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The Pious and Political Networks of Catherine of Siena

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Abstract

This project looks at the career of St. Catherine of Siena and argues that without the relationships she had with her closest followers, who provided social connections and knowledge of the operation of political power, she would not have been able to pursue as active or wide-ranging a career. The examination of Catherine's relationships, the careers of her followers, and the ways she made use of this network of support, relies mainly on Catherine's extant letters. Most prior research on St. Catherine focuses on her spirituality and work with the papacy, which leaves out the influence of her local, political environment and the activities of her associates. This work examines Catherine's place on Siena's political landscape and within the system of Italian politics more generally.

THE PIOUS AND POLITICAL NETWORKS OF CATHERINE OF SIENA

by

AUBRIE KENT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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Chronology

- 1347 Catherine is born.
- 1355 Regime of the Nine ends, rule of the Twelve begins.
- 1362 Catherine's sister Bonaventura dies in childbirth.
- 1364 Catherine enters the Dominican penitential order, the *Mantellate*; Tommaso dalla Fonte becomes her confessor.
- 1364 Catherine's period of solitude and instruction, during which she learns to read.
-68
- 1368 Government of the Twelve falls, replaced by a coalition of nobles, Nove, and Dodici.
Catherine's father, Iacopo, dies in August.
- 1370 Election of Pope Gregory XI.
- 1371 Revolt involving the Salimbeni and Dodici, after which the Salimbeni are exiled from the city.
Riformatori government takes power.
- 1374 Catherine attends the General Chapter of the Dominican Order.
Raymond of Capua becomes her confessor.
Salimbeni and their allies begin attacking towns in the Sienese countryside.
- 1375 Catherine travels to Pisa, returns to attend the execution of Niccolo di Toldo.
July: Florence and Milan make pact to protect each other from papal forces, call on Siena to join.
November: Siena joins the Florentine anti-papal league.
- 1376 Catherine writes her first letter to Gregory XI in January.
March: Pisa and Lucca join Florentine league. Florence is placed under papal interdict.
April: Catherine travels to Florence to negotiate on the pope's behalf.
May: Catherine travels to Avignon.
September: Gregory XI leaves Avignon for Rome. Rome submits to the pope on December 21.
November: Catherine returns to Italy.
- 1377 April: Catherine's convent at Belcaro is founded, begins writing to members of the Salimbeni family.

- July-December: Catherine spends time with the Salimbeni family at their stronghold, the Rocca d'Orcia.
October: Florence begins openly violating the interdict.
- 1378 Catherine travels to Florence.
March 27: Gregory XI dies.
April 8: Urban VI elected.
June: Wool-workers riot in Florence, Catherine targeted but not killed.
July: Peace reached between Florence and papacy.
September 20: Anti-pope Clement VII elected in Avignon.
November: Catherine travels to Rome.
- 1379 Catherine working in Rome to rally support for Urban VI. She can no longer eat and her health deteriorates rapidly.
- 1380 April 29: Catherine dies in Rome.

Introduction

Catherine Benincasa was born in Siena in 1347, the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children of Lapa and Iacopo Benincasa. Around 1353, Catherine experienced a vision of Christ, which inspired her to devote her life to serving God, and shortly after took a vow of chastity. The formative experience of Catherine's youth was the death of her favorite sister, Bonaventura, who died in childbirth in 1362, when Catherine was fifteen. This event was the real turning point in her pursuit of a devotional life and solidified her conviction to deny her parents' wish for her to marry. In the same year, the Dominican friar Tommaso dalla Fonte, her cousin, became her confessor. It was at this point that her fasting began, and by 1364 or early 1365 she was admitted to the Sienese *Mantellate*, the Dominican tertiary order, named for their distinctive habit. Following three years spent in solitude, during which time she learned to read in at least an elementary way, she began to engage in charitable and devotional activities in the city. By 1374, Catherine had gained enough reputation as a holy woman within Siena that she was invited to attend the Dominican General Chapter in Florence, where Raymond of Capua was assigned to be her confessor and given sole authority over her.¹

The General Chapter marked her entry into Tuscan and papal politics, and during the 1370s her career expanded rapidly. She began to use letters as a means of imparting her messages, increasingly requested as her fame spread, around 1370. Her most intense period of activity was between 1374 and 1380, when she died at Rome. During these years, Catherine's chief concerns were the anti-papal rebellions of Tuscan cities, and the

¹ Suzanne Noffke, ed., *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol. 1 (Tempe: Arizona State University, 2000), xii.

schism between Pope Urban VI (1378-1389) and Pope Clement VII (1378-1394). Her work had the ultimate goal of the unity of Christianity, and loyalty to Pope Urban VI, in what she envisioned as one Christian family.

Over 380 of Catherine's letters were preserved, collected by her followers and distributed after her death, and most recently translated and presented in a collection by Suzanne Noffke. Noffke's edition organizes the letters chronologically based on evidence found in linguistic patterns and in references to people, places, or events. Her work builds upon that of Edmund Gardner in 1907, Robert Fawtier's from 1921, and Dupré Theseider, 1923. Catherine's letters present challenges as a primary source base, particularly in the question of scribes. Catherine herself was unable to write and dictated her letters to a number of followers. Some interjections from the scribes are clearly identifiable, in the greetings to friends commonly found at the end of letters, but the question remains of to what extent her scribes may have added to or otherwise changed her dictations. A further complication is that original transcriptions remain for only eight of her letters; the rest are copies.² It is impossible to say if what remains is exactly the original words spoken by Catherine, but Noffke concludes from her analysis of linguistic patterns, compared with Catherine's book *The Dialogue*, that the essence of the language is Catherine's.

Study of Catherine is also made difficult by the layers of hagiography and historical interpretation that have built up around her life. She is remembered primarily as a saint, the confidante of Pope Gregory XI (1370-78), a voice in church reform, or as a figure typical of medieval women mystics in her ecstatic visions and extreme fasting.

² Ibid., xxii.

Catherine as a political figure was not given significant attention until the publication of Thomas Luongo's *The Saintly Politics of Catherine of Siena* in 2006. Luongo's study makes an argument for understanding Catherine not as a religious figure who became incidentally involved in political matters but as an active participant in politics from early in her career. Despite Catherine's own protestations that she was simply motivated by a desire to save souls, and the later, sanitized presentation of her life by Raymond of Capua, she was connected to numerous members of the most important political institutions of her day, and aggressive in exerting influence over their actions. Luongo's book works to place Catherine back in this context and take into account the political, social, and religious influences on her actions, without the veil of hagiography. Luongo also reacts to the work done on Catherine by historians approaching her life from the perspective religious women and female spirituality.

The bulk of studies done on Catherine take this approach, most notably that of Caroline Walker Bynum but also that of Giuliana Cavallini, Suzanne Noffke.³ Bynum details the aspects of Catherine's life and religious devotion that fit neatly within her model of medieval women mystics, in particular Catherine's attention to the body of Christ as a source of nourishment, her use of the imagery of Christ's flesh, and her fasting. Many elements of Catherine's spirituality follow the framework laid out by Bynum, especially in her argument that the spirituality of female mystics focused on the physical rather than the scholastic and emphasized fasting as a means of controlling the

³ Cavallini's work focuses on traces Catherine's thoughts back to their biblical roots and comparing her language to that used in the Bible. Noffke's work on Catherine outside of her edition of the letters focuses on Catherine's theology and mysticism, especially as it relates to the defense of the church. Cavallini and Noffke are both nuns in the Dominican Order. See Giuliana Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena* (New York: Chapman, 1998), Suzanne Noffke, "The Physical in the Mystical Writings of Catherine of Siena," *Annali D'Italianistica* 13 (1995): 109-29, and Noffke, "Catherine of Siena, Justly Doctor of the Church?," *Theology Today* 60, no. 1 (2003): 49-62.

body or avoiding marriage. Given the influence of Bynum's argument, Luongo argues that this interpretation has enforced a view of Catherine as separate from the male gendered sphere of politics and placed her entirely within the feminine and religious, which limits a full understanding of her life and activities.⁴

The following study uses Luongo's interpretation of Catherine as a political figure who was involved in many of the most crucial events of Sienese and Tuscan politics during the 1370s and looks somewhat beyond Catherine to focus more closely on how the trajectory of her career was shaped by her networks, both pious and political. Catherine's contacts with leading figures in religious orders, the papacy, and most importantly Siena's political institutions, do not just demonstrate that Catherine was politically involved, but offer insight into how she was able to undertake such an active and wide-ranging career. Whereas Luongo uses Catherine's spiritual family and their careers in government primarily as a means to argue that Catherine was heavily involved in public affairs and not an isolated holy figure as her hagiography presents her, I am going to examine their activities as a demonstration of the ways that Catherine benefited from their social positions, and how important her network was to the reach of her career. Contrary to Luongo's assertion that there was inherent tension between her followers' public and spiritual lives, I argue that the public careers of her young, noble, spiritual sons were integral to her ability to access and profit from networks of power, and despite her exhortations for them to renounce worldly affairs, in practice she operated her

⁴ Thomas Luongo, *The Sainly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 14; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 283. Bynum also discusses Catherine and her fixation on the powers of the blood of Christ to cleanse and nourish in *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

spiritual family as a private interest group that participated in the political system of leveraging personal relationships and public office for partisan benefit.

Section one gives an overview of the Dominican penitential movement, which gave Catherine her introduction into active spirituality. The religious approach of the Dominican penitents, which emphasized participation in the public sphere and engagement with the secular world, was the foundation of Catherine's own later attitude towards her place as a religious voice. An examination of the Dominican penitential order within Siena also explains the acceptance of Catherine's religious authority by the public and by elites within the city. Section two further contextualizes Catherine's career with an overview of the regime changes in Siena from 1355-1368, and the frequent revolts that followed. The political situation of Siena during Catherine's most active period was characterized by instability and rivalries between political factions, and the ruling coalition government was threatened by multiple partisan revolts. Considering Catherine's involvement with members of various dissident political parties, the tense political environment is important in understanding the motivations of her numerous relationships.

Sections three and four examine the social and political backgrounds of the members of Catherine's networks, and how these affected Catherine's own actions and attitudes. The almost uniform nobility of Catherine's spiritual family, who looked up to her as their *Mamma*, needs to be understood through the presence of their families on Siena's political field. Section four, in particular, focuses on the tangible ways that her followers' clout enabled her to reach a greater audience, both spatially and socially, than she would otherwise have been able to. Together, this study takes the understanding of

Catherine as a political figure and looks more closely at her strategies, personal connections, and how she was shaped by her associations and by wider circumstances.

Religious Background

The particularities of Siena's religious landscape during Catherine's childhood and her later career created the conditions that allowed her to exercise spiritual authority in a way that could be used in political situations. The general acceptance of the possibility of a direct line to the divine alone is not enough to explain Catherine's high level of involvement with political families and the Sienese government; several factors were present that combined to make her brand of spirituality effectual, especially in local politics. The presence of the Dominican penitential order and its socially oriented piety, the relationship between the authority of the Sienese government and the blessing of the Virgin Mary, and the pantheon of local saints recognized by the government all contributed to create a context in which Catherine's claims to exceptional religiosity could be accepted and found politically useful.

The unique nature of the Dominican penitential spiritual outlook and Catherine's early exposure to it in Siena offer some explanation for the confidence with which she participated in secular affairs. Penitential women's social space was crafted as a balance between piety and public participation. Though the Dominicans did not by any means encourage penitents to live mobile lives, as mobility was associated with personal and social instability and the spreading of heretical beliefs, pious women's lives were characterized by a high degree of social participation.⁵ The construction of the penitential women's approach to religious devotion had important effects on the way Catherine conducted her own career, most notably the focus on public participation. The social and religious position of the Dominican tertiaries was integral to the formation of Catherine's

⁵ Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly Saints: Social Interaction of Dominican Penitent Women in Italy, 1200-1500* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1999), 35.

religious expression and many elements of her approach are rooted in her foundation as a lay penitential woman. There are several core aspects of the Dominican penitential women's philosophy that set it apart from other forms of devotional life, and the growth and formation of this unofficial but influential third order had demonstrable effects on Catherine's perspective.

The penitential women's movement, begun in central Italy at the end of the twelfth century, likely arose in response to a variety of forces, though the precise cause is not clear from the available evidence.⁶ Three patterns of life for penitential women are identifiable, the first being a cenobitic one of moderately cloistered communities; the second the eremitical life of hermits and recluses; and the third a penitential mode followed by women in their own homes.⁷ The Dominican and Franciscan orders were the first to form associations with lay penitential movements, though they were not codified or classified according to order until later. Penitents began emerging as early as the 1220s and remained largely unofficial until the late thirteenth century.⁸

There were several factors that pushed women to pursue a life as part of this unofficial third order. As is reflected in Catherine's own career, the penitential movement attracted women who did not wish to spend their religious lives cloistered. Rather, they were drawn to the looser structure of the penitential communities and the space it gave them to pursue an active religious and charitable involvement and even freedom to go on pilgrimages.⁹

⁶ Mario Sensi, "Anchoresses and Penitents in Thirteenth and Fourteenth-Century Umbria," in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 85-121.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly Saints*, 36.

⁹ Anna Benvenuti Papi, "Mendicant Friars and Female Pinzochere in Tuscany: From Social Marginality to Models of Sanctity," in *Women and Religion*, ed. Bornstein and Rusconi, 88.

This ambivalence towards or even complete rejection of cloistering was central to the formation of the Dominican third order and had its roots in early monasticism. The model of women residing in their own homes was a hold-over from the fifth and sixth centuries and was common among veiled nuns until the Second Lateran Council regularized the framework of religious women's lives in 1139 and attempted to do away with the practice.¹⁰ In addition to this existing tradition of home-dwelling nuns, it was common for them to participate in the outside world, particularly by visiting family members. Even papal bulls that curtailed these lapses in enclosure, such as the *Periculoso* of 1298 issued by Pope Boniface VIII, did not seek to eradicate open monasteries entirely.¹¹ These strains of thought and practice, namely the lack of commitment to absolute enclosure and openness to participation in the secular world, became central to penitential women.

