

What Else Do We Have but a Body? Reflections on an Apparent Paradox

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Abstract: I began this paper emphasizing several aspects of bodily manipulation in a spiritual context – as traced by scholars over the last decades – and claiming that the particular case of Saint Catherine of Siena provides us with an enormous potential to analyse the body-focused spirituality. Thus, I have followed the various bibliographical clues, which – assembled – retrace a conflicting representation of the flesh, both doomed and source of redemption. Integrating this topic within the broader context of the Saint's theological vision and of her devotional practices and linking it to the religious milieu she belonged to, I attempted to shed light on what appears to be a paradox, according to contemporary standards. Yet during the Late Middle Ages, the flesh was conceived in terms of an inherent ambivalence and body and spirit were thought to be an inseparable unit. As for Saint Catherine, the flesh has no meaning in itself, but only insofar as it is a means which serves the mystical yearning to achieve oneness with God and an expression to describe this state of grace.

Key words: embodied spirituality, redemptive suffering, bodily metaphors, body and spirit as interwoven principles, immersion into the divine.

Rezumat: Dar ce altceva mai avem în afară de trup? Reflecții pe marginea unui paradox aparent. Articolul începe prin a evidenția câteva aspecte referitoare la manipularea trupului în context spiritual – așa cum au fost ele trasate de cercetători în ultimele decenii –, susținând totodată că, în ceea ce privește paradigma spiritualității orientate asupra trupului, cazul Sfintei Ecaterina de Siena oferă un uriaș potențial de analiză. Astfel, am urmărit diversele indicații bibliografice care – coroborate – dezvăluie o reprezentare contradictorie a trupului: concomitent osândit și sursă a salvării. Integrând acest motiv în contextul mai larg al gândirii teologice și al practicilor devoționale ale sfintei, precum și al ambianței religioase din care aceasta făcea parte, am încercat să aduc lumină asupra a ceea ce pare a fi un paradox, judecând după standardele gândirii contemporane. Cu toate acestea,

în Evul Mediu, trupul comporta o ambivalență inerentă, iar principiile corporal și spiritual erau concepute ca o unitate inseparabilă. Din perspectiva Sfintei Ecaterina, trupul nu are înțeles prin el însuși, ci doar în măsura în care servește drept mijloc prin care poate fi atins idealul mistic de contopire cu divinitatea și reprezintă o expresie capabilă să descrie acest ideal.

Cuvinte cheie: „spiritualitate întrupată”, suferință răscumpărătoare, metafore corporale, îngemănarea principiilor spiritual și corporal, idealul îndumnezeirii

„E poi che l' à schiacciato, el gusto il gusta, assaporando il frutto della fadiga e' l diletto del cibo dell'anime, gustandolo nel fuoco della carità mia e del prossimo suo. E così giunge questo cibo nello stomaco, che per desiderio e fame dell'anime s'era disposto a volere ricevere, ciò è lo stomaco del cuore, col cordiale amore, diletto e dilezione di carità col prossimo suo; diletandosene e rugumando per sì fatto modo, che perde la tenerezza della vita corporale per potere mangiare questo cibo, preso in su la mensa della croce, della dottrina di Cristo crocifisso.”

Saint Catherine of Siena, *Il dialogo della Divina Provvidenza*¹

From a contemporary perspective, since we are used to precise categories and classifications, the quote above is surprising as it transgresses the boundaries between body and soul. Moreover, it seems to indicate a strong focus on the corporeal. Therefore, this paper will discuss what some contemporary Western scholars call „embodied spirituality”² in reference to Saint Catherine of Siena. It is worth mentioning that this specific feature of medieval Christian spirituality has been addressed in historical, theological, and even psychological research.³

¹ S. Caterina da Siena, *Il Dialogo*, ed. Giuliana Cavallini (Siena: Cantagalli, 1995) LXXVI, pp. 65-66.

