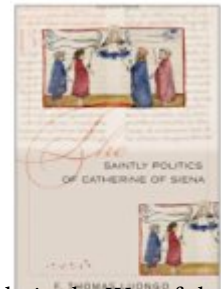


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

F. Thomas Luongo. *The Sainthood Politics of Catherine of Siena*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. xv + 233 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4395-4.

Reviewed by Thomas Izbicki (Eisenhower Library, Johns Hopkins University)
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Catherine of Siena (d. 1380, canonized 1461) too often is presented as a mystic above secular politics. This image is rooted in the biography of the saint written by her confessor, Raymond of Capua. He fashioned an image of Catherine acceptable in the hagiographic literature of his day. F. Thomas Luongo has undertaken the task of providing a corrective to this image, restoring the political dimensions of the saint's involvement in the life of her day. The result is a cogent and well-written monograph. Luongo uses Catherine's letters, firmly attributed to her agency rather than to that of the men around her, and other hagiographic materials, including the work of Tommaso Caffarini. Archival resources from Siena also are employed. The archival resources are particularly useful in Luongo's assessment of Catherine's family background. Her family usually is described as poor artisans working as dyers. The archives show a more prosperous family of entrepreneurs, whose social and political ties were to the Dodici, a faction of elite citizens recently excluded from government by the Riformatori. Several of the saint's entourage also were tied to the Dodici or to noble clans not favorable to the Riformatori. These ties made Catherine suspect to the government, although she protested purely spiritual motives for her epistolary campaigns and personal interventions in affairs. The letters also reveal themselves as statements Catherine could not have made in person to those in power, like calling the pope the equivalent of "daddy." The author's use of the letters is particularly important for a discussion of Catherine's agenda. She could be critical of the reigning pope, Gregory XI (1370-78), and she called for reform. Nonetheless, the saint saw Italy as bound for salvation and peace to the papacy, and through it to Christ. Those who had different agendas endangered their cities and

their souls. This emerges particularly in the War of the Eight Saints, the conflict between Florence—allied with the Siennese Riformatori—and the pope that culminated in an interdict imposed upon the city. Catherine sought to make peace between Florence and Gregory, even incurring the latter's displeasure at one point. Moreover, her life was endangered during the revolt of the Ciompi in Florence. Nonetheless, the saint continuously labored to bring about peace, understood as including a proper ordering of Italy under the pope, and a crusade. That agenda included not just exporting Europe's violence to the east, but participation in a papal enterprise. The overall portrait that emerges is convincing. Catherine was indeed a political player in her time. Moreover, Luongo wisely refrains from reducing the saint's motives to pure politics as some might dismiss them. Catherine's sanctity and her politics were aspects of a single identity in a Europe in which "the church" meant both the engine of salvation and the Avignon papacy. The arguments presented usually are persuasive and supported by the texts. There is a small structural problem caused by incorporating an article about Catherine's letter describing the execution of Niccolò di Toldo. The extensive discussion of the gender language of the text distracts somewhat from the political issues under discussion. Even then, Niccolò is found to be an agent of "the church," while Raymond of Capua, the recipient of the letter, is himself shown to be tied to papal policies. It is typical of the making of Catherine's hagiographic image that Raymond omitted all reference to the letter from his life of the saint. Readers should be aware that the clearest summary of Catherine's beliefs about political issues is found in the conclusion.

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