

ELEONORA CAPPUCILLI

## Saints and Sanctity for Critical Times: The Hagiography of Caterina da Racconigi

### *Abstract*

The hagiography of the prophet and Dominican tertiary Caterina da Racconigi (1476-1547) is an impressive testimony of the construction of sanctity in sixteenth-century Italy. The hagiographic narrative responds to the often-contrasting needs of the common people disappointed by the corrupt clergy and seeking a path to salvation; to the clergy that strove to revive popular devotion; and to some parts of the humanist circles, looking for an answer to the religious and intellectual doubt that especially originated after the Reformation. Through the analysis of some passages of the two extant hagiographies of Caterina da Racconigi – *Vita et legenda*, written by Caterina’s confessors, and *Compendio delle cose mirabili*, written by the philosopher Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola – this article examines the multi-layered meanings attributed to sanctity during the religious crisis of the sixteenth century. Reform, intellectual and religious doubt and certainty, and human freedom emerge as fundamental pillars of the hagiographic logic that shaped the language of sanctity.

### *Introduction*

When Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola wrote *Compendio delle cose mirabili di Caterina da Racconigi*, he was not only writing the story of an exceptional godly woman who could reinforce the faith in the Christian Church, but was also celebrating the weak things of the world chosen to put the powerful and proud to shame, as taught by St. Paul in 1 Cor 1:27. As a demonologist, reformer and natural philosopher, he saw in Caterina da Racconigi the key to the future reform of Christianity, and a powerful weapon to revive the fate of philosophy, held hostage by a handful of faithless people.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Pico found in Caterina a testimony of the powers of prophecy, which was also “the distinctive trait of the hagiographic legends of the ‘living saints’”.<sup>2</sup> Pico’s *Compendio* amplified her prophetic gifts more than they were amplified in the hagiography that the confessors of Caterina were assembling at the time Pico was violently murdered. The hagiographic representation of Caterina is a combination of the two texts, which are also a significant testimony of the powers of the hagiographical genre. Hagiography allows us to examine sanctity as produced by a narrative on the lives and works of the saints from the perspective of the different actors involved in the process of shaping sanctity itself, intended as a Christian model and ideal, as a support of political power, as a connection with the local communities, and, as we will see, as a remedy to doubt.

This article approaches sixteenth-century sanctity starting from the case study of Caterina da Racconigi – a living saint who was proclaimed blessed by the Catholic Church in 1808 but never canonized – and, in particular, analyzes the hagiographic narrative as a fundamental piece in the construction of her holy reputation while she was still alive, as well as in the building of the peculiar language of sanctity. Caterina’s hagiography, while responding to canons and appropriating models of sanctity, innovated ideals of sanctity too, adjusting it to critical times, i.e. that historical moment between the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> On Gianfrancesco Pico see Herzig 2019, 2018 and 2011; Zarri 2006; Schmitt 1967. This article has received funding from the European Union HORIZON-MSCA-2022-PF-01 Grant agreement No. 101107702.

<sup>2</sup> Zarri 2019, 42.

fifteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth century in which the ferment of reform was shaking the foundations of Christianity until the universal church collapsed. The analysis will shed light on the different interests involved in the hagiographic operation, that made Caterina one of the most complex models of Tridentine sanctity. The two pillars of doubt and miracle emerge as the guidelines of the hagiographic logic, which aims, on the one hand, to dismiss theological and philosophical ideas that were questioning the roots of faith; and, on the other hand, to persuade the believers of God's omnipotence manifesting itself in the deeds of the saint.

### *Life and sources*

Caterina da Racconigi, né Caterina Mattei, was born in 1486 during a “time of tribulation and war”<sup>3</sup> [tempo di tribulationi et guerra] in which Charles I of Savoy entered into conflict with the Piedmontese nobility and in particular Claudio, Signore di Racconigi.<sup>4</sup> Claudio would later become Caterina's main protector and help spread her reputation as a living saint and court prophetess.<sup>5</sup>

Sources on Caterina's life include the *Vitta et legenda admirabile* written by Fathers Domenico Onesto and Gabriele Dolce and completed by Father Arcangelo Marchisello, between 1515 and 1548; the *Compendio delle cose admirabili* written by the philosopher Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola in 1533, expanded by Caterina's last confessor Pietro Martire Morelli between 1549 and 1551 and lastly revised by him in 1563; and four manuscript wills in Latin dictated by Caterina in 1516, 1535 and 1546. Apart from the wills, no letters or any other text written by her are extant.

