

Catherine of Siena: Networking a Saint  
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Beginning in the 1370s, Catherine of Siena, a middle-class Siennese girl, entered the European political scene, ranging from local politics to the papal seat of Pope Gregory XI and the crowns of Europe. Early in her life, she eschewed marriage to fully devote herself to God and to provide service to others. As a result she quickly gained a reputation for her extreme piety. At the same time, she gained political experience in government through her natal and extended family, where Catherine became comfortable dealing with local politics and creating a community. Siena during the 1360s and 1370s was rife with political uprisings. Florence was battling the papacy, and Europe was reeling from the aftermath of the Black Plague that continued to return in phases. The Fourteenth-century may have seen the start of a decline in women's spiritual power, but the Italian world still sought out women who they believed could reveal the will of God. Many believed Catherine of Siena to be the successor to Brigitta of Sweden, known as the visionary queen and also a living saint, who died in 1373.

Catherine gained popularity and influence at a time when various historical events were all merging together to create an atmosphere for her to succeed in politics and the Church. Through a perusal of her letters, it is clear that Catherine created a network of families and individuals. Catherine was born in Siena in 1347 to a Iacomo di Benincasa and Monna Lapa.<sup>1</sup> The youngest of 22 children, Catherine embraced a religious life at a relatively early age. In her early twenties, Catherine joined the *Mantellate* group of women. These women were tertiaries to the Dominican Order. Unlike nuns, *Mantellate* women were all widows, lived at home, wore the dominican habit, and were allowed to walk around the city. They had freedom to follow their

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to use the traditional Italian spelling for a majority of the characters, aside from Catherine and Raymond of Capua whose names are well-known in the English as well. When quoting from translated sources I will use the translated name and then in brackets place the Italian name to clarify who the character is.

desires. Catherine, at her mother's and the *Mantellate* women's permission, joined the group and fully dedicated her life to Christ.

In 1374 Raymond of Capua entered Catherine's life as her spiritual advisor. He had had previous experience writing St. Agnes of Montepulciano's hagiography and was in the running to become the "Master of the Order," the main leader of the Dominican Order. Historians often describe Raymond of Capua as the reason why Catherine was so successful, as he provided her with an "in" with the local Italian populace. Raymond controlled Catherine's image after her death in 1380 with the hagiography he wrote of her life. Catherine accepted his guidance and believing he was God's gift to her; however, my research goes against the idea that Raymond was the biggest reason for Catherine's success.

I argue that without the support and influence of the network Catherine in which she surrounded herself, she would not have been as successful in her political, social, and divine aspirations. This group opened doors for Catherine that would have been completely closed off to her. Catherine consciously chose her companions to further advance her career starting in the local sphere of Siena. After Catherine expanded her influence to Florence and surrounding towns, such as Lucca and Pisa, her network became her *famiglia* that supported her throughout the many difficulties she faced. With her failing health, inability to read and write fluently, and the stigma of living saints needing witnesses to prove themselves, it became imperative for Catherine to encircle herself with men and women who provided the necessary work for success.

As Catherine gained popularity and political experience among the Tuscan city-states, her network broadened. Catherine gained followers wherever she travelled. Those followers included men and women from all levels of life, from the nobility to prisoners. The men she welcomed

into her family of followers were all invested in politics or had connections to governments, providing a support group for her actions which helped her to achieve her goals. These goals ranged from providing scribal support, as Catherine could not read or write, to being her messengers for important men in government positions. The women she gained as followers acted as her physical support system. These women had connections to her natal family and her *Mantellate* family. They travelled with her, and some even mimicked her radical behavior of extreme fasting. Above all, these men and women proved to be witnesses to her saintly actions.

Catherine developed relationships with two powerful Sieneese families, the Tolomei and Salimbeni. These families were heavily involved with government and had the resources to affect change. The Tolomei's were in power during the Dodici rule and Catherine's family found some power during that time. The Salimbeni family supported the uprising that led to the Dodici falling from power, resulting in the Riformatori to have control of the Sieneese government. Catherine made ties with both families which proved to be very useful in her career, for example, her father and brothers supported the Dodici which gave her an early connection to the government, and after the Riformatori took control, she aligned herself with the Salimbeni family through her follower Nanni di ser Vanni.

Network analysis is one way historians approach the past. This is a new and growing trend in historical studies that promises to allow researchers to see patterns and evidence with the help of a visual aid. Network visualization provides researchers the chance to see patterns in the evidence that is easily missed. For this project I used Gephi, a digital network visualization tool that is available to download online. According to Gephi, with their program, "the user interacts with the representation, [and] manipulates the structures, shapes and colors to reveal hidden

patterns. The goal is to help data analysts to make hypotheses, intuitively discover patterns, isolate structure singularities or faults during data sourcing.”<sup>2</sup> Once the user inputs the data, they then are able to change the settings to see various degrees of connectivity. The graph I made for Catherine’s network is the basis for my hypothesis because of the patterns I noticed only after I inserted my data. This graph led me to conclusions and connections I missed before I found Gephi. After forming my hypothesis from the graph, I returned to my primary sources and found evidence for my ideas which I explain below. After reading the historiography surrounding Catherine, it became clear to me that network analysis was a new way to understand Catherine in her created community.<sup>3</sup>

## **Historiography**

Catherine of Siena is an important character in understanding Italy because of the many different facets of study to which her life is applicable. Scholars of literature, history, religion, political science, and gender all show interest in Catherine because of the variety of primary sources she left behind in her short life. Catherine is known for having meddled in personal, political, and church affairs, and is listed as one of the great authors of the Late Middle Ages, but scholars are still hesitant to create a historical Catherine that exists in traditional historical sources (i.e tax records, group records, family records) rather than the saintly Catherine that

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<sup>2</sup> “Features,” Gephi, <https://gephi.org/features>.

<sup>3</sup> My inspiration for using Gephi and placing my work online stems from a Harvard project that maps the connections in Emma Rothschild’s book *The Inner Life of Empires*. From this website I discovered what network visualization could do for a project and historical work. To view the website see: <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~histecon/innerlife/index.html>.

historians study (i.e church records, hagiographical accounts, testimonials from companions post-mortem). The focus on Catherine's spirituality neglects the historical aspect of her life, and her network is an important part of that history.

