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Philosophical aspects of the truth in the *Orazione XV* of Caterina da Siena

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Abstract

This article will focus on the references to truth (*verità*) in the work *Orazioni* by the 14th-century Italian mystic, theologian, and philosopher Caterina da Siena. Within the dense and philosophically structured reflections of the *Orazioni*, truth is a term that recurs and acquires fundamental importance for understanding the worldview of the Italian philosopher. It can also be seen within a broader framework of philosophical perspectives on the relationship between parts and the whole, as well as on the participation of humans in the cosmic unity. We will particularly focus on *Orazione XV*, in which a more complete presentation of the term truth is provided through a clear reasoning process.

Keywords: *Caterina da Siena, female medieval mysticism, Orazioni, the philosophical concept of truth, mystical experiences, ecstasy*

1. Caterina da Siena: her life, her work and the particularity of the *Orazioni* in the corpus of her writings

One of the most famous mystics from Italy during the Late Middle Ages is Caterina da Siena (1347-1380), who gained great fame as a healer, prophetess, mystic, philosopher, and even as an ambassador of the Pope. From an early age, she had the desire to dedicate herself completely to God, despite the opposition of her parents. As her biographer and confessor, Raimondo da Capua¹, writes, when she was six years old, she received the blessing of Christ in a vision.

At the age of seven, she asked Virgin Mary to give her Jesus as her husband, and by the age of twelve, she had dedicated herself to an ascetic life, consuming little food and water. She entered the Order of the Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic, which primarily accepted elderly widows. Her fame spread widely due to her mystical experiences, which primarily involved the stigmata and her secret marriage to Christ, but also her elevation during a state of ecstasy. Caterina claimed that she always saw the wedding ring from Jesus on her finger, and she also recounted that he opened her chest, took her heart and offered his heart to her – that was the reason for a large mark on her chest. In one of her mystical experiences, she said that she abandoned her body and traveled to Hell and Purgatory.

Sometime, Caterina left the monastery and formed a circle of laypeople and clergy, both men and women. It was then that her fame as a healer and prophetess spread, with reports claiming that a single touch from her could cure even the most serious illnesses. At the same time, she wrote hundreds of letters² and also dictated the *Dialogue (Dialogo)*³ while in ecstasy.

¹ See Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda maior sive Legenda admirabilis virginis Catherine de Senis*, Edizione critica a cura di Silvia Nocentini (Edizione Nazionale dei Testi Mediolatini d'Italia, 31, I, 19), Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze 2013. In detail about the life of Caterina cf. Vauchez A., *Caterina da Siena, Una mistica trasgressiva*, trad. L. Falaschi, Laterza, 2016.

² Cf. “Database Epistolario Katerina da Siena” (<https://www.dekasisime.it/>), part of the project of Istituto storico italiano

Some bold positions expressed by Caterina are intriguing, such as her views on human free will⁴ and the unity of the soul with God in a state of ecstasy⁵. At the same time, she fought for the reconstruction of the Catholic Church during a period of corruption and crisis, engaged in intense political action. She accompanied the representative of the Dominicans to a meeting with the Pope in Avignon. Her influence on Pope Gregory XI played a significant role in his decision to leave Avignon and return to Rome, thus ending the so-called "Babylonian Captivity". She even negotiated peace with Florence. After the death of Gregory XI and the achievement of peace, she returned to Siena⁶.

In this study, we will focus on Catherine's work *Orazioni*. These are a certain number of short "orationes et postulationes", formulated by her during her numerous ecstasies, recorded by her close friends and students and gathered dur-

per il medio evo (ISIME), which started in 2015, in collaboration with Provincia Romana dell'Ordine dei frati Predicatori, aiming at the edition of the *Epistolario* of Caterina da Siena.

