

Freedom and Politics in St Catherine of Siena

We return to the great Saint of Siena with a study, to be continued in further issues, covering various subjects seen in the context of historical events and of her thought. Her powerful voice can still be heard today, through her writings. The papacy at Avignon. Catherine's work in bringing it back to Rome.

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(Original text in Italian)

During the Middle Ages the world found it needed a spirituality which would compensate trials with hope, ease mourning with comfort, redeem the "prose" of labour with the "poetry" of faith and find an answer to life's brevity in an unending afterlife.

Florence, in central Tuscany, had from early times organised itself into a commune. It was a natural place for commerce and culture to emerge, also politics - through the internal strife of Guelphs and Ghibellines. It rose to pre-eminence in the region and beyond, and its golden period was during the XIII-XV centuries. Dante, Giotto, Donatello, Leonardo and Savonarola were among its luminaries. The mid-XIV-century Catherine of Siena ranks

with them. Fired by great religious conviction and a deep love for her own country, she saw that the world around her was "without peace and without light". She sensed around her the rumblings of

rebellion, the horrors of war and the cry of wickedness. At the beginning of the XIV century there was a bitter struggle to wrest spiritual rule away from Rome. Philip the Fair, in his boundless pride

St Catherine and the Pope (Giovanni Hajnal, mixed techniques)





Avignon, France: a view of the imposing Palace of the Popes

and hatred of Pope Boniface VIII, was overjoyed when on 5 June 1305, after the brief pontificate of Benedict XI, Bertrand de Goth, Archbishop of Bordeaux, was elected as Pope Clement V. There had been French popes before. Christendom had no suspicions of what was to happen when, instead of setting out for Rome, Clement V took the road to Avignon. In the three following elections, twenty-three out of twenty four electing cardinals were French. Christianity suddenly became aware that it stood in great danger of the papacy finding a new seat on the other side of the Alps, and began persistently to ask for a return to Rome. The fame of Catherine's extraordinary virtue and her vigorous calls to the pope to return to his city, her prolonged fasts, her daily com-

munions, her ecstasies, her letters written to persons of great influence, her admonishments of evil-doers who oppressed the people and kept the pope far from Rome, "scandalised" Christendom and could not be tolerated. This woman's voice, which could well draw proselytes, had to be silenced. What business was it of hers, the reform or government of the Church? It was her business to pray (and to do so in silence), and to nurse the sick: politics, reforms, peace and war were affairs for men, not women. So she was sent to Florence to mend her ways. Here, however, her popularity was so great that in 1376 she was called to be ambassador to Avignon, where she was partly responsible for the papacy's return to Rome. We get to know Catherine through her letters, sent to Popes Gregory XI and Urban

VI, Charles V of France, Queen Joan of Naples, the Duke of Anjou, the king of Hungary and many cardinals, bishops, statesmen, brothers, sisters, family friends and artists, and ordinary men and women. No one could resist her ardour, the witness of her charity, or even her reproofs when they were needed, such as this one she wrote to Joan of Naples, "No riches or grand estate, no worldly dignity, no baron or people who are your bodily subjects will be able to defend you against the supreme Judge, or save you from divine justice".

Her teaching was adapted to the different social levels of people whom she knew and accepted just as they were in themselves, whether she was dealing with the mother of a family, or a priest, a gentleman or a poor artisan; asking only that each should be faithful to the duties of their state of life. States of soul were even more different than their exterior circumstances, and Catherine took account of this. She writes that, "the city of the soul has three main gates; memory, intellect and will. Our creator allows these gates to be attacked, and sometimes to be taken by storm, with one exception, that of the will. The intellect often sees only darkness, the memory is full of frivolous and passing things, of confused and dishonest thoughts, the senses are the prey of uncontrolled feelings. The door of the will is so strong that no creature or demon can open it if the

doorkeeper does not consent. So keep it firmly shut, and your soul will be a city that is always free".

Having, as few others did, a lively awareness of her freedom and autonomy, Catherine felt at every moment part of the entire body of Christianity and responsible for the evils afflicting the Church; and so she laboured intensively for its reform.

What did Catherine mean by the reform and renewal of the Church? Certainly not the overthrow of its essential structures, rebellion against its pastors, and an open path to personal charisms, arbitrary innovations in liturgy and discipline. On the contrary, she repeatedly stated that the full beauty of the bride of Christ would return, if reform was made "not by war but by peace and quiet, by humble and continuous prayer, by the blood and

sweat of God's servants". We are talking about a reform that is primarily interior and then exterior, but "always in communion with and in filial obedience to Christ's lawful representatives".

A look at society in the Middle Ages

To appreciate Catherine's life not only interiorly but also from the point of view of her relevance to the Papacy and to society, we need to look at the times in which she lived. A quick glance at the middle of the XIV century clearly shows us the one fact dominating other events; the papacy, which from St Peter onwards had been established in Rome for fourteen centuries, had been transferred to Avignon in France. Italians began to call this the

papacy's "Babylonian Captivity", and luminaries like Dante and Petrarch began to agitate for the return of the papacy to Rome, "which used to have two suns, the pope and the emperor".