Much of the scholarship on medieval gender focuses on the physical body, and how ideologies about gender are reflected in men and women's bodies. As many scholars argue, the theories behind the physical functions of the human body enforce the limitations of how men and women acted out their gender.<sup>4</sup> Scholars place the main power source for women, and occasionally men, as a somatic experience, but they fail to include the male and female dynamic in a way that explains more fully how the sexes and genders interacted with one another and the impact they had on each other. Authority of female spirituality was given mainly through the body, because of the ideology of the contrast between men and women.<sup>5</sup> This led to women displaying their spirituality as an opposite medium than men followed. By studying Catherine of Siena's relationship with her female companions and then her later conscious choice to connect with well-connected men, I hope to illuminate the power relationship related to the two sexes.

Studies that investigate the power relationships between the male and female agents of the Middle Ages describe details about how gender was understood. These studies do not ignore the physical component of the creation of male/female, but they take into account the authority

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<sup>4</sup> For scholarship on the body and gender see: Dyan Elliot, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, & Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Dyan Elliot, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Historians consider sex and gender to be a socially constructed ideology that had repercussions for the developing Christian Church during the Middle Ages. These ideas of how men were hot and dry and women were cold and wet reverberated throughout all aspects of society. Gender and sex became a performance. For more on this topic see: Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

based power system that shifted to men but also provided the ability for females to hold more authority than males.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Catherine of Siena, the main male component scholars identify was her Dominican spiritual advisor, Raymond of Capua, where there was a constant shift over who was in control, whether it was Catherine guiding Raymond or Raymond guiding Catherine. The current trend of scholarship, showing how power and authority factored into gender relations, is crucial to the understanding of Catherine's authority as a political figure in Late Medieval Italy. These studies focus on the confessor and mystic relationship, and they do not expand to the larger network that a mystic interacted with on a daily basis. With Catherine, Raymond of Capua was not always present. Therefore the gendered power relationship was not always relevant. By studying the relationships Catherine had with her created community of men and women, I will show how her need to quickly become an authority figure encouraged her to harness her male companions' power to achieve her spiritual, political, and social aspirations. Catherine was not a passive player to men's agendas, but rather she consciously chose individuals to interact with and used them to her advantage to achieve her political and spiritual aspirations, such as her connections with the Salimbeni Family who were influential to Sieneese government and Nanni di ser Vanni, who was a powerful banker and provided Catherine with a castle to house her monastery.

These aspirations would not have formed fully without the use of a large network of men and women that Catherine created in her early years in Siena, and then her evolution into a famous mystic, which enlarged her network even further. Beginning in the 1980s, scholars

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<sup>6</sup> Scholarship that highlight this idea: John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Jodi Blinkoff, *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450-1750* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

focused attention on networks of people. Network scholarship enforces the idea that men and women use the power of others to achieve an end goal.<sup>7</sup> Power, authority, and gender all play a part in understanding why Catherine manipulated the use of her scribes to maintain a level of authority to her voice. My research takes the existing theories of networks and applies it to Catherine of Siena and her male and female companions.

Most of the scholarship on Catherine looks at the use of language and rhetoric within her letters. This trend is understandable because of the enormous amount of written sources Catherine left behind. Source material includes over 380 letters, prayers, as well as her theological writing, *The Dialogue*. Literary scholarship tends to analyze everything from themes within her writing and breakdowns of specific letters, to the uses of specific words and phrases over the course of her writing.<sup>8</sup> While studying rhetoric is one way to understand the past for Catherine, it limits her to one frame of mind, that of a writer and nothing more. By looking past her written work as literature and finding ways to analyze how she connected herself with others, historians can gain new insight into the community she created and how group networks played a bigger role in individuals traditionally considered to be an exception to the societal rules.

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<sup>7</sup> For scholarship on medieval network analysis see: Jo Ann McNamara, "Women and Power Through the Family Revisited," in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, edited by Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 17–30; Rebecca Slitt, "The Boundaries of Women's Power: Gender and the Discourse of Political Friendship in Twelfth-Century England," *Gender & History*, vol. 21, no. 1 (April 2012), 1–17.

<sup>8</sup> This scholarship provides more information on why Catherine is considered a great literary writer because of the prose she used. It is helpful for studies on language and the use of it to understanding deeper characteristics that are not always explicitly stated. These works include: Jane Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and The Signs of Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Jennifer B. Brown, "From the Chaterhouse to the Printing House: Catherine of Siena in Medieval England," in *Middle English Religious Writing in Practice: Texts, Readers, and Transformations*, ed by Nicole R. Rice (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); Jeffrey F. Hamburger, and Gabriela Signori, editors, *Catherine of Siena: The Creation of a Cult* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); Cheryl Forbes, "The Radical Rhetoric of Catherine Da Siena," in *Rhetoric Review*, vol 23:2 (2004), 121–140; Karen Scott, "'Io Catarina': Ecclesiastical Politics and Oral Culture in the Letters of Catherine of Siena," in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, edited by Karen Cherevatuk and Ulrik Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 82–121.



Recent studies of Catherine's life are based on her religious legacy but showcase her actions as secular in nature. Studies like this include the turbulent politics of Italy in the mid-1300s and replace the focus on Catherine's mystical abilities with her method of achieving change.<sup>9</sup> By redirecting the attention on Catherine's sacred and divine characteristics to her human capabilities of persuading governments, historians are able to create a more detailed account of her life. Thomas Luongo remains at the forefront of this approach. He has painstakingly combed through traditional historical sources (ie. tax records, church membership records, town meeting minutes, ect.) to describe who the 'important' characters were in Catherine's circle and why they were important. Luongo, however, does not use his sources to understand the individual relationships to Catherine other than stating who they were to her. No in-depth analysis of their relationship takes place. By using his work to better understand and contextualize individuals, my research goes further to explore how Catherine interacted with her contemporaries. Furthermore, it attempts to look further into relationships she had with individuals that receive no scholarly attention, and then re-evaluate relationships scholars typically analyze.

