

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 356: The Blood-Drinking Bride of Christ

Become for me a mirror of virtue, following in the footsteps of the crucified Christ. Bathe yourself in the blood of the crucified Christ, and thereby, for the length of your life such as my wish, do nothing but seek out the crucified one, and make of him the great object of your longing like a true bride, bought with the blood of the crucified Christ. For you can see with your own eyes that you are become his bride, and that he has married you, and every creature not with a ring of silver, but with the very ring of his flesh. O depth and height of love are not terrible, how profoundly you have loved this bride of yours, the human race. O life through which all things do live, you have plucked humanity from the clasp of the devil, who previously had possessed it as his own, and made it one with your flesh through marriage. Your blood you have given us a pledge, and by offering your body as a sacrifice you have made the necessary payment. Therefore, my daughter, drink deep of Christ's blood. So that song, that song was a Hammer Horror film, that was actually a letter in your notes, it says written by to a nun. So either written by or to a nun, in Pisa by the 14th century Saint, Catherine of Siena. Now, Tom, who is Catherine of Siena? Because I actually don't know. Well, you know that she's someone I've been wanting to do a podcast on for a long, long time. You have, and I've always said, why? Well, okay, she is a very, very significant figure in the church, and I'm aware that I'm not selling it there, but she has become a saint within less than a century of her life. She is one of the very first female doctors of the church, so she's a figure of immense significance to the Catholic Church, but I'm aware that that's probably not enough for you as a russet-coated yeoman of the shires with Protestant inclinations. I'm aware also that that letter that you've just read that she wrote, full of stuff about drinking blood and Washington blood and everything, that again, this isn't entirely the kind of thing that say Oliver Cromwell would have gone for, your great hero. No, I can't imagine him liking that at all. And if it's not the slight hint of the vampiric in it, I think what makes it even odder, perhaps to the modern gaze, is all that stuff about her marrying Christ. I mean, people think of nuns as brides of Christ. Catherine Sienna is not a nun. She literally means that she has married Christ. Mrs. Christ, right. And she wears his wedding ring and that very ring of his flesh. You know what that is. Talk me through it, Tom. That is his circumcised foreskin. Great. And she's living in the 14th century. Is that right? She's living in the 14th century. So, at the very least, it's quite withered. No, because it's miraculous. It's miraculously preserved. It's not any sort of withered. It's bleeding as well. So, there's blood on her finger. So, all of this may to us seem very weird. And I think that the weirdness alone makes her a very interesting figure, but I would make much higher claims for her. So, she lives through the 14th century, which is a period of great convulsions. And she is probably the most significant geopolitical player in this period. She's kind of Greta Thunberg cubed. Bigger than kings, Tom. She becomes a key player in attempting to resolve the fractures within Italy. And she has a seismic influence on the history of the papacy, which of course is very influential in medieval Europe. So, I would say that she is one of the three or four most significant women to have lived in Medieval Christendom in terms of her kind of influence. And on top of that... Top two or three biggest in history, let's say. Shall we say that? I wouldn't go that far. But also, all the stuff that she's going on there, particularly about

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food, about drinking blood, about all this kind of thing, she's fascinating as a mirror held up to male attitudes to women, how women see themselves, how women understand their relationship to God

and their fellow human beings. I mean, she's a really, really, really interesting figure.

So, thank you for giving me the chance to make the case for this.

Tom, I cannot wait. I am beside myself with excitement. So, how do you want to start?

Bit of background, perhaps.

I love a bit of background.

Because the context is very important. So, listeners may have heard the episodes we did on the Hundred Years War in the 14th century. And we conveyed the sense then that the 14th century is not a great time to be alive. It's a very kind of turbulent period.

So, Catherine is born, as her name implies, in Siena in Italy on the 25th of March, 1347.

And the backdrop to Europe is pretty terrible. There are famines. The weather has gone, the climate has kind of gone into decline, so the bad harvests, people are increasingly on the kind of the margins of famine. North of the Alps in France, the Hundred Years War is starting to rage. You're starting to get those free companies, you know, the kind of bodies of men-at-arms and archers who are starting to kind of strip the French countryside bare.

And there is a risk, you know, and it's a risk that will turn out to be a very live one, that they might start to cross the Alps and come into Italy.

And if you are a devout Christian, which most people in Christendom in this period are, there is the spectacle of what is called the Babylonian captivity of the papacy.

So, basically, the papacy which, as listeners will know, is based in Rome.

In the 14th century, it's migrated to the city of Avignon in southern France. It's not actually a part of the kingdom of France, but it has come massively under French influence.

So, it was a French pope who kind of left Italy behind, moved to Avignon. And Avignon has become a kind of, well, they call it Babylonian captivity, because Avignon seems a place of enormous wealth and depravity. So, there are kind of great gardens and banqueting halls, and the pope even has his own private steam room. And so, there's a feeling that the pope shouldn't be in this kind of place of luxury. He should be back in Rome.

