

An uneducated, almost certainly illiterate mystic played an important role in Dominican spirituality and was one of the first women made a Doctor of the Church / By THOMAS McDERMOTT

Love and laughter

PHOTO: BRIDGEMAN/FRA BARTOLOMEO (1472-1517); MUSEO DI SAN MARCO DELL'ANGELICO, FLORENCE



WE SOMETIMES think of saints as frozen, passionless, anaemic. This is far from an apt description of Catherine of Siena, perhaps the most remarkable woman of the fourteenth century. When Fra Bartolomeo Dominici, one of her earliest disciples, met her as a young woman, he was struck by her joy. Raymond of Capua, her confessor and friend, was drawn to her “affectionate nature” and “outgoing affability ... and a charming graciousness in her dealings with others”.

She easily laughed and cried. Once, she was thrown from her donkey and landed painfully on the ground. Her companions found her laughing at herself. When the animal fell on top of her, she smiled wryly and said: “This little donkey is keeping me warm.”

Caterina Benincasa was born in a Siena still ravaged by the Black Death in 1347, and died in Rome in 1380, aged 33. She was one of several children of a local dyer and his wife. It seems that people were always attracted to her. She was not formally educated, but the young men and women of Siena’s sophisticated set simply enjoyed being with her and would

accompany her on extensive travels through Italy and the south of France. One admirer tells us she would squeal with joy whenever she caught sight of Catherine, and would then be overcome with the desire to pray. All told, her loose community of followers consisted of as many as 60 people – a mix of women and men, lay people and Religious, Franciscans and Augustinians, as well as Dominicans. They called her “Mama” and chroniclers tell us they “delighted to live in her company”.

SOMETIMES A thousand people or more would gather around her, just to see her or kiss her hand. She had her detractors of course, who derisively called her group the “Caterinati” or the “Catherinised ones”. But the atmosphere seems to have been playful and relaxed. After transcribing one of her vibrant letters, which she would always dictate, her disciples would sometimes sign off with nicknames such as “Crazy Giovanna” or “Foolish Cecca”.

Among her friends, Catherine had a “special love” for Raymond of Capua, a man old enough to be her father. They were both involved in caring for victims of the plague;

when Raymond contracted the disease himself, Catherine sat at his bedside until he recovered. He would later write her biography and become Master of the Dominican Order – he is sometimes known as its “second founder”.

Catherine was a spiritually precocious child, and had early mystical experiences. At about 16, she joined a group of older lay penitent women associated with the Dominican Order who met at the friars’ church in Siena. They were called the “Mantellate” because of the black mantles, or capes, they wore over their white Dominican habits. Unlike nuns, they lived in their own homes.

Her association with the Dominicans was critical as it allowed her to carry on her work under the auspices of one of the most important orders of the time. If you visit her family home, as thousands of pilgrims do every year, you will see how close it is to San Domenico, the great Dominican church and priory in Siena. But there was more than convenience in her attraction to the Dominicans. The purpose of the Order – “preaching and the salvation of souls” – precisely encompasses her own vocation.

IN 1970, Pope Paul VI proclaimed Catherine, along with St Teresa of Avila, a Doctor [teacher] of the Church – the first women to achieve this recognition. Catherine’s teaching is found principally in *The Dialogue*, in 381 extant letters and in 26 prayers. Her thought was borne not from reading books – she was illiterate for most, if not all, of her life – but from her relationship with divine Love. Pope St John Paul II referred to it as a “lived theology”.

Her life and work illustrate the richness and variety of the Dominican spiritual tradition, which embraces what you might call the “positive way” of Thomas Aquinas, the “negative way” of Meister Eckhart – as well as the mystical and prophetic way of Catherine of Siena.

As a faithful daughter of Dominic, she had tremendous regard for study and for the contemplation of Truth. The more we grow towards a true knowledge of God, the more we will grow in love of God, of ourselves and of others. Growing in holiness is not so much a struggle of the will but a constant return to an ever-deeper knowledge of God in the inner “cell of self-knowledge”. Holiness also entails growing in virtues such as justice and courage, as well as faith, hope and charity. Like Dominic, Catherine was enflamed with zeal for preaching and the salvation of souls.

Catherine’s spirituality is Christ-centred. Although she had great regard for Mary and the saints, particularly St Paul, her gaze is always on Christ. Her teaching stays closer to the Gospel than the works of some of the later mystics. Knowingly or unknowingly, she embraces many of the themes of Aquinas: the fundamental goodness of creation, an emphasis on the human person made in *imago Dei*, the superiority of the intellect over the will, knowledge of the truth as the beginning of beatitude, grace as a participation in

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Parents no longer follow the rules or expectations set by the school

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divine life, emphasis on the humanity of Christ who shows us how to be fully human, and emphasis on the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

ALTHOUGH CATHERINE was a mystic, there was nothing aloof or detached about her. Throughout her writings there is an appreciation that the quality of our love of God is mirrored in the quality of our love of neighbour. If you want to know how much you really love God, then look at how much you really love those most in need: the most vulnerable, the outcast, the stranger. In one of the most remarkable letters of medieval Christian literature, Catherine describes to Raymond of Capua how she accompanied a condemned man to the scaffold and moments later received his severed head in her hands.