² The notion employs a perspective that regards the body as an equal nominee for transcendence. Ann Trousdale, 'Embodied Spirituality', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 18/ 1 (2013): 18-29, especially 23-24. I also encountered the notion of „embodied piety”: Melissa Raine, 'Fals flesh: Food and the Embodied Piety of Margery Kempe', *New Medieval Literatures*, 7 (2005): 101-126. Jessica Barr 'Reading Wounds: Embodied Mysticism in a Fourteenth Century Codex', *Magistra*, 19/1 [2013]: 27 uses concepts like „embodied mysticism”, „embodied female spirituality”, „somatic spirituality”. Ola Tjørhom employs the phrase „embodied faith” in his homonymous work, *Embodied Faith: Reflections on a Materialist Spirituality* (Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009).

³ As bibliographical indications, see: Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Thomas Cattoi - June McDaniel (eds.), *Perceiving the Divine*

In his study, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, the French medievalist André Vauchez argues that, towards the Late Middle Ages, the model of female sanctity is both mystical and ascetic. Thus, holy women have a spiritualized life, but they also circumscribe their religious experience to an outsourced devotion, based on the conviction that the option for an authentic religious life has to be expressed through manipulation of the body – understood as restraint and control.⁴

Using a different, psychologising approach, the American historian Rudolph M. Bell stresses even more the centrality of body in the devotional world of medieval women. He points out that the prototype of female devotion, set in the Mendicant milieu and represented by Clare of Assisi, values fast and mortification of the flesh as defining elements of sanctity, imitated by women who wanted to please God. Bell's theory is a radical one, and no less controversial. He claims that „a historically significant group of women exhibited an anorexic behaviour pattern in response to the patriarchal social structures in which they were trapped”, with the difference that their eating behaviour had a strong religious significance.⁵ Bell's concept was successful among psychiatrists and psychologists, as all these researchers see anorexia as a means of seeking control and make a link between it and the ideal of perfection of the epoch.⁶

Caroline Walker Bynum also considers that late medieval culture has an „extreme interest in physicality”, which is particularly seen in women's devotion, based on fasting, eucharistic devotion and food multiplication.⁷ For the American historian and feminist, all this are

through the Human Body: Mystical Spirituality (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Sarah Coakley (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Emily A. Holmes, *Flesh Made Word: Medieval Women Mystics, Writing and the Incarnation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013); Paolo A. Orlandi, *I fenomeni fisici del misticismo* (Milano: Piero Gribaudi Editore, 1996); Nancy Bradley Warren, *The Embodied Word: Female Spiritualities, Contested Orthodoxies, and English Religious Cultures, 1350-1700* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

⁴ André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 354, 384-390.

⁵ Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. xi, 86.

⁶ For examples, see below the psychological approach to Saint Catherine's asceticism.

⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), p. 274.

basically food practices.⁸ On the other hand, those are also part of a devotional purpose: imitating Christ; hence pain and self-sacrifice become means by which medieval women feel that they can mystically take part in the salvation of mankind.⁹ The author rejects the reading of fasting as anorexia for many reasons: it is voluntarily assumed and its motivation is theological, namely the comprehension of suffering as the path to salvation. She also rejects the body-soul dichotomy or the idea of internalized misogyny as explanations for women's self-inflicted punishment.¹⁰ Bynum's interpretations are extremely influential, being quoted and assimilated in the works on female spirituality published ever since.

Thus, research in the last decades has been captured by the bodily dimension of spiritual life, the flesh being depicted either as blamed or subjected to a rigorous control, or as a realm to be embraced and explored. In this paper, I will investigate several clues regarding the spirituality of Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380),¹¹ as traced in her writings and complemented by her disciples' accounts.¹² I will refer to asceticism, devotion to the humanity of Christ, bodily metaphors and the situation of the flesh in Catherinian theology,¹³ in order to discern

⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

⁹ Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 202-206, 237-238. A strong insistence on the context, followed by a cautious use of concepts can also be found in the research made by Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press), 1988.

¹¹ Italian mystic, member of the Third Order of Saint Dominic, canonized in 1461, and declared Doctor of the Church in 1970.

