go inside, but stayed dumbly without, grieving at not being able to hear his 'mother's' inspiring words. He wanted to listen to her 'fiery speech' alone, lost in blissful contemplation of his saint, far from prying glances, and to open to her his very sensitive heart, always thirsting for affectionate and encouraging words. Catherine at once guessed his silent devotion, his honesty, his touchiness, and the twinges of jealousy which tormented him; she guided him into spiritual paths with exquisite tact. 'Bless my little son, Fra Simone; tell him to open the mouth of his desire to receive the milk that his Mother will send him', she asks someone to tell him; or 'Tell Fra Simone that I shall take the cord of love, and bind him to my bosom like a mother and her little son'; and again: 'Tell Fra Simone, my little son in Jesus Christ, that the son is never afraid to go to his mother, but runs to her, especially when he is hurt, and his mother takes him in her arms and lifts him up to her breast and feeds him; even a bad mother will always lift him up to the breast of love.'

These words and counsels must have filled him with emotion, as on those occasions when Catherine showed special kindness to him. One day when he was sick and feverish he went with Fra Tommaso della Fonte to see the Saint, who was at table with the other Tertiaries. Fra Tommaso cheerfully and naturally at once seated himself at table, but Simone stayed 'further away, a little apart', afraid of having come at the wrong time, and of being

unwanted. Catherine then called him, and when he hastened joyfully forward she made him sit down beside her and began to feed him as if he were a child—one spoonful for him, and the next for her. The distaste for food, which he had felt before, vanished as if by magic. Catherine then embraced him and made the sign of the Cross over him; his fever and sickness left him at once. The shy, timid, touchy Simone had a very tender heart; he never ceased singing her praises, and as an old man, many years after her death, still showed a fresh, ingenuous admiration for his 'little Mother'.

About this time Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi also became a 'caterinato'. One cannot state exactly when he first met Catherine, but we believe it was at the beginning of 1372, and that it was shortly afterwards that he wrote to her asking her to receive him as a son. She replied: 'You asked me whether I would receive you as a son; I, miserable, unworthy and wretched as I am, have already received you, and receive you now with fond love, and I bind myself and shall bind myself always before God to be answerable for you, for any sin you have committed or might yet commit. But I beg you to fulfil my desire, that is, to follow Christ Crucified, withdrawing yourself completely from intercourse with the world, as I have said before. In no other way can we follow Christ.' Neri became her disciple, son, travelling companion and fond faithful secretary. He belonged to a distinguished family; he was a member of the general council for St Martin's ward in 1371 and in 1375, and received offices and commissions from the Commune. He was also a poet. Before he met Catherine he was much admired by his friends, 'because he was very virtuous and pleasing, and an excellent writer of fine poems', and after joining her circle he was much loved and admired by her followers. He was of a melancholy character, often discontented and full of doubts. The two poems of his we still have cannot give us an idea of his creative talent. His sensitive soul loved the poetry of Dante, and he tried to imitate its verse, but without showing any touches of personal genius.

Catherine understood his troubled soul and the delicacy of his feelings; she succeeded in drawing him out of the despondency into which he often fell, and in teaching him self-conquest. Whether near or far, she sustained him with her prayer, and her

affectionate advice was always an encouragement to him to persevere. He thought of her as his necessary support, and confided everything to her, because he felt that she gave him the strength to continue to live, both materially and spiritually. When he feared that God would not forgive him his sins, and gave way to momentary despair, she showed him the absurdity of such a fear and prevented it from becoming a conviction. When she died he felt as if he were abandoned in a wilderness, and bewailed:

'Tell me, who will save me now from an evil end?
Who will preserve me from delusions?
Who will guide me when I try to climb?
Who will console me now in my distress?
Who will ask me now: "Are you not well?"
Who will persuade me that I shall not be damned?'

After 1370 Catherine's apostolate took on a new form of expression, in her letters. Those words of hers, so full of urgency that they converted sinners and dragged them penitent before God, imploring Him to grant them purity of life, those joyful words that extolled the glory of Christ, and others, full of delicate understanding, that stole their way into people's souls; words as ethereal as an evening sky, that bids farewell to all things earthly; strong, positive, determined, convincing words, like the voices of nature—these were to be fixed for all time. We do not know how or when she felt the need to write letters. Those that survive today are only a fraction of the numberless epistles she wrote, so that those we consider to be her first, in order of time, may well be later than many others, now lost.

