

Self-Murder She Wrote: The Asceticism of St. Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters

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Abstract

After St. Catherine's death in 1380 from starvation, she continues to be recognized as one of the greatest women in the Church. As a result, her death remains overlooked in many scholarly sources. When looking at the regulations of self-murder, or suicide in the fourteenth century, it is clear that her death from starvation produces questions. This essay utilizes St. Catherine's letters and other scholarship written about St. Catherine and self-murder in the fourteenth century to help provide answers to the question, did St. Catherine of Siena commit self-murder?

I Caterina servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, am writing to you in his precious blood. I long to see you in your place at the table of the most Holy cross. There we find the spotless Lamb, who has been made food and table and waiter for us. Knowing as I do that no other food can please or satisfy the soul, I am saying we must walk along the way, and he is the way. What was his food? It was what he ate along this way: pain, disgrace, torment, abuse, and in the end the shameful death of the cross. So we must eat this same food.¹

-St. Catherine's Letter to Frate Niccolo da Montalcino, 1376

Catherine Benincasa (1347-1380) made a direct impact on the Christian Church through her letters on ascetic practices.² Throughout her letters, she discussed the pain and suffering that she and others should endure to become like Christ. Catherine represented a larger trend within the Church as a result of her practice and preaching of asceticism. Through her guidance, she would later become one of the most influential tertiaries, a third level associate within the church, and was later sanctified in 1939 after her death. Her quote above referenced her true discipline and devotion to living a life dedicated to Christ. Due to her influence on both men and women in the Christian Church, many individuals were encouraged to follow in her footsteps. Conversely, her devotion to Christ through asceticism via fasting led to her death by starvation in 1380 at the age of thirty-three. While St. Catherine is a central figure within the historiography of the fourteenth century Catholic Church, no one has examined the relationship between her fasting and self-murder. Each primary and secondary source that I reviewed mentioned her life through her letters, and incorporated information about her fasting, but neglected to acknowledge her death as self-murder. This is puzzling given that St. Catherine died as a result of the ascetic practices for which she is known best.

¹ Catherine Benincasa, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena V. I*, (Arizona: Arizona Board of Regents for Arizona State University, 2000), 312-313.

² St. Catherine was never formally educated and used a scribe for most of her letters. By the end of her life she taught herself how to write and began writing her later letters herself. Her voice remains consistent throughout all her letters, negating any thoughts of these writings being someone else's.

This essay explores the death of St. Catherine of Siena through the lens of fasting, asceticism, and self-murder, using these terms interchangeably throughout. If Catherine Benincasa was a saint, why did the medieval Church overlook her act of self-murder? What was the larger social, religious, and cultural context behind her practices? Why does her self-murder persist as overlooked or justified? To answer these questions, this essay will explore the St. Catherine's background, along with the history of self-murder and fasting in the Church in order to understand the fourteenth century ethics. The core evidence considered in this essay includes excerpts from St. Catherine's letters dealing with suffering, fasting, charity work, and her relation to St. Paul. This evidence provides information proving that the Church considered asceticism and fasting for the glory of Christ an acceptable death during the lifetime of St. Catherine of Siena.

Background

Catherine Benincasa was born March 25, 1347 in Siena, Italy as the twenty-fourth child to her mother and father. St. Catherine became devoted to the Church at an early age as her life's calling, despite her parents' wishes for her to eventually marry and have children. Starting at the age of eighteen, she isolated herself for three years, with no information as to where or why; however, at the age of twenty-one St. Catherine reemerged. She stated that she had obtained a mystical experience, a "mystical espousal" with Christ. This experience convinced her to come out of her solitude and begin her hands-on work within the Church.³ After returning from isolation, St. Catherine's writings and movements began to attract the attention of other religious individuals. Central to her passion for Christ was her willingness to push the limits of her asceticism and fasting habits. One scholar references her behavior by stating, "Catherine's inability or reluctance to eat as much as others was one of the most interesting marvels of her life to her simple contemporaries. It is clear, that partly from the extreme mortification, which according to mediaeval custom she inflicted on her flesh from childhood, her condition became at an early age thoroughly abnormal."⁴ The historical significance of her fasting exists as a marvel and a way to distinguish St. Catherine from others throughout the history of the Church.