¹² For Catherine's writings, see: *Il Dialogo...; Lettere di Caterina da Siena*, ed. P. Misciattelli (Firenze: Marzocco, 1939); S. Caterina da Siena, *Le Orazioni*, ed. Giuliana Cavallini (Roma: Edizioni Cateriniane, 1978). For the sources on her life, see: Tommaso Nacci Caffarini, *Vita di S. Caterina da Siena scritta da un divoto della medesima con il supplement alla vulgate legenda di detta santa*, ed. Ambrogio Ansano Tantucci (Siena: Stamperia di Luiggi e Benedetto Bindi, 1765); Blessed Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Saint Catherine of Siena* (Dublin: James Duffy and Co., s.a.); *Il Processo Castellano. Santa Caterina da Siena nelle testimonianze al Processo di canonizzazione di Venezia*, eds. Tito S. Centi, Angelo Belloni (Firenze: Edizioni Nerbini, 2009).

¹³ I have previously adressed this topic, in an attempt to retrace the various hypostases of the body, as they were understood by Saint Catherine, and her disciples: from vitiated flesh to God as flesh, from tortured body to totally spiritualized body and to holy relic. This was the topic of the presentation „Carne miserabilă sau icoană vie? Trupul în viziunea sfintei Ecaterina de Siena și a

the extent and the limits of a bodily-oriented religious understanding. As it concerns Catherine's particular case, it has become a preferential example, very often quoted inside the psychological/ psychiatric approach, which advocates for the interpretation of medieval women's radical fast as anorexia.¹⁴ On the other hand, there is a theological interpretation of Saint Catherine spirituality, which also takes into account the strong emphasis she placed on the corporality. For example, Maria degli Angeli Gambirasio, O.P. stresses that the Saint's path to perfection – as it is settled in her *Dialogue* – is literally an uplift of the soul from Christ's feet to His head.¹⁵ Compared to the psychologising approach, but also to the historiographical attention directed towards other saints' body-related spiritual practices,¹⁶ the place of body within

Caterinati" [*Miserable Flesh or Living Icon? The Body Seen by Saint Catherine of Siena and the Caterinati*] I delivered at the National Scientific Session „Fragmente din trecut. Tinerii cercetători și istoria” [Fragments from the Past. Young Researchers and History], Cluj-Napoca, March 27-29, 2015.

¹⁴ For a bibliographical investigation, *Bibliografia analitica di S. Caterina da Siena 2001-2010* (Roma: Centro Internazionale di Studi Cateriniani, 2013) is a most valuable tool. Many recent studies are dedicated to her works, to her political and ecclesiastical activity, to her doctrine, but also to her spirituality. A significant number of works are dominated by a psychological approach: Fernando Espi Forcen, 'Anorexia Mirabilis: the Practice of Fasting by Saint Catherine of Siena in the Late Middle Ages', *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 170/4 (2013): 370-371; Pascal Guingand, *Anorexie et inédie: une même passion du rien?* (Ramonville – Saint-Agne – Strasbourg: Ères-Arcanes, 2004); Mario Reda – Giuseppe Sacco, 'Anorexia and the Holiness of Saint Catherine of Sienna', *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 8/1 (2001): 37-47; Finn Skårderud, 'Helliganoreksi Sultogselvskadesom religiøsepraksiser. Caterina av Siena (1347-80)', *Tidsskrift for Norsk Psykologforening*, 45/4 (2008): 408-420; Ines Testoni, *Il dio cannibale: anoressia e culture del corpo in Occidente* (Torino: Utet Libreria, 2001); Walter Vandereycken – Ron van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (London: Athleone Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Maria degli Angeli Gambirasio, „La via della Verità come irradiazione apostolica”, Manuscript, Centro Internazionale di Studi Cateriniani, Rome, 1975. See also, Giuliana Cavallini, 'La verità nell'ascesi cateriniana', Manuscript, Centro Internazionale di Studi Cateriniani, Roma, 1974. The author emphasizes that Saint Catherine literally understands asceticism as an ascent to the divine, which starts with the effort to overcome sensuality.