Recently, a new trend of historical study has emerged that attempts to contextualize Catherine in a way that rhetoricians and literary scholars do not; they analyze her with historical context in mind. There are two main groups in this school of thought: those that discuss religious power and authority, and those that see the power and authority within the mystic/confessor

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<sup>9</sup> The two main pieces of scholarship that take Catherine out of the sacred and literature realm of scholarship and place her within the 'traditional' realm of research that focus on movement, action, and change: Thomas Luongo, *The Sainly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Karen Scott, "Urban Spaces, Women's Networks, and the Lay Apostolate in the Siena of Catherine Benincasa," in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance* edited by E. Ann Matter and John Coakley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994),105–119.

relationship. Scholars now argue that religious authority was typically not given to women because of the patriarchy in the Church, so women found other ways to gain control of themselves that allowed them to create their own authority.<sup>10</sup> This still places Catherine within the Church's history as exceptional and a lone actor, and it ignores the influence of her community. The community that Catherine created was outside of the Church just as much as it was within it, so her power and authority cannot be limited to God and the Church alone. That is where a more recent trend of power and authority scholarship has made contributions.

Confessor and mystic relations is the newest wave of saintly research that focuses on the power dynamics of the two actors. These studies set out to challenge the notion that either the mystic had all the power or that the confessor had all the power. These studies demonstrate that the correlation of confessor and mystic was malleable in a way that challenges traditionally held beliefs about gender in the Late Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup> While this scholarship provides valuable insight, it takes the focus off exceptionality and does not consider the importance of Catherine's larger community. By taking their ideas on how the power was performed and authority worked, and applying them to the community she created, I will show new trends or patterns emerge that strengthens this scholarship.

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<sup>10</sup> The best examples of this are studies on food. Catherine was known for not eating food and what she did eat she could not keep down. Two major works have been done about the eating habits of mystics that take two different approaches. They both agree that food was an avenue for women's power. Caroline Walker Bynum argues that women controlled what they ate as a way to control their bodies that was beyond their control in the church. Food was an economic standpoint for these women and it showcased their power to control themselves. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. On the opposite side is Rudolph Bell who argues that through food restriction, these women could form an identity for themselves that was directly related to God and not through a male religious head. Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia*.

<sup>11</sup> For scholarship written on the power dynamic see, Jodi Blinkoff, *Related Lives*; John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*; and Dylan Elliot, "Women and Confession: From Empowerment to Pathology," in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed by Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003).

The final area of contemporary research on Catherine is agency. Scholars have debunked the idea that Catherine was a passive player in her life and have shown she had agency.<sup>12</sup> Agency is a way for power and authority to coalesce together, and Catherine created her own influence that pushed her desires forward. My research will provide an understanding of how Catherine used her mode of action, which also gave her power and authority, to form a community of followers and how that community worked together. Finally, the force of Catherine's reputation can also be extended to the group of men and women she had around her.

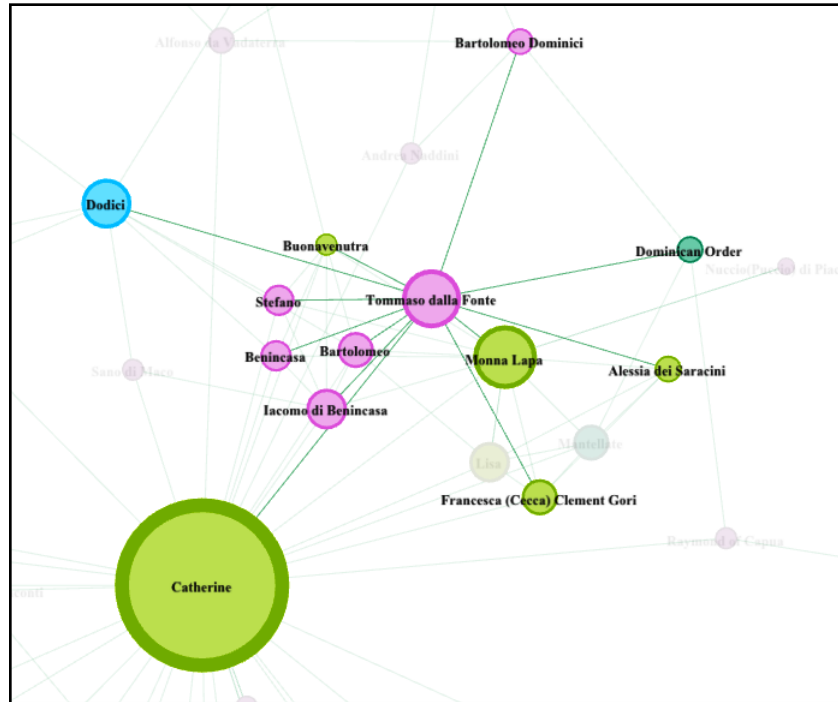
### **Building her Spiritual Identity**

Catherine began developing her network at a young age. There is no evidence that this was a conscious effort by her, as most early network systems were based around family and location, and never are intentional. Catherine found great use from her early network however. The Benincasa family belonged to the wool guild in Siena, which was prosperous during the Dodici Government. The Dodici were in power from 1355 to 1371, the same years Catherine grew into a young woman. The Benincasas participated in governmental bodies, were relatively wealthy, and were well known in their community.

Catherine aligned herself with men and women who offered some form of support. Tommaso dalla Fonte, for example, gave Catherine a strong foundation into the religious world,

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<sup>12</sup> For scholarship on agency see; Tom Grimwood, "The Body as a Lived Metaphor: Interpreting Catherine of Siena as an Ethical Agent," *The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 13, no. 1 (2004): 62–76; Lisa M. Vitale, "Transplanting the Hortus Conclusus: The Cultivation of Power by Catherine of Siena," *Magistra* 19, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 3–20.