In his excellent re-arrangement of Catherine's 'Epistolarium', Dupré-Theseider rightly places as two of the early letters one written to the nuns of Santa Marta, and the other to Monna Agnese Malavolti and the Sienese Tertiaries. Perhaps he dates the former a little too early, ascribing it to 1367. In that year, or at least until towards the end of it, Catherine was busied almost exclusively with her own spiritual development, and could hardly have felt herself sufficiently authoritative to give advice to an Abbess. Moreover, every action of hers was controlled and approved by Fra Tommaso della Fonte, and it is hardly likely that he would have allowed her to despatch a letter written in the style of a spiritual teacher. In 1367 Catherine was known as a

contemplative or ascetic, but about the significance of her spiritual life even Fra Tommaso was still perplexed. He could hardly have let pass phrases like these: 'Now I command you and compel you to show that you desire to have this knife in you'—that is, the knife of hate or love, or: 'I want you not to desire time according to your own will, but according to the will of Him who is'. These phrases imply, in their author, an authority that Catherine had not yet assumed; she was to acquire it a few years later, after her mystical death in 1370. It may therefore be supposed that her correspondence began about that year.

Letter-writing considerably extended Catherine's range of action; her letters were sincere, direct, full of truth and the spirit of justice, sometimes seeming almost to sweat blood, at other times glowing with ardour, always full of an infinite love of Christ. They had great power to move souls and to impart their own fervour to others, so that she became known not only in Siena and the province, but farther and ever farther afield, to all sorts of people. Her spiritual directors realised that letters so burning with love must promote the good of the Church, and so they encouraged their diffusion.

Her own spiritual condition is expressed in the letters she wrote before going to Florence. We must know ourselves, she says, before we may know anything else. In our innermost soul there is an empty cave, image of the nothingness of man; she reminds us that we are 'utter falsehood', and so creators 'of what is not'; but by the side of this negation of being is the positive manifestation of truth: 'supreme, eternal, and primal truth', which is a peaceful sea, from whose depths are born all those things that *are*. Even sin? Sin (here she is Augustinian) is not-being, and therefore belongs to our nothingness; it is the 'utter falsehood' already spoken of; therefore it is we who generate sin, and are alone responsible for it. But if we are nothing in ourselves, our being, in so far as we have any being, comes from an Other—and who is this Other but God? 'We know that we do not exist of ourselves; since we do not exist, we see that our being is from God.' The discovery that our being comes from God implies a close relation between ourselves and God; in other words, the Creation. In fact, God created us by an act of love towards Himself and towards us: God 'contemplated Himself, and was filled with such measure-

less love that out of this love He created us'. God's falling in love with us in Himself was the creative impulse, and this love for us has lasted, lasts, and will last for ever. But, because of the freedom granted to us from our creation, with Adam came imperfection. God's desire that the creature should love his Creator as the Creator loved His creature was not fulfilled. 'The first man fell from the height of grace through self-love.' The fall meant degradation, loss of human dignity, slavery.

But God's love for what He had created, as a concrete reality outside Himself, did not cease, and He determined to win men once more to Himself; hence the source of salvation for mankind: the appearance of the Saviour. 'God was constrained by the flame of divine charity to send the sweet incarnate Word of His own Son, to redeem Man and draw him out of his slavery': an act of love that lifts us above ourselves, and gives us understanding of ourselves, so that we become afire with love, and one with Christ, sharers in His divinity. 'Love, sweet love, refresh our memory to receive and remember God's goodness to us, and to understand it; for when we understand we love, and when we love we find ourselves united and transformed in the love of the source of all love, passing even through the gate of Christ Crucified.'

We learn all this through self-knowledge; should we not therefore remain always in the cell of our own soul? This cell may be thought of also as a deep well, for it contains water and earth: earth because we acquire the knowledge of our own worthlessness, water because we drink deeply of the will of God. Let us then enter into the depths of this well, for it must be that abiding therein we shall know ourselves and know the goodness of God.

This conception has its practical consequences, for when sin has, as far as that is possible, been eliminated from the world, everything that remains will be good, perfect, and therefore worthy to be loved—a vast field for our love which will never be exhausted, because as 'charity cannot be bound by law or measure', so the object of charity becomes a sharer in Him who is above all laws, and perfect. But to reach this fullness of vision, which before Adam fell was freely given, today we must lose and drown ourselves in God: 'ever gazing at the sweet eyes of His love'.