The Papal Palace in Avignon, for those people who haven't been, is an absolutely splendid building. I mean, it's a terrifically imposing and impressive building, isn't it, Tom? But that's kind of the problem.

Yeah. But that's the problem, because the pope is meant to be living in the heart and sort of talking to God instead of fine wines and tapestries.

He's supposed to be living in Rome, which is the seat of St Peter.

Okay. So, Tom, that's the pope. He's off there in Avignon. But what about Siena, where, I mean, Siena famously, this most apt exquisite of cities, and a republic, I think?

Yeah. So, at this time, it's a republic. So, Italy is fragmented into kind of tiny city states, a bit like ancient Greece. Siena, its territory borders Florence, which is its great rival.

But Siena is rich and sophisticated enough that it can go toe to toe with Florence in its golden age. So, Siena really is enjoying a golden age at this time as well.

Yeah. And it gets its wealth from wool, from manufacturing of clothes, but above all from banking. So, it's one of the kind of the engine rooms of the starting of capitalism in Europe.

And this enables it, the wealth that accrues from this enables it to adorn itself with absolutely

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splendid buildings. So, kind of great towers, an ability by great kind of platos everywhere. And there's an enormous platso publico. So, this is the headquarters for the republic. And the great patron of Siena is the Virgin Mary.

Right. So, in the platso publico, in the very room where the government does its business, there's a kind of great painting of the Virgin with the Christ child. And then beyond it, you have the Campo, the kind of open square. And it's said to emulate the kind of the outline of the cloak of the Virgin. Oh, nice. I did not know that. That's very good.

Yeah, it's very nice. So, it's a very wealthy, very devout city. And perhaps the ultimate symbol of this is the building project that the city fathers have embarked on a few years before Catherine is born in 1347, which is to basically double the size of the city's cathedral. So, work on that begins in 1339. And as Catherine is being born, the city is heaving with builders embarking on this great project of renewing and expanding the cathedral.

However, Dominic, I know you love a gathering storm cloud.

I did see that in your notes. And I thought, the amount of grief you give me about gathering, about storm clouds, like storm of war or whatever. And then,

Well, I thought you'd enjoy it because I knew you were a bit hesitant about this subject. So, I just wanted to make you feel at home. Yeah, I absolutely do feel at home.

So, there are gathering storm clouds, Dominic. So, I feel at home already because I've actually been to Siena Cathedral in Assassin's Creed. So, I will find. Yeah, I'm laughing. It was brilliant. Is it being built at the? I think you're fighting the Borges there, actually.

Okay. A subject that we will return to in the rest of history.

Yes, we will be. Okay. So, as Catherine is being born, to repeat, the storm clouds are gathering. So, again, listeners to our episodes on 100 Years War may remember that Edward III has borrowed enormous amounts of money from Italian bankers to fund his war effort. And he defaults in 1345. And there's a kind of massive financial crash that particularly hits Florence, but the ripple effect of that hits Siena as well. So, people are kind of going bust. There are a military reverses. So, Sienna loses a battle against Florence. And then in 1348, so a year after Catherine has been born, the biggest disaster of all hits Sienna, which is, of course, the Black Death. Yeah. So, that arrives in Sienna in May, 1348, which is a month after it's hit Florence. And the Sienes are aware it's coming. They try and impose a very strict quarantine kind of Jacinda Arden style attempt to preserve the people of Sienna from infection, but it doesn't work. The Black Death comes in, people start dropping ill, shops close up, the courts close down, the wool industry goes into deep freeze, plague pits are dug everywhere. And there's a contemporary chronicler who says he describes people kind of walking around

and then just dropping dead with the distinctive swellings under the arms and in the groin. They fell dead while talking. And there is a kind of enduring monument to the scale of the crisis, of the impact of the Black Death on Sienna, which is that they abandon the building of the Cathedral. So, to this day, it remains unbuilt. But also, there's a sense, isn't there, of sort of public, well, religiosity reaching a peak, because people are begging God for help and they flagellate themselves to their sins or flagellate themselves. But aren't they doing processions and preachers wittering on about God is judging you and all this stuff? Yes. So, it absolutely turbocharges a sense that God is angry, God has to be appeased, people need to look into their souls. So, this is the world that Catherine is born into. And she loses several of her brothers