Caterina was born to a humble family. Her parents were Bilia Ferrari and Giorgio Matheis. She had two older brothers, who soon left home to seek their fortunes. Even at a very young age, she worked as a silk weaver with her mother.<sup>6</sup> When she was five years old, she had her first vision of Christ and at the age of seven, while rapt in spirit, Christ, her “beloved bridegroom”, gave her the first communion, consisting in a chalice full of blood, the symbol of the “bitter passion” of Christ that she would henceforth experience through continuous illnesses. The Dominican hagiography recounts that when she was ten, three events occurred simultaneously: her first confrontation with the devil, the revelation of her future vow of chastity, and the beginning of “fasting and abstinence” [digiuni et abstinentie].<sup>7</sup> Following a common hagiographic topos, the *vita* relates that Caterina's family initially opposed her project of a devout life, but later her mother supported her, also thanks to the generous “occult alms” [elemosine occulte] that she was able to attract.<sup>8</sup>

Her entry into the Third Order of Saint Dominic occurred in 1514, at the age of twenty-eight, when she started to live with other Dominican tertiaries, decisively rejecting monastic life. After being spiritually advised by her first confessor of the order of the Servants of Mary, Caterina chose Father Domenico Onesto of Bra, a Dominican friar, as her spiritual father. The hagiographic account, however, relates that initially the friar was suspicious of his devotee's mystical gifts, suspecting her of falling prey to “some diabolical illusion” [qualche illusione diabolica].<sup>9</sup> The initial reluctance on friar Domenico's part to acknowledge Caterina's divine gifts betrays an attitude of ambivalence assumed by the entire Dominican order toward her and toward the female living saints in general. Supervision by friars Domenico Onesto, Gabriele Dolce, Agostino da Reggio, and Pietro Martire Morelli was essential to ensure that Caterina did not cross the boundary between holiness and witchcraft and that her prophecies did not convey heretical messages.

In 1523, two years after the death of her patron Claudio Signore di Racconigi, his successor Bernardino of Racconigi issued a decree of exile for Caterina, perhaps with the aim of restoring peace to a city turned upside down by strenuous religious infighting. Together with her fellow tertiary, Osanna Capelli, Caterina

<sup>3</sup> Lurgo 2008, 179. All translations are mine.

<sup>4</sup> A short but precise life of Caterina is contained in Zarri 1998. See also Lurgo 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Zarri 1996; Prosperi 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Lurgo 2008, 191.

<sup>7</sup> Lurgo 2008, 189. On the role of fasting in female sanctity, see, amongst others, Bell 1985 and Bynum 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Lurgo 2008, 191.

<sup>9</sup> Lurgo 2008, 201.

moved to Caramagna, a town which was chosen not only due to it having lodging available but also for its remoteness from the conflicts that shook her homeland and from the unbearable Dominican control. In these years, she travelled frequently to various Piedmontese courts, to the village of Garessio, where her last confessor Pietro Martire Morelli came from, and to Gianfrancesco Pico's castle in Roddi d'Alba, where Caterina sometimes stayed for long periods.

Between 1510 and 1514, Caterina Mattei was accused of heresy and invited to appear in Turin for a trial, most likely because of the enmities between the Dominican order and the order of the Servants of Mary in Racconigi. After being acquitted, she was received by the city's archbishop, Duke Charles II and the ladies of the Savoy family. The trial thus amplified the regional, national, and transalpine echo of Caterina's *fama sanctitatis*. Many from Emilia Romagna and even from Nice came to visit her in Racconigi. This went against the original plans of Caterina's opponents. The Church leadership, Dominicans included, intended that the trial against Caterina would keep at bay, circumscribe, and dilute the demands of reform and renewal evoked by her political prophecies. These prophecies were particularly critical of the condition of corruption and ignorance in which ecclesiastical institutions found themselves and foresaw the *renovatione* of the Roman Church, while at the same time foreshadowing the misfortunes that the Christian people and especially the spiritual hierarchy would suffer if they did not change their conduct.

