

LETTER T219/G87/DT65¹

To Frate Raimondo da Capua and others of his company, in Avignon
Early April 1376

On the night of 1 April 1376, Catherine has an experience in prayer that remarkably expresses her motivation for all of her great public concerns: the return of the pope to Rome, the reform and unity of the Church, the crusade. In this letter, written very shortly thereafter, she attempts to describe the experience to Raimondo and others of her disciples who have gone ahead of her to Avignon.²

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In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of gentle Mary.

My very loved sons in Christ Jesus,

I your poor mother have desired with anguished desire to see you nailed, heart and affection, to the cross—bound and united in the same bond that bound and engrafted God into humanity and humanity into God. This is how my soul longs^a to see your hearts and affections engrafted into the incarnate Word, gentle Jesus—so engrafted that neither the devil nor anyone else can ever separate you.

But I'm sure that if you are bound and set ablaze in the gentle Jesus, all the devils of hell with all their cunning will never be able to tear you away from so sweet a union. So, since this bonding is so strong and so necessary for you, I don't want you ever to stop throwing wood on the fire of holy desire—I mean the wood of self-knowledge. This is the wood that feeds the fire of divine charity,³ the charity that is gained by knowing^b God's

¹ MSS: Mo-b, B, P2, H, S1, P1, P5, F2, P3, S2, P4; translation based on Mo-b, with reference to H. Other variants based on Dupré Theseider.

² The linguistic evidence reinforces the historically attested date. Most of the letter's thirty-three analyzed patterns range from early to late with random frequency, but there are a few with significant clusters beginning in early 1376 (DAFIGLIO, FUNE, MUOIO, ODORVIRT). Only two other letters share eleven or more of Let. T219's patterns, one from May 1376 and the other (the very long Let. T272) from 1377, both in this volume.

³ Cf. Cavalca, *Specchio di croce*, p. 215: "It is a proverb that love never grows weary. Whoever is really strong accomplishes more, and the more we accomplish, the more our desire grows, the same as fire: the more wood we put on it, the more it blazes and grows." Also especially *Trattato dello Spirito Santo*, p. 15: "God commanded in the Old Law [Lev. 6, 5]: 'I want fire to be always burning on my altar. Let the priest add wood to it every day so as to feed it.' St. Gregory expounds on this wood, saying [*Libri moralium*, XXV, 7: PL LXXXVI] that the altar is our heart, where we must feed this fire of love, adding wood to it every day by pondering God's constant and boundless blessings." Also *Dial.* 162, p. 352:

boundless charity.

Then we become one with our neighbors as well, and the more fuel we put on the fire (I mean the wood of self-knowledge), the more intense grows the heat of our love for Christ and for our neighbors. Stay hid, then, within self-knowledge, and don't be caught outside yourselves, lest Malatasa⁴ catch you with all sorts of illusory imaginings against^c one another—for he would do this to rob you of the unity of divine charity. This is why I want you, and I command you, to be submissive to one another. Learn from gentle First Truth to bear each other's shortcomings. He chose to make himself^d the least, and humbly bore all of our sins and shortcomings, and this is what I want you to do, my sons.^e

Love, love, love one another! Be glad, be jubilant! Summertime is coming! For on the night of April first⁵ God disclosed his secrets more than usual. He showed his marvels in such a way that my soul seemed to be outside my body and was so overwhelmed with joy that I can't really describe it in words.⁶ He told and explained bit by bit the mystery of the persecution holy Church is now enduring, and of the renewal and exaltation to come. He said that what is happening now is being permitted to restore her to her original condition. First Truth cited a few words from the holy gospel: "It is inevitable that scandal should come into the world,^f but woe to the one by whom the scandal comes!"⁷ It was as if he were saying, "I am permitting this time of persecution in order to uproot the thorns from my bride, for she is all hedged in with thorns. But people have no permission from me for their evil plottings. Do you know what I am doing? I am doing as I did when I was in the world, when I made the whip of cords and drove out those who were selling and buying in the Temple,⁸ since I didn't want my Father's^h house to be made a robbers' den.⁸ In the same way, I tell you, I've made a whip now of certain people, and with that whip I am driving out the filthy, greedy, avaricious dealers

"Let them take the wood of self-knowledge along with contempt for their self-complacency and self-conceit, and put these into the fire of my divine charity."