History of Fasting in the Fourteenth Century

Why was the practice of fasting so important to the medieval tertiaries? Although historians can recall fasting prior to the Middle Ages, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries initiated a new revolution of fasting. Historian Esther Cohen noted that, "During the thirteenth century, collective flagellant processions began appearing in Europe, initiating a movement of communal self-mortification. By the fourteenth century, physical suffering had become the landmark of living sanctity."⁵ Despite the long tradition of fasting, this practice created a new level of self-mortification through asceticism. Women had previously been involved in the Church as tertiaries. However, the importance of their roles grew in the 14th century. Women began to assert new authority in the church through their pastoral voices, as well as through miracle work, piety, and charity. Throughout their work, tertiaries represented a new controversial role in their devotion to asceticism, a lifestyle

³ Suzanne Noffke, O.P., *The Letters of Catherine of Siena* (Arizona: ACMRS, 2000), xiv.

⁴ Catherine Benincasa, *St. Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters*, trans. and ed. Vida D. Scudder (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1905), 73.

⁵ Esther Cohen, *The Modulated Scream* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 27.

characterized by an individual's ability to abstain from sensual pleasures, often for fulfillment of spiritual goals. Europe witnessed an explosion of female ascetics during this time. Historian Caroline Walker Bynum added, "women's saintly vocations grew slowly through childhood and into adolescence; a disproportionate percentage of female saints were certain of their commitment to virginity before age eight."⁶ Women began choosing life in the Church at an earlier age than previously recorded.

Bynum, in her book, discussed the reasons and political dynamics behind women fasting throughout the Middle Ages. For example, she mentioned James of Vitry, a bishop in the early thirteenth century, who described this ascetic revolution as follows:

"Some of these women dissolved with such a particular and marvelous love toward God that they languished with desire and for years had rarely been able to rise from their beds. They had no other infirmity, save that their souls were melted with desire of him, and, sweetly resting with the Lord, as they were comforted in spirit they were weakened in body. The cheeks of one were seen to waste away, while her soul was liquified with the greatness of her love."⁷

While lay Christians (ordinary members of the church) also fasted, female ascetics used the practice in the extreme as a means to get closer to God. Such practices marked a significant change in the role of women in the Church. Before the fourteenth century, men dominated Christianity due to a theological understanding of women as being contaminated and wicked. Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354-430) recorded his views on women in the Church with his statement:

"Woman does not possess the image of God in herself but only when taken together with the male who is her head, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned the role as helpmate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God. But as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together into one."⁸

Men portrayed women as a lower class in their society and deemed themselves as the sole image of God. Medieval men traced this image back to Genesis 1:27 when God created the world. The Bible recorded, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."⁹ These influences provided the basis for a theology where men viewed women as lesser in God's eyes.

As a result of such theology, women were forced to work harder in order to gain likeness in God's image. Due to this doctrine, the Christian Church raised women with these teachings in order to help them live in God's likeness and to become respectable enough to enter heaven. These women grew up with the understanding that they were not born in God's image and had to spend their life attempting to obtain that image. Some of these women, including St. Catherine, chose to take the ideals and practices that were important to the Church and conduct them in a way that was

⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (California: University of California Press, 1987), 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸ Michele A. Paludi and J. Harold Ellens, eds. *Feminism and Religion: How Faiths View Women and Their Rights* (California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016), xx.

⁹ Gen. 1:27 KJV

detrimental to their bodily wellbeing. Through their efforts to obtain God's image, women began exercising public authority, owning property, and influencing their followers. These women included Joan of Arc, Catherine of Genoa, Gertrude of Helfta, and numerous other influential women.

Part of the increasing power of female mystics in the Late Middle Ages was the central role that Christ played in female asceticism. In one of St. Catherine's letters, she addressed God by saying, "By the light of understanding within your light I have tasted and seen your depth, eternal Trinity, and the beauty of your creation. Then when I considered myself in you, I saw that I am your image."¹⁰ Through her fasting habits, St. Catherine, along with other female ascetics, obtained higher importance within their church and societies. Contrary to St. Augustine's messages, women were now able to acquire God's image without a male connection. In addition, the practice of fasting achieved a number of objectives: it furthered salvation, showed charity, humility, and helped the pious clean the body and soul of their sins.¹¹ As Bynum noted, nobles and priests in this century stated that, "Fasting... cures disease, dries up the bodily humors, puts demons to flight, gets rid of impure thoughts, makes the timid clearer and the heart purer, the body sanctified, and raises man to the throne of God."¹² These influences resulted in female ascetics believing that fasting helped cleanse their bodies and spirits, and let them live a life in the image of Christ.