Thus love creates love; every time we contemplate our Creator we implore His love, and at the same time we rise above our own nothingness; and when we lose ourselves in God, it is clear that we wish to enter into, and become, love. Thus is made possible the progressive conquest of perfection, and the intimate understanding of ourselves, of our fellows, of God. 'I tell you that if a man does not arise, and open his eyes to gaze at the measureless goodness and love of God, which He shows to His creature, his soul will never reach any breadth or perfection, but will be so narrow that he will be incapable of understanding either himself or his fellows.'

This is a great achievement of love, but not the greatest of all; we are now at St Bernard's third degree of love—that is, we love God for God's sake. In fact we have surrendered ourselves so completely as to deny all our natural qualities, however good and vital; we consider ourselves as nought. When we have experienced some of God's own attributes we have found them extraordinarily appealing, and then, contemplating God, we have felt crushed by His boundless power and greatness—but it is only to escape from our own wretchedness that we try to cross the border of the Absolute. Thus we affirm God and deny man, but this is still a manifestation of our weakness, and we have not yet reached that love of the highest degree, which insists that we love ourselves for God's sake. 'Do not love yourselves for your own sake, but yourselves for God's sake.' The nobility of man is, in this way, fully re-established, because we now admit that God is at work within us to make a temple of our soul.

As a matter of fact, Catherine does not distinguish very clearly between the love of God for God's sake and the love of others for His sake; she affirms them both and confuses them. She is less precise than St Bernard, and in her anxiety to draw a distinction between worldly or selfish love and perfect love she overlooks the distinction between St Bernard's third and fourth degrees of love. In fact, she gets very close to saying that to love God for His own sake is the greatest love, not realising that to love God for His own sake means loving Him for His power and greatness, that is, for His gifts to us, while to love ourselves for God is neither to desire any gift nor to glorify human nature, but to love ourselves inasmuch as renewed and transformed by grace, we

share in His divinity, so that we love only what is of God, and act only according to His will. But if Catherine did not closely follow St Bernard's teaching, she used it as a theme for her meditations, and her aim was very similar to his because, for her also, real love is that which enables man to share in the divine nature, so that his thought and action become attuned to God's, his weakness and perversity changed to energy and righteousness, and his heart fortified so that he may become invincible.

Thus united to God, we become a living flame that burns for ever, because we are united with the eternal fire and have become fire ourselves. We understand why Catherine, remembering her experiences in ecstasy and her contacts with the divine, asserts: 'When the soul is united and transformed in God, it forgets itself and all other creatures'.

These are thoughts that Catherine does not reduce to a system, but scatters here and there in her letters, without strict order or any desire to theorise, but very frequently and with great fervour. She loved theology, she wished to know its conceptions and interpretations, but much of what she learnt was transformed into living wisdom. Many of her thoughts have the beauty of the wild flowers we admire without asking whence they came or why they bloom in this field of corn or that meadow; thoughts that, uttered in the enthusiasm and ardour of faith, acquire a greater urgency than they had in the pages of St Augustine, St Bernard, St Thomas Aquinas, Giordano da Pisa, Cavalca and Passavanti, even when they come, shorn of their profundity, directly from these Fathers. Her words still preserve the emotion which she had felt during a divine embrace, and have the colouring of a vision; the swift or gradual development of her thought follows the growth of her own being. The very contradictions are the mark of mental conflicts that she has lived through rather than resolved.

She passes swiftly from a clear explanation to a direct, urgent, adoring appeal to Christ, and from incitement to action to the quotation of a passage of Holy Scripture which seems to have little connection with it, from great excitement to the sudden calm of meditation. All this makes her style lively, frank, attractive, even in her earliest letters: 'O fire, O deep well of charity! Thou art the fire that ever burns without consuming, full of joy

and gladness and sweetness; the heart that is pierced by this dart finds all bitterness sweet, and all burdens light. O sweet love, that sustains and feeds our soul! I said that the fire burnt without consuming, but now I say that it both burns and consumes, destroying and dissolving every defect and ignorance and negligence in the soul, for charity is never idle but accomplishes great things.'

Let us fall under the warm spell of this prose, for only thus can we understand it; it is an eloquence of the soul, beyond the words themselves, that draws us into Catherine's spiritual world, just as an image or a sound is enough to reveal to us a poet's world. The warmth and vehemence of this language show us to what mystic heights Catherine had soared.