³ Caterina dictated the *Dialogo* between the end of 1377 and October 1378, while political and ecclesiastical life were in deep crisis. Her questions were posed to God Himself, and therefore the *Dialogo* is a record of what she understood directly from God. The main theme of the *Dialogo* is the identity of God, who is Mercy that leads to salvation. It is a "mystical writing" full of insights and philosophical truths, which her followers commonly referred to as *Il Libro* (The Book). The title *Dialogo* comes from the observation of Raimondo da Capua, who, while translating the text from the vernacular into Latin, noted that the work is structured as a dialogue between the Creator and a soul created by Him. The *Dialogo* is the work that led Pope Paul VI to declare Caterina «dottore della Chiesa» (Cf. the edition Santa Caterina da Siena, *Dialogo*, Prefazione di Timothy Radcliffe, Presentazione di Giuliana Cavallini, Testo critico curato da Giuliana Cavallini, Introduzione, versione in italiano corrente e note di Elena Malaspina, Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2017).

⁴ Concerning free will: Carnea M. F., "Sul concetto di libertà e autorevolezza volitiva. Raffronto tra Caterina da Siena e Tommaso d'Aquino", *Reportata*, 2011 (Last accessed: <https://mondodomani.org/reportata/carnea01.htm>)

⁵ You can find information regarding the subject in the study: Tagliafico A., "Elementi peculiari della dottrina spirituale di Caterina da Siena", *Alpha Omega*, 16:3, 2013, pp. 453-470.

⁶ For the political thought and action of Caterina Cf. Pajardi P., *Caterina la santa della politica*, Martello, 1993.

ing the last period of her life. Since they were ecstatic experiences, we understand that they were not consciously dictated by Catherine, while we are not sure that she checked the text that was recorded after the end of each of her ecstatic experiences. The manuscripts containing these peculiar "prayers" include explanations regarding the place, time and context in which each of them was performed. They were published as an appendix to her letters in the edition of Aldus Manutius of 1500⁷ and also in the editions of *Dialogo* by Girolamo Gigli⁸ and Innocenzo Taurisano⁹. Gigli collected and modified the *Orazioni* using a manuscript by Tommaso Buonconti of Pisa¹⁰, a pupil of Catherine.

An introductory note, which appears in the edition of Aldus Manutius, informs us that these are recordings made in Avignon, Genoa and Rome, while at the same time it is pointed out that none of the innumerable speeches that Catherine made in a state of ecstasy in Siena, Florence and Pisa and in many other places in Italy are included. The number of *orazioni* that have survived varies between 22 (in the manuscripts, in Latin) and 26 (printed by Aldus Manuzio, in vernacular). Fawtier has studied this work thoroughly, especially with regard to dating, and has reached convincing results¹¹. His main finding was that these texts constitute a selection among the countless prayers formulated by Catherine,

⁷ *Epistole devotissime de Sancta Catharina da Siena*, Aldo Manuzio, Venezia 1500.

⁸ *L'opere della serafica Santa Caterina da Siena nuovamente pubblicate da Girolamo Gigli. Tomo primo quarto Il dialogo della serafica Santa Caterina da Siena composto in volgare dalla medesima, essendo lei, mentre dettava ai suoi scrittori, rapita in singolare eccesso, ed astrazione di mente diviso in quattro trattati*, Siena, Stamperia del Pubblico 1707.

⁹ Santa Caterina da Siena, *Dialogo della divina provvidenza*, a cura di Innocenzo Taurisano, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, Firenze 1928. It should be noted that in the edition of Taurisano, the prayers are given the interesting title "elevazioni" which likely suggests the spiritual elevation that Caterina's prayers lead to, as well as the transition during ecstasy to another level of existence.

¹⁰ Capecelatro A., *Storia di S. Caterina da Siena e del papato del suo tempo*, Tip. liturgica di S. Giovanni, 1886, p. 272.

¹¹ Fawtier R., *Sainte Catherine de Siennes: essai de critique des sources*, E. de Boccard, 1930.

while the criterion for this selection is not clear. Furthermore, the degree of reliability of these recordings is reasonably an open research question.