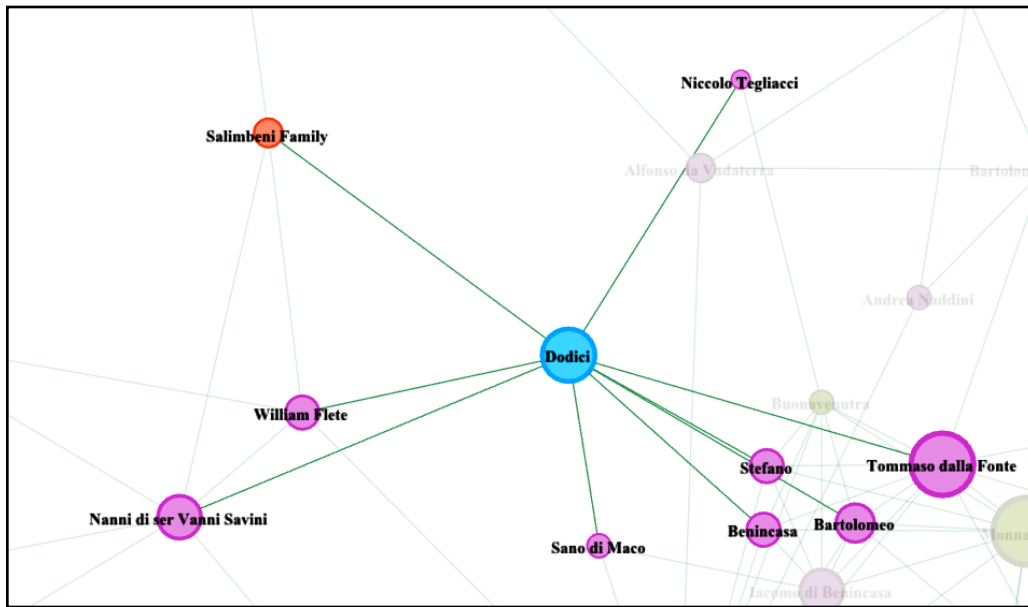


1. Graph of Tommaso dalla Fonte’s network.

acting as her Friar, confessor, friend, and supporter. As a living saint, Catherine’s allegiance to religious members was expected in order for her deeds to be considered as holy. A living saint is an individual who aspired to be holy, and thought of by the community as a spiritual individual who would, the community hoped, become a saint after the person died.<sup>13</sup> They provided her with spiritual authority and support. Italy during the 1370s however was filled with political uprisings, religious threats, and the aftermath of the Black Death. The culmination of these three components made it easy for Catherine to intervene because she had family connections to the local government which led to her gaining followers in various governmental positions. It was

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<sup>13</sup> I have refrained from using the term ‘mystic’ when possible. I believe using that term misrepresents the actions and goals of those individuals. In place of mystic I use the term ‘living saint’, this more accurately describes how the medieval mindset understood these individuals such as Catherine. Also, the term living saint immediately sends the reader to understand that the individual was conscious of their actions and had more agency. Mystic often can lead the reader to wonder what that meant, whereas living saint has the connotation of being a choice.



2. Dodici Government Gephi Graph

known from a young age that she was more spiritual than any other woman in Siena, and she joined the *Mantellate*, a group dedicated to helping heal the sick and feed the poor.

Sources described Catherine as a well-known woman in the community from a young age. In Catherine’s hagiography, Raymond of Capua described a youthful Catherine: “her mother had difficulty in keeping her at home, because all the friends and neighbours used to carry her off to their own homes so that they could enjoy her wise little sayings and the comfort of her delightful childish gaiety.”<sup>14</sup> From this account, Catherine was already becoming a jewel of Siena and forming a group of men and women who adored her and her will. This shows Catherine as already forming a charming personality that attracted both men and women in her company, which later resulted in her gaining followers. Karen Scott, a Catherinian scholar, argues that, “Raymond states that the Dominican friars and tertiaries she knew and many of her

<sup>14</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena* (Charlotte, North Carolina: TAN Books, 2003), 7.

disciples lived very close to her house, and he hints that these people helped her form a comfortable niche of neighborhood friends within Sienese society.”<sup>15</sup> These patterns of Catherine creating connections with those she interacted with started at this youthful stage and continued through to adulthood which then helped her gain success as a living saint.

Even at this early stage in Catherine’s life, she was already forming connections that helped her succeed in later endeavors. Catherine’s cousin, Tommaso dalla Fonte, grew up in Catherine’s house and was close in age with her. He joined the Dominican Order as a priest and acted as Catherine’s first confessor. This relationship lasted Catherine’s entire life. Not only did Tommaso act as Catherine’s confessor, he also had relationships with the Dodici government.

Catherine’s natal family was close with the Dodici government.<sup>16</sup> Incidentally, Catherine’s family were members of the wool guilds and owned their own shop. This placed Catherine’s upbringing in the middle of the government. However, a new faction overthrew the Dodici government in 1371, the Riformatori rose to power, with the backing of the Salimbeni family.

Catherine’s extended family also helped her to form a unique understanding of Sienese life. Influential to Catherine’s legacy was Frate Tommaso dalla Fonte. History remembers him as Catherine’s first confessor, “who was brought up as a child in her house.”<sup>17</sup> This close relationship started out from childhood and lasted her entire life. Tommaso dalla Fonte became a Dominican friar before Catherine entered the spiritual world. Relationships between confessors

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<sup>15</sup> Karen Scott, “Urban Spaces,” 110.

<sup>16</sup> For an in-depth look into Sienese Government see: Valerie Wainwright, “Testing A Popular Sienese Government,” in *I Tatti: Studies in Renaissance Italy* (Florence: The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, 1987), 107-170.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life*, 13.

and their spiritual individuals were intense, as they both provided something the other did not have: confessors were able to absolve sins, and living saints provided an avenue to God's words. Tommaso and Catherine were connected through family and faith and that relationship strengthened Catherine's mission as she became more popular and traveled around Tuscany.

Even though Tommaso dalla Fonte followed the spiritual path within the Dominican Order along with connections to the Sienese government.<sup>18</sup> Catherine understood the concept of "two birds, one stone," to use a common phrase. Tommaso dalla Fonte provided two connections, one into Dominican Order affairs that guided her in all matters of spiritual aspirations, and secondly for creating ties to governmental bodies. Tommaso was more involved in spiritual dealings, but that does not diminish the fact that he had connections to politics as well—not as much as other followers, but he helped to provide her with an initial understanding of politics, along with her father and brother who were actively engaged with the government. The relationship between Catherine and Tommaso dalla Fonte was Catherine's longest relationship, aside from her mother. Tommaso is often downplayed in Catherinian scholarship, given the sideline of only being her first confessor and cousin, but this lifelong relationship created a bond requiring more examination.

