

Catherine of Siena: Spiritual Reform as Remedy for the Diseased Condition of Christendom

by Abbey Swanson

In this paper I will discuss the uncertain environment into which Catherine Benincasa was born — a period troubled by a perplexingly fatal disease, widespread complaints of elite corruption, and rumbles of division among Christians. Catherine was an Italian laywoman, now known as Saint Catherine of Siena, who became particularly influential in the realm of papal politics. Born in 1347, Catherine's first years were haunted by the Black Death, a disease that claimed millions of lives across Europe as waves resurged for nearly 500 years after the initial outbreak.¹ After a dream she had while in solitude, Catherine felt inspired by God to reform Christendom. This inspiration led to an involvement in public life for Catherine, and scholars have discussed her importance as a politician, but also as a spiritual writer and ascetic. However, no scholarship about Catherine's mission of reform in relation to the Black Death was found. This is logical, considering Catherine herself, whose own life had been disrupted by the disease, made no explicit mention of it. This paper analyzes Catherine's letters — which often criticized church and political authorities for allowing filth to invade Christendom — in the context of the larger environment created in the wake of the disease. The illness that plagued Europe, according to Catherine, was rooted in a spiritual ailment, which was worsened by the consequences of the Black Death and its successive waves. Many of Catherine's areas of spiritual reform, even down to the specific wording of her letters, either reflect areas of Christian society that were weakened as a result of the Black Death or relate to disease generally. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resemblance between our world and Catherine's is evident. This paper provides insights into the life of a mostly illiterate 14th century laywoman named Catherine Benincasa and the turbulent environment she saw need for reform in.

¹ Samuel K. Cohn Jr., "4 Epidemiology of the Black Death and Successive Waves of Plague," in *Medical History Journal Supplement* 27, no. 52 (2008): 74.