and sisters to the Black Death. And also, it impacts her father because he is a dire. So, you know, the kind of clothing industry, the wool trade is very important to him. And so, that gets hit by the Black Death. But he, I mean, he is well off. He's kind of an upwardly mobile guy and he rides out the impact of the Black Death and his business survives it. So, Catherine is born into this kind of upwardly mobile family. And her mother, Lapa, according to Raymond of Capua, who is Catherine Siena's biographer and also her kind of spiritual advisor, writes up her life after her death, he describes Lapa filling the house with children like a fruitful bee. That's a nice image. Yeah. And she seems to have had 25 children in all. Not all of them survive, as we'll find out. 25. Yeah. And she has Catherine and a twin sister when she's kind of in her early 40s. And they're born prematurely. Lapa breastfeeds Catherine herself. And actually, she's the only, the only one of her daughters who she breastfeeds. And Catherine seems to have been her favorite. And the other twin sister, Giovanna, is sent out to a wet nurse and she dies shortly afterwards. And then after Catherine and Giovanna have been born, a last daughter is born to Lapa and her husband. And she is given Giovanna's name. So, for Catherine growing up, there is a kind of reminder of the absence of her twin in this younger sister. That was not uncommon, Tom, I think. Was it? No. But that was quite common that if a child died, you would reuse the name later on. Yeah. But kind of interesting just to think what the impact of that might have been on Catherine. Yeah. Anyway, so she is actually a very happy child. She's kind of given the nickname in Greek of Mary. She's kind of, you know, running around the house, able to run out into the streets, have fun. Chuckling. Chuckling, all that kind of famous five activity out with her brothers, all this kind of thing. And masking smugglers. Yes. And she has an elder sister to whom she's very devoted, called Bonaventura. And Bonaventura is married off, as of course it's expected Catherine will be. And her husband is a bit of a lad, a bit of a rake, very kind of loose and dissipated. And Bonaventura doesn't approve of this. And so she basically shames him into reforming his life by going on a kind of hunger strike. Crikey. Yeah. And so this works. But Bonaventura is very into her clothes. She loves her fashion. And she gets Catherine very interested in fashion. So Catherine's kind of 14, 15 by this point, starting to get interested in clothes. And Raymond of Capua, her biographer, does not approve of this at all. And he describes of the way that Bonaventura has been getting Catherine into fashion. Almighty God unable to bear the sight of his chosen bride being drawn even the slightest bit further away from him, himself removed the obstacle that was preventing her from uniting herself with him. For Bonaventura, having led her holy sister into the ways of vanity, shortly afterwards found herself about to give birth and young as she was, died in doing so. Right. So. If she's been Catherine's big sister, in every sense, kind of introducing her. Much loved. They're much loved. Then that could be a bit of a psychological blow for, well, a big psychological blow for Catherine. Yes. And all the more so because her parents want her to marry Bonaventura's widower, the Reformed lad. And she doesn't fancy that. She does not fancy that at all. And that is basically because she has already decided that she is giving herself over to God. Because from a very young age, kind of five or six, she has been having visions of Christ. One day she's out with her brother, you know, solving crimes and foiling smugglers and all that kind of thing. And then suddenly she sees this vision of Christ absolutely thrown in a blaze of glory. And she's so startled that she looks away and then she looks back and it's gone and

the vision has gone. But it gives us this kind of yearning to see Christ again. And so she starts praying to Christ. She starts praying to the Virgin. She is particularly inspired by the great saints of Egypt, among whom is someone who has her name, Catherine, Catherine of Alexandria, who is martyred by being tied to a wheel. So as in the Catherine wheel that you get in firework displays. And Catherine had a kind of mystical marriage to Christ. So this is obviously something that's playing on the mind of the young Catherine of Siena, this idea that a Catherine, if you are sufficiently saintly, you know, you can end up marrying Christ himself. And so she starts to embark on increasingly kind of ascetic behavior. She starts to starve herself. She starts to scourge herself. She basically starts to kind of mortify the flesh. And this is in her mid teens, Tom. So this is in her mid teens. So even as she is kind of being tempted by Bonaventura to try on kind of dresses, she's also, you know, being tempted to go the other way. That kind of saintly direction is then massively amplified by the pressure she gets from her parents to marry Bonaventura's widower. Because basically she's hitting puberty and she's being pressured by her parents to, you know, titivate herself and to attract men. And she's suddenly she's not being allowed to go and roam the streets anymore. She can only allowed out with a chaperone. And she hates it. And so she commits herself very, very radically to virginity. And the devil, Raymond of Capua says, kind of tempts her by bringing her vile pictures of men and women behaving loosely before her mind and foul figures before her eyes and obscene words to her ears, shameless crowds dancing around her howling and sniggering and inviting her to join them. But Dominic, she never does. So there's an awful lot going on here, Tom. And I think to a 21st century reader, what's going on seems fairly obvious, doesn't it? Well, I think we'll come to what might be going on a bit later on, but just to continue the description of what is happening in Catherine's life. And, you know, the fact that she is not only kind of committing herself to virginity, but she is also trying to suppress basically her femininity. So she cuts her hair off very short. She tries to make herself look ugly. She starves herself, I mean, very, very severely. She starts to wear a chain around her waist. Her parents are very anxious about this. I mean, they're kind of worried about her. Her mother takes her off to a spa with hot springs to see if, you know, this might help her out. And she deliberately schools herself in the hot springs. And she basically, she refuses to go to sleep as well. And she stays up all night kind of doing the work of a servant, doing the laundry, doing the housework. And when her mother forces her to come to bed, to share a bed with her mother so that she can't get up, she secretes a plank underneath the mattress, or she'll kind of creep out of bed to lie on the floor. So basically, this is, I mean, this is overtly a rebellion against her parents, against what her parents want for her, because her parents want for her, what most parents in this period want for their daughter. They want them to marry them off. They want them to kind of become wives and mothers. It's very clear that this is very overtly what Catherine is rebelling against. And Catherine feels that in kind of embarking on this, she is not alone because Christ is with her. So now Christ is appearing to her a lot. He's visiting her in her own room and she's not being made to sleep with her mother. She has her own room. And he is appearing to her nailed on the cross with all the markers of the torture inflicted on him. So there's a lot of blood. And he starts talking to her in increasingly intimate terms. And Raymond has this very kind of sweet description of the conversation between Catherine and Christ. Generally, he came and talked to Catherine as one friend to another. So much so, she shyly confessed to me,