Her style is not always successful; sometimes her eloquence stumbles and halts; then, checked by the words, we find neither solace nor emotion. Like all writers, she has dull pages, and some passages are involute, heavy, baroque, as happens when she writes without reference to her own direct and radiant experience but from hearsay and at second-hand. To be limpid, compact, logical, vivid, she needs to draw inspiration directly from her own fountain of life, that is, her own mystical experiences; then there is complete correspondence between her soul and its expression, or rather, her style is but the brilliant mirror of her soul.

These first letters of Catherine's, besides showing us the image of her spiritual world, give proof of her understanding of weak human nature, her delicacy of feeling, and constant loving care for her disciples. At times she rebukes severely and resolutely, at other times speaks caressingly, encourages like a friend or commands like a Superior, ever ready to forgive all, provided all will follow the way of God, and willing to take the ills of others upon herself if by so doing she can win a soul. Like a true apostle she strengthens and guides. She writes with the enthusiasm of St Paul, with the charity of Christ. Her aim is a lofty one, because she believes in the union of all men of good will under the spiritual protection of Christ, and the material protection of the Papacy. She desires the triumph of peace and justice on earth. There are glimpses of the diplomatic and political activity she is to busy herself with later, and one begins to see the outlines of her conception of a Church State, while her enthusiasm for the Crusades is also clearly evident.

Already in 1368, as we have seen, she may have realised the necessity for the Crusades against the infidels, seeing King Peter of Cyprus, or hearing the Dominicans speak of him, and this necessity must have seemed more pressing when she heard of Urban V's Bull, and that of Gregory XI of the 1st of August, 1371, in which he appealed to the kings and princes of Europe, the Emperor of the East, and the Knights of Rhodes, reminding them of their duty to take part in the next Crusade as champions of Christ. Before July 1372 Catherine was an eager propagandist for the 'holy expedition'.

We learn this from the letter that Giovanni of the Cells wrote to the nun Domitilla on July 1st, 1372, dissuading her from 'going overseas'. He writes indignantly against pilgrimages to the Holy Land and whoever encourages them. In his usual frank, severe manner he says: 'This desire (to go Crusading) is in the outer rind of it prompted by pity, but in the core it is more cruel than any cruelty, the enemy of all honesty, the gate of perdition, the wasting of all virtues, the loss of all innocence and purity'. Nevertheless, he goes on to say, there are Religious who preach the Crusades and exhort pilgrims to go to the Holy Land, and amongst these is Catherine, who is a holy woman. 'Perhaps you will answer me that the holy Catherine preaches the Crusade; I shall answer you that if she exhorts you to go across the sea by saying that you will find Christ there, I deny this, with all the Saints who speak of it. In the first place, Christ Himself says that the Kingdom of God is within us.' After various apposite quotations, Giovanni says that Palestine is not 'the promised land', as some believe, but 'the accursed land', since God, because of Christ's death, 'cursed its people and its country'. And why go to Jerusalem? What do you find there of Christ? The dead body. What use is it to visit what is dead when the Christian may at any moment in the sacrament of the altar receive the living Christ in himself? Useless, therefore, to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land; but 'if Catherine's words have convinced you and urge you to go', he warns Domitilla, 'since the dangers of the pilgrimage outnumber the benefits to be received from it, and strong souls are needed (not young women), then you must first acquire the sanctity of Catherine, and then I myself will give you permission to go. And if you believe in your holy Catherine more than in all the holy Doctors, go again to her and ask her how she has arrived at such perfection; and you will clearly see that it was through silence and prayer; because she kept silence for eight years, we are told, and was always in her room, and prayed. You do this first and when you have reached her perfection I will myself surely give you leave to go overseas.'

This is the letter that, four years later, aroused the ire of some disciples of Catherine's, and especially of William of Fleete, so that Giovanni of the Cells was obliged to write other explanatory, almost apologetic letters; but to us now the letter is important, because, besides showing us that even among the Religious there was no longer any general enthusiasm for the Holy Land, it proves that Catherine was already in 1372 conducting an assiduous propaganda for the 'holy expedition'. Perhaps she had heard of St Brigid's voyage to Palestine in 1372, which must have been much talked of among the Religious, given the popularity of the Nordic prophetess. In any case, through the Dominicans Catherine must have heard of Pope Gregory's Bulls of the 13th and 20th of November, 1372, exhorting the faithful to take part in the Crusades. That she preached the Crusades, not only for their religious significance but because she thought they were necessary politically, we learn from a passage in one of her letters, probably written in 1373, to Fra Bartolomeo Dominici, in which she rejoices at the declaration of a new expedition: 'I have received great joy of this, because I think much good will come of it; I mean the good news that Fra Raimondo sent me, that he heard from Messer Nicola da Osmo, about the preparations for the expedition. Rejoice and be glad, for our desires shall be accomplished.'