Especially after her trial for witchcraft and heresy, her network of relationships expanded. In 1518 she was received by the marquises of Saluzzo, Michele Antonio and his wife. The archbishop of Turin, Claude de Seyssel, author of *La monarchie de France*, visited her in 1514 and 1519. Anne d'Alençon, marquess of Monferrato, witnessed Caterina's mystical gifts and invited her to her palace, receiving in return "comfort and alleviation of pain" [comforto et allevamento di affanni].<sup>10</sup> Caterina's mystical encounters also involved deceased people, as in the case of the apparition of the King of France Francis I's wife, Claudia, who had recently passed away. Caterina was also a follower of Girolamo Savonarola,<sup>11</sup> but as soon as Caterina's prophetic visions appeared to clearly favor his sanctity, the criticism of her became harsher. Before long, the vicar-general of the Dominican Congregation of Lombardy forbade the friars in and around Caramagna from serving as her spiritual directors or giving her communion. The period that followed her trial for heresy and witchcraft and her subsequent transfer to Caramagna was marked by the souring of the relationship between Caterina and the Dominican hierarchy, who ordered all communication to be cut off between her and all Dominican friars who spread her *fama sanctitatis*. Caterina performed many miracles and unveiled the evil passions of the prelates. She died in 1547 in the odor of sanctity, and soon after, a struggle over her relics began.

### *Hagiographical representations*

Caterina's hagiography documents important elements not only of her own story, including the relationship with her biographers, but also of a broader and more general historical context that saw significant transformations in the relations between the Church and the regional state in the balance of power between the Pope and the prelates, and in the rooting of sanctity and religious orders in the territory.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, "hagiography is an unwritten chapter in the history of history writing".<sup>13</sup> However, hagiography is more than a historical document: it has multilayered meanings and its own internal logic, which are worth exploring. Beyond its celebratory and edifying purpose, Caterina's hagiography continuously refers to the novelty of female prophecy and women's mystic behaviors, to the impact of reform movements, and to the theological and political value attributed to her words and works.

To investigate the internal logic of hagiography means analyzing saints and sanctity as "patterns of meaning rather than explainers of causal relationships,"<sup>14</sup> that is as ideological and cultural sources of

<sup>10</sup> Pico 2010, 83.

<sup>11</sup> Herzig 2008, 171 ff; contra Lurgo 2013, 199.

<sup>12</sup> Cappuccilli 2020, 60 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Ditchfield 2009, 573.

<sup>14</sup> Ditchfield 2009, 559.

historical interest that are endowed with symbolic and metaphorical power. The hagiographical text can be considered as a language and, at the same time, as a literary form that crystallizes a particular experience of sanctity and places it in dialogue with the hagiographical canon as a whole. Analyzing sanctity through hagiography requires exploring the ways in which ideas of sanctity and saintly models embodied in particular saints are constructed, imagined, represented, and used. The context of heretical upheaval, widespread Nicodemism,<sup>15</sup> the influences of the Reformation, and the spirit of Catholic reaction and reform are all elements that allow hagiographies to be read as intertwinements of meanings and intentions that the celebratory façade fails to completely conceal.

The hagiographical text changed form in the Renaissance age as it responded to a need for connection with the supernatural and the world of the dead, a need that was felt in multiple contexts, regardless of the specific religious tradition. While the living saint is called upon to “vivify” the cult of the saints and Catholicism, which are criticized by Protestant propaganda, and while shifting its focus from the individual experience of imitating Christ to the exaltation of divine goodness, the same need is found in the martyrology of the Reformed tradition to write a history of the church as a community of faith.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, hagiography as a genre underwent internal tensions and transformations in the troubled years of the Italian Wars. The threshold of the Reformation contributed greatly to rearticulating the idea of sanctity, casting a shadow of skepticism and uncertainty over it. The literature relating to saints is overshadowed by doubt at the very moment it seeks to recompose the internally fragmented picture of Roman Catholicism. The *Vitta e legenda* of Caterina, in striving to constantly demonstrate the authenticity of sanctity, reveals one of the novelties of the modern era, namely that, especially within Christian thought, supernatural imagery ceases to be uncontested and yet experiences no real decline. It was *devotio moderna* that had helped to relate, from the interiority of each believer, the natural with the supernatural, bringing the individual experience closer to the collective experience.<sup>17</sup> Caterina’s hagiography relies on such internalized imagery but subjects it to the double test of faith and reason. Gianfrancesco Pico noted the inconsistency of this double test, which responded to divergent and conflicting questions and therefore abandoned all dreams of reaching any intellectual certainty, eventually arriving at a philosophical impasse.

