1. This is a frequently copied depiction of Catherine, stooped and holding a wilting lily, by the Sienese painter Giovanni di Paolo, circa 1440, reproduced in Lidia Bianchi and Diega Giunta, Iconografia di S. Caterina da Siena, Citta Nuova Editrice, Rome, 1988, tav. VIII.
Though it made perfect sense in the fourteenth century, it comes as a shock today to find the head of Catherine of Siena enshrined in a reliquary in the Church of San Domenico in Siena while the rest of her reposes beneath the altar in the beautiful Gothic Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome. Since Catherine Benincasa died in Rome in 1380 when holy relics were revered (and scattered) throughout the Christian world, it seemed appropriate to her admirers that some part of the great woman be returned to the city of her birth. Nonetheless, granting the obvious historical explanation, the bodily bifurcation of the saint has symbolic associations that are more intriguing and disturbing than the innocent piety of the devotion to relics might suggest.

Catherine was not an ordinary woman of her time or any time. She was a mystic “married” to Christ and a social activist who ministered to the most miserable outcasts of her city. She was an “uneducated” laywoman who wrote hundreds of letters of advice to popes, bishops, abbots, and princes. She was sent on diplomatic missions as a peacemaker between Rome and the Italian city-states and argued pragmatically that the crusades could be a way of stopping Christians from fighting one another if they united against a common enemy. While she was still in her twenties her followers called her “mama,” but one of her favorite terms of encouragement to herself and her female and male disciples was the admonition to behave *virilmente*, “like a man.” It would be an understatement to say that Catherine was a complicated character. But, in reading her own writing (letters, *The Dialogue*, and prayers), most of the writings about her (biographies, commentaries and papal pronouncements) and the “holy” paintings that attempt to picture her, one comes away with the impression that between Catherine’s self-representations and the many idealized representations of her by others, there is not mere complexity, but a disconnection, a mutilation almost as radical as that which was done to her corpse.

It is true that Catherine was called in two seemingly opposite directions in her lifetime. The geographic and spiritual distance between Siena and Rome is a good place to start. Catherine’s life in Siena was profoundly influenced by the interior spirituality of her Dominican friends and confessors and by her persistent care of the outcast poor and those with sicknesses so hopeless and disgusting that few others would go near them. But as her reputation for wisdom and holiness increased, she was urged to come to the aid of the pope whose authority was being challenged on all sides. There is no doubt that Catherine was a loyal defender of the papacy, that she persuaded Gregory XI to leave Avignon and reestablish his Curia in Rome, and that late in her life she herself travelled to Rome at the request of Urban VI.