There were, though, distinct divergences in the thinking of penitential women and nuns. For nuns, participation in the secular world was an occasional necessity that should be avoided if possible, practiced in cases where a family member or the nun herself was ill and needed to return home. For penitents, participation in the world was central to their devotion. The focus on a presence in the public sphere was part of what made the penitential life appealing, as it offered spiritual satisfaction without the sacrifice of social bonds.

Penitential women were referred to by a variety of names, but the main terms used in Siena were *mantellata* or *pinzochere*. The penitents emerged remarkably quickly after the foundation of the Dominican and Franciscan orders, only shortly after the deaths

¹⁰ Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly Saints*, 28.

¹¹ Sensi, "Anchoresses and Penitents," 29.

of St. Dominic and St. Francis in the 1220s. Though the founders of the mendicant orders did not themselves set up a structure intentionally conducive to lay tertiaries or encourage their formation, the penitents' evangelical streak, acts of penance, and calls for reform echoed the tradition of the wandering preachers.¹²

Possibly due to the fact that the orders themselves were still occupied with their own formation, the Franciscans and Dominicans were slow to formulate an institutional response that tightly organized their lay affiliates. Initially the orders collaborated to deal with the responsibility of lay adherents who came to them for pastoral care. The first document concerning the regulation of penitents was produced in 1221, though it survived only as a 1228 copy, the *Memoriale*.¹³ This rule laid out general guidelines for penitents' lives, including modest clothing, a calendar of fasts and abstinences, daily worship, and social responsibilities including harmony with neighbors, no participation in secular warfare, and obligations to their co-religionists.¹⁴

However, this collaborative effort to organize penitents into a more regularized community did not establish any official ties, only stating vaguely that a member of a monastic order should supervise penitents when it was possible.¹⁵ Penitents were treated with a general attitude of caution and kept at a careful distance. St. Francis forbade friars from accepting a vow from every woman who claimed to lead a penitential life and the General Chapter of the Dominicans in 1228 prohibited the easy admittance of virgins to the status of penitents.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., 34.

¹³ Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly Saints*, 35.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶ Sensi, "Anchoresses and Penitents," 58.

This attitude continued even into the late thirteenth century, when the Master General of the Dominicans at the time, Humbert of Romans, delivered a sermon on the subject of the penitential life without mentioning any actual affiliation with his order's penitents.¹⁷ This position altered significantly in the 1280s, with the official incorporation of penitents into the orders and clear distinctions between Franciscan and Dominican followers. Far from their earlier position of holding these women at arm's length, going forward they would compete for the right to organize the penitents as officially incorporated tertiary orders.¹⁸

The Franciscans acted first to produce a firmer structure for their laity in 1284 with *The Rule of Caro*, introduced by Friar Caro and later approved by Pope Nicholas IV (1288-92). It reorganized the *Memoriale* by laying out in stricter terms the relationship between clergy and laity, securing clerical authority over the penitents. It was granted approval by Pope Nicholas IV in 1289, with the significant adjustment to stipulate that lay followers were to be supervised by Minorites specifically.¹⁹ Pope Nicholas IV was himself a Franciscan, and his act of officially incorporating the penitents into the Franciscan order set up a distinct advantage for the Franciscans in their authority over the tertiary orders.

The Dominicans, by this point themselves in possession of a large number of lay adherents, were not pleased about this Franciscan bias. Pious women were already being recognized as local saints by the early days of the penitential movement, and the benefits of venerated devotees had been noted by both orders. In 1285, the Dominican Master

¹⁷ Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly Saints*, 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

General, Munio of Zamora, composed his own rule based on the *Memoriale*. It would later become the official base of the Dominican Third Order, but when first introduced did not receive a friendly welcome. Pope Nicholas IV ordered Munio to resign. Though the exact reasons for this move are not entirely clear, given the documented advantages of the lay affiliates, it is likely that the competition for their supervision played a role.²⁰ Munio resigned in 1291 and the Dominican rule was not approved until 1405, an insult that was compounded when in 1399 the Augustinian rule regarding their lay followers was approved despite the greater size and influence of the Dominicans.

This lack of official recognition and even possible resistance to Dominican authority over the laity created an awkward position for Dominican penitents. Though popular and well established by Catherine's lifetime, their lack of papal approval led to a cautious official approach that encouraged moderation and greater institutionalization.²¹ The Dominicans structured their lay order along lines less likely to upset the papacy by stressing the habit and the support of the hierarchical church and by discouraging abject poverty and severe food asceticism.²²

Despite this regularization, especially among the Dominicans, the unique elements of an outwardly oriented religiosity and an intentional avoidance of the cloister remained central to penitential life. Penitential women frequently made decisions to avoid forms of clerical control that would limit their movement and social participation. They did not keep oratories in their houses, and when they chose to form distinct communities

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly Saints*, 38.

²² Ibid.

rather than live independently in secular homes, it was often on land donated by wealthy urban elites instead of church property.²³

The church, not only a powerful political force but also the gatekeeper of salvation, was necessary for this access to religious rites and for the legitimacy of their lifestyle. But being under its direct control would limit the laity's opportunities to pursue the active and involved religious life they wanted, resulting in their continual effort to maintain a space where they could exist as legitimate associates of the church but continue participation in the secular world.

Dedicated houses for penitential women did not become common until the early fifteenth century, well after Catherine's death. During her active years, penitents mainly lived in either their natal or marital homes.²⁴ Many penitents retained their domestic duties, balancing their pious pursuits with the mundane interests of their families. As in Catherine's case, these families often expressed strong opinions about their religious activities, and familial conflict became a hallmark of the penitential woman's spiritual journey.²⁵

The housing situation of Dominican penitents and their choice to remain physically involved with secular matters was a formative factor in their spiritual approach. In contrast to the traditional view of women's spirituality, which stressed women's weakness to temptation and the value of seclusion, penitents focused on how their actions could benefit others. They challenged several precepts of female sanctity, including the ideas that marriage was incompatible with sanctity and that association with

²³ Sensi, "Anchoresses and Penitents," 68.

²⁴ Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly Saints*, 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

non-religious people was corrupting. These spiritual shifts were likely due to the demographics of the penitential movement, made up mainly of widows who remained in their homes, unmarried virgins who lived with their parents, and even married women who pursued continence but remained in their marital homes.

The social circumstances of women who became penitents affected their religious approach and blurred the boundaries between religious and secular life. This was also influenced by the geographical realities of the urban terrain, which enabled women to continue living in their immediate neighborhoods, often very close to churches (Catherine herself grew up close to the Basilica of San Domenico). The lack of distance between penitents and their surroundings shifted the arena of devotional activities to the outside world. This reorientation was not without challenges, as it went against previously accepted forms of women's piety. The public life of penitents required justification, which was given through the arguments that public life was sanctifying in itself and even possessed a higher value than seclusion.²⁶ While the monastic life offered merely contemplation and prayer, the penitential life involved tangible, immediate acts of good that benefited others in need of spiritual and physical assistance²⁷

The hagiographies of Dominican penitents exhibit awareness on the part of the confessors of the need to defend the activities of their charges. Participation in the secular world is often characterized in later accounts of the woman's life as an intentional choice made at the direction of God, usually with the woman herself resisting. Raymond of Capua's *vita* of Catherine, the *Legenda Maior*, follows this pattern and offers further

²⁶ Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly Saints*, 68.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

insight into the intentional rearrangement of existing thought around seclusion to allow for penitents' public roles.

Raymond reports that when Catherine was around age 15 or 16, she spent a period of three years in solitary contemplation, following her conversion and vow of chastity. This time spent in seclusion culminated in a vision of her mystical marriage to Christ, which would typically connote the rejection of the secular world, but in Catherine's case heralded the beginning of her public life. She received a directive from God telling her it was time to leave her cell and re-engage with the outside world.²⁸

Raymond here reverses the usual order of the progression of a pious life. Usually the public role would precede the hermetic one, but for Catherine her secluded stage was preparation for her active participation in the public sphere. Raymond explains this process through several biblical allusions, to Rachel and Jacob, Lea and Martha. He compares the contemplative stage of Catherine's life to "Jacob and Rachel's embraces," and her public participation to "the fecundity [of Lea]" and "Martha's assiduous service."²⁹

Using these scriptural justifications, Raymond portrays an active presence in public as the fruit of contemplation, not the less desirable alternative to a hermetic lifestyle. He creates an image of the Bride of Christ not as a solitary, withdrawn figure but as the messenger of Christ to the general public. Catherine's subsequent activities certainly reflect this image, and it's possible that Raymond's later report of this process was constructed as a means to defend her constant movement and close involvement with

²⁸ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. George Lamb (Rockford: Harvill Press, 1960), 106.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

public affairs. He also emphasized her own displeasure at being commanded to rejoin the world, describing the transition as Catherine being called “from rest to labor, from silence to noise,” and her reaction that she did not wish to soil herself again with “the dust of the earth.”³⁰ Raymond’s account, which mirrors others, thus indicates not only anxiety about Catherine specifically but around penitents in general.

The translation of penitents’ high level of social involvement into acceptable terms by clerical authorities had an interesting effect on the way penitential women perceived their own physical presence in the secular world. Penitent women created for themselves a mental separation from the world where they chose not to enforce a physical one. They were physically present and active in society but mentally had transcended the world and inhabited a higher space. This idea is particularly resonant in Catherine’s writing and apparent in her approach to various situations.

A frequent subject of Raymond is Catherine’s “mental cell,” which she encourages him and many of her correspondents to build and inhabit. From the beginning of her public career, Raymond characterizes her as existing “with her body amongst people but her soul entirely with her Heavenly Bridegroom.”³¹ As a religious notion, Catherine’s mental cell was an opportunity to escape in contemplation while fulfilling the direct command of God to do his work in the world. As a political tool, the idea that she resided on a higher plane gave her the room to put distance between herself and her political activities when needed. In this way her position as a Dominican penitent not only informed her approach to social participation but also enabled her to escape from responsibility by claiming a higher religious position. Catherine’s foundation as a

³⁰ Ibid., 88.

³¹ Ibid., 92.

Dominican penitent gave her spiritual legitimation and a means to justify her worldly actions through the argument that she had the leeway to act politically because she inhabited a different social space, one not entirely in the physical world.

Religious practice was one of the leading concerns of Siena's government, and the influence of religion within the civic culture of Siena helps to explain both Catherine's decision to pursue a religious life and the reaction of the Siennese government to her. In addition to the strong presence of the Dominicans, Siena's religious landscape included a large number of local saints and a local religious identity centered on a special relationship with the Virgin Mary. Later in her life Catherine became useful to the Siennese government in large part due to her spiritual authority, which can be better understood through consideration of the importance of religion to the function and administration of the city.

By the end of the thirteenth century Siena had created for itself a local religious mythos of a special relationship with the Virgin Mary, and coins issued by the commune after 1260 began to bear not only the usual "Sena vetus" but also an expanded inscription of "Sena vetus civitas virginis." The shift from "ancient Siena" to "ancient Siena, city of the Virgin" followed a dramatic series of events that took place in late 1260, but was also a continuation of a special relationship between Siena and the Virgin that had begun as early as the tenth century.³² The cathedral of Siena and its high altar were dedicated to "Santa Maria" as early as 913 and the Feast of the Assumption, August 15, was the city's largest and most important religious festival, required to be attended by the bishop and all the city's clergy.

³² Gerald Parsons, *Siena, Civil Religion and the Siennese* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 1.

The yearly celebration of the Assumption included a ritual procession in which representatives of various social groups presented candles to the Virgin, which had the dual purpose of a symbolic submission to the authority of the commune. The surrounding towns and the powerful land-owning families of the countryside were required to offer both banners and candles in an oath of loyalty to the commune, submitted directly to the Virgin. These rituals created a claim to Mary's direct spiritual oversight and blessing and forged a link between the government's right to rule Siena and the divine.³³

The emphasis placed by the commune on its religious nature, already established by the beginning of the thirteenth century, grew to be an even greater piece of the city's consciousness in 1260, when Siena was saved by the Virgin from an invasion by Florence. The story of the battle of Montaperti became the central myth of Siena's self-conception as a city whose existence was protected directly by the Virgin Mary. Whether or not the accounts of the events of the battle are accurate, they were the subject of great attention in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and were the driving force behind the growth and centralization of the civic cult of the Virgin.³⁴

The basic narrative is that Florence, Siena's greatest regional rival, had advanced a large army a significant distance into Siennese territory and presented the city with a demand that it surrender and accept Florentine rule. Having resolved not to surrender, the ruling council of the Nine gave full command of the city to a man named Buonaguida Lucari. During the council's deliberations, Lucari addressed the gathered people and encouraged them to give themselves, their worldly possessions, and the city itself over to the Virgin. He proceeded to take off his own shirt, place a rope around his neck and lead

³³ Ibid., 2.

³⁴ Ibid., 3.

a procession towards the cathedral, where he placed the keys to the city on the altar and asked Mary to protect Siena. The following night, as the Siennese army was camped over the hill from the Florentines, a large white cloud resembling the cloak of the Virgin, which she used to shield those who asked for her protection, was seen floating over the Siennese. The spectacular victory they won against Florence the next day convinced the city that their exhortations to the Virgin had worked and confirmed their spiritual bond.³⁵

Whatever the actual facts of the situation, after 1260 and throughout the fourteenth century the divine sanction of Siena by the Virgin was an important feature not only of the city's religious atmosphere but also of its administration. The simultaneous submission to Mary and the authority of the Nine incorporated religion directly into the legitimacy of their rule.

That Siena had an institutionalized relationship with a patron saint was not unique for an Italian city, as most venerated a patron along with a pantheon of local saints. This cast of saints was subject to change and the government was tasked with approving and regulating the veneration of new saints, an indication of the large role that spiritual matters played in the city's business. In addition to the festival of the Assumption, Siena's religious orders frequently produced saints and requested official recognition and support for their public veneration. This contributed to the creation of an environment where lay spirituality was accepted and given institutional support.

By the 1320s Siena had begun to recognize the ancient martyr Ansano, credited with the conversion of the city's forefathers, and two new saints recognized by the local

³⁵ Ibid., 5.