In the light of the emergence of religious doubt, some passages of the *Compendio* may acquire new meaning, allowing us to shed light on Christianity’s reaction to the opening of modernity. For example, the account of the conversation between Caterina and the Dominican Girolamo of Pietrasanta testifies to the spread of doubt within the ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchies. Father Girolamo at first could not “believe the wondrous things that were narrated about Catterina, but after being convinced by experiences grew very fond of her”. The visit of Caterina “mutated in an instant the mind of Girolamo so that he could no longer doubt”.<sup>18</sup> The end of doubt crowns Caterina’s sacred performance and marks the friar’s successful conversion to devotion to her. The winning attestation of sanctity is symbolic evidence of divine victory over Christian skepticism. It is an internal struggle within Christianity that Caterina, flanked by her confessors and biographers, had to face.

While Pico’s *Compendio* gives voice to the intellectual tension toward doubting as an action of modern and devout reason, the Dominican *Vitta e legenda* presents further evidence that skepticism was a phenomenon by no means limited to the educated classes or religious elites close to the Church’s reform. The two texts show the effort to deal with religious and intellectual doubt, the two things often reinforcing each other. This demonstrates that the question of theoretical certainty cannot be reduced to the secularization of the fundamental Christian problem of the certainty of salvation,<sup>19</sup> that from the beginning had itself been enmeshed in theological and philosophical debates. In the hagiographic text, however, the search for a certain way to salvation is crucial and links to the search for authentic sanctity. No one was

<sup>15</sup> Ginzburg 1970; Eliav-Feldon, Herzig 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Cavallotto 2002, 329-330.

<sup>17</sup> Imbruglia 1989, 43.

<sup>18</sup> “credere alle cose mirabili che di Catterina si narravano, doppo vinto dalli esperimenti li fù molto affettionato”; “mutossi in un subito la mente di Hieronimo per modo, che più non potea dubitare”, Pico 1681, 52 (wrong pagination).

<sup>19</sup> Blumenberg 1983, 8.

exempt from this search, not even Caterina herself, who often doubted her salvation and looked for proofs, in a sort of self-made *discretio spirituum*.<sup>20</sup>

Father Domenico of Bra also expressed his skepticism on the occasion of the account of Caterina's vision of the "standard". In 1511 she told him that she saw "Christ Jesus in the time of the mass holding a white and red standard with a cross on its stick"<sup>21</sup> and ordering her to take "the standard, under which everyone will be safe, and which will accomplish the good of the Church".<sup>22</sup> Father Domenico, still unbeknownst of the "foundations and great gifts bestowed" to Caterina, suspected "some diabolical illusion" and scolded her:

I doubt that this is an illusion and deceit of the Devil and think that you, as you were light-minded, believe in these visions and will be fooled by them. What does it mean that you were given the standard of the Militant Church, under which everyone will be safe?<sup>23</sup>

Fra Domenico could not believe that Christ chose a humble woman to take guidance of the Militant Church, defying existing ecclesiastical, social, and sexed hierarchies. He said to her:

This government is not convenient for women nor it is for you to make any congregation, because you are young and come from a poor land. Even though God wants to give the standard to a woman, it would be more convenient for many other holy women in the monasteries and out of them, who are appreciated for their life and customs, older than you and some of them renowned for their miracles performed while they are still alive. But how does this enterprise convene to you, who are young and unexperienced?<sup>24</sup>

Caterina was well aware that she was young and unexperienced but also that she could not avoid the task to which she was called by Christ. Saint Jerome and Saint Stephan then appeared in a vision to convince her to accomplish the mission of carrying forward the standard of the Militant Church: "we were soldiers of Christ and congregated many souls under the standard of faith, although under many toils. So will you gather many with much sweat and suffering".<sup>25</sup>

To overcome her distrust, Christ appeared again to her and, after showing the meaning of the previous vision, invited her to relate it to Father Domenico: "Now your confessor can understand the meaning of the given standard, which he feared and doubted was the devil's illusion and deceit".<sup>26</sup>

However, the fear of being subject to diabolical illusions and not to authentic divine inspiration did not only concern Caterina's devotees and her spiritual fathers, but also herself. Yet Christ, appearing to her in a vision together with St. Peter Martyr handing her the chalice filled with holy blood, reassured her: "Do not doubt, my bride, that this is not the devil, but is my loyal knight Peter Martyr of the Order of Preachers."<sup>27</sup> The fear of being abandoned by God, or of being unworthy of his grace constantly challenged Caterina's faith, eliciting Christ's reassurance. During a mystical rapture, Caterina expressed the desire to live in obscurity, as befits a "miserable female full of every flaw" [*feminella misera et d'ogni*

<sup>20</sup> Voaden 1999; Caciola 2003; Elliott 2004; Love Anderson 2011.