Writings on St. Catherine of Siena

How do contemporary scholars interpret the Middle Ages and St. Catherine's life choices? A number of scholars have celebrated the important role St. Catherine played in the Late Medieval church as well as the larger changes in Late Medieval Christianity. In their edited collection, Bornstein and Rusconi, for instance, described the relationship between St. Catherine of Siena and the rise of the Dominican tertiaries in the fourteenth century. As their collection showed, the model of her Dominican Third Order Regular of Siena led towards the adoption of their ideological configuration within the Observant reform of the entire Dominican order. St. Catherine's example and inspiration directly impacted these new ideological changes in Siena, while influencing society and the Church.¹³ Another historian who discussed St. Catherine's actions was Bynum. She argued that although women originally were limited in their involvement in the Church, the fourteenth century produced a number of prominent women who utilized food and fasting as a central part of their theology. In many cases, these behaviors were an underlying theme in women's spirituality and their movement within the Church providing new opportunities.¹⁴ Such new opportunities encompassed the values of asceticism, piety, and leadership in their communities.

Following the pioneering work of Bynum, many other scholars reference, modify, and critique her research. For example, John Howe criticized her views of fasting within their role in the Church. Howe believed that Bynum neglected other possible explanations and argued that fasting

¹⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 261.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36-37.

¹³ Anna Benvenuti Papi, "Mendicant Friars and Female Pinzochere in Tuscany: From Social Marginality to Models of Sanctity," *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 93.

¹⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 14.

could have resulted from a male-dominated society.¹⁵ While each woman's reason for fasting was different and often not explained in existing sources, Bynum ultimately pieced together her primary sources to contribute a new interpretation on this subject. Her interpretations set up the ability for other scholars to utilize her work in their own research.

In spite of her convincing thesis, Bynum, as well as her critics, have generally ignored the existence of self-murder within the topic of medieval female asceticism. Historian Alexander Murray conducted extensive research in chronicles, legal, and religious sources on the subject of self-murder. In particular, Murray contributed significant evidence in regard to society's punishments for self-murders and how these penalties saved other criminals from conducting the same crimes. In his work, he relied on legal documents in order to interpret self-murder in the Middle Ages. Murray contributed evidence of why people desired to kill themselves and why this was relevant in Medieval Europe. He also distinguished the problems with the Church's distribution of punishment within each trial, differentiating between egotistical and altruistic self-murder (the distinction is addressed in further detail later on in this paper).¹⁶ Depending on the situation, Christians ignored certain cases despite the evidence given to them. In addition, Cohen also contributed to the conversation of self-murder in the Middle Ages. In her book, she included a more realistic interpretation of the Middle Ages. Throughout her book she incorporated self-murder alongside other elements of suffering such as torture, pain, and, most importantly, asceticism.¹⁷

Although there are modern day sources written on self-murder and fasting as separate entities in the Middle Ages, such as *History of Suicide*, *The Modulated Scream*, *Holy Feast*, *Holy Fast*, and other sources, they neglect the deaths that resulted from starvation through fasting. After utilizing these sources, the remainder of this paper examines how the Church was able to reframe the death of St. Catherine from a case of self-murder to one of spiritual asceticism. It also examines the connection her fasting and self-murder, along with similar cases that also remain ignored in the historical writings.

History of Self-Murder in the Fourteenth Century

Fasting invoked a clear problem for medieval theologians: What happened if someone fasted too much to the point of death? Theologians in the Middle Ages distinguished between two types of self-murder: egotistical or altruistic. The difference between these two classifications was the motivation behind their death.¹⁸ Egotistical self-murder was a direct path to hell. Augustine stated, "By trying to make yourself martyrs, by burning yourself on the altar of Christ, you will in fact make yourselves a sacrifice to the Devil."¹⁹ An egotistical self-murder resulted from an individual's

¹⁵ John Howe, "Reviewed Work: Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women by Caroline Walker Bynum," *The Catholic Historical Review* 74, no. 3 (1988): 456-458, doi: http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.uccs.edu/stable/25022849?seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents.