The fame of Catherine's sanctity spread rapidly and far; the Visconti of Milan heard of her between 1373 and 1374, we do not know in what way. Bernabò Visconti and his wife Regina della Scala both sent messengers to her, but what they wanted of the young Sienese Tertiary, or what were their aims, we do not know. Judging from Catherine's reply—a part of both her replies is missing—we gather that Bernabò was out of favour with the Church for having punished several priests, and had therefore asked for her advice, and perhaps for her help, knowing her to be a holy woman and much esteemed in the Church. Catherine

replied with great vehemence as if she wished to drag both Bernabò and Regina before Christ bleeding for the salvation of man, so that both of them, who had lived so far from Him, might bathe in that sacred ever-flowing Blood.

Catherine knew Bernabò's power, his ambitions, his vast plans for domination; she knew he was cruel, had been (and might become again at any moment) the enemy of the Church. First of all she invited him to love, to love with an extraordinary love, and to seek for domination not outside himself, but in his innermost self. The overlordship of lands and States is but temporary, and always uncertain. 'We may not call ourselves lords of any dominion we have in this world.' Let us abandon this ambition, therefore, and count ourselves to be mere dispensers of earthly goods, and let us direct our greed for conquest towards that city that no one can wrest from us—the citadel of our soul. 'Oh, is there any greater glory than to possess a city where God Himself, who is all our Good, reposes, where peace and quiet and all consolation may be found? This citadel is so strong, and governed so well, that neither devil nor any creature can rob us of it, unless we ourselves consent.'

The ruler of this city is neither proud nor servile, but humble and free; ransomed by the Blood of Christ. Here below the guardian of the Blood of Christ is the Church, and who represents the Church if not the Pope, the Vicar of Christ? The Church therefore, and consequently the Pope, are the true rulers of the world; we must all be submissive to both. 'He is foolish who strays far from this Vicar, or opposes him, for he holds the keys of the Blood of Christ Crucified.' And as Bernabò has more than once humiliated and opposed the Papacy, Catherine insists: 'I beg of you, for the love of Christ Crucified, never again to go against your Head', and tells him he has no right to punish priests, even guilty ones, because they are the ministers of God; no one may touch them except the Pope and God. 'I tell you this, and I beg you, in the name of Christ Crucified, not to meddle with them any more.'

We do not know the effect of these warnings and counsels on Bernabò Visconti; if he had expected to find in Catherine support or encouragement for his own cause he must have felt disappointed. Catherine was accustomed to the clarity, sincerity and straightforwardness of the spiritual life, and could not muffle her thought in a fog of words, use ambiguous phrases, or give elastic judgments that might be interpreted as encouraging everyone's own desire. A Christian had to stand by the Pope; whoever was against the Pope was 'a rotten member, cut off from the body of Holy Church'. No compromise was possible; every one must make his own choice and shoulder his own responsibility. Perhaps Bernabò smiled at such simple absolutism, accustomed as he was to considering everything from the political point of view, and he may have judged Catherine to be an ingenuous girl, without any understanding of the means necessary to build up and maintain a strong and lasting dominion. But she was very logical. If he wanted to win the Pope's favour he must cease from all rebellion against the Church and wash himself in the Blood of Christ; he must have the same aims as the Church, and fight for her cause. If he really wished to be a Christian and show his repentance for having rebelled against the Church, what better way of showing his good intentions than by taking up arms in the new Crusade? 'But what vengeance shall we take for the time you have been hostile? I think a time comes when we shall be able to take sweet and glorious vengeance, for, as you have exposed your body and temporal substance to all kinds of peril and death, in warfare against your Father, so now I invite you, in the name of Christ Crucified, to make a real and perfect peace with your kindly Father, Christ on earth, and to wage war against the infidels, hazarding your body and substance in the service of Christ Crucified. Make your preparations, for it behoves you to make such sweet amends, for, as you have been against him, now you will go to his help when the Holy Father raises aloft the banner of the most holy Cross, as he has a very great longing and will to do. I want you to be the chief leader, and to beg and urge the Holy Father to make haste, for it is a great shame and disgrace for Christian folk to leave what is theirs by right in the hands of the wretched infidels.'

