CHAPTER NINE

CATHERINE OF SIENA IN LATE MEDIEVAL SERMONS

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Considering the numerous sermons written about Catherine of Siena in the late Middle Ages, it is surprising that there has been no major study on this topic.1 Yet, the sermons dedicated to her comprise a rich variety of themes including praise for her virginity, her public involvement in ecclesiastical matters, and her likeness to Christ. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to provide a preliminary study of sermons written about Catherine of Siena and to evaluate what they tell us about the immediate and subsequent reception of her saintly image. It will assess the development of Catherine of Siena’s depiction in sermons from the 14th to the 16th centuries in order to demonstrate how portrayals of her were executed and distributed from the influential medieval pulpit. Nine preachers and their sermons will be examined; these are: the English Augustinian hermit and friend of Catherine of Siena, William Flete (fl. second half of the 14th century); the Dominican architects of Catherine’s cult, Caffarini (d. 1434) and Bartolomeo da Ferrara (d. 1448); Pope Pius II (d. 1464); the humanists Agostino Dati (d. 1478) and Domenico De’ Domenichi (1478); the 15th-century Franciscan bishop of Aquino, Robert Caracciolo (d. 1495); and the Dominican preachers Gabriel Bruni of Barletta (died after 1480) and Guillaume Pépin (d. 1533).2

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1 For two studies on this largely untapped area of research, see Domenico De’ Domenichi, Oratorio in Laudem Beatissimae Catherineae de Senis, ed. Antonio Piolanti, Textus Breviores Theologiam et Historiam Spectantes 6 (Vatican City, 1972); sermon on pp. 17–38; Gerardo Cappelluti, “S. Caterina da Siena in alcuni Sermones del secolo XV,” in Congresso Internazionale di Studi Cateriniani. Siena—Roma—24–29 Aprile 1980 (Rome, 1981), pp. 483–522. I am grateful to Eliana Corbari and Beverly Kienzle for bringing these works to my attention.

The earliest extant sermon about Catherine has been attributed to William Flete, who was one of Catherine’s close friends. He wrote this sermon in 1382, just two years after her death; its prolixity implies that the sermon was for reading rather than preaching. It begins, “May the grace of the Holy Spirit be with us. With great devotion let us celebrate the feast day of the passing of the glorious virgin, Catherine of Siena.” The tone clearly promotes the certainty of Catherine’s sanctity; but William would have to wait almost 80 years before Catherine’s official canonization.

The sermon contains several precedents for many themes that we will see repeated in pastoral literature on Catherine for the next 200 years. William identifies Catherine primarily as the virginal spouse of Christ. Her extreme devotional practices are praised: in particular her fasting, her bodily mortifications, and prayer. William also compares her to St Paul, a comparison repeated throughout the sermon. The first time this is mentioned she is called “a disciple of Paul.” Her peripatetic