Dominicans, and Franciscans.³⁶ In 1328, the general council reversed their initial agreement for the provision of these civic religious festivals, which had taken care of the cost of “lights, offerings and expenses.” The council resolved that the Nine, who had previously been permitted to attend the festival, would no longer be allowed to go or to give “any tapers, candles, offering of money,” due mainly to concerns of expense and worry over preserving the central position of the Virgin.³⁷ In response to this policy change, the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians submitted three petitions in close succession in February of 1329, arguing for the continued veneration of their respective saints. All three demonstrated not only a desire for the feasts and festivals to continue, but specifically for the Nine governors to be allowed and required to attend, the Franciscans asking that “this good and honorable custom should by some means become law.”³⁸ The Augustinians argued that their blessed Agostino Novello be honored because of his “great love and affection which he had for the commune of Siena,” as well as the benefit gained by the city from his advocacy in heaven on its behalf.³⁹

The petitions were partly successful; in 1337 the statutes were revised to prohibit the Nine from attending any festival except that of the Assumption on penalty of a fine. However, the festivals for saints Ansano and the Dominican Ambrogio were mandatory for “the rectors and all the foreign officials and all the magistrates of Siena.” The Augustinians, much less successfully, fell in the category of “others” who were given “six wax tapers of ten pounds weight...at the expense of the commune.”⁴⁰ These

³⁶ “Civic Veneration of the Saints at Siena, Six Texts,” trans. Diana Webb, in *Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation*, ed. Katherine Jansen, Joanna Drell, and Frances Andrews (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 406.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 405.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 408.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 410.

negotiations and the decisions made by the general council regarding monetary contributions and the honor of the attendance of the Nine indicate the importance of religious matters to the Sieneese government as well as their integration into the function of the administration.

The flexibility of recognition of local saints and the ability of Siena's religious groups to haggle with the state when new saints gained support gives insight into the religious landscape of Catherine's Siena. In a context where local saints were produced and supported by the city with some frequency and the presence of lay penitential women engaged in society was well established and accepted, it makes sense both that Catherine would be comfortable claiming a connection to the divine and that the city's government would accept that claim or at least find use for it. Later in her career, her connection with Siena's community of penitents became an important base of support for her while she was away from the city, and its many noble members gave her connections with powerful families.

Political Background

During Catherine's life Siena went through several major regime changes, between the Nine, the Twelve, and the Riformatori. The overthrow of the Nine by the merchant classes in 1355 left Siena in considerable political turmoil and destroyed hope among the city's various political interests of forming a stable ruling coalition. As a result, the city's leading political players abandoned attempts at maintaining stability in favor of plotting to gain the upper hand over rivals. Following the overthrow of the Twelve in 1368, there were several large revolts, the result of constantly shifting alliances and interests among the most powerful political parties. During Cathrine's most active years the political landscape of Siena was thus factious, unstable, and characterized by frequent rebellions and the constant fight between major political powers vying to promote their self-interests.⁴¹

The Nine, or Nove, who came to power in 1287, were the most consequential in terms of establishing a lasting governmental structure and function. The government of the Nine was headed by the podestà, who served as the city's chief magistrate. The podestà served for a six-month term and was typically a non-Sienese noble, to avoid any internal factions from gaining too much power. Under the podestà were the signori, composed of the members of the Nine (whose members were called the Noveschi), the four Provisores of the Biccherna (the leading financial magistracy), the four Consuls of

⁴¹ Mario Ascheri, "Siena in the Fourteenth Century: State, Territory and Culture," in *The Other Tuscany: Essays in the History of Lucca, Pisa and Siena during the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Thomas Blomquist and Maureen Mazzaoui (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), 160-82.

the Mercanzia or the merchant guild, and the three Consuls of the Knights, who led the Guelf Party.⁴²

Though the government of the Nine was nominally a podestarile regime, by the late thirteenth century most of the power had already been transferred to the signory, following a series of constitutional reforms aimed at undermining the podestà. The first was the constitution of 1262, which was followed by another in 1309. The effort to undermine the podestà gradually integrated many of his key functions into the duties and privileges of the signory. After the constitution of 1262, the podestà was selected by the city council, with an intent to find one compatible with the oligarchy's interests. The Nine also gave themselves the ability to convene councils, and the podestà no longer prepared proposals himself, though he did still present them. His courts were run by judges who were bound to observe communal law, and he was stripped of his ability to decide criminal penalties. His judges were likewise prevented from issuing any new punishments, leaving them only able to pass judgment based on previous cases.⁴³

The Nine guarded influence over Siena jealously both in the regulations imposed on the podestà and in where they selected him. Beyond the requirements that he be loyal to the Church and not a Ghibelline (or at least not a infamous one), the Nine also carefully rotated the home city of their selection to avoid any city gaining too much power over Siena and favored cities that were not equal to Siena in strength or stature. During the reign of the Nine roughly 140 podestàs were selected all together and no town

⁴² William Bowsky, *A Medieval Italian Commune, Siena Under the Nine, 1287-1355* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 33.

provided more than sixteen. Florence, Siena's long-time Tuscan rival, did not provide any.⁴⁴

The privilege of serving on the Nine itself was subject to similar anxieties over corruption, entanglement, and influence. This seems reasonable in light of the broad power exercised by the Nine over judicial, legislative, and executive actions, and the wide range of elements of Sienese society under their jurisdiction. Their duties included overseeing diplomatic relations with foreign states, receiving embassies, delegating disputes between Sienese citizens and towns, taxation, maintenance of defenses, nomination of counsellors, and serving as an appellate court for minor cases.⁴⁵ The Nine were also afforded special protections, such as immunity from prosecution for major crimes and protection from torture for a period of ten years after they had served.⁴⁶

The question of which groups were permitted membership in the Nine was repeatedly debated over the course of their rule, with a central focus on the role of magnate families. The Nine were centrally composed of merchants and "the middle people," and generally were reticent to allow magnate houses into the government for fear of them gaining control. The first list of excluded families was drawn up in 1277 with the intent of identifying Ghibellines, with two subsequent lists compiled in 1313 and 1337. All three included the Tolomei, Malavolti, Salimbeni, Saracini, Forteguerra, Piccolomini, Ugurgieri, Pagliaresi, and Bonsignori families.⁴⁷ Though some of the magnate houses occasionally pushed to have their exclusion lifted, more often they were

⁴⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 66. Catherine later had relationships with members of the Tolomei, Malavolti, Salimbeni, Saracini, Piccolomini, and Pagliaresi.

content to influence the government in other ways. Through their access to city councils and assemblies, judgeships, war captaincies, and ambassadorships they were still able to affect major governmental policy decisions. Too powerful to exclude entirely, the magnates were given enough power to keep them satisfied with the continued existence of the Nine.⁴⁸ Beyond this, the contentious nature of relationships between the magnate houses drove most to support their own constitutional exclusion in order to prevent rival families from accumulating power and influence.⁴⁹

The Nine lost power in 1355 during a revolt that erupted when Emperor Charles IV (1346-1378) visited the city in March, the culmination of a period of tension begun in the late 1340s. In 1348 the Nine had adopted a measure to align themselves with Florence and Perugia, the other powerful Tuscan Guelf cities, to ensure their safety from Charles. With the emergence of a threat from the Visconti of Milan, they reversed their position and encouraged the emperor to visit Italy with his troops, though with the request that he not undertake any “novelties” against the Tuscan Guelf powers.⁵⁰ On the agreement that Charles would swear to uphold the rule of the Nine, he entered the city on March 25, 1348, and dismounted in the Palazzo Salimbeni where the celebration quickly turned into a riot. Faced with the revolt, Charles changed his mind about the promises he had made and allowed the rebels to throw the box containing the names of those eligible to serve on the Nine out the window of the building where he was taking shelter. The leading foreign magistrates were expelled from the city and only at the emperor’s command did the rebels not kill the current nine governors.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 300.

⁵¹ Ibid., 302.

Despite the drama of their overthrow, little actually changed with the departure of the Nine. Those who had been forced out of the city were evidently back within a few weeks, as the records of the Biccherna from the time after the rebellion include permission for several former members of the magistracy to carry arms within the city for defensive purposes.⁵² Most of the structure and style of the Nine's administration continued without interruption, though the social groups that constituted the government changed. The rebellion was credited to the magnate families in combination with the *popolo minuto* (the people of the lower merchant classes not represented by the Nine), though they had different goals. For the *popolo minuto*, who were excluded from office, the issue was the Nine's favoritism towards their friends and unfair taxation and banking practices. For the magnates, the motivation was more opportunistic. Several years of complaints against the government combined with the social instability left by Siena's plague epidemic in the preceding decades caused a rebellion that gave the magnates a chance to increase their power, something they had been pushing for throughout the rule of the Nine. A city council measure from 1349 that limited the number of magnates that could serve on each of the merchant councils to just one suggests that in the few years before the rebellion, the magnates had already made serious enough attempts to grab power that their participation had to be restricted further.⁵³

The government put in place after the fall of Nine was the Twelve, or the Dodici, who held power from 1355-1368. The form and structure of the government largely remained the same, but it now included twelve governors and a different social composition. The *mercanzia*, which had made up most of membership in the Nine, was

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 305.

excluded and eligibility for service was given to a broader oligarchy that encompassed influential Sieneese guilds, notaries, wealthier shop owners and other socially prominent men.⁵⁴ The Twelve were focused on giving an equal role to each of the twelve groups of guilds, though in practice some were regularly favored over others. One of these groups were the wool masters, who shared their guild with smaller businessmen involved in the process of manufacturing wool. They almost always held a seat on the Twelve itself and the council who elected them, though the members of the guild were not the most powerful socially.⁵⁵ Though they had established themselves as a more inclusive government than the Nine, the governors of the Twelve were chosen from a similarly small pool.⁵⁶ The discontent of those still excluded from politics, in combination with the lingering bitterness of former members of the Nine and the ambition of the nobles, resulted in another revolt in September of 1368.⁵⁷

The reign of the Dodici was short-lived and tumultuous but had the important effect for Catherine of reorganizing social standing in a way that allowed for her father and brothers to hold office. Her father Iacopo and brother Bartolomeo both appear on the guild membership rolls of the *Capitoline della Arti* in the 1350s, meaning they had established high enough standing prior to the fall of the Nine that they were well placed to take advantage of the new regime. Bartolomeo was elected to the Signoria in February of 1368, shortly before the fall of the Dodici. Benincasa and Stefano, two more of her brothers, gained office in 1368 immediately after the fall. Even after the regime changed

⁵⁴ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 31.

⁵⁵ Valerie Wainwright, "The Testing of a Popular Sieneese Regime: The Riformatori and the Insurrections of 1371," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 2 (1987): 107-70.

⁵⁶ Ferdinand Schevill, *Siena* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 219.

⁵⁷ Wainwright, "Testing of a Popular Sieneese Regime," 119.

again in 1371, Bartolomeo was part of the coalition that was established between the Dodici and the party of reformers, and once again served on the Signoria.⁵⁸

The period of 1368-1371 was a particularly chaotic one, with several successive uprisings and short-lived ruling parties. The main groups involved in the upsets that occurred during these years were the most powerful political castes of Siena. The parties involved in the events of 1368-1371 were the magnate houses, the *Popolari* - who were composed of a shifting assortment of the middle and lower classes - the Nove, and the Dodici. Affiliation with a political caste mainly served the purpose of identifying a person's eligibility to hold office, but they also came to be associated with particular socioeconomic groups.⁵⁹ Tension over which groups were represented in and consequently favored by the regime was one of the central factors in the uprisings.

The first upset came in September of 1368, when the unhappy parties within the city succeeded in ousting the Dodici, with the assistance of the Salimbeni and Tolomei families, who had briefly called a truce in their ongoing feud. Unfortunately for the *popolo minuto*, the aristocrats promptly set up a government under the control of ten representatives from the magnate families and three Noveschi.⁶⁰ Having been briefly given access to the upper levels of power during the reign of the Twelve, the lower middle classes did not want to give it up. The Salimbeni at this point abandoned the nobility, sided with the people, and helped to drive the aristocrats out on September 23. The resulting ruling coalition, the Council of the Riformatori, was an assemblage of the parties of Noveschi, Dodicini and *Popolari*: the two former ruling parties and the *popolo*

⁵⁸ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 31.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁰ Wainwright, "Testing of a Popular Siennese Regime," 121.

minuto. For their efforts, the Salimbeni were given several special concessions and six castles.⁶¹

This governing body, despite its broad representation, faced its own insurrection in December of the same year from those members of the *popolo minuto* who were committed to total control and felt the current ruling party was too vulnerable to the influences of the experienced politicians from the Dodici and Nove. On December 11, a force of *popolo minuto* and Salimbeni, who were once again taking advantage of civic strife, drove the Nove out. During the riot, the Dodici were rounded up for good measure. With the Nove and Dodici both expelled, the government was briefly run by a council of eighteen. As the supporters of this party, four members of the Salimbeni family were given seats, along with several of their close allies from the Dodici. The balance of power shifted to favor the magnates and the Dodici, which by the summer led to yet another insurrection by the *popolo minuto*.⁶²

Following a series of food shortages, a period of high taxes and yet more discontent with who was being selected for office, in the summer of 1371 a radical wing of the *popolo* attempted to bring about another change in administration, with the support of the lower and middle classes currently in power, who wished to reassert their supremacy. The wool workers, who were angry at the government for not taking action to resolve disputes over their pay, made up the largest number of the protestors. They demanded the expulsion of the Signori Defensori, who were all members of the Dodici and Nove, and were immediately obeyed. The crowd proceeded to engage in street fights with members of the Salimbeni, Tolomei, Malavolti, and Montanini families. In response

⁶¹ Schevill, *Siena*, 220.