This request may have given Bernabò a little food for reflection. It is said that even in 1363 the eloquence of Piero Tomasio and Philippe de Mézières had already convinced him of the necessity of the Crusades, and had persuaded him to make his peace with the Church; but the peace he had then desired, and

the promise he had made to be a faithful servant of the Church, were chiefly a clever ruse to get rid of his dread enemy, Cardinal Egidio Albornoz. He had persuaded Pope Urban V to replace him with the Cardinal of Cluny, Androuin de la Roche, his own friend who, he hoped, might help him in his vast plan of gathering the whole of Northern Italy under his rule. But would a sincere and complete submission to the Pope really be to his advantage? He was, in Mirot's words, 'a first-class politician, despotic and astute, presenting a strange mixture of tyranny and justice, cruelty and kindness, never hampered by political scruples or religious convictions'. How could he consent to an act of submission that implied the destruction of all his political ideals?

In 1373 he had been threatened with excommunication by Gregory XI; on May 7th, the same year, his army had been beaten at Montechiari by the Cardinal of Bourges, and later on his ambassadors, sent expressly to Avignon to offer a peace that had seemed to him honourable for the Papacy, had not only not been received by Pope Gregory XI, but, as Cristoforo da Piacenza avers, had been rudely dismissed. The Pope evidently wanted to reduce him to powerlessness, and this he would not agree to. Catherine appealed to him to submit to the Vicar of Christ, but in reality such a submission amounted to forfeiting all his power, giving up his dreams of greatness and becoming an insignificant provincial noble. He had to refuse, even if his refusal were to lead to difficult and painful struggles.

Moreover, what advantage could he expect from leading a Crusade against the infidels? In the first place, although he was a great noble of Northern Italy and, because of the excellent geographical position of his territory, could be a powerful friend or foe to the Crusades, yet compared with the kings and emperors of Europe he was but a modest prince. And what European court at that time appeared favourable to the Crusades? The Council of Thebes of the 1st of October, 1373, had failed to establish a league against the Turks. Bernabò Visconti was able shrewdly to forecast the failure of the Crusade desired by Catherine. He did not follow up her invitation, and most probably had no other political or spiritual correspondence with her.

If Catherine's letter to Bernabò Visconti shows us that her authority was esteemed by princes, the letter she sent to Fra

Bartolomeo Dominici and Fra Tommaso di Antonio, who were at Pisa (a letter that Dupré-Theseider dates March 26th, 1374), proves that her fame had reached the Pope in Avignon, and that in Rome prelates and Religious were interested in her. 'And therefore I tell you: the Pope sent here his vicar, who was the spiritual director of that Countess who died in Rome, and the same who renounced the bishopric for the love of virtue. He was sent to me by the Holy Father, to ask me to pray especially for him and for Holy Church, and he sent me the holy Indulgence as a sign.'

This visit touched Catherine very deeply, and her enthusiasm soared aloft. At last the Crusade was at hand; the Church would rise again to the epic grandeur that was hers, and the honour of God would be restored: 'Rejoice and be glad, for the Holy Father has begun to open his eyes to the honour of God and of Holy Church'. There was therefore no time to be lost: action must be prompt and energetic. Off to the Holy Land! The sepulchre of Christ awaited liberation at the hands of all manly Christians. What did danger matter? Hardships, suffering, death must be endured. The honour of God was at stake. The valiant must now sally forth, fight and conquer for their faith. Catherine would have liked to give the example: 'I have written a letter to the Holy Father and sent it with the request that, for love of that most sweet Blood, he may grant us leave to offer our bodies for martyrdom'. She burned to do something great for the Christian cause; the longing for action became all-powerful and thrust her forward; men and women companions, friends, disciples—all must accompany her overseas.

'Pray to that supreme eternal Truth that, if it is for the best, He may grant this mercy for us and to you; we will all go in a happy band to give our life for Him.' Her fervour and desire were great, but not extravagant; she measured her longing, and found time to reflect that perhaps her wish might not be pleasing to God. 'I am sure that, if it is for the best, He will grant us this.' First of all come God's designs for us; we must submit, even in the things we most long for, to His will. Therefore she awaited with patience the Pope's reply, that perhaps never came; but she did not let all her activity, present or future, depend on it. 'I am sure that, if it is for the best, He will grant it to us.'