¹⁶ Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁷ Esther Cohen, *The Modulated Scream* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), I.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages: The Curse on Self-Murder V. II* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2000), 109.

selfishness to end his or her life, out of depression, or other similar motives. The lower class individuals acted out these self-murders in the medieval society. Authorities viewed these deaths as unacceptable because of the motivation behind their self-murder. One example showed, "The peasant or the craftsman hanged himself to escape poverty and suffering."²⁰ Authorities condemned egotistical self-murderers for their cowardly acts by observing how these individuals avoided the life that Christ had given to them on earth.

On the other hand, an altruistic self-murder resulted from an unselfish act to serve God. The higher-class nobles and knights typically acted out these self-murders in the medieval society. In another example, "The knight or cleric arranged to get himself killed to escape humiliation and to deprive 'the infidel' of a victory."²¹ These self-murders were considered acceptable due to their involvement with higher-class citizens. Similarly, the Holy Bible contained eight different stories of self-murder: Abimelech, Samson, Achitophel, Zimry, Saul, Ptolemy Macron, Razias, and Judas. These stories provided the authorities a way to distinguish between the justified and condemned acts of these self-murders. These cases resulted in biases towards one person over another, which was due to the authority's reliance on the Church for their laws.

Given that the difference between these two types of self-murder relied on an understanding of motivation, medieval courts had to distinguish the difference between egotistical and altruistic self-murder. This permitted them to make their decision in order to punish or absolve the charges. Such determinations could lead to dramatically different results. For example, the punishment for breaking these laws varied, but all contained torture of the corpses and condemning them to hell. In one case it is recorded that, "Pierre Crochet of Boissy-Saint-Léger killed himself while under suspicion of murder. The judicial arm of the Abbey of Saint-Maur-des-Fossés sentenced the body to be dragged through the streets, then hanged (1274)."²² They would also confiscate the criminal's estate from their family to send a message to other individuals considering this same death. The Church created these punishments to expose the criminals and to hopefully discourage others from committing the same acts.

St. Catherine's Voice Regarding Suffering and Pain

The first place we can see the importance of ascetic practices for St. Catherine is in the way she linked the rejection of food to Christ's pain. In many ways, she discussed these themes by encouraging individuals to follow in her footsteps. St. Catherine in one of her letters stated, "In our sufferings we will experience eternal life even in this life. Though we are in pain we will not suffer. Rather, suffering will be refreshing for us when we consider that suffering can make us like Christ crucified in his disgrace."²³ St. Catherine attributed separate meanings to the terms pain and suffering. In this letter and others, she referenced suffering as a heavenly act, and pain as an earthly

²⁰ Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ Catherine Benincasa, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena V. III*, trans. Suzanne Noffke O.P. (Arizona: Arizona Board of Regents for Arizona State University, 2000), 63.

and sinful discomfort. She therefore recognized that pain was not equal to suffering because suffering in this life was a way to inherit Christ's image.

Although St. Catherine never discussed her personal fasting and ascetic journey with her followers, there is strong evidence that she conducted these practices.²⁴ In particular, St. Catherine wanted to live and die similarly to Christ with her earthly sufferings. Raymond of Capua (1330-1399), the Confessor of St. Catherine, wrote:

“She therefore caused her Confessor to be called and said to him: “Father, if through excessive fasting, I was in danger of death, would you not prohibit me from fasting, so as to prevent me from committing suicide?” “Without doubt” answered her Confessor. “But,” resumed she, “is it not as bad to expose one’s self to sin by eating as by fasting? If therefore you see, by the numerous experiments of which you have been witness, that I am killing myself by taking nourishment, why do you not forbid me, as you would forbid me to fast, if the fast produced a similar result?” There could nothing be said in reply to this reasoning, and her Confessor, who saw the danger to which he was exposing her, said to her: “Henceforth act according to the inspirations of the Holy Ghost, for I perceive that God is accomplishing marvelous things in you.”²⁵

Direct evidence supported that St. Catherine understood her habits would be detrimental to her livelihood, but Raymond persisted in supporting her behavior. Raymond's statement that, “God is accomplishing marvelous things in you,” supported her to continue fasting.²⁶ However, her statements also evidenced that she encountered difficulties in her journey but persisted. Through this direct understanding, she guided others through similar struggles.

