

Catherine of Siena: Letter 74 To Pope Gregory XI, in Avignon

Note: We do not know how often Catherine actually met with Pope Gregory XI while she was in Avignon, but she did not hesitate besides to use letters to communicate with him, as well as the services of her male companions. Dupré Theseider (DT) dates this letter, sent to the court with Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi, sometime between June and September of 1376.

In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of gentle Mary, mother of God's Son.

Very loved and reverend father in Christ Jesus,

I Caterina, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ and your poor wretched unworthy daughter, am writing to you in his precious blood. I long to see you the sort of true gentle shepherd who takes an example from the shepherd Christ, whose place you hold. He laid down his life for his little sheep in spite of our ingratitude. The hounding, the wrongs, the scorn, the insults of the people he had created and so greatly blessed did not keep him from working out our salvation. No, as one in love with the Father's honor and our salvation he ignores his own suffering and conquers our malice with his wisdom and peace and kindness. Just so I am begging you, I am telling you, my dear babbo, in the name of Christ crucified, to conquer with kindness, with patience, with humility, with gentleness the wrongdoing and pride of your children who have rebelled against you their father. You know that the devil is not cast out by the devil but by virtue.[1] Even though you have been seriously wronged—since they have insulted you and robbed you of what is yours[2]—still, father, I beg you to consider not their wrongdoing but your own kindness. Don't let this keep you from working out our salvation. And this will be their salvation: that you re-establish peace with them, for as long as a son is at war with his father he is dispossessed of his inheritance.[3] Ah, father, peace, for love of God, so that all these children may not lose the inheritance of eternal life! For you know that God has placed in your hands the giving and the taking away of this inheritance as your kindness pleases. You hold the keys, and to whomever you open it is opened, and to whomever you close it is closed. This is what the good gentle Jesus said to Peter, whose place you take: "Whatever you shall loose on earth will be loosed in heaven, and whatever you shall bind on earth will be bound in heaven." [4]

So take a lesson from the true father and shepherd. For you see that now is the time to give your life for the little sheep who have left the flock. You must seek and win them back by using patience and war—by war I mean by raising the standard of the sweet blazing cross and setting out against the unbelievers. So you must sleep no longer, but wake up and raise that standard courageously. I am confident that by God's measureless goodness you will win back the unbelievers and [at the same time] correct the wrongdoing of Christians, because everyone will come running to the

fragrance of the cross,[5] even those who have rebelled against you most.

Oh what joy, if we were to see the Christian people giving the seasoning of faith to the unbelievers! [6] For once these had received the light they would become perfect, like a new plant. And once the Holy Spirit's warmth and light had, through holy faith, displaced the chill of unbelief, they would produce the flowers and fruits of virtue in the mystic body of holy Church. So by the fragrance of their virtue they would help eliminate the vice and sin, the pride and filth that are rampant among the Christian people—especially among the prelates, pastors, and administrators of holy Church who have turned to eating and devouring souls, [7] not converting them but devouring them! And it all comes from their selfish love for themselves, from which pride is born, and greed and avarice and spiritual and bodily impurity. They see the infernal wolves carrying off their charges and it seems they don't care. Their care has been absorbed in piling up worldly pleasures and enjoyment, approval and praise. And all this comes from their selfish love for themselves. For if they loved themselves for God instead of selfishly, they would be concerned only about God's honor and not their own, for their neighbors' good and not their own self indulgence. Ah, my dear babbo, see that you attend to these things! Look for good virtuous men, and put them in charge of the little sheep. Such men will feed in the mystic body of holy Church not as wolves but as lambs. It will be for our good and for your peace and consolation, and they will help you to carry the great burdens I know are yours. It seems to me, gracious father, that you are like a lamb among wolves. But take heart and don't be afraid, for God's providential help will always be with you. Don't be surprised even though you see a great deal of opposition, and see that human help is failing us, and that those who should be helping us most disappoint us and act against us. Don't be afraid, but even more self-confident; don't give up or restrain your sweet holy desire, but let it be more enkindled with each day that passes.

Up, father! Put into effect the resolution you have made concerning your return and the crusade. [8] You can see that the unbelievers are challenging you to this by coming as close as they can to take what is yours. Up, to give your life for Christ! Isn't our body the only thing we have? [9] Why not give your life a thousand times, if necessary, for God's honor and the salvation of his creatures? That is what he did, and you, his vicar, ought to be carrying on his work. It is

to be expected that as long as you are his vicar you will follow your Lord's ways and example.