Full of trust in God, she went on with her apostolate, striving to make men righteous, and at peace with God, and endeavouring to form around herself a group of valiant Christians who would be ready to bear all hardships and sufferings for their religion. She believed in peace on earth, and desired it; but she saw the Mahomedans as the obstacle to peace—an obstacle that must be removed. Every Christian must take up a cross and a sword and go overseas to destroy the infidel and thus win peace for himself and his neighbour. Only by conquering the Saracen could peace and security be established in the Christian world, which was God's world. The Crusade therefore was not only necessary to liberate a land dear to every believer, but also to establish a state of tranquillity and happiness for the faithful. It was a fight for the triumph of the soul, and victory would mean freedom for the salvation of souls.

Catherine's activity, which grew more intense and more widespread every day, was displeasing to many, who considered her propaganda for the Crusades to be dangerous. Was it right for a woman to busy herself with problems of such gravity and consequence? Her freedom of manner with her disciples and friends also came in for criticism. She had no womanly reserve. Her sanctity was called in doubt, her visions and her mortifications debated. She allowed her followers to kiss her hands and feet, as did the great ones of the earth; was this right for a seeker after holiness? And how could she presume to give advice to everyone, and dare to take upon herself the sins of so many sinners? Who ordered her to fast so long, and so strictly? Her fastings, indeed, were the greatest cause of scandal. Raimondo da Capua says that 'everyone had something to say against the holy Catherine', and enumerated the various grumblers: 'Some said that no one is greater than Our Lord, yet He ate and drank, and so did His glorious Mother, and so did the Apostles, to whom Our Lord said: "Eat and drink what is placed before you", and who can be equal or superior to these? Others said that all the Saints had taught, by word and example, that one must not set oneself apart, but follow in all things the common usage. Others whispered that all excess was harmful, and therefore to be shunned by all who fear God. Some, admitting Catherine's good intentions, said that her being different from everyone else was due to a trick of the devil;

and there were the worldly also, and the openly scornful, who said that Catherine was deceiving everyone to win notoriety: it was untrue that she fasted; she ate very abundantly, but in secret.'

One can, however, understand these critics if one remembers that Catherine's almost complete abstention from food was accompanied by a tireless activity. She was always in prayer, or in ecstasy, preaching, walking, speaking, encouraging, consoling, reading, dictating letters, and keeping in touch with her numerous spiritual family. Those who see things only from the human point of view, as most men do, cannot imagine how it is possible to give out so much physical energy without renewing it with abundant food. Is not eating the constant preoccupation of mankind? Is not a great part of their work conditioned by the need to procure more or less copious quantities of food? This being so, every exception is regarded with diffidence and scepticism. Few realise that there are privileged beings endowed with exceptional powers, and that divine action may so work on them that food is no longer the essential element for life and action. Some of the Saint's accusers knew that many Saints had lived and laboured fasting; but when they found themselves face to face with a woman who had remained for days on end without touching food, yet without showing any physical weakness, they failed to understand her.

We have an echo of this disquiet about Catherine in a letter that she wrote to a priest in Florence, a letter that, according to Dupré-Theseider, was written in the winter of 1373–1374. 'I think you are very worried, hearing about my life', observes Catherine to her correspondent, and adds: 'I am not surprised at this—in fact, I understand you, because I even worry about myself. You are afraid because I do not eat, and you think it is a trick of the devil, and you give me to understand I rely too much on myself. Undeceive yourself, because I place no trust in myself, and rely entirely on God's goodness. As for the devil, I am not so ingenuous as you might think; I know his wiles, and so I turn to the tree of the most holy Cross of Christ Crucified, on which I lean, and I fasten myself to it; and I do not doubt that if I am fastened there with Him, for love in all humility, the devils will have no power over me—not because of my virtue but because of the virtue of Christ Crucified. You beg me to pray to God that I

may eat; I have done so, and I do so now. I have continually prayed to God, I pray to Him, and I shall pray to Him that he may grant me this mercy that in this matter of eating I may live like other creatures, if that is His will, as it is mine. Moreover, I will tell you that God has allowed me to overcome the sin of gluttony, but I am not very well pleased about this, because I would have preferred to overcome it with my own strength and for love; whereas the victory is entirely due to Him. If, however, I can do nothing about this, why do you not pray for me? God will not despise your orations. And if you have any good remedy for my case, write to me of it, and provided that it be to the honour of God, I will try it willingly. Meanwhile, I beg you to judge less hastily of persons and events, and only when God clearly asks you to do so.'