¹⁶ See some of the works mentioned in footnotes 2 and 3. Jessica Barr is focusing her study on Beatrice of Nazareth, Melissa Raine refers to Margery Kempe and Ann Trousdale provides the example of Julian of Norwich. In the book edited by Cattoi and McDaniel, studies on Christian saints refer to Christina the Astonishing and Mechthild of Magdeburg, whilst Emily Holmes analyses Hadewijch of Brabant,

Catherinian spiritual life is evidently less discussed. One contribution worth mentioning is that of Kristine Fleckenstein, who explores Catherine's body images, in which – alongside her bodily austerities – the foundation of her power was rooted. According to the author, the Saint believes in the reciprocity of soul and, by turn, world, God and the body of Christ, accomplished through charity, intense prayer and a spiritual-physical union with the Savior. This regime of identification reflects a „positive bodiliness”.¹⁷

This investigation is circumscribed to the history of spirituality and employs a strong interdisciplinary approach. It is beyond the purpose of this paper to elaborate reflections on gender or distinguish a specific female spirituality, although this is a common topic among researches dealing with this issue. For example, Caroline Walker Bynum considers that relating feminity to corporeality is a transcultural feature, crossing the entire history of civilization. At the same time, women are more likely to somatize emotions and spiritual experience.¹⁸

This paper therefore intends to bring a broad contextualization of Saint Catherine's body-centered devotion and her religious reflections, impregnated with metaphors of flesh – both internal, in reference to the Saint's thinking, and external, linked to the spiritual

Angela of Foligno and Marguerite Porette. Nancy Bradley Warren discusses not only the case of Catherine of Siena, but also that of other medieval mystics, such as Julian of Norwich, Birgitta of Sweden and Margery Kempe.

¹⁷ Kristine Fleckenstein, 'Incarnate Word: Verbal Image, Body Image, and the Rhetorical Authority of Saint Catherine of Siena', *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*, 6/2 (2009): 1-20. See also Dominique de Courcelle, 'La chair transpercée d'un Dieu: au delà des angoisses de la raison, quelques représentations de peinture et d'écriture: Catherine de Sienne, Andrea Mantegna, Jean de la Croix, Le Greco', in *Les enjeux philosophiques de la mystique: actes du colloque*, 6 - 8 avril 2006, Collège international de philosophie (Grenoble: J. Millon, 2007), pp. 50-70. The author proposed a philosophical approach to the representation of an incarnated God, who had a sensitive body. Tom Grimwood, 'The Body as a Lived Metaphor: Interpreting Catherine of Siena as an Ethical Agent', *Feminist Theology*, 13/1 (2004): 62-76, stresses that the Saint, despite being a woman, was autonomous and had a real authority, using her body as a manipulative tool. Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, 'Il linguaggio del corpo in santa Caterina da Siena' in Lino Leonardi - Pietro Trifone (eds.), *Dire l'ineffabile. Caterina da Siena e il linguaggio della mistica* (Firenze: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2006), pp. 205-229, highlights the fact that the body is a multifaceted symbol in Catherine's writings.

¹⁸ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 172-173.

context she belongs to –, in an attempt to avoid what we consider to be the methodological trap of over-extending the limits of embodied piety. In the case of Saint Catherine, a sense of balance between the outsourced religious experience and a genuine spiritual insight is required. Furthermore, this study offers an alternative to the agonistic vision which is traditionally considered in regard with the body-soul relationship, showing that the apparent rivalry of the two principles is subject to the hierarchy established between the divine and the mundane. At this stage of the research, I can only assess such a ratio with respect to a particular case, but further research may verify it in other medieval writers' thinking.