⁶² Wainwright, "Testing of a Popular Siennese Regime," 127.

to the violence, the Consiglio Generale of the Riformatori awarded themselves full authority for July and August. After two days of deliberation, a new Signori Defensori was appointed from the party of the rebels.⁶³

This solution was not enough to satisfy the Dodici, who had allied themselves with the Salimbeni and were in the process of forming their own revolution. With the current Captain of the People and the three standard-bearers of the civic militia in on the plot, the rebels invaded the city and occupied the Palazzo Pubblico. However, the Riformatori made a last-minute appeal to the magnate families who were traditional rivals of the Salimbeni, hoping that fear of a Salimbeni power grab would convince them to lend their help. The magnates, in particular the Malavolti and Tolomei, responded, and by the end of the day the rebellion was crushed.⁶⁴ It was this insurrection that finally resulted in the Salimbeni's political proscription and exile.⁶⁵

This revolt was likely the most intense lesson Catherine received on the contentious and frequently bloody nature of Siena's politics. Her brothers, who had been members of the Dodici, were targeted during the violence of the days following the coup attempt. Members of the Dodici and the Captain of the People who had participated in the rebellion were rounded up and executed, and the riots stretched into Catherine's neighborhood. The *Miracoli*, a contemporary account of Catherine's activities written by an unknown author, relates her involvement in this episode. A friend of the family came to their home and informed them that her brothers, at this point "enemies and opponents of the party," were being targeted by an approaching angry mob. Catherine, ignoring his

⁶³ Ibid., 158.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 159.

⁶⁵ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 46.

advice to run, put on her habit and instructed her brothers to follow her. Out of respect for her, the mob let them pass unharmed to the hospital, the Santa Maria della Scala, where she left her brothers in the care of its monks. When they emerged three days later the violence had ceased and they were only sentenced to pay a fine.⁶⁶

The Riformatori, having survived this upheaval, went on to rule until 1385, when the Nove reinstated themselves with the help of the Tolomei. The turmoil of the transition from Dodici to Riformatori and the subsequent factious disputes corresponds with the beginning of Catherine's public career and had direct effects on her family. The political situation established after the uprising of 1371 would come into play in her political activities a few years later, when she became involved with the Salimbeni. Beyond the direct effects the events of 1371 had on her later actions, the general discord they occasioned served as the backdrop of her interactions with Siena's political parties.

The proliferation of interests in Sieneese politics and the continual conflict between them, in addition to the tension between the magnate houses and the commune, created an environment where someone with Catherine's connections and authority as a holy woman would be useful. Her interactions with magnate families, which are the focus of the next chapter, are particularly indicative of the ways in which political motivations led powerful figures to identify Catherine as an advantageous contact. Without the remarkably unstable nature of Sieneese politics during her active years, it is unlikely she would have been so closely involved with the highest levels of political power in the region.

⁶⁶ Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, ed., with Daniel E. Bornstein and E. Ann Matter, *Dominican Penitent Women* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2005), 96.

Magnate Families

Catherine's ability to participate in the highest levels of Sieneese politics was due in large part to her relationships with members of Siena's magnate families, which often stemmed from her reputation as a holy woman and her place in Siena's Dominican tertiary order. Relationships with magnate families, who operated as their own communities within the commune, were central to cultivating the network of support Catherine relied upon to reach sources of influence she needed to push her agenda forward. Magnates, though officially excluded from government, dominated seats of power such as municipal assemblies, were adept at leveraging their connections for political action, and were altogether better equipped with authority and resources.⁶⁷ The concentration of members of the nobility within the whole of Catherine's associations demonstrates both the importance of their influence, and her awareness of who had the ability to pull the levers of power. Her relationships with the magnates provided connections and social standing that could give her access to groups and individuals with political power, and also occasionally led to tension and conflict due to the unstable nature of Sieneese politics, the rivalries between the magnates, and their strained relationship with the Riformatori government.

Magnates, the families who made up the political caste called the *casati*, comprised the most wealthy and influential political and social groups in Siena. The magnates can be identified most easily through the formal exclusions from government made by the Nine, the Twelve, and the Riformatori. As noted previously, those identified on all three lists of excluded families were the Tolomei, Malavolti, Salimbeni, Saracini,

⁶⁷ Dale Kent, "The Power of the Elites: Family, Patronage, and the State," in *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance*, ed. John Najemy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 165-183.

Forteguerra, Piccolomini, Ugurgieri, Pagliaresi, and Bonsignori. Of these, Catherine had interactions with members of the Tolomei, Salimbeni, Piccolomini, Saracini, Pagliaresi, and Malavolti.

The Malavolti family took its name from the highest point of the district that contained their stronghold, a hill called the *poggio Malavola*. Initially a rural noble family, the Malavolti split into two branches in the thirteenth century, one descending from Malavolta di Braccio and the other Orlando di Bartolomeo, with that of Orlando later becoming dominant. The Malavolti held property throughout the southern and eastern Sieneese countryside and were already identifiable as a powerful family by 1280, when eleven Malavolti men were present to swear to uphold the peace treaty between the Guelfs and Ghibellines. On the 1316-20 evaluation of property-holders in the commune, eighteen Malavolti were counted. By this time, the Malavolti had established a palace on the *poggio Malavolta*, the compound of which contained a hostel, almshouse, and stores (ninety percent owned by the family), and was occasionally used by the city for defense.⁶⁸

The most interesting venture of the Malavolti family was the prolonged occupation by its members of the office of bishop in Siena. Though the only clear and tangible ties of the Malavolti and the church are the construction of the church of Sant' Egidio and the contribution of funds to the Basilica San Domenico (the one near Catherine's home), members of the family served as bishop for nearly a century between 1282 and 1371, with only one break between 1307 and 1317.⁶⁹ In addition to the

⁶⁸ Edward English, "Five Magnate Families of Siena: 1240-1350" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1982), 6.

⁶⁹ Ibid; Daniel Waley, *Siena and the Sieneese in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991), 128.

bishopric, eight Malavolti were canons attached to the cathedral of Siena from the late thirteenth to mid-fourteenth century.⁷⁰

Catherine's first definite interaction with a member of the Malavolti family was a letter to Monna Agnesa Malavolti, who was also a Dominican penitent. Monna Agnesa was the widow of Orso Malavolti and a member of the *Mantellate* from 1352, where she first appears on its membership rolls, and remained with the order until at least 1378, the last time her name appears.⁷¹ The letter, written before or in May of 1374, imparts a general entreaty to Monna Agnesa and the rest of the Sienese *mantellata* to model their lives after Mary Magdalen and humble themselves before Christ, and includes a vote of support for a girl named Caterina to join the order.⁷² Catherine wrote two later letters to Monna Agnesa between October and November of 1377. The first was in response to the death of Agnesa's daughter, who from Catherine's description as being her "final outward tie," seems to have been her last surviving child.⁷³ The last of the three letters contains general spiritual advice on the use of self-knowledge as a means to know Christ.⁷⁴

In April of 1376, Catherine wrote to Don Giovanni dei Sabbatini and Don Taddeo dei Malavolti, two Carthusian monks at the monastery of Belriguardo, located a few miles northwest of Siena.⁷⁵ She had written to Don Giovanni before, in 1375, when she made several allusions to crusade in her encouragements to prepare for "the time when brave knights will prove themselves" and to "offer blood for blood."⁷⁶ From the

⁷⁰ Waley, *Siena and the Sienese*, 128.

⁷¹ Noffke, ed., *Letters*, vol. 1:2.

⁷² Letter T61. All citations of letters follow Noffke's format and numbering.

⁷³ Letter T36.

⁷⁴ Letter T53.

⁷⁵ Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:171.

⁷⁶ Letter T187.

consolations that she offers to Giovanni and Taddeo, and her demand that they “be obedient even to the point of death in whatever [they] may be commanded to do,” it is evident they had been given a command they were resisting. Her mention of going to their cells to embrace the cross suggests that they had been told that if a crusade were to be called, they would not be allowed to go.⁷⁷

Catherine’s most significant relationship with a member of the Malavolti family was with her disciple, Francesco di Messer Vanni Malavolti. Unfortunately, only one letter from Catherine to Francesco remains and most of the information on his activities comes from the *Processo Castellano*, the collected testimonies of Catherine’s followers given after her death. According to Francesco’s testimony, he came to Catherine sometime in 1374 at the request of his friend Neri Pagliaresi, who was already a follower of Catherine’s. Francesco was evidently one of her least consistent spiritual sons, and the letter from 1377 is in response to one of his lapses.⁷⁸ She exhorts him to come “back into the fold” with his companions and come back to Siena to visit her, his “poor mother,” whom he has left “in tears and sweat and bitter grief.”⁷⁹ Francesco would, in fact, accompany her on her visit to the Salimbeni in the Val d’Orcia later that year.

The Piccolomini emerge in the historical record in the twelfth century with Piccolomo di Montone and his four sons Bartolomei, Chiaramontese, Rustichino, and Ugo, who became the four main branches of the family.⁸⁰ The Piccolomini held a palace in the city from around 1251 and various rural properties scattered in over thirty locations

⁷⁷ Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:173.

⁷⁸ *Il Processo Castellano. Fontes vitae s. Catharinae Senensis historici*, ed. Marie-Hyacinthe Laurent, vol. 9 (Milan: Bocca, 1942), 376-412, quoted in Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:285.

⁷⁹ Letter T45.

⁸⁰ English, “Five Magnate Families,” 6.

throughout the countryside.⁸¹ Their wealth and property were neither primarily urban nor rural, and they were active in banking as well as trade on a local and regional level.⁸²

Compared to the Malavolti, the Piccolomini were not terribly involved with material support of religious institutions, besides establishing one hospital attached to the parish church of San Vigilio in 1215. However, the family produced two saints in the fourteenth century, one a co-founder of the order of Monte Oliveto and the other a Servite.⁸³

Catherine's only evident relationship with the Piccolomini is through Gabriele di Davino Piccolomini, who accompanied her to the Val d'Orcia in 1377 and to Rome in 1378. Francesco Malavolti's *Processo Castellano* testimony claims Gabriele had joined Catherine's circle early in her public career and eventually had a son who became a Dominican at her encouragement.⁸⁴

The only extant letter to Gabriele from Catherine is from November or December of 1377, while she was on her mission to the Salimbeni, possibly during the time he had left the Val d'Orcia and was serving as a messenger between Catherine's group at the Salimbeni fortress and the rest of her followers in Siena. The letter concerns his spiritual life and uses of the imagery of battle. She tells him that there "is no way to conquer these enemies except by being fearless and well-armed, by willingly joining battle, ready to die."⁸⁵ She paraphrases his worries as "the world and other people hound and hurt me and spread rumors about me," a subject that comes up frequently in her letters to her followers during this period, as she was under scrutiny by the Sienese government for her

⁸¹ Ibid., 7.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁴ *Il Processo Castellano*, 396, quoted in Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:687.

⁸⁵ Letter T128.

association with the Salimbeni. She seems to feel this tension has gotten to Gabriele, and she instructs him not to be like “so many fools who are ashamed . . . to admit they are Christ’s servants,” and to “be constant and persevering in battle even to the point of death.”⁸⁶

Information on the foundations and economic status of the Saracini is difficult to find, as little research on them specifically has been done, but at least a partial picture of their place within Siena’s elite can be gained from their activities. The greatest indication of their prominence is their inclusion on the lists of excluded families and from their ownership of several houses and shops within the city.⁸⁷ A member of the family was involved in writing the provisions for the borrowing of money by the government in 1347, and the Saracini were represented on a special council convened in 1333 to decide how to settle the matter of the Tolomei banking company failing to repay its creditors.⁸⁸

Catherine’s connection with the Saracini comes from her relationship with Monna Alessa dei Saracini, who was also a Dominican tertiary and one of Catherine’s closest followers. The first of the extant letters from Catherine to Alessa dates from 1377, but she is mentioned in several of Catherine’s earliest letters from 1372, and Catherine lived with her for a short time in 1373, after the Benincasa family business had collapsed and her brothers had moved to Florence.⁸⁹ Several of the letters to Alessa focus on her apparent inability to avoid gossip and excessive social interaction. In a letter of October or November 1377, Catherine advises her to moderate her love for other people, keep to her cell as much as possible, to “keep watch over the movements of your tongue, for

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Bowsky, *A Medieval Italian Commune*, 16.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 92; 256.

⁸⁹ Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 1:31.

sometimes it shouldn't echo the feelings of your heart," and to not "spend time in chatting until the proper hour."⁹⁰ In the next letter to Alessa following this, also written in late 1377, Catherine instructs her: "Let your mouth be silent." Given the timing of the admonishments, when Catherine was in tense conversation with the communal government over her stay with the Salimbeni family, Alessa's gossip was likely about her political activities.⁹¹

The two remaining letters to Alessa, both from 1378, were written while Catherine was in Florence and concern the matter of the papal interdict, which had been ignored up until the appointment of Salvestro de' Medici as a minister of justice in the Florentine signoria.⁹² Catherine tells Alessa that "the darkness of all the deadly sins that were being committed through the recitation of the Divine Office has lifted . . . and the interdict is being observed."⁹³ The final letter, written in May of 1378, expresses Catherine's hope that peace will be reached soon between the pope and Florence.⁹⁴

The first reliably documented members of the Tolomei family are Tolomeo della Platea and Jacobo della Platea, though after the family gained prominence they claimed descent from the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt.⁹⁵ The Tolomei were one of the largest families in Siena, with sixty-one present in 1280 to swear to the peace between Guelfs and Ghibellines, fifty-seven present at a family reunion in 1310, 120 jointly owning the family's palace in 1290, eighty evaluated for taxation purposes between 1316 and 1320, and seventy-two involved in a peace treaty with the Salimbeni in 1337.⁹⁶ The Tolomei

⁹⁰ Letter T49.

⁹¹ Letter T119.

⁹² Letter T277.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁹⁴ Letter T271.

⁹⁵ English, "Five Magnate Families," 10.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

were second in wealth only to the Salimbeni, with holdings concentrated in the northern part of Siena, where twenty-eight members who were evaluated for taxes were in residence. In the neighborhood of San Cristoforo around fifty percent of the residences were owned by the Tolomei family, and they held an estimated thirty-four percent of the area's wealth.⁹⁷ The Tolomei also owned numerous properties in the surrounding area, including at least seven castles, with the total number of holdings somewhere around 100.⁹⁸

The Tolomei had their religious center in the church of San Cristoforo, where they exercised considerable influence over the appointment of the priest. They also supported the Servites by donating a plot of land to the prior general in 1252 to build a church and a convent. A member of the family served as a papal tax collector in the thirteenth century, another as an official in the Franciscan order, and a Bernardo Tolomei assisted in founding the order of Monte Oliveto, along with Ambrogio Piccolomini.⁹⁹

Catherine's ties with the Tolomei were all made through the Dominican tertiary order or through Raymond of Capua. Her first letter to a member of the Tolomei dates from January 1377 and is addressed to Pietro di Missere Iacomo Attaghufi dei Tolomei. Near the end of the year in 1376, Queen Giovanna of Naples sent a troop of 400 soldiers to assist the papal forces in a battle with Viterbo and Florence, 200 of which were then taken prisoner by the Florentines.¹⁰⁰ Catherine wrote to Pietro to request a "merciful favor" for the release of Luigi della Vigna da Capua, Raymond of Capua's brother. She had heard that he was "arrested by the prefect's people, and that they have fined him four

⁹⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁰ Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:292.

thousand florins,” which he was unable to pay “because he is poor.”¹⁰¹ There is no indication in the text of how Catherine identified Pietro as a person who could convince the prefect to release Luigi, but given all the details she knew of his predicament, at least some of her information probably came from Raymond. She could also have been advised to write to Pietro by one of the three Tolomei who were her disciples.¹⁰²

Her appeal to the prefect focused on the spiritual benefits he would receive from doing the moral thing, specifically, “everlasting life for him, where he will have life without death and light without darkness, satiety without boredom and hunger without pain.”¹⁰³ Her offer of “continual prayers, tears, and longing for your salvation” seems small in comparison with 4,000 florins, but since Florence was under papal interdict at the time, she may have thought the increased chance at salvation would be appealing. There is no subsequent mention of Luigi’s fate.

The three members of the Tolomei family who were in Catherine’s spiritual family were the children of Monna Rabe degli Agazzari and Francesco de’ Tolomei. Their two daughters, Francesca and Ghibnocchia, were also penitents, and their son Matteo was a Dominican friar. Testimony in the *Processo Castellano* reports that Matteo was converted by Catherine before her public career, and he accompanied her on many of her trips, including to the Salimbeni in 1377.¹⁰⁴ There are only two extant letters to Matteo, as he was seldom away from her, and one to Francesca, offering her comfort during an illness.¹⁰⁵ Catherine’s final letter to Matteo was written in 1378 and is identical

¹⁰¹ Letter T254.

¹⁰² Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:437.

¹⁰³ Letter T254.

¹⁰⁴ *Il Processo Castellano*, 96, quoted in Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:666.

¹⁰⁵ Letter T81.

to another addressed to a Carthusian monk, and contains generic Catherinian spiritual advice on willingness to serve God.¹⁰⁶

The most interesting of Catherine's communications with the Tolomei family were written during her stay with the Salimbeni, and concern the anxiety expressed by various parties in Siena over her activities there. It is difficult to discuss her relationship with the Tolomei without first examining the Salimbeni, as much of it is informed by the relationship between those two rival families.

The Salimbeni family grew from two primary lines of descent from Salimbene di Giovanni, whose actual origin is unknown but who was later claimed to have been present at the siege of Antioch in 1097. The family grew more slowly than the other magnate families, though by the fourteenth century it was by far the wealthiest in Siena. Only six members of the family were present in 1280 to swear to uphold the peace and twelve evaluated for taxes in 1316-1320. However, there were enough of them by the mid-fourteenth century for forty-six to serve in a military force in 1323 and for thirty-two to be present to swear to a truce with the Tolomei in 1337.¹⁰⁷ Their urban base of resources was the San Donato district, where they held around seventy-eight percent of the wealth. Their residences were placed along the main route north out of the city, a complex that was divided into thirty-six parts and referred to by government documents as held by "the sons of Salimbene."¹⁰⁸

By 1338 the Salimbeni drew 100,000 florins worth of rent from sixteen households and had enough money in 1338 to pay for their own army, including

¹⁰⁶ Letter T169b.

¹⁰⁷ English, "Five Magnate Families," 8.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

cavalry.¹⁰⁹ They also owned numerous properties in the countryside, including nine castles in the Val d’Orcia, the most important of which was the stronghold known as the Rocca d’Orcia. From the Val d’Orcia they controlled the road connecting Rome to Siena from the north. The Salimbeni strategically sold property rights to the city and took towns and rural jurisdictions as collateral for loans, which they would cede back to the communal government when payment was returned.¹¹⁰

The Salimbeni had little interest in participating in religion, and besides an appointment of a family member as an inquisition official in 1312, they lent very little material or monetary support to the church and did not hold any significant ecclesiastical offices, though they did support a charity named after them.¹¹¹ This disinclination towards religious activities is evident in Catherine’s own network of spiritual adherents. In a group where the Saracini, Malavolti, Tolomei, Pagliaresi, and Piccolomini are represented, the lack of Salimbeni is conspicuous, and a desire to gain their support may have been a motivating factor for her work with them.

The extent of Catherine’s interactions with the Salimbeni is limited to her mission to their lands in the Val d’Orcia from July to December of 1377. Catherine pursued several different goals during this period besides her work with the Salimbeni family, including the opening of a monastery, the resolution of a dispute between an abbot and an archpriest, and the reconciliation of the sons of an unidentified noble. Her extended stay with the Salimbeni, the original cause of which was to heal a rift between two cousins,

¹⁰⁹ “Vendetta in Fourteenth-Century Siena,” trans. Trevor Dean, in *Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation*, 133.

¹¹⁰ English, “Five Magnate Families, 10.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

prompted a series of tense letters between her and the Sienese government, and exhibits some of the political implications of her associations with the magnate families.

Catherine's contact with the Salimbeni through letters begins in April of 1377, after she had been given permission by Pope Gregory XI to form a monastery for women, the Santa Maria degli Angeli at Belcaro. Her friend, Giovanni di Gano da Orvieto, the abbot of Sant'Antimo, had been assisting her in finding suitable leaders for the monastery, founded at the former military outpost of Belcaro, after it was gifted to Catherine by her follower Nanni di Vanni Savini.¹¹² As it had formerly been used for the military, special dispensation had to be granted by the *consiglio generale* before it could be put to non-military use, and the permission did not come until January of 1377.¹¹³ Belcaro is located about thirty-five miles north of the Rocca d'Orcia, the Salimbeni fortress, and if Catherine was looking for women to fill her monastery, her April 1377 letter to Countess Benedetta Salimbeni may have been her first contact with the family.

Catherine wrote three letters in the spring of 1377 regarding Salimbeni participation in her new monastery, the first to Benedetta, the second to her brother, Agnolino di Giovanni dei Salimbeni, and the third to their sister Isa. Giovanni d'Agnolino Salimbeni, their father, had died in 1368 and left Agnolino as the head of the family, making him the person in charge of Benedetta and Isa's futures. Catherine's initial appeal to Benedetta that service to Christ is the best path, because "other husbands die and pass away like the wind – and often they are the cause of death to us," apparently did not work with Agnolino.¹¹⁴ Benedetta's own response may have been more positive,

¹¹² Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 1:271.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹¹⁴ Letter T112.

but from Catherine's letter to Agnolino, there was family resistance to the idea. In her letter to Agnolino, Catherine urges him to allow Benedetta to enter the monastery, despite the members of their family who would "present as disgrace and debasement what is the greatest honor you could possibly have." Benedetta had lost her first husband and her fiancé, and to Catherine, they would both be "really simple-minded" not to recognize that "the world is rejecting her and pushing her towards Christ crucified."¹¹⁵

The letter to Isa Salimbeni, in late June or early July of 1377, takes a different approach and urges Isa to be a "steadfast and faithful spouse." Isa, also a widow, seems to have already expressed some interest in taking the habit, either as a tertiary or a nun, as Catherine refers back to "what the Holy Spirit has asked through your own mouth" and says it would be wrong for her to "turn back on what you have begun." She ends with a request that the countess be present at the Rocca before she arrives there, indicating that since the first letter to Benedetta in April a plan had been made for Catherine to come to the Rocca, where she would do "whatever the Holy Spirit will have us do."¹¹⁶

Catherine's motivations for her involvement with the Salimbeni become much less clear after her first letters to Benedetta and Isa. Her stated main goal was the reconciliation of the feuding cousins, Agnolino and Cione di Sandro Salimbeni, but the involvement of the Sieneese government complicated the situation. The cousins had both laid claim to a castle in the Val d'Orcia and Agnolino's mother, Biancina, along with Cione's wife, Stricca, may have been the ones to formally invite Catherine to help.¹¹⁷ She stopped first at Montepulciano, where she dealt with the business of healing a rift

¹¹⁵ Letter T114.

¹¹⁶ Letter T115.

¹¹⁷ Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:361.

between a Messer Spinello's nephews. From there, she spent some time with Cione and Stricca in Castiglioncello di Trinoro, and then south to the Rocca d'Orcia to stay with Agnolino, Benedetta, Isa, and their mother Biancina.¹¹⁸

Almost immediately upon her arrival at the Rocca in July, she received a letter from the Lords and Defenders of the Commune of Siena, the central council of the Riformatori government. Catherine's mission to stop a feud between two cousins was complicated significantly by the fact that those cousins were Salimbeni and had been politically proscribed and exiled from the city in 1374, following their involvement in several plots in the 1360s and early 1370s, outlined in the previous chapter. In 1369, the Riformatori had allowed back to the city other exiled magnate families, including the Tolomei, Saracini, Malavolti, and Piccolomini.¹¹⁹ A relationship between the Salimbeni and a person with demonstrable connections to other powerful families and her own previous family involvement in government by itself would have been questionable. With the addition of her accompanying coterie of members of magnate families, including a Malavolti, a Tolomei, a Saracini, a Pagliaresi, and a Piccolomini (and probably a Maconi), the Siennese government was understandably alarmed by a convergence of the city's most powerful and often rebellious families.

The Riformatori's anxiety is reflected in Catherine's reply to their letter, written in July 1377. She opines about their "selfish love and slavish fear," and their hatred for "God's poor servants who are seeking God's honor and the salvation of souls as well as peace and tranquility for the cities." She was particularly offended by their criticism of

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 362.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 361.

“the actions, the ways and the associations of God’s servants (oime!).”¹²⁰ The letter they sent to her requested that she serve as a mediator for the reconciliation between the city and the Salimbeni, which she agreed to do, with the stipulation that she would only be able to obey them “in so far as the Holy Spirit allows.”¹²¹ The Holy Spirit reached its limits quickly — in the next paragraph she refused to return to Siena immediately as they wanted her to, due to her outstanding obligations to Messer Spinello and some business with the monastery of Sant’ Agnesa.¹²² The issue of Messer Spinello and his nephews at Montepulciano was a matter that Catherine says the government had begun to work on before, but was never brought to a conclusion, and she saw it as her responsibility to finish the job on their behalf. She closed with an apology for all the time her fellow citizens were “spending in worrying and wagging their tongues.”¹²³

The tension between Catherine and the governors increased in August and Catherine sent a lengthy letter, presumably in response to one she had received from them, accusing them of being blind and unfit for their offices, as “it is impossible to be a true lord unless one is in control of oneself.” She saw them as out of control because they had continued to listen to rumors about her, rather than doing what she wanted them to: “cut off the tongue of the rumor-monger.”¹²⁴ She argued that she was working for their interests, but following her refusal to return to Siena, it would not have seemed so to them.

¹²⁰ Letter T123.

¹²¹ Ibid., 376.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 377.

¹²⁴ Letter T141.

It is possible that the increased suspicion of the Riformatori was not due entirely to Catherine's new relationship with the Salimbeni but was also a result of the departure from the Consiglio Generale of Catherine's close friend and supporter, Pietro del Monte Santa Maria. Pietro served from February 18 to August 18, 1377, when Catherine would have received the reply to her refusal to leave the Rocca. Catherine was also connected to Pietro through Neri di Pagliaresi, one of her closest spiritual sons, who worked with the senator as a representative of the district of San Martino.¹²⁵ The senator who replaced Pietro was described by her supporter, Neri di Donato, as "a military type and not very honorable."¹²⁶ Catherine, whose actions depended so much on the people she knew, had her political fortunes altered by the loss of a supporter in a high government position.

This tongue wagging had also reached her followers in Siena, prompting her to write to Sano di Maco and all her other spiritual children in August. Some of them must have indicated doubt about the purity of her motivations, and she compares their lack of faith in her to the false followers of Christ, whose commitment "failed when he was no longer present."¹²⁷ She instructs them to be "firm, stable and constant" because "good children do more when their mother is away than when she is there."¹²⁸

Another letter from August to Salvi di Messer Pietro, a member of the Santa Maria della Scala's confraternity, the Company of the Virgin Mary, addresses similar worries. Other of her children had "taken scandal [sic] because of the tricks of the devils who were lurking within them," and communicated their fears to Salvi, who had written to Catherine about it. She declares it to be "God's will" that she remain where she is, and

¹²⁵ Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 1:150.

¹²⁶ Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:413.

¹²⁷ Letter T294.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 382.

that “the citizens of Siena are acting shamefully in believing or imagining that we are about to be contriving plots in the lands of the Salimbeni or anywhere else.” The only plot she was participating in was “to defeat the devil.”¹²⁹

The Sienese government was not the only party unhappy with Catherine’s activities during this period. She also received complaints from members of the Tolomei family, who were at near constant odds with the Salimbeni. Though in 1377 they were in a tenuous peace (which ended in 1378 when the Tolomei of Montepulciano attacked the Salimbeni lands in the Val d’Orcia), the feud between the Tolomei and Salimbeni was extended and violent. Their conflict had such an effect on the commune as a whole that in 1337 the bishop of Florence was brought in to mediate. That same year, even after the peace, the Salimbeni could not stand to march beneath the communal banner in a battle with the city of Lucca because it was being held by a Tolomei, and in response they raised and paid for their own army and marched by themselves.¹³⁰

Catherine’s conflict with Monna Rabe, the mother of her three Tolomei disciples, was a gentle expression of this enmity and a demonstration of the complexity of a network formed from factious political families. Monna Rabe requested that her son Matteo return home immediately, claiming that his sister Francesca was sick. Catherine did not buy this excuse and chastises her for carrying on “like a person whose ears were buzzing with gossip,” and for an excess of “sensual love” that caused her to love her children “out of all proportion.”¹³¹ In Catherine’s view, Monna Rabe’s request was caused by the rumors about her activities. For Monna Rabe, as a Tolomei, it is not

¹²⁹ Letter T122.