Philip the Fair completely dominated Clement V, and it could be said that Clement's pontificate was the Church's real "captivity"; John XXII was more energetic in the pursuit of his own policies. After the death of Philip the Fair, France had less influence, and Benedict XII had serious thoughts of returning to Italy. But the College of Cardinals was dominated by the French, and an outbreak of hostilities between France and England laid a moral commitment on the pope and his successors to remain in Avignon in order to negotiate an end to this war which was impeding the Crusades, so important to the Church. A return to Italy and the difficulties foreseen in re-establishing a secure papal authority over its restless population was not an inviting prospect.

Avignon was purchased from Joan of Naples on 12 June 1348 for 80,000 florins, and became the established legal seat of the Church. It was enriched with sumptuous houses and sacred buildings; the papal palace was magnificently enhanced and refurbished. The pontificates of Clement VI and Innocent VI were passed here. With the disastrous end of the first period of the Hundred Years War, the political influence of

Rome: a period print showing Castel S. Angelo with its access bridge across the River Tiber



the House of Anjou was partly diminished, and France's growing moral and political power was brought to a standstill. There was a growing conviction that a return to Rome was possible, and a tentative attempt was made by Urban V, but the definitive return was made by Gregory XI in 1377.

When we look at the attitude of the Avignon popes to the question of returning to Rome, we have to recognise that none of them (with the exception of Clement VI perhaps) ruled out the possibility. There was no easy solution; indeed, it called for a change of position in the whole western political situation. It touched upon essential and important points in the whole life of the Church, such as its sovereignty in Italy and its temporal independence throughout the countries of Christendom, the relationship between the papacy and the college of cardinals, and between the Curia and the people of Italy, who, in their great exasperation, were threatening a schism.

International political issues had to be addressed, like the settlement of the French-English conflict, the struggle against mercenary armies and preparation for the crusades. A whole series of interdependent problems had been created, which could only find a solution by the abandonment of Avignon.

All this may be summed up in a single phrase, "the Roman question"; making use of a formula which, five centuries



Rome: the Piazza of St Peter's, crowded for a religious ceremony

later, would signify the problem of relationship between State and Church. To use it of the 14th century is not inappropriate, because from then on the first national kingdoms, partly autonomous because they recognised no superior, were confronting the problem of their relationship with the Church.

To regain its full ascendancy over the Christian world, the papacy had to return to Rome and sever its relationship with the kingdom of France. There were indeed many difficulties, but also a prophetic atmosphere, revelations, an eschatological vision which tended to favour a return to Rome, and saw it as part of a process pre-established by Providence.

After Pope Urban V's failed attempt to return to Rome, and the countless counter-arguments for making the move, it seemed a miracle of Providence when, on 17 January 1377, Gregory XI actually arrived in Rome to take up his

definitive residence. This pope had been induced to make the final decision, at least partly, by the words of St Catherine of Siena; indeed, his good intentions to return to Rome were not resulting in action, and Catherine could see papal power rapidly crumbling away, and the Italian population's spiritual detachment from the Church. The pope had to return to Rome as soon as possible. She therefore sent a letter to Gregory XI; its courageous severity is amazing. The exhortation to "kill the rat of self-love; it is a rat that gnaws and severs the roots of our tree" has a precise meaning, because he was notoriously indulgent towards his own relations and their representatives in Italy.

Catherine teaches us that we need to know how to be firm in our resolutions; and she would utter the maxim, "Sometimes affection for one's family is the greatest cruelty".

Every single letter she sent to the pope urged him to “behave manfully” (whereas all those she would later send to the more choleric Urban VI invited him to be calm and indulgent). To hasten his return, she made the important decision to meet the entire Curia and overcome the pope’s last resistances, he himself not having the fortitude to confront the obstacles they were putting in his way. A single confrontation convinced him that his return to Rome was God’s will.

In Catherinian tradition there is one more episode: the departure for Rome had already been decided, ships from Genoa, Venice and Naples were waiting; and around the pope the last battle was waging. The cardinals, the people of Avignon and the pope’s relations were imploring him, threatening him and beseeching him to remain. Gregory XI summoned Catherine, not for advice, but to command her under obedience to reveal God’s will to him. Catherine then took counsel with her own conscience, and reminded him of his secret vow, made as a cardinal and of which he had never spoken, to return the papacy to Rome if he were elected pope. Gregory bowed to this decisive revelation of the divine will.

On 17 January 1377, Gregory XI set foot in Rome with the intention of remaining, and there he died on 27 March 1378. An Italian, Urban VI, was elected pope. The cardinals who had never accepted the

idea of leaving Avignon for ever took revenge by proceeding to the election of a second pope, Robert of Geneva, who took the name of Clement VII.

The schism caused by the Avignon cardinals rebelling against the Italian pope divided the whole of Europe into two camps and two “obediences”, one devoted to the pope of Rome, the other to the antipope at Avignon. Only with Martin V, of the House of Colonna, would the helm of St Peter’s boat be taken firmly in hand and the Church definitively become a territorial entity among the Italian States.

(Part one, to be continued)

N.B.: The original version of this study, from which the magazine version has been adapted, is available in Italian.

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