CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF CATHERINE OF SIENA’S STIGMATA*

Diega Giunta

During a solemn liturgy at St Peter’s Basilica on the morning of 29 June 1461, Pope Pius II canonized Catherine of Siena.1 On the afternoon of the same day in Rome’s basilica of St Maria sopra Minerva, a church served by Dominican friars, the Franciscan bishop, Roberto Caracciolo, delivered a sermon for the occasion. We learn this from Caracciolo’s later sermon on Catherine of Siena which he included in his Sermones de Laudibus: “On the day of the canonization, I gave a sermon after lunch in the church of Minerva of the Order of Preachers.”2

Caracciolo divided his later sermon on Catherine into three parts. In the first, he exalted the qualities of the saintly woman with references to the Old and New Testaments; in the second, he spoke of the singularity of Catherine’s virtue; and in the third part, he pondered

* This chapter is an abridgement and translation of Diega Giunta, “La questione delle stimmate alle origini della iconografia cateriniana e la fortuna del tema nel corso dei secoli,” in Con l’occhio e col lume. Atti del corso seminariale di studi su S. Caterina da Siena (25 settembre–7 ottobre 1995), eds. Luigi Trenti and Bente Klange Addabbo (Siena, 1999), pp. 319–47. Hereafter, this will be cited as: Giunta, “La questione.” The translator, Travis Stevens of Harvard University, expresses his gratitude to the editors of this volume (and especially Beverly Kienzle) for their suggestions. (Editors’ note: The editors have made updates, adaptations and alterations of content based on scholarship appearing since 1999. They have also added some references to English-language studies which readers will find readily accessible in most research libraries.)


the sublimity of her charismatic gifts. Toward the end of his sermon, he recounted the mystical phenomenon of the stigmatization of Catherine, as reported in the *Legenda maior* of Raymond of Capua, disciple and confessor of the saint. In the *Legenda*, Raymond related in detail Catherine’s reception of the stigmata:

It happened in the city of Pisa, and I was present at it myself and witnessed it all. She had arrived in that city accompanied by a large group of followers including myself, and had gone to stay in the house of a gentleman of the city near the church or chapel of Santa Cristina. In that church one Sunday morning, at the virgin’s own earnest request, I had celebrated Mass and had—to use the popular expression—“communicated” her. Afterwards, as was her habit, she remained for a considerable time in a state of abstraction from her bodily senses; for on such occasions her spirit, caught up into that union with the Supreme Spirit, her Creator, for which it ever thirsted, left her body far behind, as best it could. The rest of us were waiting until she would return to her senses, in the hope that she would then, as often happened, have some words of spiritual comfort for ourselves. Suddenly, before our eyes, her emaciated body, which had been prostrate on the ground, rose up to a kneeling position; she stretched out her arms and hands to their full length; her face grew radiant. For a long time she knelt like that, bolt upright, her eyes closed. Then, while we still looked on, all of a sudden she pitched forward on the ground as if she had received a mortal wound. A few minutes later she returned to her senses.

In a little while, she sent for me, and spoke to me privately apart from the others. “Father,” she said, “I must tell you that, by his mercy, I now bear the stigmata of the Lord Jesus in my body.” I replied that while she was in ecstasy, I had been taking careful note of the attitudes and movements of her body, endeavoring to fathom their significance, and I asked her to describe the way in which our Lord had proceeded. She replied: “I saw our Lord, fastened to the cross, coming down upon me in a blaze of light. With that, as my spirit leaped to meet its Creator, this poor body was pulled upright. Then I saw, springing from the marks of his most sacred wounds, five blood-red rays coming down upon me, directed towards my hands and feet and heart. Realizing the meaning of this mystery, I promptly cried out: ‘Ah, Lord, my God, I implore you not to let the marks show outwardly on my body.’ While these words were still upon my lips, before the rays had reached me, their blood-red color changed to radiant brightness, and it was in the form of clearest light that they fell upon the five parts of my body—hands, feet, and heart.”

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3 Cappelluti, “S. Caterina,” p. 505.