Tommaso dalla Fonte did more for Catherine's personal understanding of her spiritual aspirations than Raymond of Capua provided her during her lifetime. It was Tommaso who provided personal support. He encouraged her to follow through with her spiritual aspirations from a young age when he encouraged her to devote herself to Christ. In an effort to avoid marriage, Catherine cut her hair as a sign of defiance. When Raymond of Capua described the

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<sup>18</sup> Luongo, *The Saintly Politics*, 47. Luongo wrote that one of Tommaso's nephews, a dyer, was beheaded after the take over by the Riformatori.

story he was vague about Tommaso's involvement as she, "went to see one of the Order of Preaching Friars, a friend of the family, who is still alive," and as he went to persuade her to marry he, "found her firm in her holy intention, felt bound in conscious to give her this sensible advice," to cut off her hair as a sign to her family that she wished to serve the Lord.<sup>19</sup> In Raymond's version, there was a small clue about the identity of the friar, but he did not say it was Tommaso. In *The Miracoli of Catherine of Siena*, the author attributed Tommaso as the one who gave Catherine the hair-cut advice; "In her increasingly frequent confessions to the friar discussed above, she asked him to pray for her and to give her counsel on the problem."<sup>20</sup> Here is evidence of the same situation corroborating together with reference to a friar. While one is explicit in identifying the man, the other only hints, but it is clear that this friar actively encouraged Catherine to pursue her spiritual life from the beginning. Furthermore, in other stories throughout her hagiography, Raymond was not hesitant in telling the reader when his information came from her friend and confessor Tommaso dalla Fonte.

Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, a Dominican penitent and Catherine scholar, argues that "her relative [Tommaso dalla Fonte], was never influential enough to back Catherine's missions outside Siena."<sup>21</sup> I agree that Tommaso dalla Fonte was not influential on a larger scale, but to Catherine's important work in Siena before 1374 and in her understanding of spirituality he was crucial to her success.

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<sup>19</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, trans., "The Miracoli of Catherine of Siena," in *Dominican Penitent Women* (New York: Paley Press, 2005), 92. The hair cutting story is in Chapter five of the work, the quote "friar discussed above" the author is mentioning Tommaso dalla Fonte in Chapter 4, "As is commonly done, a friar of the Order of Preachers Tommaso della Fonte, came to console the mother and other women who had gathered in the house."

<sup>21</sup> Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly Saints: Social Interaction of Dominican Penitent Women in Italy, 1200-1500* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1999), 115.



Tommaso dalla Fonte was the foundational friar in Catherine's quest for spirituality. Later in life, when Raymond of Capua could not be there for Catherine, he delegated his confessor role to Tommaso because of their relationship as confessor/female saint. In a letter from 1375 written to Tommaso, after Raymond had control of her affairs, Catherine discussed future meetings with spiritual leaders, "I want you to know that I'm afraid to put off doing as you told me, because the archbishop has asked the [master] general whether I might stay several more days, as a favor."<sup>22</sup> Raymond and Catherine did not dismiss the fierce connection that she and Tommaso had together. Catherine looked toward Tommaso when Raymond was not available, and Raymond trusted Tommaso. This explains why, throughout Catherine's hagiography, Raymond was always alluding to Tommaso's notes on Catherine's life as sources of authority. He was the second in command of her spiritual legacy. Furthermore, he provided Catherine with advice and support while she faced adversity from her family in her youth, and on her missions after she departed Siena. He did not accompany Catherine on her travels often because of his commitments to the Sienese Dominicans, and the result is several surviving letters Catherine wrote to him over her lifetime.

This relationship was reciprocal. Catherine gave advice and Tommaso provided his preaching duties absolving her sins and also acting and speaking on her behalf. In the same letter as before, Catherine, in response to a letter he sent to her wrote, "You wrote me about your visit to the body of Sant' Agnesa and how you commended us to her and to her daughters. I am very much consoled by that news."<sup>23</sup> This seems insignificant, but Catherine went on to have a

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<sup>22</sup> Catherine of Siena to Frate Tommaso dalla Fonte, in Siena, T139/G106/DT46, in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol.1. Trans by Suzanne Noffke, (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000) p. 196.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 196.

flourishing relationship with the women at of the monastery of Sant' Agnese in Montepulciano. For example in *The Miracoli*, the unknown author recounts, "In Montepulciano there is a monastery for women which has the holy body of one of its nuns whose name was Agnes," and after a brief account of the preserved nun of Sant' Agnes, "Catherine went to the monastery to leave there a girl whom the monastery accepted as a favor to her."<sup>24</sup> Tommaso dalla Fonte brought attention to Catherine's spiritual life when he visited Montepulciano, and he created a contact for her to pursue later. Catherine found hospitality there, she found sisterhood, and she desired to have her own convent there. Montepulciano and the Sant' Agnes monastery was where Catherine initially placed her legacy. I credit this contact as a direct result of Tommaso's travels and how he sought to advocate for Catherine a spiritual legacy before she became popular under the influence of Raymond of Capua.

Many scholars recognize that Tommaso dalla Fonte existed and that Catherine had a close friendship with him, but their relationship had lasting effects on their careers. When conducting my network visualization (see "*Figure 1: Gephi Graph of Tommaso dalla Fonte*") Tommaso's node ended larger than I anticipated. At first I attributed this to his association with her family and dismissed it. After re-examination, however it is clear that the association he had with her family and with the Dominican Order in Siena is precisely why he was so influential in Catherine's life. Tommaso and the people of Siena provided Catherine with the initial infrastructure she needed to move forward with her divine mission. Because of his upbringing in Catherine's family, he was well acquainted with the Dodici and developed an understanding of how alliances worked. His relationship with the Dominicans should not be underestimated

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24 Maiju Lehmouhiji-Gardner, trans., "The *Miracoli* of Catherine of Siena," in *Dominican Penitent Women* (New York: Palest Press, 2005) 99.

because it was his belief, support, and advocacy of Catherine in those early years that encouraged her to continue on her desired path.

Before 1374, Catherine had already formed connections to members of the political elite. This started young with her family taking part as representatives in the Dodici government. It soon evolved into Catherine expanding her network to include individuals with ties to political parties. Almost all followers she gained had something to offer, and most of the men offered a political connection.