Throughout her letters, she persistently displayed herself as completing ascetic practices in an easy manner but offered some reassurance for her audience. As a tertiary within the Church, St. Catherine recognized her disciples' struggles and provided support for them. In one of her letters addressed to Matteo Cenni in 1378, she identified and recognized his difficulties and personal sufferings. She responded, “Still, I am with you in continual prayer. In no way in the world do I want you to have any more suffering, so that you will be better able to bear what you do have.”²⁷ Although many of her letters depicted a version of masculinity in the promotion of asceticism by telling individuals how they should worship God, this letter presented a more maternal version of St. Catherine. Elsewhere, St. Catherine said, “I long to see you suffering with genuine holy patience, so that you may lay the true foundation God's true servants must lay.”²⁸ She recognized that pain and suffering were difficult, but they contained a necessary aspect of living a life pleasing to God. Other contemporaries deemed her actions as justified with the belief that ascetic works led an individual to life in heaven. Raymond consistently supported St. Catherine in every aspect. He highlighted the love and support from her followers. He exclaimed, “many men and women recall her with

²⁴ Cohen, *The Modulated Scream: Pain in Late Medieval Culture*, 28.

²⁵ Raymond of Capua, *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. Ladies of Sacred Heart (New York: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1859), 113-114.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁷ Benincasa, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena V. III*, trans. Suzane Noffke O.P., 45.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

statements of, “God enriches his saints and bestows on them new perfections. They should also prove the admirable virtue of Catherine, and that the Church may say of her without injury to her other saints; ‘We find none like her!’”²⁹ St. Catherine created a template for many individuals to help them obtain the same image of Christ.

St. Paul’s Influence on St. Catherine and Her Asceticism

St. Catherine’s ideas on asceticism originated from the teachings and practices of the Church. However, in many of her letters, St. Catherine referenced St. Paul’s letters and experiences, drawing in his inspirations found in the Holy Bible. She incorporated his teachings into her letters in order to help her audience understand the importance of asceticism. She also offered support by using quotes and stories of St. Paul’s struggles throughout his life to help bring comfort to her readers. For example, in her letter to Frate Matteo Tolomei da Siena (1378), she clearly depicted St. Paul and incorporated his story to help Matteo understand the glory of suffering:

“Oh dearest son, it seems to me that the eternal Bridegroom (Jesus) wants you to glory, as did the glorious St. Paul, in many trials. Among his trials was the great thorn [in the flesh] he had after he had been seized and beaten so many times by the Jews. Glory along with him, dearest son, and hold these things in due reverence, considering yourself deserving of the suffering but not of its reward. Now is our time to suffer for the glory and praise of God’s name.”³⁰

St. Paul also recognized the difficulties in the practice of asceticism in his personal life. Although St. Catherine utilized his words of promotion and encouragement when discussing suffering and pain, she also acknowledged the tribulations that they were enduring. She stated in several letters, “Gentle herald Paul, who says that ‘the sufferings of this life are not worthy to be compared with that future glory.’”³¹ Again, she referenced that suffering was a path to heaven. Although St. Catherine was writing to her disciples to help encourage them, for St. Catherine herself, his writings helped her through difficult times as well.

St. Paul’s writings were also a guideline for St. Catherine, a way to help her endure her practice of asceticism. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:8, St. Paul wrote, “We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.”³² Abstinence from the body’s desires was a clear attribute of asceticism in the fourteenth century. Bynum noted, “Abstinence was seen less as self-control, offered to God in propitiation for Adam’s sin of greed and disobedience, than as a never-sated physical hunger that mirrors and recapitulates in bodily agony both Christ’s suffering on the cross and the soul’s unquenchable thirst for mystical union.”³³ As a result, St. Catherine would grow closer to God through the added pain she encountered through asceticism.

²⁹ Raymond of Capua, *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. Ladies of Sacred Heart, 46.