¹³⁰ “Vendetta in Fourteenth-Century Siena,” trans. Dean, 133.

¹³¹ Letter T20.

surprising that she would attempt to call her son home if she suspected he was involved with political mischief or at risk from the Salimbeni.

The entire Salimbeni episode, fraught as it was for many involved, ended unspectacularly. Catherine was instructed by the pope in late 1377 to travel to Florence to act as his mediator with the city, which had been ignoring the papal interdict and was rapidly becoming openly rebellious. The Salimbeni mission was the result of a connection made between Catherine and Benedetta, an introduction to a familial network that entangled the members of magnate families already in her company. This connection came from her establishment of the monastery, an exercise of her spiritual authority, and led to her involvement in a conflict between the Sieneese government and a powerful political family. She was drawn into one of the largest issues then facing Siena, the threat of Salimbeni violence in the countryside, which in turn created political tension among her followers due to their own familial allegiances.

Catherine's relationships with members of Siena's most wealthy and influential families, most originating from a religious connection, gave her the ability to access and participate in Sieneese and occasionally Tuscan politics at the highest levels. The activities of her spiritual family, most of them young nobles, further exhibit the importance of the social position of her followers and associates.

Spiritual Family

During the 1370s, Catherine formed around herself a spiritual family that included members of both the socially prominent, wealthy merchant classes, and members of noble families. The young men who formed the core of her family were instrumental in expanding the reach of Catherine's message across both physical space and social barriers that she would otherwise have been unable to cross. They provided the mobility required to maintain a network that extended throughout Italy, were able to access the central civic institutions of Siena, and through their own positions offered connections to those able to help Catherine achieve her goals.

Her followers were drawn to her in response to the pressures put on Siena by the anti-papal rebellions of Florence and the internal divisions within Siena that created such an unstable political landscape. Siena joined the Anti-Papal League in November of 1375, an act contrary to the political allegiances of many of the magnate families, who tended to support the Guelf party. The Malavolti, whose power came mainly from ecclesiastical offices, probably had particular concerns about the growing anti-ecclesiastical sentiment in Florence, and the popular notion among the laity of that city that all clerics ordained after Pope John XXII (1316-1334) were illegitimate. Catherine was aligned with the Dodici by birth and from early on was sanctioned by and loyal to the pope, and would have seemed like a useful ally for those in Siena concerned with growing anti-papal sentiment.

The political environment of Siena was particularly unstable during Catherine's most active period in Tuscan politics, and the members of her family were influenced both by previous conflicts between the Guelf and Ghibelline parties and Siena's political

strife of the late 1360s and early 1370s. The noble families, who had remained allies of the Guelf cause since they regained power in 1271, were concerned by the growing force of Ghibellinism in Florence that began to spread to the leaders of the Riformatori government in the mid-1370s. It is possible that the noble and upper class members of Catherine's spiritual family were also influenced by animus towards the Riformatori government, either because of their displeasure at the rule of the lower classes or out of loyalty to the papacy.¹³²

The nobles and wealthy merchants of Siena were the two groups most affected by both the conflicts between other Italian cities and the papacy, and by local political instability. The regime of the Riformatori had put the main decision-making authority in the hands of the lower classes and barred the magnates, the Dodici, and the Nove from holding office in the central council. Catherine's most consequential and close relationships were with young men who represented these peripheral groups: Sano di Maco, Nanni di ser Vanni Savini, Cristofano di Gano Guidini, Stefano Maconi, Neri Pagliaresi, Gabriele Piccolomini, and Francesco Malavolti. Sano, Nanni, and Cristofano were all from non-noble but wealthy and prominent families. Stefano, Neri, Gabriele, and Francesco represented four of the most powerful magnate houses, and formed the true core of the family.

Sano di Maco was a wealthy wool merchant, a group that was generally associated with the Dodici, and his introduction to Catherine was likely made through business dealings with her family.¹³³ Sano occupied a tenuous political position following the removal of the Dodici in the uprising of 1371, the same one that caused Catherine's

¹³² Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 154.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 128.

brothers to be targeted by a mob. Before this, Sano had held office as a representative of the Dodici in September of 1368 but did not appear in government again until after the fall of the Riformatori in 1385.¹³⁴

Nanni di ser Vanni Savini was a wealthy banker and also a member of the Dodici, and, like Sano, was politically proscribed but socially influential. There are no letters to Nanni directly, but his connection with Catherine is evident through mentions of him in letters to her other followers. During the rule of the Nine, Nanni was one of the few Dodici who managed to gain a foothold in government and by the time of the revolts that brought the Twelve into power had established himself as one of the wealthiest citizens of Siena. Before 1371, he was chosen as an ambassador to Florence and was elected a grain official in 1370. This role made him a major target for the rebels of 1371, who accused the Dodici and Nove of hoarding grain. During the period of retaliation that followed the revolt, he was one of the two men most heavily penalized by the new ruling coalition. In the years after the removal of the Dodici from power, Nanni participated in several Salimbeni-sponsored plots against the Riformati government and was identified as a participant in the 1374 conspiracy that ended with the Salimbeni family's expulsion from the city.¹³⁵

Cristofano di Gano Guidini's association with Catherine began in or before 1375, and his public career as a notary began around 1362. Although Cristofano's father was not from a noble family, his mother came from a branch of the Piccolomini and after her husband's death from plague in 1348 she returned to her natal family and raised Cristofano among the Piccolomini. Their wealth and connections set him up for a

¹³⁴ Ibid., 129.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 134.

political career and by 1375 he was regularly working as a notary; by 1377 he had been elected to the Consiglio Generale.¹³⁶

Stefano Maconi became a member of Catherine's spiritual family in 1376 and remained with her for nearly three full years following, with only three short breaks between 1376 and 1380, when Catherine died. Because he was with her so regularly, there are only twelve extant letters from Catherine to Stefano, and all concern her displeasure with his absence, due to his excessive attachment to his mother.¹³⁷ Stefano's family was considered lesser nobility, but powerful enough to be included on the 1277 list of families excluded from government by the Nine.¹³⁸ Stefano initially sought Catherine out on the advice of his mother, for the spiritual help she could give him in settling a feud between two families, the Tolomei and Rinaldini, that was negatively impacting the Maconi. Her success in reconciling the two convinced Stefano of her sanctity and he joined her company soon after.¹³⁹

Neri Pagliaresi was arguably Catherine's closest spiritual son and went the furthest in his renunciation of public life in order to spend time with her. The Pagliaresi were one of the largest magnate families and included on all lists of excluded nobles. Before his introduction to Catherine, Neri served on the Consiglio Generale in 1370, 1372, and 1373, was nominated for the position of podestà of Montalcino in January 1370, and was elected to the Ordines, a central advisory council, in 1372 and 1375.¹⁴⁰ As a frequent participant in communal politics and a member of a noble family, Neri was a

¹³⁶ Ibid., 138.

¹³⁷ In Letter T41, dated from 1376, Catherine wrote to chastise Stefano's mother, Monna Giovanna Maconi, for hindering Stefano's spiritual journey by keeping him at home. Letters T205, T195, T332, T222, T239, and T320 all encourage Stefano to cut his earthly ties and move out of his parents' home.

¹³⁸ Waley, *Siena and the Sieneese*, 77.

¹³⁹ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 148.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 145.

valuable asset to Catherine's company and played a key role both in extending her network and advancing her agenda during the 1370s.

Francesco Malavolti joined Catherine's spiritual family in 1375, and was also a prominent figure in government, and was the son of the one of the main figures in the revolt headed by the magnate families in 1368. He was elected to the Ordines in September 1377, and to the Consiglio Generale in July and December of 1374, June 1375, December 1376, and December 1377.¹⁴¹

The form that Catherine's spiritual family took as it grew was decided less by Catherine herself and more by the series of introductions and recruitments of friends that her followers made on their own. Those her followers identified as most in need of her spiritual guidance often coincidentally held sympathetic political leanings and possessed power or access that made them valuable. Nanni di ser Vanni Savini, for example, was referred to Catherine by her friend, the Augustinian hermit William Flete, with whom she had become friends soon after she emerged from her period of solitude. Flete was a supporter of the papacy connected to the Salimbeni and occasionally opposed to the Riformatori.¹⁴² Catherine's main concern in the 1370s was the Sienese government's fluctuation between support of the papacy and rebellion, and Nanni was too well known a figure for Flete to not be aware of his political activities when Flete introduced him to Catherine.

Neri Pagliaresi served as the point of connection between Catherine, Cristofano Guidini, and Francesco Malavolti. Neri became Catherine's disciple as early as 1371, at the beginning of her public career, and the connections he made for her are demonstrable

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁴² Ibid., 135.

of the importance of well-placed followers. Beyond what Neri himself brought to her spiritual family through his access to government and his nobility, his role as an advocate for her among other young men of high status led to the recruitment of two members who later would be consequential in enabling the wide reach of her activities. Neri introduced Cristofano to Catherine in March or April of 1374, when he was serving as the notary for the Captain of the People, who led the civic militia and made decisions in criminal cases.¹⁴³ The Captain of the People was one of the most powerful offices in the Sienese government, and Cristofano's position gave him frequent, personal contact. Cristofano is also distinguished from his spiritual brothers in that he was a member of the current ruling party, while the rest of them were affiliated with parties that had been defeated and mostly existed on the periphery of the government, which Neri would have known through his own political experience.¹⁴⁴

Cristofano's position was more useful than those of his spiritual brothers, who were relegated to the less influential general council because of either family or party affiliations. His own rise to an important position was partly due to the political instability that preceded his career and the dearth of notaries left by the expulsion of the Dodici in 1371. As opposed to the general councils, which were not considered especially prestigious or able to influence major decisions, Cristofano's position as a notary gave him access to important information regarding the center of government, and his loyalty to the papacy gave him motivation to support Catherine and her followers in their opposition to an alliance with anti-papal Florence.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Wainwright, "Testing of a Popular Regime," 130.

¹⁴⁴ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 139.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Francesco Malavolti was introduced to Catherine by Neri early in 1374, the same year he was first elected to the Consiglio Generale. In Francesco's *Processo Castellano* testimony he described himself as "bold and hot-headed, lascivious and unrestrained," much like his friend Neri.¹⁴⁶ Given the similarities between their temperaments, it is possible Neri introduced Francesco to Catherine purely for the spiritual benefits he would receive from her influence, but regardless of the motivation, Neri's recruitment of Francesco gained another follower with influence and power and an interest in Siena's relationship with the papacy.

The addition of these young, wealthy, and politically active men broadened the range of Catherine's activities through their greater ability to travel and serve as messengers or representatives. As the scope of her mission widened during the anti-papal rebellions of the 1370s, the need for an extended system that could pass messages and coordinate activity increased. Catherine had numerous followers among the Dominican tertiary movement, but many of them were women and limited in their mobility and access to the people she would need to reach in order to accomplish her goals. In many of her letters there are mentions of the duties performed by members of her family that suggest a system of scribes, couriers, and representatives that enabled her to reach across physical distances as well as social barriers.

Catherine's inability to write required that she have a scribe with her at all times, and this person can often be easily identified through self-deprecatory greetings inserted at the close of the letter, such as "fat Alessa," "negligent Stefano," "I, two-bit Neri," and "bad, lazy Francesco."¹⁴⁷ The scribe was usually whoever was at hand and not needed

¹⁴⁶ *Processo Castellano*, 376-412, quoted in Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:285.

¹⁴⁷ Letters T204, T212, T298, and T228.

elsewhere; frequently it was the aforementioned Neri, Alessa dei Saracini or Stefano Maconi, who were with her most consistently. The role of courier was also dependent on availability and was more difficult to organize due to the frequency with which her spiritual sons held office — periods of time in which prolonged absences from the city would be difficult. Neri, who ceased his work in the government after 1375, was often chosen. In 1376, after Catherine sent Raymond to Avignon to consult with the pope about the growing rebellion in Florence, Catherine sent Neri to serve as a messenger between Siena and Avignon, in case the pope needed to get in touch. Francesco Malavolti served as courier a few times, once to retrieve the manuscript of her book and her portable altar from where she had left them with a tailor in Florence.¹⁴⁸ While she was in the Val d’Orcia with the Salimbeni, Gabriele Piccolomini carried messages between Neri and Simone da Cortona, one of her followers who had remained in Siena with Sano di Maco and the rest who were unable to accompany her.¹⁴⁹

Occasionally the role of messenger did not involve just the delivery of a letter but the communication of unwritten information. In her second and most tense letter to the members of the Riformatori during her stay with the Salimbeni, Catherine sent a letter with the addendum, “Pietro will tell you in person my chief reason for coming here and for staying.”¹⁵⁰ In her letter to Raymond from July 1378 recounting the events of the wool workers’ riot in Florence, where she was almost killed, she wrote, “as Cristofano will tell you in person,” rather than furnishing further detail.¹⁵¹ Whether Catherine did not trust the information to be written down or if she considered verbal communication

¹⁴⁸ Letter T45.

¹⁴⁹ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 141.

¹⁵⁰ Letter T121. Pietro is her disciple Pietro di Giovanni Ventura.

¹⁵¹ Letter T295.

generally more effective is unclear, but either way having a trusted follower able to travel to the recipient and convey her messages along with the letters was useful. In the case of the Salimbeni letter, written during a time when she was under intense scrutiny from several parties, the information was likely too sensitive to write down.

The number of young men Catherine had in her following who were willing and able to travel and act on her behalf was thus beneficial in increasing the physical reach of her message, but it required vigilant management on her part to keep such an extended group committed. Catherine took on the role of their spiritual *mamma* and administered guidance, criticism, and instruction from a distance. Her family members did not always enjoy the tasks they had been given, as Neri demonstrated during his time in Florence in 1378. While there, Catherine sent him four brief letters in quick succession, all concerning his selfishness and lack of conviction. Neri was apparently anxious at his distance from her, and she had to reassure him that she was always near him “in holy desire and holy prayer.”¹⁵² Her followers who were left behind in Siena during her stay with the Salimbeni required similar attention, and she made use of Sano di Maco’s presence in the city to maintain stability among them while she was away. Letter T62, written in December 1377, is representative of her style of long-distance spiritual parenting:

No, you are grumbling much of the time, passing judgment on one another under the pretext of compassion and goodness. This sort of thing cannot but be offensive to God. It displeases him, and it very emphatically displeases me! This is not how

¹⁵² Letter T212.

you were taught. No, you were taught to love one another, to bear with and share the burden of each others' [sic] shortcomings at all [sic].