Regardless of the extent to which the *Orazioni* constitute the “authentic” recordings of Catherine’s discourses and our ability to verify this, the texts themselves constitute an important source for understanding female mysticism in the Late Middle Ages, as well as the philosophical background that constitutes it. Of particular interest in the *Orazioni* is the fact that the discourse is not only a descriptive and experiential discourse regarding the contact of man and divine, but also a formulation of relationships between concepts in a framework of axiomatic propositions, reasoning and definitions. All these elements form the basis of an original philosophical discourse, dense in meanings, which can be read together with other philosophical texts that belong to the broader category of philosophical mysticism.

2. The *Orazione* 15 and the concept of truth: a philosophical approach

In this text we will explore one of the fundamental concepts that constitute the philosophical core of the work, the concept of truth through the *Orazione* 15, where the reasoning of the text requires a purely philosophical approach¹². In order to have a better overview of the commentary, I consider that it is appropriate to quote both the original text and my own translation into English. The text will be divided into three parts based on the different semantic core of each part. At the end of each part, the commentary will follow, which will include references to other parts of the *Orazioni*, when it is necessary to illuminate the passage under consideration.

¹² The text is quoted according to the edition: Santa Caterina da Siena, *Orazioni*, a cura di Giuliana Cavallini, 2a edizione, Ed. Cantagalli, 2005.

Part 1

Verità, verità, e chi sono io che tu dài a me la verità tua? Io so' colei che non so'. Adunque la verità tua è quella che fa e parla et adopera tutte le cose, poi che io non so'. La verità tua è quella che porge la verità, e con la verità tua dico la verità. La verità tua eterna porge la verità in diversi modi a diverse creature, e non è separata da te la verità tua, anco tu se' essa verità. Tu, deità eterna, Figliuolo di Dio, venisti da Dio per adempire la verità del Padre eterno e neuno può avere verità se non da te, verità e chiunque vuole avere la verità tua si conviene che niente gli manchi della tua verità, altrimenti non potrebbe avere la verità, la quale verità neuno difetto può patire.

Translation

Truth, truth, who am I to whom you give your truth? I am she who I am not. Therefore, your truth is that which acts and speaks and handles all things, since I am not. Your truth is that which gives the truth, and with your truth, I speak the truth. Your eternal truth gives the truth in different ways to different beings, and it is not separated from you, your truth, while at the same time, you are that truth. You, eternal deity, Son of God, came from God to fulfill the truth of the eternal Father, and no one can have the truth except from you, truth, and whoever wants to have your truth is convinced that nothing is missing in them from your truth, otherwise, they could not have the truth, which can have no flaw.

Commentary

Caterina addresses the truth, posing a question that will serve as the starting point to explore the nature of truth and the relationship of humans to it. She wonders about who she is, defining her relationship with the truth. She is the one to whom the truth is granted. Otherwise, there is no way for

her to speak of herself. Without the truth, she is the one who is not; that is, she cannot have any ontological existence, and she cannot attribute any property to herself¹³. Therefore, everything that defines her actions, words, and relationship with things is the result of the fact that the truth was granted to her, that is she partakes in the truth¹⁴. The truth gives the truth¹⁵, that is, it gives itself to the human beings, and only then they can speak the truth, if they partake in it. The truth is eternal, as Catherine often repeats within the *Orazioni*¹⁶, and within eternity, there is the imperishable and the unchanging for her. The truth is given to different beings in different ways, but this part of the truth that is given is never separated from the truth as a whole. It thus seems that the participation of beings in the truth does not affect the truth as a whole.

