

## St. Catherine of Genoa

(CATERINA FIESCHI ADORNO.)

Born at Genoa in 1447, died at the same place 15 September, 1510. The life of St. Catherine of Genoa may be more properly described as a state than as a life in the ordinary sense. When about twenty-six years old she became the subject of one of the most extraordinary operations of God in the human soul of which we have record, the result being a marvellous inward condition that lasted till her death. In this state, she received wonderful revelations, of which she spoke at times to those around her, but which are mainly embodied in her two celebrated works: the "Dialogues of the Soul and Body", and the "Treatise on Purgatory". Her modern biographies, chiefly translations or adaptations of an old Italian one which is itself founded on "Memoirs" drawn up by the saint's own confessor and a friend, mingle what facts they give of her outward life with accounts of her supernatural state and "doctrine", regardless of sequence, and in an almost casual fashion that makes them entirely subservient to her psychological history. These facts are as follows:

St. Catherine's parents were Jacopo Fieschi and Francesca di Negro, both of illustrious Italian birth. Two popes — Innocent IV and Adrian V — had been of the Fieschi family, and Jacopo himself became Viceroy of Naples. Catherine is described as an extraordinarily holy child, highly gifted in the way of prayer, and with a wonderful love of Christ's Passion and of penitential practices; but, also, as having been a most quiet, simple, and exceedingly obedient girl. When about thirteen, she wished to enter the convent, but the nuns to whom her confessor applied having refused her on account of her youth, she appears to have put the idea aside without any further attempt. At sixteen, she was married by her parents' wish to a young Genoese nobleman, Giuliano Adorno. The marriage turned out wretchedly; Giuliano proved faithless, violent-tempered, and a spendthrift. And made the life of his wife a misery. Details are scanty, but it seems at least clear that Catherine spent the first five years of her marriage in silent, melancholy submission to her husband; and that she then, for another five, turned a little to the world for consolation in her troubles. The distractions she took were most innocent; nevertheless, destined as she was for an extraordinary life, they had the effect in her case of producing lukewarmness, the end of which was such intense weariness and depression that she prayed earnestly for a return of her old fervour. Then, just ten years after her marriage, came the event of her life, in answer to her prayer. She went one day, full of melancholy, to a convent in Genoa where she had a sister, a nun. The latter advised her to go to confession to the nuns' confessor, and Catherine agreed. No sooner, however, had she knelt down in the confessional than a ray of Divine light pierced her soul, and in one moment manifested her own sinfulness and the Love of God with equal clearness. The revelation was so overwhelming that she lost consciousness and fell into a kind of ecstasy, for a space during which the confessor happened to be called away. When he returned, Catherine could only murmur that she would put off her confession, and go home quickly.

From the moment of that sudden vision of herself and God, the saint's interior state seems never to have changed, save by varying in intensity and being accompanied by more or less severe penance, according to what she saw required of her by the Holy Spirit Who guided her incessantly. No one could describe it except herself; but she does so, minutely, in her writings, from which may here be made one short extract: — "[The souls in Purgatory] see all things, not in themselves, nor by themselves, but as they are in God, on whom they are more intent than on their own sufferings. . . . For the least vision they have of God overbalances all woes and all joys that can be conceived. Yet their joy in God does by no means abate their pain. . . . This process of purification to which I see the souls in Purgatory subjected, I feel within myself." (Treatise on Purgatory, xvi, xvii.) For about twenty-five years, Catherine, though frequently making confessions, was unable to open her mind for direction to anyone; but towards the end of her life a

Father Marabotti was appointed to be her spiritual guide. To him she explained her states, past and present, in full, and he compiled the "Memoirs" above referred to from his intimate personal knowledge of her. Of the saint's outward life, after this great change, her biographies practically tell us but two facts: that she at last converted her husband who died penitent in 1497; and that both before and after his death — though more entirely after it — she gave herself to the care of the sick in the great Hospital of Genoa, where she eventually became manager and treasurer. She died worn out with labours of body and soul, and consumed, even physically, by the fires of Divine love within her. She was beatified in 1675 by Clement X, but not canonized till 1737, by Clement XII. Meantime, her writings had been examined by the Holy Office and pronounced to contain doctrine that would be enough, in itself, to prove her sanctity.

## Sources

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The first published life, based on early MSS., is GENUTI, "Vita mirabile e dottrina santa della Beata Caterina da Genova" (Florence, 1551). Founded on the above: FLICHE, "St. Catherine de Genes, sa vie et son esprit" (1881); "Life and Doctrine of St. Catherine of Genoa" (Eng. Tr., New York, 1874). For a discussion of her doctrine, PARPERA, "Beata Caterina Genuensis illustrata (Genoa, 1682). See also BUTLER "Lives of the Saints", IX, 14 Sept., and a modern life by DE BUSSIÈRE.

## About this page

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