³⁰ Benincasa, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena V. III*, trans. Suzzane Noffke O.P., 81.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

³² 2 Cor. 5:8 KJV

³³ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 33.

We can see this clearly throughout her letters in which St. Catherine copied the same subjects that St. Paul used in his letters in the Bible. She referenced St. Paul in one letter saying, “The sufferings of this life are not worth comparing with the future glory the soul receives who endures with good patience.”³⁴ To perpetuate this same theme, St. Catherine stated in her own words in a different letter, “We must find joy in suffering pain and weariness and even death if necessary for the glory and praise of God’s name. This is how we will become like the gentle Lamb.”³⁵ Through her incorporation of St. Paul’s teachings, St. Catherine established credibility with her disciples, nobles, and community members. In this aspect, St. Catherine constantly utilized his writings validating her behavior of asceticism.

St. Catherine’s Fasting

Several women, including St. Catherine, fasted and followed an ascetic lifestyle in varying degrees throughout the Middle Ages. Although each tertiary practiced different routines of fasting, it was most common to fast during the Lenten Season of the Church. St. Catherine did not only follow this ritual but went beyond the initial phases by fasting throughout her entire life. As a child, St. Catherine refused to eat meat, which was prevalent during her teen years and led to her refusal to eat sweet foods, which included wine. She persisted throughout her teen years to give up all foods that were cooked as well. Ultimately, at the age of twenty, she gave up bread, which led to her strict diet of water and raw vegetables for the last thirteen years of her life.³⁶ This strict diet was a direct result of St. Catherine’s ascetic practices. Her devotion to asceticism remained unchangeable despite other individuals’ efforts to help her. Raymond reported that at one point St. Catherine had a vision of Christ appearing to her to discuss his concern about her eating habits. Christ apparently summoned her to eat again with her family, but she was physically unable to do so.³⁷ This practice displayed her high virtue and tamed flesh in the sinful world.

How did St. Catherine’s fasting affect her well-being? As previously stated, fasting and asceticism endured throughout the Middle Ages as an important practice of Christianity. At the end of her life, individuals recorded, “Indeed, the taking of food became to her not merely unnecessary but actually impossible, except to the accompaniment of great bodily suffering. If food was ever forced down her throat, intense pain followed, no digestion took place, and all that had been violently forced down was violently forced back again.”³⁸ Despite the pain that she endured by eating, she remained dedicated to her charitable works, which ironically involved food. Regardless of her repulsion to food, she persistently fed the hungry through charitable works and endured as vindicated by the Church.

Although the Church considered charity work an important practice, St. Catherine again conducted these behaviors in an extreme manner. Drawing again on St. Paul, who stated in 1

³⁴ Catherine Benincasa, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena V. IV*, trans. Suzanne Noffke O.P. (Arizona: Arizona Board of Regents for Arizona State University, 2000), 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 338.

³⁶ Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle, *A Companion to Catherine of Siena* (Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 114.

³⁷ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 168.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

Corinthians 13:3, “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.”³⁹ St. Catherine referenced Paul with a similar statement, “If I were to give everything to the poor and my body to be burned, if I had an angelic tongue, if I knew the future, and did not have charity none of it would be worth anything for me.”⁴⁰ For that reason, her excitement for charitable works was a distinguishable attribute of her persistence with her asceticism. Even further, she related cooking and satisfaction together in one of her letters. “Just as salt and oil season and perfect the cooking, so did my association with the devil in humility and hatred, and my hunger and association with holy church in love and desire, make me experience and actually be in everlasting life with the truly joyful.”⁴¹ She conducted her life by pursuing the activities that Christ had given to her through his word. Although she proceeded to discuss this topic as though it were easy, it is interesting that she never complained or indulged in eating as well.