Next, Catherine addresses Jesus, whom she calls "eternal deity"¹⁷ who fulfilled and completed the eternal truth of the eternal Father¹⁸: therefore, the end (purpose) of the divine plan is fulfilled when, through truth (who is Jesus), the human partakes in the truth (of the Father), who is the Idea of truth from which every shared truth arises. Therefore, Jesus is the emanating truth, but he is also identified with the source of truth, and the human who possesses the truth es-

¹³ Cf. Plat. *Republic*, 509b, where all things are known through participation in the Ideas, which in turn participate in the Good: "Καὶ τοῖς γιγνώσκομένοις τοίνυν μὴ μόνον τὸ γινώσκεισθαι φάναι ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρεῖναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶναι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ὑπ' ἐκείνου αὐτοῖς προσεῖναι, οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ' ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβεῖα καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος" ["In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence² in dignity and surpassing power"], (Translation: Perseus Digital Library).

¹⁴ Cf. *Ps.* 32,6; *Ps.* 32,9.

¹⁵ Cf. *Jn* 1,16-17.

¹⁶ Cf. *Orazioni* IV, VIII, X, XIX, XX, XII,

¹⁷ It is interesting that Caterina chooses the phrase "eternal deity" ("deità eterna"), which in the Italian language is feminine, just as the noun "truth" ("verità") is.

¹⁸ Cf. also *Dial.* XXI καὶ *Dial.* LXXXVII.

entially partakes in the truth of Jesus, and thus of the Father. In this participation, no part of the truth can be missing from the one who wants¹⁹ to partake in the truth, since the truth is perfect and cannot have any lack or flaw when granted to the one who partakes in it.

Part 2

A questo modo l'hanno e beati, e quali perfettamente senza difetto veggono la verità tua per l'eterna tua visione che hanno partecipando la visione tua, con la quale tu medesimo ti vedi; imperciò che tu se' quello medesimo lume col quale tu ti vedi e col quale se' veduto dalla creatura tua, né tra te e colui che ti vede è alcuno mezo che rappresenti te a colui che vede te. Adunque, mentre che i beati partecipano te, partecipano et il lume et il mezzo con che tu se' veduto; e perché tu stesso sempre se' quello medesimo lume, quello medesimo mezzo e quel medesimo obietto partecipati da loro ne l'unione che fanno in te, però si fa una medesima cosa della visione tua e della visione della tua creatura in te, non obstante che uno più perfettamente vegga e un altro meno perfettamente, però che questo è per la diversità di coloro che ricevono e non per la diversità della visione tua.

¹⁹ At this point, Catherine addresses the issue of free will in a very clear way: only that being which chooses the truth participates in it. Catherine has expressed herself very clearly regarding the relationship between free will and divine grace in one of her most famous letters: “Noi siamo uno giardino, e veramente orto, del quale giardino e orto n'è fatto ortolano, la prima Verità, la ragione col libero arbitrio; la quale ragione e libero arbitrio, con l'aiutorio della divina grazia, à a divellare le spine de' vizii, e piantare l'erbe odorifere delle virtù”. [We are a garden, and indeed an orchard, and the gardener of this garden and orchard is the First Truth, the Reason with a free will. And this Reason and the free will, with the help of divine grace, uproot the thorns of flaws and plant the fragrant herbs of virtues.] (All'Abbate Martino - Lettera 67). All the excerpts from the *Letters* of Caterina presented in this study follow the edition: *Epistole della Serafica Vergine S. Caterina Da Siena Scritte da Lei a Pontefici, Cardinali, Prelati ed altre persone ecclesiastiche tratte fedelmente da' suoi migliori esemplari e purgate dagli errori dell'altre impressioni colle annotazioni del P. Federico Burlamacchi della Compagnia di Gesù*, Tomo I, Tipografia e Libreria Pirota & C., Milano 1842.

Translation

In this way the human beings possess you, are possessed by you, and blessed are they, and those who perfectly, without flaw, see your truth through your eternal vision, in which they partake, with which you are beheld. This is why you are that same light with which you see yourself and with which you are seen by your creation. Between you and whoever sees you, there is no intermediary which represents you to the one who beholds you. Therefore, while the blessed partake in you, they also partake in the light and in the medium through which you are beheld. And because you yourself are always that very light, that very medium, and that very thing that partake in the unity created within you, an identical thing is created by your vision and by the vision of your creation within you, even though one sees more perfectly and another less perfectly, because this exists due to the difference of those who receive and not because of the difference of your vision.