So come, come! Delay no longer, so you may soon set up camp against the unbelievers, and so you will not be frustrated in the endeavor by these rotten members who are rebelling against you! [10] I am asking you, and I want you to play a holy trick on them—I mean the kindness I've been telling about. [11] This will be for them a fire of love, burning coals that you will heap on their heads. [12] In this way you will have gained both them and their material means to help you wage a real war against the unbelievers. This is what our gentle Savior did. By heaping such burning hot love on those who were rebelling against him, he succeeded little by little in making them his helpers, bearers of God's name. Take, for example, that dear preacher Paul. [13] He was a wolf, but he became a lamb, a gracious vessel of love [14]—and the fire with which Christ filled his vessel he carried through the whole world. He uprooted vice from Christians and planted virtue in them; unbelievers he drew away from error and unbelief, and offered them the light of faith. Now this is what gentle First Truth is telling you and wants you to do. What you have received, give. [15]

Peace, peace, peace, my dear babbo, and no more war! Let us set out against our enemies, wearing as armor the most holy cross and carrying the sword of God's sweet holy word. [16] Ah, feed your hungry servants who are waiting for you and for this time with tremendous blazing desire! Take

courage, take courage, father! Stay away from the bitterness that cripples, but take hold of the bitterness that strengthens [17]—bitterness at seeing God's name insulted, and strength in the trust that God will provide for your needs. I'll say no more, for if I followed my inclination I wouldn't stop as long as I had life in my body!

Forgive my presumption. Let my love and grief for God's honor and the advancement of holy Church be my excuse in the presence of your kindness. I would rather say it personally than in writing, for I think I would more completely unburden my soul. [18] This is all I can do now. Have pity on the sweet loving desires being offered for you and holy Church in continual tears and prayers. Please don't treat them with indifference, but act on them vigorously, for it seems that spring is ready to burst into bloom, and soon the fruit will come, because the flowers are beginning to blossom. So have a courageous, absolutely fearless heart, as you follow the Lamb who was slain and consumed on the cross for us! Keep living in God's holy and tender love. Please, reverend father, grant the request that Neri, the bearer of this letter, will communicate to you, if you find it possible and acceptable. Please listen to him and trust what he says. [19] Sometimes it is impossible to write about what we would like to; so if you want to send me any private message, entrust it to him by word of mouth, for you can do so with confidence. As for whatever I can do, I would gladly give my life if necessary for God's honor and the salvation of souls. Gentle Jesus! Jesus!

[1] Cf. Mt. 12, 26-27. (DT, n. 2)

[2] A clear allusion to the revolt of the Italian cities, as a consequence of which the Church for a time effectively lost dominion over almost all of the papal territory. (DT, n. 3)

[3] Cf. Let. 68, n. 4. (DT, n. 4)

[4] Mt. 16, 19. Cf. Let. 60, n. 9. (DT, n. 5)

[5] An echo of Sg. 1, 3: "Draw me! We shall run after you in the fragrance of your ointment." (Vulg.) (DT, n. 6)

[6] This homey image of seasoning is often used by Catherine. Cf., e.g., Dial. 3, p. 29: "seasoned with loving charity"; 11, p. 44: "Discernment . . . seasons every virtue and virtuous deed." The basis for the image is probably Mt. 5, 13: "You are the salt of the earth" (DT, n. 7)

[7] Here the image of the ravaging wolf has lent a negative sense to the "eating of souls" which is usually such a positive image in Catherine, for whom life in Christ means "eating souls at the table of the most holy cross." (SN)

[8] Catherine's words confirm that the return of the papacy to Rome and the crusade were already coupled in Gregory's intent, and that the joining of the two projects did not come from Catherine's suggestion. (DT, n. 8)

[9] Cf. Let. 56. (DT, n. 9)

[10] Catherine's usual way of referring to the rebellious Italian cities. (DT, n. 10)

[11] Cf. Let. 77, n. 3. With kindness the pope will win his children back to himself, and at the same time get them to join the crusade. (DT, n. 11)

[12] Cf. Rom. 12, 20: "But 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; by doing this you will heap burning coals upon his head.'" (Prv. 2S, 21-22) (DT, n. 12)

[13] "quello dolce di banditore": the words evoke the image of a town crier, someone who shouts an urgent message in the streets. (SN)

[14] Here as elsewhere Catherine misquotes Acts 9, 15, which she would have heard in the Latin as *vas electionis*, "chosen vessel," or in the Tuscan vernacular as *vasello d'electione*; the latter she could easily have misheard as *vasello di dllectione*, which is what she uses. (SN)

[15] Cf. I Cor. 11, 23: "I received from the Lord what I handed on to you..."; Jn. 17, 8: "The word you gave to me I gave to them" (Vulg.); Mt. 10, 8: "The gift you have received, give as a gift." (DT, n. 13)

[16] Cf. Heb. 4, 12: "Indeed, God's word is living and true, sharper than any two-edged sword." (SN)

[17] Cf. Dial. 78, p. 147: "...their sadness is called not 'distressing sadness' that dries up the soul, but 'fattening sadness' that fattens the soul in loving charity, because sufferings increase and strengthen virtue, make it grow and prove it." Cf. also Let. 79: "Let your grief over what happened not be crippling; rather let it be the healing pain of a holy self knowledge." (DT, n. 14)

[18] Analogously, Let. 68, n. 22; Let. 71. (DT, n. 15)

[19] DT speculates that the pope had probably asked Catherine not to come to see him again, so as not to irritate too much those who were opposing his return to Rome. Catherine continued, however, to communicate with him through intermediaries, in this case Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi. (DT, n. 16)