<sup>21</sup> "Iesù Christo nel' hora della messa con el stendardo bianco et rosso con la croce di sopra fissa nel bastone del stendardo". Lurgo 2008, 201.

<sup>22</sup> "stendardo, sott'el quale tutti quelli che se gli ritrovaranno seranno salvi, et con esso sarà bene alla Chiesa". Lurgo 2008, 201.

<sup>23</sup> "Io dubito che questa sia illusione et inganno del Demonio et che voi come ligera di cervello facilmente credeti in queste visioni, per le quale sareti inganata. Chi vol dire che a voi è dato el stendardo della Chiesa Militante, sott'el quale chi se gli ritrovarà sarà salvo?". Lurgo 2008, 201.

<sup>24</sup> "Non conviene tal governo a done né anchor a voi s'apartiene di far congregatione alcuna, per esser giovine et in una terra povera. Et se pur Iddio vol dare el stendardo ad una donna, sono molte sante done nelli monasterii et fora di monasterii, di vitta et costumi approbate et di più matura ettade et anchor d'alcune vivente che ne havemo espressi miraculi, ch'a loro meglio gli conveniria. Ma a voi, giovine et inesperta, come vi conviene tal impresa?". Lurgo 2008, 201.

<sup>25</sup> "Noi siamo stati soldati di Iesù Christo et sotto el stendardo della fede havemo congregato molte anime, benché con grandissime fatiche. Così anchora tu con grandi sudori et affanni ricoglierai molti". Lurgo 2008, 202.

<sup>26</sup> "Adesso po' cognoscere il tuo confessore che significava el stendardo dato, del quale temeva et dubitava che fusse illusione et inganno del demonio". Lurgo 2008, 203.

<sup>27</sup> "Non dubitare o sposa mia che questo non è el Demonio, ma è el mio fidel cavaleiro san Pietro Martire de l'ordine di Frati Predicatori". Lurgo 2008, 187.

diffetto piena]. Then Christ commanded her, “Walk, and do not doubt, for my grace will always assist you.”<sup>28</sup>

Again, following the extraction of Caterina’s heart, Christ reassured her in the face of the intense sufferings she endured: “Do not doubt of my help because I will always be with you in pains and tribulations.”<sup>29</sup> On the occasion, then, of her revelation about the foundation of the Dominican convent of San Vincenzo in Racconigi

there appeared the said St. Peter Martyr, all cheerful and happy, who said smiling: “My daughter, do not doubt but be certain of the promise, for that was not diabolical illusion but the promise of Christ [and] the greatest truth”.<sup>30</sup>

In short, doubt does not spare Caterina herself, a devout daughter tested by the appearances of the devil in disguise, by the declared insufficiency of her own ability to understand divine signs, and by her Dominican fellows’ resistance to recognizing her sanctity. Religious doubt, linked to the fear of demonic presence and the opacity of God’s message in the face of the limited capacities of the human mind, strengthened and shaped skepticism of humanistic origin. Doubt influenced the beliefs of both intellectuals and clergymen, upper clergy and lower clergy, and even the perceptions of devout common people. Philosophical skepticism and religious doubt sprang, in short, from the same uncertainty of conscience that characterized all of sixteenth-century Europe. It is no accident that during the Fifth Lateran Council in 1513, philosophers were given the task of proving the truth of the faith and persuading their audience in this regard.

Although the need to overcome the distrust of the unbelieving is a constant element in the history of Christianity, this need was felt even more strongly in the late Renaissance age, when Christian dogmas started to be contested, until the Reformation struck a deadly blow against them. The hagiographic narrative constituted one of the attempts to react to the crisis of faith without, however, ignoring its causes: the decadence of worship, the waning of dogma, and the shattering of certainty. The reconfiguration of Christian discipline attempted by the Holy See was not a sufficient response to this. The religious crisis demanded a rethinking of religious certainty itself.

Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, therefore, the intertwining of skepticism, religious doubt, and popular superstition made it virtually impossible to make a clear distinction between orthodox and pro-heretical or openly heterodox positions on miraculous phenomena. Indeed, the increasing separation between the divine cosmos and individual fate or “fortune” stimulated reflections on the insufficiency of Providence, causing great uncertainty and, at the same time, a sense of liberation that raised many concerns among the clergy. The rise of the singular self, who – at least partially – can be the architect of their own fate,<sup>31</sup> coincided with the intensification of the individual aspect of sanctity.

Then the hagiographical narrative had to come to terms with this challenge: to reconcile the feeling of liberation mixed with uncertainty that snaked through popular and high religiosity with the presence of a divine construction that greatly exceeded any individual attempt to shape the cosmos. Faced with the failure of the medieval and scholastic effort to “demonstrate the compatibility of divine foreknowledge with the freedom of human will and action”,<sup>32</sup> hagiography expressed a fundamental incompatibility that was resolved in the modern search for a remedy for human error, a search that was not always conducted in a purely rational manner.

Contrary to a teleological narrative of the development of Western rationality, hagiography circumvented the supposed linearity of reason and offered answers to pastoral, apologetic, devotional, and spiritual needs that were not fully rational, but could not be discarded as purely irrational. In the face of

<sup>28</sup> “Camina, et non dubitare, perché sempre te sarà assistente la gratia mia”. Lurgo 2008, 231.

<sup>29</sup> “non dubitare de l’adiutorio mio imperhocché nelle pene et tribulatione sarò sempre con te”. Lurgo 2008, 244.

<sup>30</sup> “apparve el ditto san Pietro Martire tutto iocondo et allegro, et sorridendo disse: ‘Figlia mia, non dubitare ma sia certa della promessa, perché quella non fu illusione diabolica ma promissione di Christo summa verità’”. Lurgo 2008, 186.

<sup>31</sup> Cox 2022; Cappuccilli 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Cassirer 2000, 75.

the gradual rise of humanist thought, theological thought did not represent an antagonistic but rather a complementary force.

The cracks in faith and the belief system during the religious crisis preceding the tumult of the “Lutheran schism” called for a rethinking of the response by the Church and the individual believer on questions of faith. Sanctity – which can be defined as a mediation between man and God, the earthly world and the afterlife, nature, and the supernatural sphere<sup>33</sup> – was not immune to such a crisis. The harsh condemnation of the cult of the saints came from different milieus. The Protestants had heterogeneous opinions on the topic. For instance, while Calvin harshly attacked the cult of the saints, Luther argued that they were nonetheless pious men and women deserving of respect from the faithful.<sup>34</sup> Prestigious members of the Roman Church hierarchy, linked to the groups of the Spirituali, also criticized (superstitious) devotion to saints. What they contested was the very idea of “a pluralistic religion characterized by a multiplicity of devotions”.<sup>35</sup>

One of the purposes of Caterina’s hagiography was to overcome the aversion and skepticism surrounding sanctity in Italy and the Christian world in general. Gianfrancesco Pico, in particular, was convinced that God chose a woman to humble theologians and philosophers who thought so highly of themselves that they started to question Christian certainties. God did not just govern the world but bestowed the proofs of faith to all Christians through a woman: “Suffice it to be shown that God in our day not only governs the world with his providence but even manifests it most generously for the weak and ignorant sex.”<sup>36</sup>

To contain unbelief within the Christian community, the hagiographic resorted to the miracle, the true test of sanctity. Through its linkage with the supernatural world, the miracle historically represents a remedy to religious doubt.

Since patristics, supernatural powers have been an essential element in the struggle against paganism, a vehicle for converting unbelievers and pagans and affirming the truth of God’s word. The diffusion of the sacred power of miracles continued throughout the Middle Ages, thanks in part to the Church, which “found itself saddled with the tradition that the working of miracles was the most efficacious means of demonstrating its monopoly of the truth.”<sup>37</sup> Belief in miracles, far from being simply arational or irrational, was the way in which pious men and especially women, claimed God’s presence on earth. As it represented transcendence’s immanent field of action, the miracle became central to theological debate in the sixteenth century.<sup>38</sup> From this perspective, sanctity can be conceived of as a truly humanized transfiguration of the miracle: through the saints, the common people could gain access to the sphere of the miracle and get closer to heaven. From a subjective point of view, the supernatural experience constitutes a guarantee that God stands by the side of the saint. In other words, the miracle represents a symbol of authority and, in the case of Caterina, a specific female authority relying on previous female models of sanctity.<sup>39</sup>