that is, that is Raymond, that they would say the psalms together, walking up and down the little room, like two religious brothers saying their offices. So very sweet. One quick question. Is he still on the cross? He's walking up and down? No, Dominic. That's the question I would put to Raymond at this point. That's such a protestant question. He's kind of hopping up and down. No, I imagine he comes down from the cross, but I imagine he's still bleeding would be my suggestion. Well, I'm sure that definitely happened. So he's leaving blood all over the floor. Yeah. Which Catherine's written, you know, she loves that. Right. And the result of this is a miracle that the previously illiterate Catherine is able to read. That is an unexpected boon. And she becomes very, very kind of scholarly. So, you know, her writings of what ultimately in the long run will make her one of the doctors of the church. And she, you know, she hadn't been taught to read at all. And the ultimate fruit of this is that she ends up marrying Jesus. So David, you know, who writes the Psalms, he plays the harp. Oh, he's there now. He's there too. Yeah. Well, at the wedding. So he comes. Is this still in her room? This is all in her room. Yeah. Okay. I mean, Raymond Capriccio said it was a little room. So it must be getting pretty crowded in there. But it's miraculous, Dominic. You're entering the dimension of the supernatural. Oh, yeah. Okay. So St. Paul is a witness. Mary, the Virgin Mary leads her up to Christ. And Christ, you know, takes her by his hand and gives her his foreskin and puts it on her finger. Yeah. And they are married. It sounds such a lovely, what a lovely day. Yeah. Yeah. And then Christ orders her to go out into the world and to manifest to her family, to the people of Siena, and in the long run to the world, this kind of awesome power that she has been endowed with. And it becomes evident to her parents that they are not going to get her to marry. So basically, they kind of, they accept her vocation. And she joins the Dominicans, you know, this order that had been set up by your namesake Dominic, St. Dominic, originally to combat the Albigensians. But she doesn't join them as a nun. She's a kind of lay, a lay sister. And she commits herself utterly to the service of the poor, which is quite annoying for her parents, because every time they have any money or food in the house, she kind of takes it and gives it out to the starving or the sick. Right. So, Tom, a question that you will probably think a Protestant question. So this is not a money making scheme by her parents, quite the reverse. They're losing money rather than gaining it. Completely. They're completely losing her money. At one point, her father has brought in some really top quality wine. Catherine immediately takes it and kind of hands it out to beggars. And her father is furious about this. And then miraculously, you know, the cask starts flowing with wonderful wine. And everyone can come in and share it. So maybe, I mean, who knows? But definitely people think that miracles are happening and that displays of charity are spectacular. And she goes out there and she performs miracles. She heals the sick. A particular trick of hers is to restore milk to the breasts of women whose breasts have gone dry. She makes bread from rotten wheat. And these loaves then multiply, rather as the miracles that Christ himself had done. And on one occasion, her mother seems to die and Catherine complains to God and her mother comes back to life. So that's all very spectacular. And then when Lapa dies, Christ himself gives her Mary Magdalene to be her mother. So that's nice. Okay. But the greatest miracle of all that she performs, and which is very, very obvious and very spectacular, is her fasting. She really, really starts to not eat anything at all, pretty much. And it's this that really, really starts to get attention, because it's kind of a spectacular display of asceticism and self-abnegation. And this, you know, she started to exercise power within her own house. Her parents are increasingly in awe of

her.

