

A Daughter of Saint Catherine

A Comparison with Margaret Hallahan

SISTER MARY CATHERINE O.P. (S.M.C.)

On March the 25th 1347, in the Fontebranda, Siena, were born to Jacomo Benincasa and his wife Lapa, twin girls, the last of a family of twenty five. One, Giovanna, died shortly after birth, the other, Catherine, lived to become the glory of her city.

On January the 23rd 1802, over four and a half centuries later, in Saint Giles Rookery, one of London's slums, was born to Edmund Hallahan and his wife, Catherine, Margaret, the only child of poverty-stricken parents, but who grew up to be one of the very faithful followers of the dyer's daughter.

Both belonged to the people, but whereas one was the daughter of well-to-do parents, the other was the child of a casual—a very casual—labourer. Catherine died at the age of thirty three on April the 29th. Margaret doubled the life's span of her prototype and died on May the 11th at the age of sixty six.

Catherine's parents lived until she was a grown woman; Lapa in fact outlived her. Both Margaret's parents were dead by the time she was ten years old, and she was facing a hard life alone and friendless at an age when Catherine still had the shelter of a good home; though when she reached her teens and refused to consider marriage, life there was made none too easy for her.

Both were children of their own time insofar as Catherine's life was a succession of ecstasies and miracles, whereas the supernatural in Margaret's took an almost furtive character. One lived in a century when miracles and supernatural favours were in the accepted order of things, the other in a century of scepticism when everything out of the ordinary was questioned.

In this connection there is one detail of a remarkable likeness. Catherine wished to recite the Divine Office but could not read. She tried vainly to master the alphabet, but as all her efforts were fruitless, she said to God one day in prayer: 'Lord, if it be agreeable to thee that I may know how to read in order that I may recite the Divine Office and sing thy praises, vouchsafe to teach me, for I cannot learn of myself. If not, I am well content to remain in ignorance, or spend my time in such simple meditation as it shall please thee to grant'. God heard her

prayer and from that time on she was able to read any kind of writing as quickly and easily as the most experienced person.

Mrs. O'Shea, a schoolmistress, wrote of Mother Margaret. 'When she first went to Belgium she was much tried by her total ignorance of French and Flemish; in the latter the general instructions and sermons were given; and she felt she could not possibly learn it. But one day in the church she felt inspired to invoke the Holy Spirit for special light and grace to understand some lenten sermons soon to be given, and undertook to say the *Veni Creator* twice a day for that intention, rising every morning and going more than a mile to hear mass at five o'clock . . . She told me she went to the church and found she quite understood the sermon, and from that time found no more difficulty in the language'.

Both made a private vow of chastity, and in this also we have likeness and contrast. Saint Catherine made hers at the age of seven. She considered the matter for some days, praying to our Lady. Then she went into the most secret place she could find and made her vow at our Lady's hands and through her.

Margaret was about twenty years old when she began to realise her good looks and the effect they had on others. She was busy in the kitchen when it was irresistibly borne in on her that she wished to belong to our Lord only. There and then she knelt down by a kitchen chair and made her vow of chastity. After which she resumed her household work.

Saint Catherine and Mother Margaret were both professed Secular Tertiaries. During the last sixteen years of her life Mother Margaret founded a Congregation with five convents of the Third Order conventual. Though Saint Catherine remained a Tertiary, nevertheless she founded a convent of Dominican sisters at Belcaro on the site of a castle given to her by one of her disciples.

During the earlier part of their lives both were servants. When her family tried to break Catherine of her penitential way of life in order that she might marry and settle down, they deprived her of all solitude, took away her room and made her do the domestic work of the house. But in this work, ceaseless though it was, she only found another way of union with God. Hard necessity drove Margaret to work from her twelfth to her fortieth year. She was sent from the orphanage in Somers Town, where she went on the death of her father, because those in charge there had a quite erroneous notion that she had friends and relatives who would take care of her. She was given shelter first by

Madame Caulier who took her as a maid. Then she became house-keeper and later nurse to Doctor Morgan. Finally she served as nurse and servant to his married daughter, Mrs Thompson, both in England and in Belgium.

Roughly speaking, two thirds of the lives of both Saint Catherine and Margaret were spent in preparation, in the case of Saint Catherine, for ten years of what might be called high politics as ambassador and adviser of the Pope; in the case of Mother Margaret, for twenty four years spent in preparation for and inauguration of the English Congregation of Saint Catherine of Siena. Though of course there can be no comparison between Saint Catherine's field of labour and Mother Margaret's, in both cases the preparation was the same: years spent in deepening the interior life and allowing God to penetrate by his love into the very depths of the soul.