Commentary

Those who see the truth, which is eternal, see it eternally. The vision of the truth is equivalent to partaking in it. Those who partake in the truth partake in all the attributes of the truth. The vision of the truth is, in reality, the vision of the truth by itself. The truth is the light with which it sees itself and its creation²⁰. Nothing intervenes between the truth and

²⁰ Cf. also: “Io Caterina, serva e schiava de’servi di Jesù Cristo, scrivo a voi nel prezioso sangue suo, con desiderio di vedere in voi il lume della santissima fede, il quale lume ci mostra la via della verità, e senza questo lume veruno nostro esercizio, nè veruno desiderio o operazione non verrebbe a frutto, nè a quello fine per lo quale cominciassimo ad operare, ma ogni cosa verrebbe imperfetta, lenti saremmo nella carità di Dio e del prossimo”. [I, Caterina, servant and slave of the slaves of Jesus Christ, write to you with His precious blood, with the desire to see within you the light of the most holy faith, which shows us the way of truth. Without this light, no effort, desire, or action could bear fruit, nor would it reach the goal for which we would begin to work, but everything would

the beings that partake in the truth, since, ultimately, the light with which the truth sees itself and sees its creation is the truth itself. Therefore, whoever partakes in the truth also partakes in the medium with which the truth sees itself. Thus, everything creates a unity within the truth, without anything intervening to enable the participation and union. The vision of the truth by the creation and the vision of the creation by the truth are the same thing within the truth. The difference in the way someone sees the truth is a consequence of the differences in the imperfect beings, but in no way the truth is affected by how one sees it, perfectly or imperfectly. The fact that the otherness of living beings is emphasized as the cause of the different visions of the truth raises the issue of how the individual soul is structured, as well as the individual limits that determine the knowledge of the truth—issues that will be more clearly addressed in the third part of Orazione XV.

In this part of the text, the mystical perception of participation and, ultimately, the absolute unity between parts and the whole is recalled²¹, when one follows the mystical path of knowledge, which in this case is participation in the truth. Furthermore, the mysteries are traditionally linked with the above position: the initiates partook in allegorical representations related to the myth of a deity who usually died and was reborn, symbolizing the destiny of the soul after death, but also unity that govern all beings. The initiates believed not only that the deity was present during the rituals, but also that they themselves somehow partook in the deity. In a

be imperfect, and we would be slow in the mercy of God and of our neighbor] (A frate Raimondo da Capua - Lettera 101).

²¹ Cf. Plat. *Parmenides*, 145b7-145e6. Also, Alexander of Aphrodisias presents, as a kind of mixture of elements, the so-called fusion (*krasis*) according to the Stoic Chrysippus. In this case, the components permeate each other so completely that every particle of each one participates in all the components of the mixture. Long A. A., *Hellenistic Philosophy*, MIET, 1990, p. 256. Cf. Long, A. A., Vertzagia D., “Antiquity Revisited: A Discussion with Anthony Arthur Long”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 5, 1, 2020, pp. 111-122. <https://doi.org/10.12684/cjp.23324>; Dendrinis M., “Integrated dialectic in Plato’s *Parmenides*: a comparative analysis of Proclus’ and Ficino’s Commentaries on *Parmenides*”, *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 16, 2024, pp. 189-210. <https://doi.org/10.12684/dia.39539>.

philosophical context, a passage from Plotinus' *Enneads* is indicative, and it can be read as shedding light on Caterina's text:

... δύο οὐκ ἦν, ἀλλ' ἐν ἧν αὐτὸς ὁ ἰδὼν πρὸς τὸ ἐωραμένον, ὡς ἂν μὴ ἐωραμένον, ἀλλ' ἠνωμένον...