But her holiness becomes something that people in Siena start to be very proud of and very respectful

of. And they start to hail her as a Donna, a free woman. So this is supposedly an illiterate daughter of a dyer. And increasingly, she is becoming, as she describes herself, the owner and mistress of herself. And she sees herself as being the pilot of a great ship on the tempestuous sea that is this life of shadows. And this gives her power. So in 1371, there are great riots throughout Siena. And Catherine walks through the riots and brings peace to the streets. 1374, plague returns to Siena. Catherine, again, does spectacular and miraculous healings throughout this outbreak of the plague. And in 1375, she goes to Pisa, which is when she writes to that nun that we opened the episode with. And there she, she persuades the people of Pisa and the people of the neighboring city of Lucca to abandon a league against the Pope and to sign up to the authority of the Pope. So she's starting to become a figure within the politics of Italy. And it's at this time that she starts writing to the Pope himself, Gregory XI, who is off in Avignon, exhorting him to return to Rome. And Gregory XI kind of, you know, he takes her letters, he replies to them, and he comments about her letters that they have an intolerably dictatorial tone, a little sweetened with expressions of her perfect Christian deference, which is obviously very, very kind of Catherine. And then the following year, in 1376, she actually goes to Avignon. She's been sent by Florence, you know, so an amazing tribute to a woman from the Florentine's great enemy of Sienna. Catherine goes to Avignon as their ambassador. And even though

once she has kind of smoothed things for the Florentines, the Florentines dismiss her as an ambassador. She has met the Pope and the Pope is incredibly, incredibly taken with her. He finds her

amazingly impressive. And sure enough, in January 1377, the miraculous happens. He leaves Avignon

for Rome. It seems as though the Babylonian exile of the papacy is over. And people absolutely feel that it is Catherine who has affected this. So you can say of Catherine that she is seen by people in a tormented world to be a living symbol of sanctity, a living symbol of the fact that God can animate the dimension of the human. And that this sanctity is having a measurable impact on the geopolitics of the age. So I mean, that is, I think, amazing. And you may well wonder, well, two things, I guess, how is she able to leverage this? And what is going on in her mind? What is all this stuff about? Blood and things?

Tom, let us end on this thrilling cliffhanger. Or rather, let's take a break on this thrilling cliffhanger. We'll be back in just a few minutes and you can explain the answers to these exciting questions. See you in a second. Welcome back to the Restless History. We're talking about Catherine of Siena for Tom Holland, one of the two most important women in all history. And Tom, what is going on there? So there are obvious explanations, I would say. I mean, even without looking at your notes where you've written down the various possibilities, I would have said the obvious explanations are number one, this really happened. All these people did climb into her bedroom for this extraordinary wedding ceremony. There was loads of blood, all that. That's all real. That is what Catholics believe. Right. And number two is she is a deeply troubled teenager. There's been all the stuff with her dead twin, with her dead sister, with the pressure from her parents to get married. She is going through a whole series of kind of mental health issues that

are very familiar to us in the 21st century. And she's living through a time of enormous political fragmentation, anxiety about the Black Death. All of these things and that the people of Siena and beyond are projecting onto her, they're making of her what they need, which is a saintly figure who will give them a sense of salvation, unity, whatever. The Pope was probably going to go to Rome anyway. So steer us through it. I have no knowledge of this at all. So I'm just guessing. No, you're right. There are two obvious explanations. One is that it's all true. It all happened. That's why she's a saint. And the other is exactly that you look back and you medicalise it. And you read through the accounts that are written of her, look at her own letters, look at the life written of her by her confessor Raymond of Capua. And all these kinds of details, as you said, you highlighted the fact that she probably feels and perhaps a measure of guilt that she has lived and her twin sister has died. And her twin sister has died because she didn't have the milk. Oh, yeah, of course. Her mother's milk and she did. So maybe there's something going on there. The thing of her favourite sister, starving herself to persuade her husband to behave and then dying in childbirth, that again, this kind of thing that you, a psychologist would probably say that that might encourage her to feel that food can be used as a tool, as a weapon, and also to feel that marriage and childbirth is something dangerous and threatening. Yeah, to give her a dread of sex, presumably.