### **Catherine's Involvement in Local Politics**

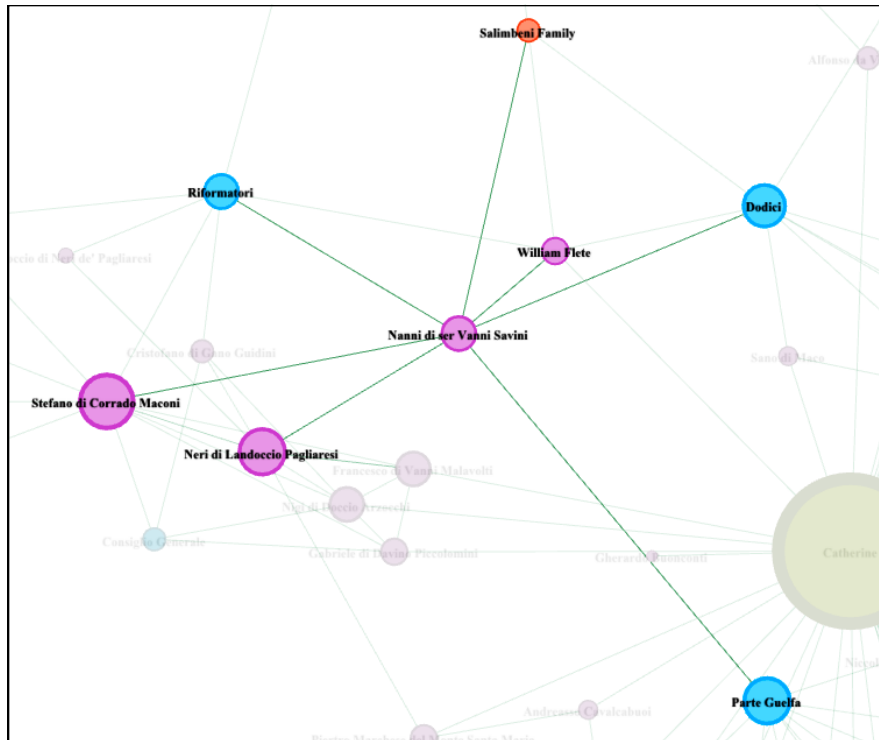
William of Flete, the “Bachelor of Lecceto” as he was known in the Italian world, was an Augustinian Hermit and became Catherine’s friend and follower. In the *Miracoli*, the author dedicates an entire chapter (the chapters are only a paragraph or two) to William:

He carries books with him so that he avoids conversation with people. He goes to church and then returns to his place. He is a man of mature counsel; he is a friend of God, and a man of great exemplarity. He avoids speaking unless the situation makes words necessary. He has never spoken to Catherine, or she him, but they are connected by the Holy Spirit and speak of each other with great devotion and respect.<sup>25</sup>

From this description, William of Flete was a wise, contemplative, religious man whom Catherine wrote letters to before Raymond entered her life. This source also mentions how they never met, yet letters and hagiographical accounts written after 1374 declare that they eventually met in person, but the majority of their relationship was through the written word. William never became well-versed in the Italian language and needed a secretary to translate

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<sup>25</sup> Lehmijoki-Gardner, *The Miracoli of Catherine of Siena*, 98.



3. Nanni di ser Vanni in Gephi Graph

for him. This man was Antonio da Nizza.<sup>26</sup> William of Flete was never strongly associated with Catherine in the political world. He receives more attention as her religious friend.

William of Flete supported the Dodici government, and after the Riformatori, led by the Salimbeni family, gained power he advocated for Dodici members to remain in the government. Luongo uses Flete’s letter written sometime between 1368–1371 to determine Flete’s advocacy for the Dodici. Flete wrote to the Signoria, “Let it be known to you that your predecessors ill-used those good men who are called the Dodici, and in consequence evils fell by chance upon your community; and unless you establish peace, charity, and concord with them,” which signals

<sup>26</sup> Suzanne Noffke, “Persons Associated with Catherine of Siena,” in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol.1. Trans by Suzanne Noffke (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000) 536.

that he was more than just a book loving, cave dwelling hermit from Lecceto.<sup>27</sup> William of Flete engaged in political affairs and fought for what he believed in — the Dodici as a governmental body. He did not receive his wish, but he voiced his idea and used his reputation to the best of his ability. Catherine developed the same habits: she voiced her opinion and used her power and connections to try and get her way, even if it did not always end well.

William of Flete was a mentor for Nanni di ser Vanni Savini, a wealthy Sieneese banker, but William did not know that Nanni worked for the Salimbeni family. This played a crucial role in Catherine's future actions with the Sieneese government. Figure 3 highlights his connections to both the Dodici and Riformatori. Nanni was under the guidance of William who supported the Dodici even though Nanni favored the Salimbeni family. This double connection had a positive outcome for Catherine, as it allowed her to gain a connection within the Salimbeni family, even though her family was part of the Dodici and in direct opposition to the goals of the Riformatori structure and the Salimbeni family, but she managed to use her connections to her advantage. Catherine used her connections to the 3. Nanni di ser Vanni in Gephi Graph various factions when each was in power to further advance her goals, whether they were political or spiritual.

Nanni became a disciple to Catherine through William of Flete and, "By public deed he made a gift to the holy virgin of a magnificent castle of his about two miles out from Siena, so that she could use it as a women's convent."<sup>28</sup> Actions by Catherine's followers allowed her to flourish as a living saint; they provided contacts, hospitality, and in the case of Nanni, a castle for Catherine to set up her legacy like other women did, like the Sant'Agnese monastery in

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<sup>27</sup> William of Flete, "Letter to the Signoria" 1368-1371, quoted in Thomas Luongo, *The Saintly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 68.

<sup>28</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life*, 191-192.

Montepulciano. Catherine's family was wealthy at one point, but by the later 1370s, her brothers were bankrupt and they were no longer in government positions. Unlike her predecessor, Birgitta of Sweden, who came from one of the wealthiest landowners, Catherine had to branch out in order to promote herself as a religious woman.

Because of Nanni's allegiance with the Salimbeni family and his status as a banker, Catherine used her spiritual authority to quell disagreements between Sieneese factions with the support of the leading family during the 1370s. In the summer of 1377, the Defenders of Siena required Catherine's assistance. Catherine replied to their request, "I thank you for the charity I see you have toward your fellow citizens in seeking their peace and tranquility, and your charity for poor me, undeserving as I am that you should want me to come or that you should ask me to be a mediator for this reconciliation."<sup>29</sup> Catherine's association, through Nanni's connection, to the Salmibeni family made her the ideal candidate for mediating a problem between the Sieneese government and the now hated Salimbeni family. Catherine consciously chose to intervene in political affairs, local politics sought out her power of influence, and this quote shows how Catherine perceived her position as mediator.