The reason is obvious. No one can lead others unless he first treads the way himself. An apostolic life must rest on the bedrock of contemplation, for no one can pass on the fruits of contemplation unless he has himself first learnt to contemplate. But if by contemplation the soul is first rooted in charity—the love of God—it does not matter in what diverse ways this charity shows itself.

Once, speaking of Saint Catherine, Mother Margaret said: 'Her one spirit was love, humility and sacrifice. There is no love where there is no sacrifice, and her whole life is an example of this. Let us imitate her, for all can do it. It needs not health or strength, but it needs the *will*. We are what our will is, and we are only masters of that, and none can will or not will for us, therefore our perfection is in our own hands, and we shall be judged accordingly'.

Father Austin Maltus, a Dominican who knew Mother Margaret well, writes of her . . . 'As the salvation of the world was only given by our Lord meriting this by his course of dire suffering and death, so all his great servants, who have had great works to found for the sanctification and salvation of souls, had to receive a greater plenitude of our Lord's suffering, first to purify them and then that they might receive the reward of merit necessary for perfecting their work.

'Her great mother Saint Catherine of Siena was perfected by suffering in the proportion necessary to raise her to the measure of the purity of divine Love, that she might merit the great graces then and since necessary for the exigencies of the Church and especially for the salvation of innumerable souls. There is a great similarity between the mother and the daughter in their spirit, life and suffering, with that

difference in degree of perfection and variety of formation which God gave to each according to his designs. Mother Margaret required a strong and powerful nature to bear the labours of founding, raising and doing a great work as she has done. And this gift of great physical power and energy, notwithstanding her infirmities, was best suited for our age—an age of flesh and decay of faith. Whereas in the time of Saint Catherine, though there was laxity in morals and great political emotions occasioning great evils, yet there was not the same measure of decay of faith, and hence the frailer body of Saint Catherine served better to display more vividly the supernatural gifts of God in her before a people who had eyes of faith to see and to be moved by the sight. Mother Margaret's type is best for our times, in which a good God has contrived to combine Saint Catherine's gifts with a powerfully formed frame.

'And yet, after this physique had served Mother Margaret for her work and even for her sanctification during a long life, the body and its exquisite nervous organisation was made use of in her long illness to serve as an instrument to raise her to that degree of similarity with her Mother that the comparison is just and appropriate'.

Archbishop Ullathorne, who knew her perhaps better than any one, also says of her: 'She had much of Saint Catherine's way of looking at the great destiny of souls, much of her vehement love for souls, much of her way of living in the Church and for the Church, much of her habit of taking an interest in and praying for those who rule and govern the Church, and especially was she like Saint Catherine in that she sought to know God in herself and herself in God . . .'

In Margaret, as in Saint Catherine, there was an intense love of the Church. 'The Church is none other than Christ Himself', Catherine tells Nicholas Soderini. And again in a letter to the magistrates of Lucca she writes: 'I entreat you then, my dear brothers, all of you children of holy Church, be firm and constant in what you have done . . . Keep faithful to him who alone is strong; and have no fellowship with those dead members who have separated themselves from the source of strength'.

Mother Margaret once told a religious: 'Let all who have to do with children instil into them a great love of holy Church. Do not use half measures yourselves; be bold and open in your profession of loyalty to the Church; let us have no compromises'.

A prayer of Saint Catherine's uttered while she was in ecstasy and written down by the papal notary who was present, proves her devo-

tion to the Vicar of Christ. 'O ineffable Deity! I am all sin and unworthy to address thee, but thou canst make me worthy. O Lord punish my sins and regard not my miseries. I have one body and to thee I give it; behold my blood; behold my flesh; destroy it, annihilate it, separate it bone from bone, for the sake of those for whom I pray. If it be thy will, cause my bones and my very marrow to be ground to pieces for thy Vicar on earth, the bridegroom of thy spouse, for whom I pray; that thou wilt deign to hear me, and that he, thy Vicar, may both know thy will and love it, and perform it, to the end that we may not perish'.

After visiting Rome on business concerned with the papal approval of her Constitutions, Mother Margaret once said: 'I am afraid of saying what I really feel about the pope, lest I should scandalise people. I wanted to kneel there (in Saint Peter's in Rome) and look at him for hours. There was all that was most great and powerful upon earth—the man before whom all things are as nothing! And when I heard him sing mass I cannot express what I felt; it was the god of the earth prostrate in adoration before the God of heaven!'

Both were alike in the love of the Order to which they belonged. Saint Catherine describes the glorious Father Saint Dominic guiding the ship of his Order and 'desiring that his sons should seek no other thing than the glory of God and the salvation of souls . . . And he made his Order a royal Order, large, joyous and odoriferous, as a delightful garden'.