Yeah, but also a dread of food. So I'm not a psychologist at all. And I talk with some hesitation about this. I mean, I've read scholars who have written about this. So I will say what they say, which is that it's fairly clear that the modern diagnosis of Catherine would be that she is suffering from anorexia. She is progressively starving herself. So from the age of 16, so exactly the age when her parents are starting to pressure her to marry, she is eating nothing except bread, raw vegetables, all she's drinking is water. And then from her early 20s, it becomes really, really severe. So she's eating bitter herbs, which she will chew up and then often just spit out. She's having the Eucharist, so the wafer, the bread that is supposedly the body of Christ, and again, water. So I mean, this is very, very severe. And she is told by Christ herself, she says, after their marriage, that she has to go back to her parents' table and eat. And she tries to obey him. But she can't take food down and say there are, again, the reports that she will stick twigs down the back of her throat to make herself vomit, to throw up food. And so Raymond of Capua says specifically, her stomach could no longer digest food. He says it's a medical condition. And so the question then is, is there a way of negotiating these two extremes? Because one is very much bread of the 14th century. It's bread of an age where it is absolutely assumed that Christ could appear to those who are particularly saintly. And our age is much more skeptical. It's much more secular. It's much more prone to kind of medicalize everything. Is there a way of kind of walking that tightrope of perhaps of squaring those circles? And there is one book in particular, which I highly commend to anyone who's interested,

not just in Catherine, but in, I mean, basically, the whole field of the mindset of the middle ages. And it's a book by a great scholar called Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast, the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. And it is really superb. It's not just about Catherine, but Catherine kind of is at the heart of the analysis. And it's brilliant at looking how there are things about Catherine that are very, very culturally specific. It's bread of things that are very, very specific to the age. And that therefore, to say, well, she was anorexic is very reductive. And indeed, almost anachronistic. Because that's not to deny that she probably

was

anorexic. But it's also to recognize that there were people in the middle ages who understood that they had a sense of eating disorders. They recognized that there were people who, and particularly girls, who might starve themselves out of opposition to their parents or because they were ill. I mean, they did understand that. Catherine's contemporaries did not think that this is what she was, even though Catherine herself recognized that there was an element of infirmity about it, that her inability to digest food was a kind of medical complaint. So just to say she's anorexic does not really get to grips with the complexity of what is going on here. So essentially, I said at the beginning that this is a time when there is increasing famine across Europe. Parvists are failing. And it's a subsistence era. So food is a constant obsession for people. The threat of starvation is omnipresent. And so there's a sense in the middle ages that almost the deadliest of the deadly sins is gluttony, and that to renounce food is the kind of ultimate renunciation. And this is particularly true for women, because it is women in the medieval household who are charged with the provision of food, with the cooking of it, with the preparation of it, with the serving of it. And therefore, because of that, a woman who renounces food, her renunciation is much more visible, say than that of a man. And it's evident that Catherine is, it's not just that she's cutting off her hair and refusing to marry. By rejecting food, she is elevating herself as a woman above the normal rank of women. Oh, that's interesting. This is why she's becoming a donor paradoxically. A free woman. She's elevating herself above her social rank by doing that. So if you're a gender theorist or something, you could have a field day with all this, right? She is rebelling against her gender role. It's not just that she's troubled by sexuality or whatever, but she is actually actively resisting and subverting the role, cutting her hair, presumably dressing, well, what's so fascinating, having initially been obsessed with clothes and fashion, she then veers to the other extreme, rebels against it. She wears the habit of a Dominican. Yeah, she's absolutely not kind of celebrating fashion. But there's a further dimension, Dominic, and I know how much you love discussion of transubstantiation. Oh, I would. Your face drops. So people who listen to our episode on the Grail may remember that the 12th, the 13th, and then particularly the 14th century is a period where the sense that Christ is literally present in the bread and the wine that is given to people at the Eucharist. This is very, very kind of powerfully felt. And Tom, could that, if I was being very skeptical and reductive as I love to be, is that related maybe to the fact that Europe is suffering such intense food shortages in this period? Yes. In the Grail episode, I talked about the kind of, there were various, and there were always women who were able to live solely off the Eucharist, it was said. And there was this idea that the fact that Christ is present in the bread means that it is the ultimate form of sustenance. And that's why Catherine does this as well. There are times where basically she's eating nothing except the Eucharist. So all that stuff in the opening passage about drink his blood that sounds vampiric to us, for Catherine to eat and drink Christ is to know him. So she is experiencing Christ in a kind of multiple number of ways with her mind, but also with her senses. She's tasting him, she is feeling him. And she feels this absolutely vividly. But because she is a woman, she is able to push this to extremes that men can't, because the idea that you can marry Christ, you know, this is something that nuns have, this is something that men can't do. So men have this, they definitely have this sense that

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even though women are subordinate in medieval society, that very subordination, the fact that their bodies are primed as men see it, for marriage to men, for childbirth, for submitting to men, that in a sense this gives them an elevated understanding of Christ. It kind of hardwires them for the experience of the supernatural, the experience of Christ himself. And the Dominicans, interestingly, particularly understood this. So I suspect that this is why Catherine becomes a Dominican. The Dominicans understand that, you know, Christ says the last shall become first,

that there is a kind of power in the subordination of women. And this is the great paradox of Christianity. It's the paradox that Nietzsche, many centuries later, will pick up on. And it's a paradox, I think, that's very evident now. The idea that to be subordinate, to be weak, to be inferior relative to those who have status, is itself a source of power. You know, if you are a victim, then you can leverage that to attain a status that is greater than those who are not victims. That would never happen in the 21st century, Tom.