Within her fasting behavior, she persisted in living a life that excluded her own well-being. We can see the complex way in which food and asceticism interacted in St. Catherine’s theology through her caring for the sick. In one case, scholars mentioned that St. Catherine drank the pus from a diseased breast.⁴² Raymond also recalled, “One of the finest establishments of Siena, the hospital of the Scala, also preserves the recollection of St. Catherine; it was there she exercised charity towards the sick, there she combated against nature, by embracing infected wounds and drinking the water which had been employed in washing an ulcer.”⁴³ These practices supported the belief that Christ’s agony on the cross was greater than the excruciating pain of earthly hunger, and suffering, and she wanted to emulate such suffering.⁴⁴

Conclusion

How did St. Catherine’s death impact the fourteenth century and present day Christianity? St. Catherine’s death on April 29th, 1380 at the age of thirty-three sent shock waves over fourteenth century Europe. Raymond stated, “In one of the most painful moments of my life, I implored intercession of St. Catherine, and promised to endeavor to spread her fame in France.”⁴⁵ Many Europeans mourned the death of the beloved St. Catherine and were upset to hear the news of her death at a young age. Yet in spite of the surprise, current evidence provides proof that the Church considered her death as a normal death, rather than self-murder. This established the acceptance and promotion of her practices. Why?

St. Catherine confessed at the end of her life that because eating caused her torture, it was the sin of self-murder for her to eat—a far worse homicide of the self than by starvation, because it

³⁹ 1 Cor. 13:3 KJV

⁴⁰ Benincasa, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena V. IV*, trans. Suzzane Noffke O.P., 237.

⁴¹ Catherine Benincasa, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena V. II*, trans. Suzzane Noffke O.P. (Arizona: Arizona Board of Regents for Arizona State University, 2000), 11.

⁴² Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 166.

⁴³ Raymond of Capua, *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. Ladies of Sacred Heart, 420.

⁴⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 165.

⁴⁵ Raymond of Capua, *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. Ladies of Sacred Heart, 410.

was homicide by greed.⁴⁶ This statement displayed St. Catherine's recognition of her behavior, and her acceptance to persistently fast despite it resulting in her inevitable death. In opposition, many in the community murmured about St. Catherine's death as controversial. Raymond recorded these conversations by stating the different views of Europeans. They mentioned her death by starvation was an act of infirmity, resulting in a justified death.⁴⁷ Others argued, "that it was a kind of vanity that prompted her to wish to be noticed; that she did not fast really, but fed herself well in secret."⁴⁸ Still others believed, "she was the victim of an illusion."⁴⁹ These so-called illusions of visions of Christ directly speaking and spending time with individuals in the Church, were a vital part of the Christian theology.

St. Catherine herself and many of her followers recognized the deadly effects of fasting and asceticism but ignored the consequences of her behavior. The current Church could argue that the fourteenth century encountered many diseases and famines, which affected their communities throughout Europe. Famines would affect these individuals and lead them to a similar death that resulted from starvation. Similar to St. Catherine, these individuals would die from lack of food. However, the key difference between St. Catherine and the victims of famine was her direct refusal of the food given to her. Accordingly, she was no longer a victim of circumstance, but an individual choosing to kill herself for her devotion to asceticism. This mindset is what distinguishes the difference between a natural and self-inflicted death.

Why was it important to determine whether her death was natural or self-murder? An acceptable death in the Church's eyes led an individual to eternal life. As a result, it is important for Christians to recognize her death as either natural, or as a self-murder, because this determined if she was granted everlasting life with Christ, or a life of eternal pain in hell. St. Paul himself wrote, "How weary we grow of our present bodies, but we wouldn't like to think of dying and having no bodies at all. We want... these dying bodies to ... be swallowed up by everlasting life."⁵⁰ As a result, these members would use the Church's determination of her death as a way to define St. Catherine as a worthy and holy extension of their religion. For this reason, the Church influenced their societies into trusting that this was an acceptable way to die, leading them to consider St. Catherine as one of the greatest Saints of the Church.

However, St. Catherine was not the only woman who killed herself through her fasting practices. St. Catherine of Genoa (1347-1380) also promoted similar themes of fasting and asceticism during her lifetime. Although her practices were less extreme than St. Catherine of Siena's were, she ultimately ended her life in the same manner. St. Catherine of Genoa also perpetuated the same theology in her writings by depicting sufferings as an acceptable practice.⁵¹ Similar stories of St. Catherine of Siena's and St. Catherine of Genoa's asceticism exist throughout history in varying extremes. In a similar case, Ellen of Udine recorded in 1458, "Thirty-three stones I put in my soles

⁴⁶ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 169.

⁴⁷ Bynum., 200.

⁴⁸ Raymond of Capua, *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. Ladies of Sacred Heart, 118.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵⁰ Ron M. Brown, *The Art of Suicide*, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2001), 52.