Although she had many mystical experiences, each of them represented a broadening and deepening of her outreach to others rather than being private or individualistic moments. As she comes to love Jesus more, her love expands and is transformed into love of his Body, the Church. She firmly believed that the good of the Church is the good of humanity and that anyone who rebelled against the Church was his or her own enemy.

Catherine was bold and fearless. She became preoccupied with church reform, by which she meant its spiritual and moral reform, beginning with the pope, cardinals and bishops, then the priests and Religious. Always a direct hitter, her criticism of homosexual activity among the clergy (*The Dialogue*, Ch. 124) was seen as so indelicate that it was often excised from earlier editions of the work.

ANOTHER CONCERN was the return of the papacy to Rome from Avignon, where popes had resided for almost 70 years. She was utterly devoted to the Pope, no matter who he was, often calling him the “sweet Christ on earth”. She travelled all the way from Siena to Avignon to urge Gregory XI to return to Rome, which he did (and later regretted). In her letters to various popes, she speaks very directly, telling one that if he isn’t “man enough” to do the job it would be better if he resigned.

Catherine promoted the *santo passaggio*, or crusade, to reclaim the Holy Sepulchre and the Holy Land from Muslim control. However uncomfortable some of us might feel today about calls for a crusade, she was convinced that good would come from it; it would bring the warring Christian nations in Europe together for a purpose. And she had another, more intriguing, reason. She longed for the conversion of Muslims because she admired their prayerfulness and zeal, and thought they would be vital allies in the reform of the Church that she worked and prayed for.

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Why is behaviour getting worse? This rather unhelpful question gave rise to a whole host of internal conflicts for me this week. Day-to-day disruption in classrooms across the land is far from rare and many teachers now cite student disaffection and misbehaviour as reasons for unhappiness in their posts.

Equally worrying is the evidence from research that young people in the United Kingdom are among the unhappiest in the developed world. What is going wrong? Paradoxically, my theory is that it is because so many other things are going right.

Historically speaking, we are living in a period of peace, tolerance, safety and compassion. Never before in human history have so many people across the world enjoyed such pleasant conditions. Despite the advent of 24-hour news telling us otherwise, there is less murder, less robbery, less bigotry and hatred, and less intolerance now than ever before. That is not to say that less is good enough, it certainly is not, but that is a whole different discussion.

My time in the classroom has led me to believe that the better the world becomes, the more undesirable, at least for teachers, certain forms of student behaviour become. The main gripe of most teachers seems to be something that educators describe as “low-level disruption”. This term is often used as a euphemism to mean that “they just won’t shut up”. This is a growing problem in many schools.

Also on the list of complaints among numerous teachers is that parents no longer unanimously or unquestioningly follow the rules or expectations set by the school, or are unafraid to voice their views should the school do something they do not like. This cultural shift from teacher as authority figure to parent as the party with the power is, I think, partly responsible for a shift in student attitude and behaviour. Some children will confidently tell you that they object to a task, or do not see the value in an activity. I am sure I would not have dared to express these things, although I certainly thought them, at 13.

Dealing with this questioning day to day, as someone at the chalkface, can be rather annoying. But, when I think about it rationally, it is reflective of a very positive general trend towards a

kind of personal autonomy that is found in the wider world. People are no longer afraid to say that they feel something is wrong, unjust, intolerant or dangerous. We have become a more transparent, and in many ways more unapologetic, world.

When I first started teaching, I made a conscious effort not to be “too nice”. On reflection, that sounds ridiculous but it was commonly held wisdom to “not smile till Christmas”. I am sure my Victorian forebears were not given this advice. It seemed to be something that came naturally to them. Obviously, at a time when the cane was a threat and your parents might administer a second round as punishment for the first, there was good reason to keep quiet in class. Equally, when poor schooling meant a poverty-stricken future in which the state offered no help at all, the very real consequences of not listening loomed over the heads of the young.

Culturally, questioning your teachers, as a student or parent, was simply not done. This was a world in which you were meant to be silent, you were meant to know your place and you were meant to punish misunderstanding as ignorance. Our obsession with information and minute-by-minute news has given people a greater ability to empathise with others of whom we would otherwise have little or no knowledge. I would argue that this understanding is contributing to a more compassionate world.

I do not want to see the children in my care have their self-esteem crushed or their enthusiasm marred by my stern approach or public admonishment. I am tempted to say that teachers have become kinder, as have parents, and that this, along with quick forgiveness, has allowed some of the behaviours I have described to grow.

Perhaps we have forgotten that forgiveness involves penance, and that sometimes it is necessary to see a student disappointed or annoyed with themselves before they can move on.

If our words and actions are to mean anything to students, and indeed to each other, compliments and praise must be earned and not simply proffered out of kindness.



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