This letter is full of humility, confidence, irony, reproof, subtlety. Catherine has no fear because she knows that she is in union with God, and intent on following the will of Christ, who acts through her. Those who fail to understand how God may use our physical organs must be strangers to the life of the spirit. Why, therefore, should we care about such complaints? 'Let those speak who will. I am sorry for them, not for myself.' This is still her mind, and this is what she wrote, as we have already noted, on another occasion in Florence, probably to the same person to whom this letter is addressed.

The critics, the grumblers, the accusers left Catherine indifferent, but many of those who listened were perturbed. In Siena and beyond the Caterinati multiplied, but so also did the anti-Caterinati. For a Dominican Saint to be so much talked of did not please the Franciscans—they were the Inquisitors of the city—and they began to oppose her. Among the Dominicans many were favourable to her, but not a few were hostile, and while some continued to praise her ever more highly, others criticised her openly. These various and contrasting judgments were soon known in the highest Dominican sphere, as also at Avignon, where everything was always suspect, for fear of old heresies, and alarm at the appearance of new ones. Catherine's activity was no longer limited to Siena; she wrote letters to the powerful princes of Italy, judging them, giving them advice; she was interested in Papal policy and wrote directly to the Pope; she spoke and

wrote in the name of Christianity and of the Church. Might not all this be dangerous for ecclesiastical policy? It was time, too, to examine and judge the accusations of a religious nature that were made against her. It became necessary to take notice of her, to examine her life and thought. Who could do this better than the Dominicans, the strict guardians of orthodoxy, the supporters of Papal policy? Father Taurisano believes that in the Provincial Chapter of the Dominicans, held in Siena in 1372, the 'case' of Catherine was discussed. This may well be, but we have no document to prove it. We may suppose that the anti-Caterinati did their best to have the Saint judged by the highest authority, and perhaps they hoped also to limit or to frustrate her apostolate; but we may also be sure that the Caterinati too were anxious to have her life and work examined, sure as they were that she would emerge triumphant from such a trial. Many of them had been spectators of some miracles performed by her, and some of them had themselves experienced the virgin's healing power, or her second sight, or the 'doubling' of her person, and had been close to her when she was at prayer or in ecstasy. Some Dominicans knew that the doctrine she professed was strictly Catholic, having instructed her in it themselves. And no one could seriously call in question her attachment to Christ, to the Church, to the Pope, just as no one could deny her great virtues. A trial, conducted with sincere zeal, could only reveal her natural and supernatural qualities, and was therefore to be desired, especially as it would be advantageous to the Dominican Order because, after its conclusions, which would certainly be favourable to Catherine, the Order would be able to make a freer and more generous use of her intellectual and spiritual talents. All who knew her burning love for Christ and the influence she had over men, and had heard her impassioned words, or read her letters, could not fail to realise the advantages that would accrue, through her apostolate, to the Christian and Dominican cause.

Fawtier is inclined to believe that the trial was made necessary by the very ardour with which Catherine preached the Crusades. This also, no doubt, was one of the impelling reasons, but not the only one, nor the principal. She had to be examined because many good and many bad things were being said about her; because her activity had now become far-flung; because it was necessary

to know about her faith, her virtues, her gifts; because she had the power of arousing energies; because she drew souls to herself.

It was necessary to study her mind so as to know her intentions. She fasted for weeks together, and it was not sure whether this was God's work or the devil's. She must be examined to test her sincerity and her spirituality. She must be examined because she was endowed with great gifts—also to find out whether she might be useful to the Papacy in propagating the Crusades. St Brigid of Sweden had died in 1373, and it was necessary that her propaganda for the Church should be continued, and Catherine might be her worthy successor. Finally, and most important of all, she must be examined because when it is a question of sanctity the Church must know whether there are present those virtues in their highest degree that are required for its recognition.

And the examination came: Catherine received from Fra Elia of Toulouse, Master-General of the Dominicans, the order to present herself in Florence before the General Chapter of the Preaching Friars, during Pentecost of 1374, to 'give an account of herself'.