⁵¹ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 184-185.

of my shoes because I have so often offended God with my leaping and dancing... I flagellate my body for the impious and carnal pleasures with which I indulged it during my marriage and out of regard for my Lord who was whipped at the post for me.”⁵² These female ascetics broadcast these similar behaviors to their readers as an adequate practice to conduct. This continued to provide members of the Church with guidelines and role models to base their lifestyles on. Since the Church ignored these deaths, the perpetuations of these ascetic customs endured to lead other women to their self-mutilation and deaths. Although these deaths only continued a few centuries after her death, the Catholic Church still promotes fasting habits throughout different seasons of the liturgical calendar. St. Catherine’s influence, therefore lingered to inspire others in the Church.

Consequently, the Church considered asceticism and fasting for the glory of Christ an acceptable death during the lifetime of St. Catherine of Siena. However, further investigation contributes evidence that St. Catherine herself recognized her behavior as leading her towards death. Her self-mutilation, passion for asceticism, and consistent fasting led to her self-murder in 1380. The Church continues to dispute her death as natural, dissociating it from the idea of self-murder. As a result, the story of St. Catherine is a clear example of the Church’s influence on both past and present theology.

The fourteenth century Church and contemporaries preserved her ideas and theology after her death. One Pastor, William Flete, created a powerful sermon in 1382, two years after her death, and compared her directly to St. Paul. He referenced her as, “a disciple of Paul,” and “Paula.”⁵³ He stated, “She was not Paul but a Paula; a teacher of teachers, a pastor of pastors, an abyss of wisdom – the high-sounding flute was revealed to her – an untiring preacher of the truth.”⁵⁴ This direct encouragement of the Church maintained after her death in 1380 and followed into 1383; when Raymond moved Catherine’s tomb inside the Basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, he also arranged for her head to be removed. They cherished her so much that the ornate reliquary in the Basilica San Domenico in Siena displayed her mummified head and right thumb, which can be found still today. Many people around the world continue to visit her mummified body to pay their respects to St. Catherine.



Head of St. Catherine of Siena during a procession. Giovanni Cerretani/CC By-SA 3.0

Historian Jennifer Ward stated, “The most famous medieval tertiary was undoubtedly St. Catherine of Siena.”⁵⁵ They proceed to list all of her accomplishments from her birth to her death, but neglect to recognize her death as a self-murder. Again, this is a clear depiction of the justification of St. Catherine’s eating habits and behavior. On June 29th, 1461, Pope Pius II canonized Catherine

⁵² Bynum, 215.

⁵³ Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle, *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, 204-205.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 204-205.

⁵⁵ Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe 1200-1500*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 208.

Benincasa, officially making her a Saint in the Church. This happened nearly a century after her death, which again perpetuates the ideology of St. Catherine and her life of starvation among other members. Finally, in 1970, Pope Paul VI proclaimed St. Catherine, who was never formally educated, a "Doctor of the Church." There is even a "Feast Day" as a traditional holiday in honor of St. Catherine every year on April 29th. This is ironic since St. Catherine herself did not indulge in feast activities.

Still today, St. Catherine's life is used as a way to comfort those who are suffering. The Vatican states, "For the pilgrims gathered today in Rome, and around the world, as Christian disciples, they may not be able to take away the trials and sorrows of those whom they find themselves serving; but, in the example of St Catherine, they can show those in their charge the profound, and immeasurable depths of God's love and mercy."⁵⁶ Again, these present day sources perpetuate the myth of St. Catherine, while ignoring the causes of her death. Religious institutions incorporate these ideas to maintain her image and justify her act of fasting.

Therefore, the information of her self-murder exists as overlooked today, resulting from the fourteenth century Christian theology. Information about St. Catherine's death is a result of the agenda from the fourteenth century Church, which is prevalent in impacting contemporary societies. As a result, dissecting into St. Catherine's letters, habits, and information on self-murder, historians are able to truly understand the reasoning behind her death as self-murder from starvation.

⁵⁶ Vatican Radio, "St. Catherine of Siena – Apostle of Mercy," *News.VA*, published April 2016, <http://www.news.va/en/news/st-catherine-of-siena-apostle-of-mercy>.

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