The 14th century was not kind to the papacy. It began with the outrage at Anagni and ended in the teeth of a devastating schism. In between, it witnessed the papacy’s long stay at Avignon, which was widely, if somewhat unfairly, perceived as seven decades of base servitude to the French crown. Along the way there were famines, economic crises, imperial incursions into Italy, a tragicomic antipope, crusades that went nowhere, the alarming ascendancy of the Ottomans in the East, a proliferation of dissenting religious movements, the Hundred Years War, and the horrors of the Black Death—all of which, it seemed, a veritable legion of contemporary critics could somehow or other trace to the moral failings of the papacy.

Catherine of Siena belongs on the list of illustrious 14th-century Italians—among whom Dante, Ptolemy of Lucca, and Petrarch are most prominent—who viewed the papacy’s absence as a matter of gravest import. Catherine shared the sense of urgency which other Italian observers attached to the papacy’s return and had serious concerns about the moral implications of the popes’ long absence, but she was not, in the conventional sense, a critic of the papacy. At a time when the popes were in dire need of a champion, she invested herself wholeheartedly in their service. She bolstered Gregory XI (1370–78) as he braced himself for his daunting return to Rome; she stood by the caustic and self-defeating Urban VI (1378–89) as celebrations over the papacy’s return died down in the opening salvos of the Great Schism. At first glance, it might seem strange that a woman best known for the intense interiority of her private spiritual life should place herself in the very public arena of papal politics, but Catherine’s service to the papacy was wholly consistent with the public ministry to which she was called. Indeed, Catherine never saw herself as a servant or agent of the popes; her labors on their behalf were merely part—albeit a crucial
part—of the greater mission to which she devoted herself in the final
decade of her life.

Modern scholarship on Catherine’s involvement with the papacy
begins with Alfonso Capecelatro’s elegant and erudite *Storia di santa
Caterina da Siena e del papato del suo tempo* (1878). The imprint of the
author—an Italian patriot and prominent ecclesiastic who eventually
rose to the cardinalate—is apparent throughout the work. Profoundly
and sometimes uncritically indebted to the *vita* of Catherine by “the
most faithful narrator of the heavenly life of Benincasa,” Raymond of
Capua, it is also deeply imbued with the nationalist spirit of the *Risor-
gimento* and responsive to contemporary debates about the Church’s
place in the new Italian nation.¹ Capecelatro’s Catherine is the patron
saint of the papacy’s restoration to its rightful seat in Rome; if she
could not solve the intractable problem of the Great Schism, she suc-
cceeded at least in underscoring the essential link between the Roman
papacy and a stable, well-ordered Italy.

Capecelatro’s work has faced many scholarly challenges but contin-
ues to inform much of the received wisdom about Catherine’s role in
papal affairs. Catherine is the humble saint—a political naïf by worldly
standards, but illuminated by supernal wisdom—who persuaded the
well-intentioned but weak-willed Gregory XI to bring the papacy
home and then spoke with the voice of angelic reason in the breaking
storm of the Schism.² But Catherine’s involvement with the papacy
is more complex and perhaps less determinative than such a view
would allow. She may have been humble, but she was not naive; she
understood the political implications of her actions and knew how to
assert her influence in the service of her goals. Even so, her influence
may not have been as great as she desired. Gregory XI and Urban VI
were very different men, to whom Catherine related in very different
ways; personal dynamics inevitably impinged on Catherine’s ability to
inform their decisions. Nor were the popes and Catherine in complete
accord about precisely what role Catherine should play. What Cath-
erine wanted is revealed in her writings and especially in her extensive
correspondence; what the popes intended is discernible in the actions

¹ Alfonso Capecelatro, *Storia di santa Caterina da Siena e del papato del suo tempo*,
² See, for example, the treatment in the classic work by Edmund Gardner, *Saint
Catherine of Siena: A Study in the Religion, Literature and History of the Fourteenth
Century in Italy* (London, 1907).