An analysis of the typology of miracles can show significant elements of the way certain social problems, such as infirmities, were handled by making reference to the sacral sphere. The narrative of the miracle shows how illness was perceived not only socially but also in relation to the role attributed to women, which was often one of the “purification” of the community, which was closely related to the sacral realm. It is no coincidence that the “miraculous gifts that Christ made to his beloved bride Caterina,” [miracolose provisioni qual faceva Christo alla sua diletta sposa Caterina] according to the Dominican legend, have mainly to do with the sphere of bodily diseases and more generally with the ability to restore health and purity. These gifts were: instantaneous healings, Christ’s intrusion into Caterina’s heart, and

<sup>33</sup> Boesch Gajano 1999, V; Boesch Gajano 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Gotor 2004, 24.

<sup>36</sup> “Basti essere manifestato che Dio a questi nostri tempi non solamente governa il mondo con la sua providentia, ma etiam quella manifesta copiosissimamente per il sexo fragile et imbecille”. Pico 2010, chapter 23, 203.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas 1991, 28.

<sup>38</sup> Bell, Weinstein 1986, 228; Boesch Gajano 1985, 242-243.

<sup>39</sup> Falkeid, Oen 2020; Cappuccilli 2021.

the extractions and purifications of her heart. In the hagiography of Caterina, the miracle is thus linked to great suffering and the equally great ecstasy that followed the healing. Unlike Gianfrancesco Pico's *Compendio*, which focuses on miraculous things understood as miraculous actions performed by the living saint for the benefit of her devotees, or to convince skeptics, the Dominicans' *Vitta e legenda* focuses on the miracles of which she is a direct beneficiary. Extreme jubilation and deep misery alternate in Caterina's experience, indicating the double face of Christ, capable of punishing and rewarding, tormenting, and healing. Fra Gabriele and Fra Ludovico report that she did not dare to go to the doctors to show her many incurable illnesses, which Christ, the "highest physician", miraculously healed.<sup>40</sup>

In comparison with the *Compendio*, the Dominican *Vitta* has a much harsher and more violent tone: the violence of the passion; the violence of the punishments inflicted on Caterina by the angels, by Christ, and even by herself; the violence of the mystical raptures; and the violence of the pain felt by the sinners with which Caterina empathized. The five extractions of her heart are described with vivid and scabrous images designed to arouse horror and awe in the reader. St. Peter Martyr is the author of one of these extractions: "by placing the fingers between the two ribs, he pulled out her heart: so great was her pain that she remained as if dead for a good time lapse"<sup>41</sup>. No less violent is the description of the "iron girdle" [cingulo di ferro] that Caterina put on herself to seal her vow of chastity and that Jesus and the angels tightened to increase its effectiveness.

The pain was so intense that she fell on the ground as if she was dead, but then she was relieved and restored by Christ, who offered his blood to her. She felt severe pains in her girdle for many days and months, and several times blood came out: and at that time she lay many days in bed.<sup>42</sup>

The crude depiction of violent pain goes hand in hand with the heavenly description of the sweetness of divine election, which is expressed in the words of St. John speaking with Caterina in a mystical conversation:

[The way to Paradise] is difficult and arduous for those who do not love, but it is easy for the true lovers of God. If you readily suffer for his love, everything will seem easy to you, your tribulations will turn into consolations and you will get roses out of thorns.<sup>43</sup>

Pain turns into comfort for those who sincerely love God and are ready to suffer for him. Thus, Caterina could experience not only suffering but also the immense joy of God's love. The signs of her asceticism are illustrated through ecstatic, heavenly images. When Caterina took the habit of the third order, there was a "very great odor of roses and different odoriferous things" [grandissimo odor di rose et de diverse cose odorifere]. In 1517 Virgin Mary "seeing her suffering great pains, made her drink the Virgin's own milk, by which she was much comforted and relieved."<sup>44</sup> The odor of sanctity, which is an unmistakable sign of divine election, is described suggestively by the Dominican friars:

When she spoke, we could smell several times a great aromatic scent, and especially carnations' scent, coming out from her mouth. I could experience this above all after she vomited, as the smell of her vomit

<sup>40</sup> "Sarebbe longo processo se volessimo manifestare quante infirmitate per arte incurabile et de alcune curabile, quale non ardiva alli medici manifestare dal summo medico Christo Iesù che percotte et sana, sia stata miracolosamente liberata". Lurgo 2008, 190.