Right. But this, I think, is why it's so interesting that Catherine seems a figure who is so remote from us, and so alien, and all this, you know, the language in which she's expressing it is so strange. And yet, it is, I think, recognizable. And I think it's what the Pope is, you know, when he says she is, you know, she's very kind of, you know, verging on arrogance

when she writes to me, while simultaneously being very humble, that the humility and the arrogance are kind of intertwined for the Pope. I'm just going to come out and say it, it's so Greta Thunberg, isn't it? Yeah. I mean, I think there is an element of that.

And so the fact that Catherine is seen as having married Christ at a time when the world seems abandoned by God, you know, this is what basically is the kind of the source of her power, because she's kind of literally been absorbed into the flesh of Christ. So, you know, the foreskin, the bleeding foreskin that's been put on her hand, this has become part of her body.

And she starts to display stigmata, so the marks of the wounds that Christ suffers on the cross. And there is an absolutely stunning moment that illustrates this.

This is a stunning moment. Stunning moment. So, Catherine brings herself to drink the pass from the diseased breast of a lay sister. And she really obviously has to kind of screw up her courage to do this. And she does it as a mark of humility. And she says that it is the sweetest thing that she has ever tasted, that it's radiant with the sweetness of heaven. And Christ then appears

to her in a vision and offers her the wound in his side. As you have gone beyond what mere human nature could ever have achieved, he tells Catherine after she has drunk this pass. So, I today shall give you a drink that transcends imperfection, any that human nature can provide, drawn close to the

outlet of the fountain of life, Raymond writes. She fastened her lips upon that sacred wound and still more eagerly the mouth of her soul and there she slacked her thirst. So, this is an image of Christ as a mother. You know, he is effectively offering her his breast to drink from. And this becomes one of the favourite images that Catherine repeats over and over again in her letters. But I mean, it's not just that. Dominic pulling a very protestant face.

It's not just that though, is it, Tom? I mean, such an obvious sexual dimension to this, isn't there? I mean, no, you don't think there is? It's a massively unerotic. There isn't really any erotic quality in her letters or writings at all. I mean, Catherine's pretty uninhibited

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in what she writes. So, even though she marries him, Christ is not really the bridegroom in her letters. He is the nursing mother. And so, I think that that is what's so interesting.

Okay. Is that it's almost as though the extremes of suffering that Catherine is putting herself through, the starvation, the chain around her body, all that kind of thing, that she is becoming like Christ. She is suffering as Christ suffers on the cross. And this is what enables her to be joined with Christ. And she, you know, she says that this is an option that is open to all humans, that in their suffering, they become like Christ. I mean, that's in a way the promise of Christianity generally, isn't it? It is. But she makes it very, very vivid for people.

So, this is illustrated in another kind of astonishing episode that she writes about in the letter to Raymond of Capua. And it's about a young Perugian who's been working as a papal agent against the interests of Sienna. He gets brought to Sienna and he gets beheaded. And before the execution, Catherine visits him in prison, comforts him, goes with him to the scaffold. And then she's standing beneath the scaffold. The head kind of gets cut off the body, bumps down the steps. She catches the head and the blood washes her and covers her. She's drenched in his blood. And she says, again, a bit like the past that she's drunk, that this is sweet, that it's like the blood of Christ. And Bayne writes of this, that Catherine craved blood because she craved identification with the humanity of Christ. Catherine understood union with Christ not as an erotic fusing with a male figure, but as a taking in and a taking on, a becoming of Christ's flesh itself.

So, what do you make of that, Dominic? I don't know what to say, Tom, but I would have stern words with her parents, frankly, if I was catapulted back to the 14th century.

Yeah, but the thing is, Dominic, her parents, I mean, you know, they struggled and struggled against it. And finally, they were forced to accept that she was...

No, fair enough. Fair enough. It's easy for me to judge.

So, there were absolutely worse skeptics at the time. There were people, say, in Sienna, who said, well, she's not really a Donna, she's a witch or she's a fraud. And when she goes to Avignon, she kind of... She goes into one of her, you know, a state of spiritual ecstasy. And one of the mistresses of a cardinal takes a hairpin, jabs it in her foot to see if it's true or not. And actually, it is. She doesn't, you know, she holds proof against it.

Just a quick observation. You said people who think she's a witch or a fraud.

Interestingly, you didn't say there are people who think she's not well.

That, presumably, is because that's a 21st century category that they would not have recognized. No, it isn't. There are absolutely people who accept that people can be ill. I mean, no, no, I said that. They do have a kind of sense of, you know, that you can have something that we might call anorexia. They do have that.

