CHAPTER ONE

THE HISTORICAL RECEPTION OF CATHERINE OF SIENA

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About 30 years after her death, the Sienese Dominican friar Bartolomeo Dominici (1343–1415), one of Catherine of Siena’s companions when she visited Avignon in 1376, described one of her encounters with Pope Gregory XI. According to Fra Bartolomeo, the pope desired to return the papacy to Rome, but he was wavering in the face of opposition from his court, the French prelacy, and the king of France. Gregory asked Catherine whether it seemed to her good that he should persevere in his plan despite such opposition. She replied that it was not fitting that a mere woman (muliercula) should advise the supreme pontiff.

He [Gregory] responded, “I am not asking that you advise me, but that you tell me what the will of God is in this matter.” But when she humbly excused herself, he commanded her in obedience that she make clear what she knew of God’s will in this matter. Then, with her head humbly inclined, she said: “Who knows this better than your Holiness, who vowed to God that you were going to do this?” When he heard this he was greatly stunned, since, as he said, no living body knew of this [vow] except him. From this he resolved to take to the road, which he then did.¹

Fra Bartolomeo has Gregory XI acknowledge Catherine in terms with which we are now very familiar from several decades of scholarship on late medieval female sanctity and the “feminine” in late medieval religious culture: for the pope, Catherine is a prophetess or mystic, who through her virginity and extreme asceticism has been granted

intimacy with Christ. Thus what Gregory XI wants from Catherine is not her advice, but access through her to divine wisdom. Catherine obliges, and in so doing demonstrates her claims to saintly authority. But the terms by which the pope is prepared to recognize her authority deny her agency for her own utterances and remove her—the muliercula—from the stage. In this episode, Catherine stands at the center of international politics, but she participates in worldly affairs only by being apart from the world.

This paradox at the heart of Catherine’s “saintly situation”—to use the term coined by Aviad Kleinberg to denote “that situation in which a person is labeled a saint”—has been the main challenge for historians and other scholars in assessing Catherine’s career and writings, and their relationship to the world in which she lived. Catherine is famous for her public life and for her writings, but the terms in which scholars remember her as a mystic or prophetic saint, like the terms in which her public was prepared to recognize her authority in her own day, have nearly always placed her apart from worldly politics and the larger culture of the period in which she lived. There have been exceptions, as in the heroic vision of Catherine as the saint who brought the papacy back to Rome, which—as will be discussed below—dominated much discussion of her from the 1850s through the 1940s. But the very grandiosity of that version of Catherine’s political engagement tended to make the Italy in which she lived a mere backdrop to her saintly career.

Moreover, Fra Bartolomeo’s story also contains a reminder of the complications of saintly politics and the changeability of political values. While helping to end the papacy’s “Babylonian Captivity” has been a prominent part of Catherine’s modern popular reputation (if not so prominent an attribute in more recent Catherinian scholarship), the return of the papal court to Rome was not considered an unqualified good by Europeans—even Italians—in the several decades following Catherine’s death, since it precipitated the disputed papal election of 1378 and a schism that lasted until 1417. Some contemporaries blamed this catastrophe on the influence that women such as Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine had on Gregory XI; Birgitta was criticized in spite of her canonization in 1390, and Catherine’s

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