The connections she made with local individuals brought non-religious problems to the forefront of her radar. The Salimbenis took advantage of their position and started taking over lands without the permission of the government, thus forcing them out of direct power. This is a prime example of Catherine's lasting legacy remaining in Siena from her younger days before she traveled around Italy, and how her connections continued to garner problems that groups called on her to mediate. Without the connection to the Salimbeni family, without the respect she

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<sup>29</sup> Catherine of Siena to the Defenders of the Commune of Siena, in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol.2. Trans by Suzanne Noffke, (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000) p. 376.

earned before her popularity, her work as a living saint would have been drastically smaller, potentially affecting her canonization. These connections gave Catherine a purpose, they gave her reasons to travel to other city-states, and they gave her a living legacy: Saint Catherine.

The Canigiani family provides evidence for Catherine's conscious effort to solidify relationships with politically-active individuals. While Catherine finally received an authority figure to watch her spiritual goals, she also became acquainted with the Canigiani family from Florence who were heavily involved in the Parte Guelfa activities. This party supported the Pope's actions rather than the Ghibellines who favored the Holy Roman Emperor. When Pope Gregory XI placed Florence under interdict, however it was the Guelfs who rejected his announcement. Catherine had a close connection with the Canigiani family. Barduccio Canigiani became her follower and scribe from 1378 on, and no letter exists between the two which suggests that they were always together after they met. Catherine saw the potential for high connections within Florence. Barduccio's brother, Ristoro was a lawyer and one of the leading Guelfs.<sup>30</sup> The Canigiani's gave Catherine something Raymond could not: access to a religiously powerful group that had influence over the actions of the papacy, governments, and everyday life. Raymond did not have that kind of power while he was her spiritual advisor. He may have had connections to the Pope, but Catherine still had to place her reputation on the line for Raymond's ventures. Raymond's position within the Dominican Order solidified Catherine's place in the history of important dominicans, but her connections to politically active and connected individuals made her an important woman with influence.

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<sup>30</sup> Noffke, "Persons Associated with Catherine," vol. 4, 402.

## The Question of Raymond of Capua

Raymond held considerable power after Catherine died. He wrote the narrative of her actions, he controlled how she was portrayed in the official retelling of her life. This has left scholars to grapple with knowing that Catherine's hagiography says as much about Catherine as it does Raymond. Due to his position in the Dominican Order, he offered Catherine spiritual authority. Dyan Elliot describes the role of confessor as, "A saint's confessor was usually the chief purveyor of proof on behalf of his holy client's sanctity."<sup>31</sup> Raymond had the most important role in Catherine's life, that of witness, but that occurred only after death. It was important for him to witness her saintly actions so he then had proof of her divine abilities. His word was the only one that could be trusted. While Catherine lived, however evidence shows that he was more under her supervision than his. Catherine often sent him as her messenger, sent him to places before she traveled there, and had no quarrels about confronting his divergence from her idea of a true follower of Christ. Catherine saw his quest for power as a weakness, "I make use of reprimands to bring you constantly back to your senses."<sup>32</sup> Catherine knew how important she was to Raymond's career and how much he was necessary for her career.

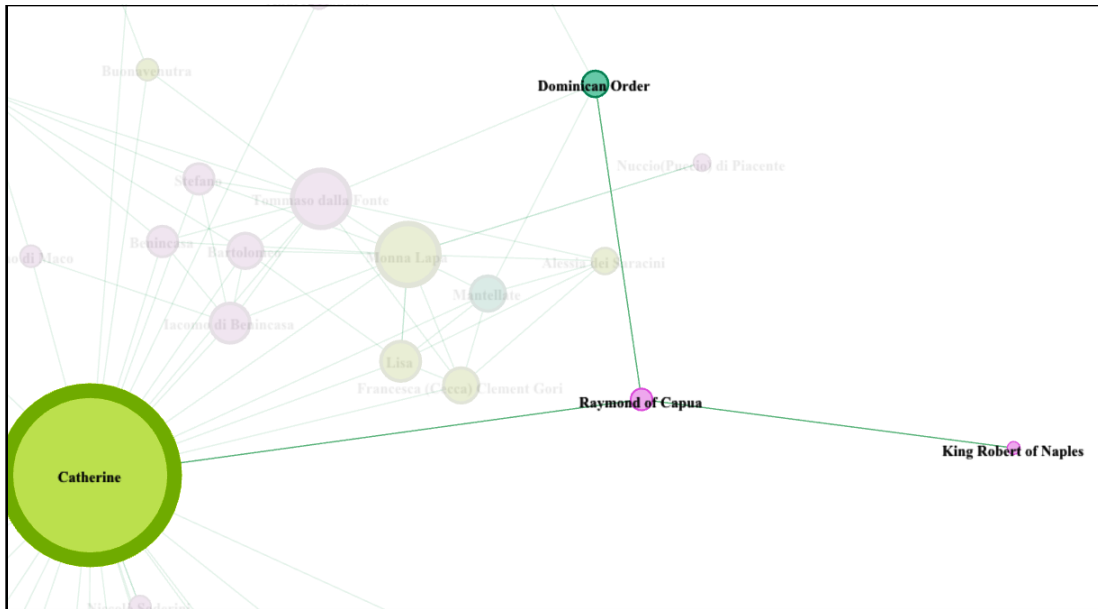
This explains why Catherine's network expanded drastically after 1374 when she traveled to Florence, Italy, and met Raymond. With the help of the Master of the Order of Dominicans, Catherine and Raymond of Capua and started to spread her image as a living saint to the larger

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<sup>31</sup> Elliot, *Proving Woman*, 181.

<sup>32</sup> Catherine of Siena to Raimondo da Capua in Genoa, T344/G101, in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol. 4. Trans by Suzanne Noffke (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 233.