Punishing the sinful flesh

„What else do we have but a body?” (*O abbiamo noi altro che un corpo?*): this is the rhetorical question Saint Catherine asks in regard with her profound wish to dedicate herself to God. She realizes that the main available instrument she has is her own body; this is her only belonging, so that offering it to God signifies devoting herself entirely.¹⁹ She gives her body as a sacrifice; entrusting it to God, Catherine professes her disponibility to suffer. As André Vauchez argued, female mystics in the Late Middle Ages glorify the passion of Christ and the mortification of the flesh allows them to experience on their own the redeeming suffering.²⁰ Moreover, as a saint builds his/her own sanctity, their efforts are displayed upon the body.²¹

The female body was mostly associated with sexuality and women were thought to be more likely to yield to the temptation of flesh. Therefore, the religious literature of the time recommends chastity

¹⁹ According to Thomas Caffarini, the Saint has said: „Signore, ho un solo corpo; te lo offro e te lo rendo. Ecco io ti offro la mia carne, ecco ti offro il mio sangue, che esso si asparso e distrutto e disperso; che le mie ossa siano stritolate fino al midollo...” Thomas Caffarini's testimony, *Il Processo Castellano*, p. 102. Elsewhere, Catherine defines the Christian's duty as follows: „a dare la vita per Cristo, o abbiamo noi altro che un corpo? Perché non dar la vita mille volte, se bisogna, in onore di Dio e in salute delle creature?” Letter CCXVIII, *Lettere*, pp. 685-686.

²⁰ Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 384.

²¹ Sofia Boesch Gajano, „Sfințenia” [Sainthood], in Jacques Le Goff – Jean-Claude Schmitt (eds.), *Dicționar tematic al Evului Mediu occidental* [Thematic Dictionary of Western Middle Ages], (Iași: Polirom, 2002), pp. 734-744, especially 734.

and abstinence, as means of control for women.²² Under these circumstances, the main possibility of expression women used to have was manipulating the body.²³ Consequently, in the religious environment of the fourteenth century, particularly in Dominican female convents, the drive towards mortification was a common feature; moreover it seems it was guided by God and it was a quest for joining God's will.²⁴

Consequently, the Saint exercises a „holy hatred” against herself and strives to detach from the world, entrusted to the belief that love of God and the attachment to the worldly – even to her own temporary existence – are incompatible.²⁵ For the same purpose, she practices humility, obedience and charity.²⁶

Moreover, she implements an extensive ascetical program which implies fasting,²⁷ sleep and rest deprivation, using a couple of planks instead of a proper bed, vow of silence, voluntary mutilation – through flagellation, use of an iron chain which stung the flesh, causing severe pain –, together with continuous and fervent prayers and vigils.²⁸ Catherine interprets in a radical manner the Pauline Neoplatonic

²² Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, „Masculin/feminin” [Male/Female], in Le Goff – Schmitt, *Dictionar tematic*, pp. 440-449, especially 445.

²³ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 2 sqq. See also Gajano, „Sfințenia”, p. 740.

²⁴ Peter Ochsenbein, ‘Mistica della sofferenza nei conventi femminili domenicani del secolo XIV secondo l’esempio di Elsbethdi Oye’, in Peter Dinzelbacher – Dieter R. Bauer (eds.), *Movimento religioso e mistica femminile nel Medioevo* (Roma: Edizioni Paoline, 1993), pp. 399, 413.

²⁵ *Lettere*: XCV, p. 300; CXLIX, p. 458: „...con desiderio di vedervi l’affeto e il desiderio vostro spogliato e sciolto dalle perverse delizie e dilette disordinati del mondo, le qua il sono cagione e materiache parte e divide l’anima de Dio.” The concept of „holy hatred” is mentioned by Raymond of Capua: „Catherine, faithful to the inspirations of God, excited a holy hatred against herself.” *The Life*, pp. 51-52; and also in Thomas Caffarini’s deposition: „Dalle quale rivelazioni essa fu condotta a un ammirabile amore di Dio ed insieme a un grande odio verso se stessa. Odio che essa chiamava santo, in quanto per opera di tale odio l’anima diviene immune di ogni peccato e anche perché in forza di tale odiosi fa vendetta delle tentazioni della sensualità e di qualsiasi peccato commesso.” *Il Processo Castellano*, p. 116. Both testimonies note that the Saint’s attitude was God inspired.