Her messengers could also access spaces Catherine herself could not, or where their voices might be more effective than hers in convincing the recipient. As she did by asking Sano to convey her message to her other children in Siena, Catherine was sometimes able to send a person whose specific presence would add weight to her words. In some cases, such as when she sent Raymond and Nanni Savini to the war camp of John Hawkwood to negotiate with him in June 1375, it might have been because Catherine herself would not have been welcome in that space.¹⁵³ In another instance from 1373, she chose Ser Francesco Landi, a member of the Consiglio Generale, to deliver a letter to the senator, Pietro del Monte. Having a current member of the government carry the message would make it easier to ensure that it reached its destination. This strategy also had the potential to increase the chances that the message would be listened to if it was delivered by someone who possessed a seat in government and the social standing that went with it. She also used this strategy through Stefano Maconi, whose participation is indicative of her spiritual family's other most important function, their connections to government.

Several of Catherine's spiritual sons held office between the years of 1370 and 1380, a time frame that corresponds with the height of Catherine's activity in Sienese politics. The overlap between secular and papal politics, especially evident in the debates over Siena's membership in the anti-papal league, necessitated that Catherine have a bridge between the two. Through her reputation as a holy woman and support from

¹⁵³ Letter T140.

within the papacy and Dominican order, Catherine had established a base of spiritual authority, but the allegiance of socially and politically prominent young men added an element of secular authority both within Siena and in the wider Tuscan political sphere.

Stefano, like most of Catherine's young male followers, did not renounce his worldly ties after his religious transformation, but integrated his work with Catherine into his career. He was elected to the general council of the Riformatori in December 1373, July 1374, December 1374, June 1375, December 1376, December 1377, December 1378, June 1379, and May 1380, periods of time which account for most of his absences from Catherine.¹⁵⁴ Despite Catherine's objections to his refusal to cut his ties and commit fully to a religious life, she did not hesitate to use him for his connections. In December of 1379, Catherine wrote to Stefano to request that he pass on two letters, one to the Signori and the other to the Company of the Virgin Mary, the confraternity associated with the hospital, the Santa Maria della Scala.¹⁵⁵ The letter to the Signori concerned the Sienese government's continued support of Pope Urban VI over the antipope Clement VII, which Catherine was worried they would withdraw. Siena had sided with Florence during the antipapal rebellions in 1375, and she criticized them for both of these lapses in judgment.¹⁵⁶ In her letter to Stefano, she asked that he read the letter aloud to the Signori, and that he ask each one individually in Christ's name and her name to act in support of the pope. She also requested that he prod the other members of the confraternity into action, and that if successful he would "light a fire not only there but in all of Italy."¹⁵⁷ Catherine evidently thought highly of Stefano's abilities to persuade the Signori and

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 149.

¹⁵⁵ Letter T368. The enclosed letters are T367 and T313.

¹⁵⁶ Letter T367.

¹⁵⁷ Letter T368.

attempted to take advantage of his experience within government to increase the impact of her message.

Nanni Savini was another follower who provided connections, particularly outside of Siena. Nanni's political use to Catherine came primarily from his opposition to the government of Florence, but he was also a notorious agitator in Siena, and had been a participant in the Dodici-and-Salimbeni-led rebellion against the Riformatori in 1370. In 1375, when the first mentions of him are made in Catherine's letters, he had already been connected with Florence through his service as an ambassador to the city in 1371.¹⁵⁸

During the negotiations of a settlement between the Salimbeni and the Riformatori in 1374 and 1375, which took place in Florence, Nanni was a representative of the Dodici and Salimbeni party. While in Florence, Nanni would have met with Buonaccorso di Lapo, who held office as a senator in Florence from March to April of 1376 and served as the ambassador to Siena in March of 1375, two months before the settlement.¹⁵⁹

Buonaccorso was affiliated with the pro-papal faction, and may have been the one to offer Catherine support for her negotiation with Gregory XI on behalf of Florence.¹⁶⁰

Nanni was also present when Catherine sent Raymond to meet with John Hawkwood in June 1375, carrying a letter from her that suggested he join the crusade instead of protecting Florence. Since 1372, when Hawkwood left the employ of Bernabo Visconti of Milan, Guelf and Ghibelline leaders had been engaged in a bidding war for his services. Gregory XI hired Hawkwood in May 1375 to end Florence's rebellion, but Florence retaliated by paying him 130,000 florins in exchange for a five-year promise of

¹⁵⁸ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 133.

¹⁵⁹ Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:239.

¹⁶⁰ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 135.

safety.¹⁶¹ Nanni's connections with Florence's Guelf leaders, including Buonaccorso di Lapo, made Hawkwood's allegiance of interest to him, as the loss of Hawkwood's support would weaken the Florentine Ghibellines.

Nanni's rebellious tendencies made him questionable as an associate and added to the appearance of sedition that her spiritual family began to take on in the 1370s, but his contacts with papal supporters, especially within the government of Florence, were an asset to Catherine. Nanni was a link between Catherine's religious ally William Flete, the Dodici party, the Salimbeni family, and pro-papal forces within Florence, making him a useful nexus in Tuscan politics, and one experienced in the organization of political opposition.

Neri Pagliaresi and Francesco Malavolti were also in positions that could be used for Catherine's benefit, though as in the case of Nanni Savini, these connections between Catherine and government officials could just as easily be a cause of suspicion as an asset. Francesco Malavolti served on one of the main advisory councils from September to October of 1377, during the period when Catherine's relationship with the Riformatori had grown contentious. Francesco had been with Catherine at the Salimbeni stronghold during the previous four months, and his connection with her at this sensitive moment may have contributed to the appearance of Catherine's company as a subversive group.¹⁶²

Beginning in early September 1375, Neri Pagliaresi was working for the Sienese senator, Pietro del Monte Santa Maria, who held office from February 1375 to August 1377.¹⁶³ There was only one senator at a time, and he, along with the Captain of the

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 79.

¹⁶² Ibid., 142.

¹⁶³ Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:150.

People, was one of the two officials responsible for carrying out war and passing judgment in criminal cases.¹⁶⁴ Pietro was himself one of Catherine's contacts; she wrote four letters to him between 1375 and 1376, and Neri is mentioned in two of them, both from 1375.¹⁶⁵ Catherine's relationship with the senator was close enough that she was informed of a debt he owed to another of her contacts, the rector of the confraternity of the Casa della Misericordia in Siena. Her letter to him from September 1375 contained the warning that if he did not pay his hand would be cut off, as was the customary settlement for unpaid debts.¹⁶⁶ The senator was an excellent ally to have in the government, especially during 1375, the year that the Riformatori was debating joining Florence's rebellion. Pietro was a strong supporter of the papacy, to the extent that he was occasionally criticized for excessive loyalty by Florentine leaders.¹⁶⁷ Catherine's connection with the senator's court is one of the few she had with members of the government not confined to lower positions. However, even this affiliation with a central office was not without political implications, as Neri was replacing another young man, Niccolo di Toldo, who had been executed for political dissension just two months before.¹⁶⁸

Niccolò di Toldo was the young Perugian whose arrest and execution is addressed in one of Catherine's most famous letters, written in June 1375. The affair involves a series of connections made between political groups with which Catherine was involved and demonstrates the wider political maneuverings that affected Catherine and her

¹⁶⁴ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 128.

¹⁶⁵ Letters T148, T135, T170, and T180 are addressed to Pietro.

¹⁶⁶ Letter T135; Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 2:163.

¹⁶⁷ Noffke, *Letters*, vol. 1:150.

¹⁶⁸ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 146.

followers' standing in Siena. Niccolò had entered into the service of the senator at least as early as 1375, and was arrested in June of that year for the vague crime of sowing discord considered "pernicious and deadly to the state of the present government and against the manifest honor and good reputation and legal authority of the present Lord Senator."¹⁶⁹ There is a possibility Niccolò was a spy for the vicar-general of the Papal States and ruler of Perugia, Gerard du Puy, who wrote to protest Niccolò's innocence and request that he be treated mercifully. The general was suspected of involvement in the Salimbeni-and-Dodici-led plot of 1374, and the Riformatori took offense to his attempt to broker a peace between the Salimbeni and Siena. The year 1375 was an incredibly unstable moment of pressure for the Riformatori, and the possibility of an alliance between the Salimbeni and the Papal States was threat enough to justify Niccolò's execution.¹⁷⁰

Catherine probably heard about the affair from Pietro del Monte, who himself may have been implicated by Niccolò's activities. Already considered sympathetic to papal interests, the senator was not allowed to pass judgment on Niccolò's case, which was usually within his jurisdiction. Catherine visited Niccolò in jail before his execution, and accompanied him to the chopping block, where she experienced a vision of Christ and exalted in being splashed with Niccolò's blood. In her letter to Raymond concerning the incident, which was her first letter to her new confessor, she reports: "I have already begun by receiving a head into my hands. It was sweeter to me than the heart can imagine or the tongue speak or the eye see or the ear hear." She repeats the claim that she held his head in her hands as it was chopped off later in the letter, and adds that her soul "rested in

¹⁶⁹ Marie-Hyacinth Laurent, ed., *Documenti. Fontes vitae s. Catharinae Senesis historici*, vol. 1 (Florence: Sansoni, 1936), 31, quoted in Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 93.

¹⁷⁰ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 94.

peace and quiet in such a fragrance of blood” that she could not “bear to wash away his blood.”¹⁷¹ Catherine’s repeated references in the letter to the blood of Christ as the blood of the martyr and her report that she laid her own head on the block in hopes of being martyred convey that she considered Niccolò’s death a martyrdom, which confirms the idea that he was acting in service of the papacy.¹⁷²

Several of Catherine’s followers were also members of one of Siena’s central civic institutions, the confraternity of the Santa Maria della Scala hospital, the Company of the Virgin Mary. The Santa Maria della Scala had been in existence since at least the eleventh century, and was the frequent recipient of donations from magnate families.¹⁷³ The hospital was neither entirely an ecclesiastical or secular institution, but an independent entity that held enough property in its own right to rank just below the magnates as one of the city’s wealthiest landowners.¹⁷⁴ The hospital was occasionally used by the communal government for economic assistance, as in 1316 when the Nine pawned two-thirds of a valley in the countryside to the hospital at an interest rate of ten percent over twenty years.¹⁷⁵ The Company of the Virgin Mary was the city’s most prominent confraternity, and membership was both a political and pious statement. The confraternity was dominated by magnates and wealthy members of the merchant class, and after the Dodici were removed from power in 1371 it became a center for their political activity. Ten of Catherine’s followers were listed as members, including those

¹⁷¹ Letter T273.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Bowsky, *Medieval Italian Commune*, 15.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 187.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 190.

closest to her: Sano di Maco, Gabriele Piccolomini, and Stefano Maconi.¹⁷⁶ Sano was the prior of the Company at least three times, in 1377, 1378, and 1380.

Catherine's letter to Stefano in December 1379, asking him to deliver a letter to the Company and personally ask them to give their support to Urban VI, indicates that she was aware of its importance both socially and politically and that it could be used as a way to communicate with a number of political allies at once. The Company could also have been a potential source of anti-Riformatori activity, as Bartolomeo da Siena recorded in his biography of Stefano. In response to the injustice of popular rule, a group of nobles began to plot to overthrow the Riformatori, and Stefano was drawn into the scheme. Bartolomeo claimed that Catherine detected Stefano's plans through her prophetic abilities and dissuaded him from facilitating the revolt. The story is mainly used by Bartolomeo as evidence of Catherine's sanctity, but it's entirely likely that the members of the Company, all nobles or wealthy merchants with pronounced religious convictions, would hatch a conspiracy either on the grounds of opposition to popular rule or with the excuse of the Riformatori's anti-papal orientation.¹⁷⁷

Catherine was clearly willing to sacrifice the appearance of compliance in order to forge relationships wherever they were useful. This could in part be due to the detachment that Catherine displayed toward her mortal existence, and her desire to martyr herself, but in reality by the time she was in conflict with the communal government, she had built up a substantial enough base of support that there was not actually much threat of reprisal.¹⁷⁸ The Riformatori was a coalition government ruled, in

¹⁷⁶ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 126.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁷⁸ In letter T273 regarding the execution of Niccolò di Toldo, Catherine expresses envy of his death, and in July 1378 she laments that she was not killed during the *Ciompi* riot in Florence.

theory, by the lower working classes, but contingent upon the habitual conflicts between the magnate houses that prevented a noble alliance (the Riformatori would eventually be toppled by a Tolomei-led rebellion in 1385). It was also impossible for the government to function without the participation of the nobles and other wealthy families, who were the only ones with sufficient capital to support the financial offices and run the military outposts of the countryside.¹⁷⁹ In essence, the Riformatori existed only with the compliance of other powerful social and political groups, most of who were represented in Catherine's spiritual family. The suspicion that came along with her assortment of dissident followers would seem to be a barrier that would detract from any access or authority they would provide, but the factiousness of Siena's political landscape effectively tied the hands of the government.

Catherine's Sieneese spiritual family was an extended network composed of mainly young men from noble families, most of who served in some government position during their affiliation with Catherine, and whose social and political positions offered her important benefits. Their positions gave her access to the main civic institutions of the city, and their mobility widened the arena in which she could pursue her agenda. They also had an important effect on the trajectory of her career by recruiting their own friends and allies to aid in the cause, which expanded her network to encompass members of each of the city's most powerful groups. The system she was able to organize with her followers of scribes, couriers, and representatives enabled her to reach people and places that would have otherwise have been beyond her ability.

¹⁷⁹ Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 140.

Conclusion

A study of Catherine's networks and the context that shaped her growth as a religious and political figure, as well as her movements during the most active period of her career, exhibits that Catherine's outlook and ability to reach the people capable of furthering her cause was dependent to a large extent on the involvement of her followers. Her network was shaped by the recruitments her followers made of their friends and allies, which in turn affected the spaces into which Catherine was able to interject her voice. The movements of her followers also make it clear that Catherine was not passive in this process but took advantage of the network that had coalesced around her to create for herself a system that enabled her to push her agenda forward. Her unique combination of divinely inspired rhetoric and political authority, gained both through her family connections and through the prominent positions of her followers, made her voice effective and sought after. However, without the willingness of her followers to engage in her actions and lend their support to her aims, it is not likely she would have achieved the breadth of influence she did.