4. Raymond of Capua Gephi Graph

Tuscan world. Raymond is often discussed as giving Catherine the power to expand her network and outreach as a living saint. Scholar Thomas Luongo writes, “When Raymond met Catherine, he was a prominent and learned friar who had already undoubtedly acquired the reputation he held later as an ecclesiastical statesman.”<sup>33</sup> The Dominican Order saw the potential for both rising stars to affect change when they appointed Raymond as Catherine’s spiritual advisor. Raymond and Catherine used each other to further their own agenda. Raymond used Catherine as his spiritual protégé to advance his career in the Dominican Order, which worked in his favor after she died. Catherine gained a seasoned hagiographer with Raymond, who then wrote her life story that was the crucial text that supported her canonization who provided spiritual guidance and authority through the Church. Catherine saw this appointment as an answer to her prayers. The last letter Catherine wrote was to Raymond and she declared that he was, “given to me by

<sup>33</sup> Luongo, *The Saintly Politics*, 69.

that dear mother Mary.”<sup>34</sup> For Catherine, Raymond was an avenue to advance her agenda as a woman of spirituality and as a political woman. She saw the opportunity to expand her network through the authorization that he provided for her as a highstanding member of the Dominican Order, something that Tommaso dalla Fonte could not provide.

Raymond of Capua is often thought of as the connection between Pope Gregory XI and Catherine because of his position in the Dominican Order. In 1376, Catherine wrote the first letter to Pope Gregory XI in Avignon, France.<sup>35</sup> In this letter she asked him for help in Lucca and Pisa and offering him advice, “I’ve heard you have appointed some cardinals. I believe it would be to God’s honor and better for you to be careful always to choose virtuous men.”<sup>36</sup> Catherine voiced her criticism to the Pope unabashedly, she did not hide behind her spiritual confessor, Raymond of Capua or allude to his presence as her connection to the Pope.

In no letter to the pope did Catherine use Raymond’s status in the Dominican Order to help her cause. In fact, the opposite is true; Catherine used her authority to help Raymond of Capua. Catherine wrote to the Pope in the first half 1376 after a long dispute between Florence and the Papacy. Catherine said, “I beg you to hear and listen to what Frate Raimondo my father and my other sons who are in his company have to say to you. They come in the name of Christ crucified and in mine, for they are true servants of God and sons of the holy Church.”<sup>37</sup> Because Catherine was not able to see the Pope, she placed her authority in Raymond. For the pope, her

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<sup>34</sup> Catherine of Siena to Raimondo da Capua, T373/G102, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol. 4, 368.

<sup>35</sup> Suzanne Noffke notes that this is not the first letter Catherine wrote to Pope Gregory. In a letter written to Frate Tommaso and Frate Bartolomeo Dominici, she refers to a letter written to him before this letter. Either this is in fact the second letter Catherine wrote to Pope Gregory, or Noffke’s dating system is wrong. History’s curse is that not everything can be preserved, therefore both scenarios are plausible.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine of Siena to Pope Gregory XI, in Avignon, in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol.1, 250.

<sup>37</sup> Catherine of Siena to Pope Gregory XI, in Avignon, T206/G5/DT63 in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol.2. 64.

authority rested right next to Christ's authority. This letter confirmed that Raymond spoke on behalf of Catherine because she made it possible.

Florence and the papacy fought for years over economic and political power. Scholar Paul Thibault described that, "the Florentines, for their part, wanted a quick peace. They knew only too well their economic vulnerability," and in an effort to solve the problem, "they authorized a peace mission to Avignon, headed by Catherine of Siena."<sup>38</sup> A powerful party saw the potential for Catherine advocating for them. Even though Thibault doubts how much sway Catherine had over Pope Gregory XI, the fact remains that Florence sought her help which means they saw how their connections could benefit their goals.<sup>39</sup> Catherine's connection through the Church, with Raymond, the Dominican Order, and her growing group of followers, gave her power through a support system.

Catherine and Raymond's relationship needs to be re-evaluated in regards to his role in her popularity and success. To what degree was Catherine's success made possible due to the many troublesome issues that plagued Italy and the Church that she helped appease? Most of Catherine's connections were either spiritual or political. Aside from her early group in Siena that were associated with religious groups, Catherine expanded into the political world through her male connections that expanded all over Tuscany: mainly Florence, Pisa, and Lucca. Tommaso dalla Fonte, although not seriously involved in politics, provided Catherine with a spiritual safehouse. Raymond did not appear to have political connections, but he had connections through the Dominican Order and the Catholic Church.

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<sup>38</sup> Thibault, Paul R, *Pope Gregory XI: The Failure of Tradition* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1986), 153.

<sup>39</sup> See Thibault, "Appendix C: The Question of Catherine of Siena," 211-213, for his brief analysis of Catherine and Gregory's relationship.

A pattern formed that Catherine developed relationships with men with connections to either noble families or government structures. Raymond of Capua does not fit that model, why? It was a direct result from Catherine living two interconnected lives. From a young age she was set on the path towards embodying the ideals of a living saint, but along the way her path became clouded. While under the care of Tommaso dalla Fonte, she thrived in the religious world, helping the sick, becoming a tertiary, and having visions from God. By 1374, she hit a milestone when the Dominican Order recognized her saintly ambitions, but real world politics got in the way. Her network expanded into a different direction: those who became followers were not just religious men and women but politically active ones as well.

Catherine showed intuitiveness throughout her career as a living saint. Catherine had an agenda that hid under the surface of her public persona and she used all she could to advance that agenda. Mainly, her agenda consisted of pursuing peace during the tumultuous 1370s when nobody found peace, completing her theological work that stemmed from deep personal reflection, helping the sick that were affected by the plague, and furthering her reputation as a living saint. All of these agendas were completed because of the dense network in which she surrounded herself. Everywhere she traveled, she had followers and connections to help her cause, even if it was simply housing her during her stay. Every single connection had a purpose.

Catherine saw the usefulness of a created community from her youth, perfected her skills as a networker, and went into the world and created a strong network filled with men who were connected in one way or another and women who acted as spiritual support and bolstered her following. Based on her experience as a young girl in Siena, loved by everyone, evidence shows that she made the conscious choices to align herself with those in positions of power. In no way

did Catherine ever admit that her choices followed a pattern, but new research methods can reveal hidden layers of Catherine's world.

Through the actors of Tommaso dalla Fonte, William of Flete, Nanni di ser Vanni Savini, Raymond of Capua, and much more, it is evident that Catherine acknowledged that power to affect change came from a network of supporters. Catherine's success as a living saint depended on the resources of the individuals she surrounded herself with, and without them, her ability to create a large letter base, have her theology remembered, and even physically support her would not have existed. Religious women found power during the 14th-century, but it was also in large part because of their active choices to align their goals with those around them. No saint is an island and Catherine's network proves that. Just as everyone in history is a product of their time, Catherine was a product of those she interacted with on a daily basis.

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