Mother Margaret said: 'The feeling I have of belonging to the Order has been planted there by God deep down in my soul . . . This is not the thought of a day, nor is it an affection for any individual belonging to the Order, but it was innate in my soul many years before coming to England; so it must have been put there by God. I did not choose the Dominican Order, but God in his mercy and for his own wise reasons forced me into it and I have reason to bless Him for it'.

In both devotion was simple, straightforward and free. In her last testament to her children, Saint Catherine says on this subject: that 'God had shown her that none can ever arrive at perfection, nor acquire true virtue save by means of humble, faithful and continual prayer, which she said is the mother that conceives and nourishes all true virtues in the soul; and without it all languish and fade away. To which prayer she exhorted us most earnestly to apply ourselves, declaring that there were two kinds thereof, namely, vocal and mental prayer. To vocal prayer, she said, we should attend at the appointed hours; but to

mental prayer continually, striving always to know ourselves and God's great goodness to us'.

Of Mother Margaret, Archbishop Ullathorne wrote: 'God alone! This was the first of her principles both in contemplation and action. There is nothing like prayer. This was a second and necessary consequence of the first. You cannot truly love God without loving souls. This was the third principle which completed the circle of her wisdom. And God alone, God as present within the soul, God as there communing with her, God as there illuminating her way, as there inspiring her with His eternal love, and His divine will, God as the centre and spring of virtue, this great and glorious God, so near her heart, was the one sovereign object of attraction to Mother Margaret's soul, was the one motive and reason of her inner life and outward conduct'.

Our Lord himself kindled the love of souls in Saint Catherine's heart by showing her the beauty of a soul in a state of grace. 'How sayst thou, daughter, is not this a fair and beautiful soul which through thy care has been recovered from the hands of the enemy? What man or woman would refuse to suffer somewhat for the winning of so noble a creature? If I, the Sovereign Beauty, was nevertheless so overcome by the love and beauty of a man's soul that I refused not to come down from heaven and to suffer labour and reproaches for many years, and in the end to shed my blood for his redemption, how much more ought you to labour one for another, and do what in you lyeth for the recovery of a soul?'

In a Christmas letter to her daughters, Mother Margaret speaks in much the same terms. 'It is a great condescension of our dear Lord to employ us in the same work he came to accomplish—the salvation of souls . . . If we love God, we must love souls and work for them too as our Lord did. It requires sacrifice, and of this he gave one continual example. He lived a life of continual sacrifices and died a sacrifice of love for souls on the altar of the Cross. This must animate us to work and to suffer. It is all very well to be fine in our words, and to speak of the good of saving souls, but this will not save us . . . We must work and suffer, pray and love, and do all we can, with our dear hidden Lord to help us, to save souls'.

Both Saint Catherine and Mother Margaret died as victims for the salvation of souls. Saint Catherine, as befitted the greater, offered herself for Rome and the end of the schism. Mother Margaret, in her lesser degree, but still wholly selflessly, said herself that she was suffering for her youngest and best loved convent in the slums at Bow Road;

but in truth she was a victim for her whole congregation with its five convents.

In both cases the last words that those standing round heard the dying woman say aloud were: 'Lord, into Thy hands I commend my spirit'.

Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini¹

J. H. WHITFIELD

And how should Aeneas Sylvius not be the first to beckon? When on the opening page of that bulky folio (Bâle 1551) there is a formula so close to us: that one should be grown up at twenty, prudent at thirty, rich at forty? Measure that formula against Dante, or even Petrarch (whom it might fit, yet who could not have uttered it), and you will see why Aeneas Sylvius claims kinship forward, more than back. The quality of his mind was also therefore sceptical, as witness that little anecdote on Scotland. 'I had heard once there was a tree in Scotland which growing on the river bank produced fruits in the shape of ducklings; and these when they reach maturity fall of their own accord, some on the land, some in the water; and those that fall on the ground rot, but those falling in the water soon come to life and straight away fly up into the air with wings and feathers. But when I eagerly investigated this thing I learnt that miracles flee ever farther off, and that the famous tree was not in Scotland but in the islands of the Arcades.' You see by that how far he set his foot. But his eye goes even further. His *Cosmography* was never finished, his *Asia* was limited, on the whole, to Asia Minor; though it ends with the eager note of discovery: 'if life is given me I have decreed to cover the site and peoples of the world'. And already, despite the limitations of his *Asia*, his gaze extends to the Irrawaddy and Peking; while in our north he for the first time enters the Baltic on the map, which none of the ancients knew. And elsewhere offers *unknown land* to the appetite of the Quattrocento, with affirmation of the circumnavigability of Africa as far as the Arabian Gulf and

¹A lecture given to the Society for Italian Studies. Pope Pius II canonized St Catherine.