Catherine's networks, which she managed with a lively and forceful presence through her letters, and whose movements across Tuscany she directed, were a considerable force, especially within Siena. The political and familial identities of her followers, not only the positions they held within government, are central to an understanding of her place within the political context. By the time her career reached its peak, she was consistently accompanied by a member of every magnate family save the Salimbeni, which had the dual effect of increasing the weight of her voice and shielding her from governmental retaliation. The factious nature of Siena's politics and the tenuous

position of the Riformatori created an environment where a party composed of a coalition of nobility, influential religious figures, and political dissidents had to be treated cautiously by the communal government. Catherine benefited greatly from this situation and used her followers to access and appeal to figures within noble families, to the pope, leaders within Siena's government, and to foreign powers.

Exploring the religious and political context of Catherine's Siena, the backgrounds and loyalties of her followers, and the ways in which she directed their movements to secure access to those who could help her, is necessary to understand her career. She conducted her family as a religious and political unit, in order to maximize her influence on a broad range of affairs. Within the context of the politics of a late medieval Italian republic, the form and function of her spiritual family exhibits many of the common attitudes and practices towards the cultivation of networks in order to promote a special interest.

Politics in late medieval Italy was based in the immediate and local, and power was gained, maintained, and exercised through personal and family bonds secured through marriage, blood, and friendship. These relationships created ties of obligation, dependence, and protection that participants relied upon to further their own interests and those of their associates.¹⁸⁰ The neighborhood was the most important area for the formation of personal ties into a recognizable group with the ability to shape the behavior of its members and work together to influence members of other groups, and most republican governments of the fourteenth century still relied upon this local self-

¹⁸⁰ John Najemy, "The Dialogue of Power in Florentine Politics," in *City States in Classical and Medieval Italy*, ed. Anthony Molho, Kurt Raaflaub, and Julia Emlen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 269-288.

government to support the routine administration of the city, making participation in government a community obligation based on membership in an interest group.¹⁸¹ This structure made the communal government the instrument of parties, and the state and political system was identified with a particular class, party, or clan who held power at the moment.¹⁸² As in Catherine's Siena, where the Riformatori government was affiliated with the lower merchant classes, this necessitated negotiation and the use of personal ties to cultivate influence.

This informal organization of relationships and associations developed along with the communal governments and migrated from the pre-republican system of patronage and lordship to the manipulation of public office. The translation of the rule of personal ties and influence into the framework of communal government confused the public and the private and created a parallel system of governance that operated along with the state that was based on informal, personal, and group associations, composed of both equal and unequal relationships among kin, friends, and neighbors.¹⁸³ The primary groups to which an individual owed loyalty and support were *parenti*, *vicini*, and *amici*. Since the communal government was generally unable to provide security or protection of rights, people relied upon their personal networks as a source of support and authority.¹⁸⁴ For the lower classes, networks operated as a counter-weight to the domination of elites, but for the upper classes and especially the nobility, its primary operation was a means of creating alliances, trading favors, and working connections for profit and influence.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Philip Jones, *The Italian City-State: From Commune to Signoria* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1997), 531; Najemy, "Dialogue," 272.

¹⁸² Jones, *The Italian City-State*, 543.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 537.

¹⁸⁴ Kent, "The Power of Elites," 178.

¹⁸⁵ Jones, *The Italian City-State*, 537.

Government office was treated as an asset that could be exploited for personal and group benefit, and different classes or other interest groups chose particular offices and avoided others depending on their aims. Civil assemblies offered the opportunity to build up a group, while more central offices gave prestige, the ability to act as a patron, accept political gifts, and offered access to the commune's resources. Communes evolved as a federation of interests, and the mechanisms of government were used by these semi-autonomous, private communities as a means to build networks of support, gain access to power, and reap benefits through these connections.¹⁸⁶

The importance of the personal in the politics of Italian republics is demonstrated most clearly by the complaints made by contemporaries of corruption within the government, which most commonly focused on the prevalence of personal bias and self-interest. In Siena, during the rule of the Nine, these complaints were focused on unfair taxation and financial corruption and resulted in the reforms of the 1260s to reduce the personal enrichment of finance officials.¹⁸⁷ Similar tensions over corruption came to the forefront of communal politics in August 1370, when the lower classes rioted over suspicions that government officials were hoarding grain during a food shortage.¹⁸⁸ Those viewed as most prone to venality, corruption, and dishonesty were legal professionals, in particular notaries, like Catherine's follower Cristofano di Gano Guidini. Notaries were singled out for their dual position in public and private administration, which gave them abundant opportunities for personal enrichment through tax farms, fraudulent prosecutions, and opportunities for extortion.¹⁸⁹ The general feeling among critics of

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 540.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 531.

¹⁸⁸ Wainwright, "Testing of a Popular Regime," 43.

¹⁸⁹ Jones, *The Italian City-State*, 531.

republican governments was that office was held not as a public service but as a possession that enabled the holders to pursue their own interests. Despite the ideal of the communal government, the same issues of privilege, corruption, and manipulation for personal benefit that plagued monarchies also ran rampant in the communes.¹⁹⁰

Many of the strategies that were central to this system of personal influence in communal politics are exhibited in the actions taken by Catherine and her spiritual family, particularly in their high level of access to noble family networks and the government. Magnate families were the only social group who truly had the resources to take their relationships, loyalties, and neighborhood solidarity and effectively combine them into a cohesive group that could be utilized in this accumulation of power and influence.¹⁹¹ For the magnate families, wealth and access to public office were essential in maintaining their stature, and they brought their social prestige, old wealth, and traditional means of exercising influence into the structure of communal government.¹⁹² These families were particularly unwilling to relinquish their modes of operation prior to republicanism. They brought their private interests into the public sphere and took a dominant role in the state, maintaining their position through their networks of personal bonds that supported a system of defense and promotion for their kin, marital relatives, neighbors, and friends.¹⁹³ Magnates supported the interests of their connections through the holding of high offices within the church and state, as well the domination of municipal assemblies, where their participation was less restricted. They practiced politics as a means to gain access to appointments, contacts within the government, and

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 538.

¹⁹¹ Najemy, "Dialogue," 272.

¹⁹² Kent, "The Power of the Elites," 169.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 178.

financial benefits. They served the family before the state and were unabashedly partisan in their pursuit of special privileges.¹⁹⁴

Siena's magnates had a level of access to the government that was remarkable by the standards of Tuscan republics, and Catherine's choice to align herself primarily with members of these families, as well as the work done by her followers in expanding their connections through the recruitment of their noble friends, places her within this system of elite self-promotion.¹⁹⁵ Considering the domination of municipal assemblies and leading posts within both the church and state by the nobility, connections to these networks of power were essential to exercise influence over communal affairs.¹⁹⁶ Even with Siena's anti-magnate laws, and the hostile attitudes of the *popolo* towards magnate participation in the central offices of government, true ability to affect change still rested with the noble families. In the case of Catherine's central goal of reconciliation between the papacy and the communal government, her alignment with the nobility and other powerful social groups gave her access to these instruments of influence within the government, and the backing of an established system of mutual support and defense.

Family, the primary unit of community life, was the main guarantor of rights and privileges, and was especially important to the magnates, whose families functioned as their own miniature communes, sometimes even authoring their own statutes that stipulated serving the commune or the family was the dichotomous choice.¹⁹⁷ The magnates were obsessed with genealogies and traditional associations, their long histories

¹⁹⁴ Philip Jones, "Communes and Despots: The City State in Late Medieval Italy," in *Communes and Despots*, ed. John Law and Bernadette Paton (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 3-26.

¹⁹⁵ Kent, "The Power of the Elites," 170.

¹⁹⁶ Jones, "Communes and Despots," 14.

¹⁹⁷ Jones, "Communes and Despots," 14.

made their ties more enduring and gave them added significance, enabling them to more effectively translate relationships into political solidarities and action. The authority of magnates in public affairs was often derived from a pedigree of wealth and augmented by the cultivation of personal bonds. These bonds were often understood in terms of kinship, which included god-parents, members of confraternities, and instrumental friendships with business or political associates who became honorary family, relationships that entailed the exchange of favors and an obligation to mutual assistance.¹⁹⁸

The structure and function of Catherine's own network, especially her spiritual family, follows this pattern. Her followers considered her their spiritual *Mamma* and understood themselves as a family. Catherine's letters of direction to them speak the language of mutual assistance, obligation, and loyalty that would have been familiar to her almost uniformly noble followers. With the attitude that holding office was primarily an opportunity to further personal and group interest, Catherine's spiritual family's close involvement with the government was a strategy that fit within the common understanding of how interests were promoted. Catherine's followers cultivated their spiritual family in a way that mirrored the functioning of their own noble families, bringing in other young men whom they understood as brothers, utilizing relationships from disparate sources including business, family, religious groups, and confraternities to further their private interests through the public sphere. The commonality of loyalty to several levels and types of bond also explains the ability of her followers to pursue apparently contradictory activities. Catherine's aim of preventing anti-papal rebellion aligned with the interests of the nobility, and her followers were able to incorporate their

¹⁹⁸ Kent, "The Power of the Elites," 178.

membership in her spiritual family into their other obligations and relationships. The centrality of self-interest prevented tension between their governmental offices and their own goals and allowed them to translate understanding of the use of networks into their participation in Catherine's spiritual family. Despite Catherine's exhortations to her associates to renounce worldly pursuits, for them the two were not contradictory but complimentary loyalties that both sat comfortably within the system of mutual obligation, friendship, and the cultivation of influence.

In a communal government that was run in large part by members of interest groups who utilized networks of friendships, honorary kin, and business and political associates, the loyalty and support of a group with the knowledge and ability to operate within this system was essential. The language of communal politics, which Catherine needed to be able to participate in to work towards preventing anti-papal rebellion, was that of relationships, mutual assistance, and private power. Catherine's spiritual family expressed their relationships in terms of honorary kinship and pulled together disparate bonds to create a cohesive unit with both the private and public influence to operate on the terms of communal politics. Without the social position of her followers, their knowledge of the operation of political power, and their ability to create the network of support necessary to participate in Siena's arenas of power, Catherine would likely not have been able to access or utilize the sources of influence that enabled her career to be so far-reaching.

Catherine's Associates

Agnesa Malavolti

Widow of Orso Malavolti, member of the Dominican penitential order.
Letters: T38, T53, T61

Alessa dei Saracini

Early friend and supporter of Catherine, accompanied her on almost all her trips and frequently served as a scribe.
Letters: T49, T119, T126, T271, T277, T286

Cristofano di Gano Guidini

One of Catherine's spiritual sons, he served as a notary during the rule of the Riformatori. He was with Catherine in Florence when the riot occurred, and was used to deliver a letter to the Signoria and the members of the confraternity of the Santa Maria della Scala.
Letters: T43

Francesco di Messer Vanni Malavolti

Francesco was introduced to Catherine by Neri Pagliaresi, and became one of her closest spiritual sons, and frequently served as scribe. After Catherine's death he became a Benedictine monk.
Letters: T45

Gabriele di Piccolomini

Joined Catherine's following early in her career, and accompanied her to the Rocca d'Orcia.
Letters: T128

Gregory XI

Elected pope on December 30, 1370. Catherine's first letter to him is from 1376, after which she wrote to him regularly, frequently referring to him as "*babbo*," and exhorting him to return to Rome.
Letters: T185, T196, T206, T209, T218, T229, T231, T233, T238, T239, T252, T255, T270, T285

Matteo di Francesco Tolomei

A Dominican friar and member of Catherine's entourage, he traveled with her frequently.
Letters: T94, T169a

Nanni di ser Vanni Savini

Nanni was a friend of the Salimbeni family who was introduced to Catherine by William Flete, he donated Belcaro to her after it had been razed by the government following his participation in the Salimbeni coup attempt.

Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi

Neri was introduced to Catherine early in her career, and after became her closest follower. He was almost never away from her, save for his periods in office, and trips at her behest. After her death he became a hermit, and was responsible for collecting many of her letters.

Letters: T42, T46, T99, T106, T178, T186, T192, T212, T228, T269, T281

Niccolo di Toldo

A young man in the employ of the Senator, Pietro del Monte, whose execution Catherine attended. The letter concerning his death is T273, to Raymond of Capua.

Pietro del Monte

Senator in Siena from February 1375 to August 1377, a friend of Catherine's with acknowledged loyalty to the papacy. Neri Pagliaresi worked under him as a member of the general council.

Letters: T135, T148, T170, T180

Raymond of Capua

Raymond became Catherine's confessor following her attendance of the General Chapter in 1374. He was appointed Master of the Order after her death in 1380, and began writing her vita in 1385.

Letters: T100, T102, T104, T211, T219, T226, T267, T272, T273, T275, T280, T295, T330, T333, T344, T373

Sano di Maco

A non-noble spiritual son, Sano was a wool-worker and member of the confraternity of the Santa Maria della Scala, who Catherine frequently used to pass letters to her entire Sienese family. He was affiliated with the Dodici and involved in a possible plot with the confraternity that Catherine intervened to prevent.

Letters: T62, T69, T142, T147, T232, T294, T303, T318

Stefano di Corrado Maconi

Following their meeting in 1376, Stefano became a close follower of Catherine. He accompanied her to Florence and Avignon, and the Rocca d'Orcia. After her death he joined the Carthusian order.

Letters: T195, T205, T222, T298, T319, T320, T324, T329, T332, T365, T368, T369

Tommaso dalla Fonte

Catherine's cousin and first confessor, he called for the testimonies collected in the *Processo Castellano* after her death.

Letters: T25, T41, T98, T139, T283

William Flete

An Augustinian hermit, Catherine met him early in her religious life. He was nicknamed “the bachelor,” after dropping out of a Cambridge master’s degree in 1339, after he became disillusioned with the strain of academic life and left to become a hermit. He sent Nanni Savini to her but refused to physically participate in her activities.

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