<sup>41</sup> "ponendo li diti fra le doe coste, gli estrasse sensibelmente el core: et tanto fu el dolore che rimase come morta per bon spacio di tempo". Lurgo 2008, 240.

<sup>42</sup> "si intenso fu el dolore che cadde in terra come morta, ma da poi fu da Christo sollevata et restaurata, offerendogli el suo sangue. Rimaseno per molti giorni et mesi gravi dolori nella cintura, et più volte usciva sangue: et in quel tempo stette molti giorni al letto, non potendo aiutarse delle rene, per li ditti dolori". Lurgo 2008, 226.

<sup>43</sup> "Difficile et ardua è [la via del Paradiso] a chi non ama, ma è facile alli veri amatori de Dio. Et se tu per amor suo patirai volentiera, te parerà ogni cosa facile, et le tue tribulatione si convertiranno in consolatione, et dalle spine caverai le rose". Lurgo 2008, 299.

<sup>44</sup> "vedendola aggravata de dolori, gli dette a gustare del proprio latte, dal quale molto fu confortata et sollevata". Lurgo 2008, 263.



surpassed any other smell, although she did not use any aromatic thing [...] A rich smell came out not only from her mouth, but also from her clothes and her presence.<sup>45</sup>

The intense fragrances, the suavity of the taste of Christ's blood and the Virgin Mary's milk, and the glow of divine light counterbalance the impassive cruelty of Christ testing his beloved daughter. Yet, the use of the imagery of the suffering and violent manipulation of Caterina's body to explain the miraculous motif clearly prevails over the depiction of the miracle as a joyful event. The relief bestowed by Christ follows the pain he himself caused – a metaphor for the torment undergone by the Piedmontese people and all Christians, who had fallen prey to impiety. The war for the fate of Christendom was fought on Caterina's body. Only Christ, Dominican hagiographers seemed to say, could put an end to this through his miraculous action.

### *Conclusion*

The sense of uncertainty manifested in the act of doubting and the staging of the miracle as its remedy corresponded to the waning of millenarian expectations. The miracle did not announce new times, nor was the hint of the upcoming apocalyptic moment postponed by the *katecon*,<sup>46</sup> but it was a sign that God was already present and required urgent human initiative. The unresolved tension between prophetic sanctity and millenarianism marked a struggle for the meaning of history. In the hagiographic narrative, Christian history, although ultimately independent of human free will, was conceived of not only as a story of expectations about the end of the world<sup>47</sup> but also as a battleground for human freedom in the present. Amid the spiritual crisis that exploded at the turn of the sixteenth century, the hagiographic logic rereads Christian history and makes manifest the dialectic of freedom and providence by translating it into a dialectics between religious doubt and the miracle.

Doubt and miracle thus constitute the two founding pillars of the hagiographic logic, a logic that is found in both *Vitta and legenda* and Pico's *Compendio*. They both describe a situation of a perceived gap between beliefs and doctrines, religious experience and institutions, Christian consciousness and the ideological or institutional representations of faith.<sup>48</sup> A sense of urgency permeates the two texts: it is already too late to act in the present, because Christian people and especially their pastors are indulging in the corruption that threatens to prolong the time of apostasy indefinitely. Only a saint, in the solitude of her individual election, can remedy the drama of the Christian collectivity as a whole and fight so that the future will not be burdened by the weight of present error. Hagiography thus shapes sanctity as a language to convey urgent messages to all believers. Yet, it also aims to reach and persuade the powerful through the miraculous action of an elect godly woman – a proof that the end-times were close and demanded unity under the banner of the Church.

*Eleonora Cappuccilli*

*University of Toronto – University of Oslo*

*eleonor.cappuccilli2@unibo.it*

<sup>45</sup> "Sentivamo più volte spirar dalla bocca quando con raggionava gran'odore aromatico, et specialmente de garofali. Et ego experimentu cognovi, et questo massime doppo el vomito: el qual odore superava ogni odore aromatico, benché lei non adoperava cose aromatiche [...] Et non tanto dalla bocca usciva grand'odore, ma ancho dalle proprie veste, et dalla sua presentia". Lurgo 2008, 264.

<sup>46</sup> Cacciari 2013, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Koselleck 2007, 310.

<sup>48</sup> Certeau 1988, 135.

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