Or generally mental illness.

So, they distinguish between people who are, I guess, what we would call anorexic and people who are saintly.

Okay. Yeah.

You know, they feel that there's a distinction between that. And Catherine is definitely on the borders of the saintly.

Well, I mean, you've got a list here of the people who believe her who are hardened, ruthless, cold-blooded kind of people, aren't they?

Yes.

Or are they using her?

Of course they're using her. Absolutely. Exactly as, you know, people, you know, today may use Greta Thunberg or the Green Movement or whatever for their political ends. But they do feel that, you know, she is someone who has to be treated with respect and who they are willing to be influenced by. So, you know, all the leaders of these various Italian states who she's negotiating with them. She's trying to patch up peace between them. She's serving as their ambassador. So, that's going on. But they're also, by this point, you know, by the time that she's, say, become 30, all those free companies from France have indeed spilled over into Italy and they're part of the mix now.

So, the Wagner groups of the 14th century.

Yes, exactly. And the, what's his name?

Prigogine. You have gained a Prigogine.

The Prigogine of the 14th century is Sir John Hawquid, the Englishman who leads the free company, the most terrifying free company of all. And she writes to him and he's very respectful of her. But of course, the key figure who's influenced by her is the Pope. And when Gregory XI leaves for Rome, it does seem at least in part that he's doing it because he believes that Catherine is a messenger who's been sent to him from God. And this, you know, this is a key development in the geopolitics of the 14th century in Europe. Because actually, the return to Rome of the papacy goes horribly wrong. Because barely a year after he's returned to Rome, Gregory XI is dead. And the Cardinals then, by kind of catastrophic series of misadventures and unfortunate coincidences, end up electing two popes. One is an Italian and one is a particularly murderous aristocrat from Geneva. And basically, it's an argument which is kind of turbocharged by the Hundred Years' War as to where the papacy should be based. Should it be based in Rome? Should it be based in Avignon? The French are obviously backing, you know, they're backing the Geneva and Pope because they want him to go back to Avignon, which he does. Catherine, of course, backs the Italian Pope, who takes the name of Urban, Urban VI, and rallies to his cause. And again, she plays a key role in ensuring that he is able to cast himself as the authentic Pope against all the wealth and power of the French King with his backing for the French Pope. And basically, I think without Catherine's backing, what comes to be called the Great Schism wouldn't have happened. I think that Urban VI would have been kind of jettisoned. But instead, you know, he is able to draw on her support. In fact, in November 1378, he summons all his cardinals to come and listen to Catherine give a talk, you know, which is amazing. This is the daughter of a tradesman addressing the Pope, addressing the cardinals, and being listened to. And Urban VI wrote of her, this weak woman puts us all to shame. I call her a weak woman, not to make little of her, but I want to emphasize that she is a woman and belongs to what is by nature the weaker sex. By nature, it is she who should show fear, even in situations where we would feel no danger. But on the contrary, it is we who play the coward while she stands undaunted and by her rousing words imparts to us her own courageous spirit. And so again, it's that idea that in weakness's strength, that the last have become first. And Catherine, she embarks on a particularly spectacular process of fasting. So she goes, it said, a month without drinking any water. And, you know, she can't survive this. So she does that in January 1380. And she ends her total fast in February. But by April, she's dead. Her body can't really cope

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with it. So she's only 33 years old. And then she's canonized immediately. She becomes a saint? No. So her body is kept in Rome, where it still lies. And her head is taken to Siena, where you can still see it. And she's canonized the following century.

What an extraordinary story. And she is felt as she is still felt by many Christians to be a figure of incredible power. Well, I mean, she was a figure of incredible power in her time.

Right. But also the story is an incredibly powerful story, Tom.

Yeah. So are you convinced? I'm disturbed, actually. So one thing I will say, one of the great things about doing this podcast is you will sometimes pitch a subject that I think, that's going to be a bit dry. And then as has happened today, you do it, Tom. I'm being nice about you for, you know, I mean, I should do this more often. Bless you. And it's so interesting.

But actually, I find this a very dark story. She's a very troubled woman, clearly. I mean, frankly, I don't believe that Jesus appeared to her in her bedroom, and she got married with David playing the liar or whatever he was doing. Ever the skeptic. Ever the skeptic. But I think it says something fascinating about the 14th century about was clearly a very, very troubled, anxious, paranoid time. But it also says something quite tragic about her and her family.

Do you not think? I mean, it's a dark story.

It is a dark story. Well, you know, and it's a dark age. And I think the fact that she becomes the most celebrated woman of her age tells you quite a lot about the age.

It does indeed. Well, Tom, that was absolutely brilliant. I really enjoyed that.

So thank you to all of you for listening. And well done, Tom.

Thank you so much. And we'll see you all next time. Bye-bye. Bye-bye.