⁴ Cf. *Life*, II, ii, 128, p. 123: "That was her name for the devil. He is a sack of wickedness (*malus saccus*) for souls; and in Catherine's country a little sack or pouch is called a *tasca* by the common people." Jorgensen (*Saint Catherine of Siena*, p. 425, n. 8) points out that the expression is not original, but can be found earlier in Giovanni Colombini (*Lettere*, pp. 105, 219), and is reminiscent of Dante's *Malacoda* ("Evil Tail," *Inferno*, XXI, 76) and *Malebranche* ("Evil Claws," *ibid.*, 37).

⁵ 1 April 1376.

⁶ Cf. 2 Cor. 12, 2-4.

⁷ Mt. 18, 7.

⁸ Mt. 21,13; Mk. 11,17; Lk. 19, 46. Catherine refers to this gospel incident also in *Dial.* 127, p. 248, where she applies it to the avarice of the clergy who sell their services, making "the grace of the Holy Spirit a piece of merchandise."

bloated with pride, who are selling and buying the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit." So with the whip of human persecution he was driving them out—I mean he was using suffering and persecution to free them from their shameful disordered way of living.

The fire of holy desire was growing within me as I gazed. And I saw the people, Christians and unbelievers, entering the side of Christ crucified. In desire and impelled by love I walked through their midst and entered with them into Christ gentle Jesus. And with me were my father Saint Dominic, the beloved John,⁹ and all my children. Then he placed the cross on my shoulder and put the olive branch in my hand, as if he wanted me (and so he told me) to carry it to the Christians and unbelievers alike. And he said to me: "Tell them, 'I am bringing you news of great joy!'"¹⁰

Then my soul was fuller than ever. It was immersed in the divine Being, along with the truly joyful, in union and love's affection. So great was my soul's delight that I was no longer conscious of the pain I had felt at seeing God offended. In fact, I said, "Oh happy blessed fault!"¹¹ Then the gentle Jesus smiled and said, "Is sin blessed now? Sin, which is nothingness? Do you know what Gregory meant when he said, 'happy blessed fault'? What aspect of sin do you see as blessed and happy, and what was Saint Gregory talking about?"

I answered as he made me answer, "I see well, my dear Lord, and I know well that sin is not worthy of blessedness, and so it is neither blessed nor happy.¹ But the fruit that comes from sin is. This, it seems to me, is what Gregory meant, that because of Adam's sin God gave us the Word, his only-begotten Son. And the Word gave his blood; by giving his life he restored grace² to us with such³ blazing love. So sin is blessed not because

it is sin, but for the fruit and the gift we receive⁴ because of that sin. Yes, that's the way it is!"

So from the sin wicked Christians^m commit by persecuting Christ's bride come exaltation, light, and the fragrance of virtue in this bride. And this was so sweet that there seemed to be no comparison between the offense and the immeasurable goodness and generosity God was showing this bride. Then I was marvelously happy. I was so confident about the future that it seemed I was already possessing and enjoying it. Then I said, like Simeon, "Now you can dismiss your servant, Lord. . . ."^{12,n} And there were such mysteries as words can never describe, nor heart imagine, nor eye see.¹³ Now what words could ever describe the wonderful things of God? None from this poor wretch! So I'd rather keep silent and give myself completely to seeking God's honor, the salvation of souls, and the renewal and exaltation^o of holy Church. And by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit I intend to persevere until I die.

With this desire I called and will continue to call our Christ on earth, and you, father, and all my dear children with great love and compassion.

I asked for and obtained what you had asked.¹⁴ Be happy; be jubilantly happy! *Oh sweet^p God, love, fulfill quickly your servants' desires!* I don't want to say any more; I've said nothing anyway. In my anguish I am dying of desire. Be compassionate to me! Beg divine Goodness and Christ on earth to hurry.¹⁵

Keep living in God's holy and tender love. Drown yourselves in the blood of Christ crucified. Don't let anything make you waver; no, be more encouraged than ever. Be happy, be happy in your sweet labors. Love, love, love one another!

Gentle Jesus! Good Jesus! Jesus love! Jesus, Jesus!