["... there were not two, but the one who saw was one with the seen, as if it were not something visible, but something with which the person unites..." ²²]

Part 3

Sì come l'anima che è in questa vita in stato di gracia riceve la verità tua per lo lume de la fede, con la quale fede vede che le cose che ci predica la chiesa tua sonno vere, e non di meno diverse anime, secondo la diversità delle loro disposizioni, in diversi modi ricevono questa verità, più e meno perfettamente, né per questo è diversificata la fede, anco è una medesima fede in tutti; così ne' beati è una medesima visione, avegna che più e meno perfettamente da diverse creature sia ricevuto, come detto è. Amen.

Translation

Since the soul that is in this life in a state of grace receives your truth through the light of faith, by which it sees that the things proclaimed by your Church are true, and since very different souls, according to the diversity of their dispositions, receive your truth in different ways, more or less perfectly, neither for this reason the faith is differentiated, but the faith is the same for all. Thus, in the blessed ones, there is the same vision, which is received more or less perfectly by different creations, as has been said. Amen.

Commentary

Participation in the truth happens through the means of faith in the truth of Christian teachings in a state of grace. As

²² Cf. the broader passage from the *Enneads* from which the referenced phrase originates (VI.9.11.5-15).

has been said, the means that leads to participation in the truth is also truth, so faith itself, as both process and means, is truth²³. We can reasonably conclude that faith is not a subjective conception (Plato would call it a "δόξα"), but it is an objective and indisputable knowledge in which the human partakes.

Just as participation in the truth is perfect, so also is participation in faith perfect and the same for all, since faith is the truth. The different vision of the truth by different creations is not due to differing faiths, but to the different inclinations of each one, which lead to perfect or imperfect vision. In any case, the truth and the faith-truth are not affected by the perfect or imperfect vision from the side of the creations. The inclination is a disposition of the soul towards the vision of a greater or smaller part of the truth. Therefore, throughout the entirety of the Orazione XV, we understand that the human being is determined by an inherent predisposition to knowledge, which operates in parallel with the divine grace and the free will. Catherine seems to explore the complex nature of humanity, involving in its formation the transcendent factor, natural characteristics, and individual freedom.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

Through the philosophical approach of the Orazione XV, we could shape the characteristics and relationships of the truth as follows:

²³ Cf. also 2 *Tm* 3,15.

TRUTH → HUMAN = TRUTH → MANIFESTS IN → WORDS → ACTIONS
→ HANDLING OF THINGS



PROPERTIES OF TRUTH

→ ETERNAL AND IMMUTABLE

→ GIVEN DIFFERENTLY TO DIFFERENT BEINGS DUE TO DIVERSITY OF:

- DIVINE GRACE
- INDIVIDUAL INCLINATION
- FREE WILL

→ PERFECT

→ SOURCE (FATHER) = MEDIUM (LIGHT = FAITH = OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE) = EMANATING (JESUS) = TRUTH

→ PARTICIPATION IN THIS IS PERFECT, SO WHOEVER PARTICIPATES IN IT PARTICIPATES ALSO IN THE SOURCE, IN THE MEDIUM, AND IN THE EMANATING

We therefore observe both the density of meanings and the multi-layered considerations presented during the Late Middle Ages within the framework of female mysticism. Regardless of the extent to which the records of Catherine's writings represent a "faithful" reproduction of what she said in a state of ecstasy or have undergone changes and transformations by her disciples, we must be certain that the texts absolutely reflect the world, the spiritual quests, and the fundamental ideas of the Italian philosopher and theologian.

In the frame the research interest that has emerged in recent decades regarding the approach to the lives and works of women in the Middle Ages, a broad field of study is opened, within which interdisciplinary methods will be applied. For example, Catherine's work can involve the collaboration of theologians, philosophers, social scientists, historians, and gender theorists. Specifically, regarding philosophical studies, it is worth noting the generally dense and coher-

ent reasoning, which triggers a further research of relations and conceptual associations between different philosophical contexts, as was shown in the passage from the *Orazioni* under examination.

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