Textual Notes

- a. Mo: *My soul considers / This . . . longs (considera / cosi desidera).*
- b. B, Mo: *by knowledge in / by knowing* (the latter reading from P2).
- c. From Mo, H; B: *with / against.*
- d. Mo: *be / make himself.*
- e. Mo: *dearest sons / sons.*
- f. Mo inserts *but then he added.*

¹² Lk. 2, 29.

¹³ Cf. 1 Cor. 2, 9.

¹⁴ Perhaps Raimondo has asked Catherine to pray for something in particular.

¹⁵ She may be referring to her desire for the calling of the projected crusade, or she may be alluding to her conviction that the pope should return to Rome.

⁹ *Iohanni singulare.* Cf. *Life*, I, xii, 115, p. 107, where Saints John the evangelist, Paul, and Dominic are present at Catherine's mystical espousals. Giordano da Rivalto, *Prediche inedite*, ed. Narducci, p. 430, speaks of the evangelist in the same way: "What was so singular and special about St. John the evangelist, that he should be singled out among all the others? He himself tells us what his singularity was. And what was it? It was Christ's love, and this is why he says, 'This was the disciple who was loved by Christ.' This gift, this singularity he had among all the other disciples, was that he was singularly loved by Christ."

¹⁰ Lk. 2, 10.

¹¹ From the hymn for the Easter Vigil, the *Exultet*: "Oh truly necessary sin of Adam, that was blotted out by Christ's death! Oh happy fault, that merited to have such and so great a Redeemer!" (PL LXXII, 269) F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq have written amply about the authorship of the *Exultet* (*Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, "Paques," XIII, 2, p. 1568f.), but in Catherine's day the hymn was attributed to Gregory the Great. Cf. Giovanni Dominici, *Il libro d'amore*, p. 244: "In this way St. Gregory sang joyfully about the sin of Adam when he said, 'O happy fault. . . .'"

- g. *in the Temple* from Mo; missing in B, P2.
- h. Mo: *God's / my Father's*.
- i. Mo: *happy in itself / happy*.
- j. Mo, H: *life / grace*.
- k. Mo: *a great / such*.
- l. Mo: [*we receive*].
- m. P2: *people / Christians*.
- n. Mo, H add: *according to your word in peace*.
- o. *and exaltation* from Mo; missing in B, P2.
- p. H: [*Oh sweet*].

LETTER T177/G29/DT61¹

To Cardinal Pietro Corsini of Florence, in Avignon
Most probably near Palm Sunday (6 April) 1376

Pietro di Tommaso Corsini, former bishop of Florence (1363–1370) and titular cardinal of Porto and San Rufino, has been asked by the Florentines to support their cause in their conflict with the papacy. Catherine writes in this letter to him that “Christians have risen and are continuing to rise up in rebellion.” Yet it is clear from her remarks that Gregory XI is still in Avignon. One might connect the letter with the date Florence joined the antipapal league (24 July 1375), but given the mention of Christians “continuing to rise up in rebellion,” it seems more logical to associate it with the rebellion (on 12 March 1376) of Pisa and Lucca, cities Catherine has tried so hard to hold to the papal cause. And the call for Cardinal Corsini to roar like a lion to “help bring back to life the children lying dead” could well be related to his own city of Florence being placed under interdict by Gregory XI on 31 March, since the ecclesiastical penalty of interdict deprived the offender (in this case, the entire city) of access to the sacraments and public worship.

The linguistic evidence supports this choice far more strongly than the earlier date.² Also, a Lenten date would be consistent with the theme of Christ as the slain Lamb as well as with the Palm Sunday themes of kingship and humility. I would therefore guess that the letter was almost surely written between February and early April 1376, but most probably near Palm Sunday (6 April), thus putting it shortly after the above-mentioned events of 12 and 31 March.³

¹ MSS: Mo-c, B, P2, H, P1, P3, S2, P4, S4; translation based on Mo-c, with reference to H. Other variants based on Dupré Theseider.

² First, two of the three letters which share twenty-three or more of its eighty-two analyzed patterns are from February to March 1376 (the third from June to July 1375). An even stronger argument lies in the concentration of individual patterns which do not begin until early 1376: ARREND, GIACMORT, GIOCBRAC, MADCHIES, MORTDIST, PLACIRA, TORNIELL, VERIANUN.

³ Both Fawtier (II, p. 168) and Dupré Theseider place the letter in February or March 1376.