²⁶ *Il Dialogo* IV, p. 4; LXIII, p. 53; CLIV, p. 166; *Lettere* L, p. 157.

²⁷ *The Life*, pp. 5-7, 24, 265. See also *Vita di S. Caterina*, pp. 3-4; *Supplemento*, p. 215, 220-221.

²⁸ *The Life*, pp. 25-26, 38. *Vita di S. Caterina*, pp. 4-5. The testimony of Augustin of Pisa *Il Processo Castellano*, p. 311.

dialectics, according to which the rule of the body is contrary to the rule of God (Romans, 7:23) and man serves the law of God with his mind and the law of sin with his body. Hence the Saint pictures a vicious body, enemy and prison of mankind.²⁹ The paradigm for this attitude of hatred against sin and compensation of sin through scourging the body was offered by Christ himself on the cross.³⁰

On the other hand, Saint Thomas emphasizes the fact that body is also God's creation and it has an ontologically positive essence (S.T. I, q 65, art.1). In agreement with the Thomistic thought, the Saint did not design an entirely negative representation of the flesh; on the contrary, she values it, being created by God.³¹ Besides, during the High and Late Middle Ages, Christian theology started to promote a more positive attitude towards the body, since it had been strongly denigrated and denied by the various heretical movements. At this time, the Church upholds the doctrine of transubstantiation or the devotion to the Host as *Corpus Christi*. By the Late Middle Ages, the sense of body as a place where God may reside – as old as the cult of saints – had become notably influential.³² But Saint Catherine suggests that humankind was created to be far more than bodily existence; in order to discover their beauty and dignity and access their divine potential,³³ humans have to acknowledge God within, since the creature is futility and God is absolute and perfect.³⁴

Moreover, for Catherine, God is also body. The antidote of mortal, filthy flesh is none other than Christ's tormented body and the

²⁹ *Il Dialogo* CXLV, p. 154: „stando nella carcere del corpo...”; CLXVII, p. 185-186: „desidera l'anima mia d'escire della carcere del corpo tenebroso...” See also *Lettere*: CLXXXIX, pp. 581-582: „l'uomo, mentre che vive nella carcere corruttibile del corpo suo (il quale è una legge perversa, che sempre lo invita e inchina a peccato)...”; CCXCIV, p. 927: „L'ultimo nemico nostro, cioè la miserabile carne coll'appetito sensitivo...”.

³⁰ *Le Orazioni* I, p. 1; *Lettere*, CCXCIX, pp. 943-944.

³¹ *Il Dialogo* I, p. 1; XV, pp. 16 sqq; *Lettere* XXI, p. 58; *Le Orazioni* I, pp. 1 sqq.

³² Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 252-255.

³³ *Il Dialogo* IV, p. 3; CLXVII, p. 186. See also Cavallini, 'La verità nell'ascesi cateriniana'.

³⁴ In this regard, the Saint often refers to her own nothingness, evoking, at the same time, the scriptural quotation „I Am who I Am” (Exodus 3:14) in order to underline the divine completion. *Le Orazioni* XIII, p. 18: „perché tu sei quello che sei ma io sono quella che non sono.” Elsewhere: „Io sono co lui che so', e voi non sete per voi medesimi, se non quanto se te fatti da me...” *Il Dialogo* XVIII, p. 18.

memory of his sacrifice.³⁵ This representation, however paradoxical it might seem, it is the typical bivalent image medieval people had on the flesh. The body was blamed, due to the original sin and it was also the reminder of salvation.³⁶ In an orthodox, non-dualistic view, the body is necessary for salvation, as it is dangerous: is a medium for the soul and a locus of learning, but it is also fond of the material world, so it may compromise the quest for salvation.³⁷

Embodied devotion to the humanity of Christ

Emerging in the thirteenth century, devotion to the humanity of Christ and the endeavour to resemble Him in his sufferings will be subsumed – in the following century – to the mystical ideal, particularly in female religious experience. According to this, authentic Christian life is demonstrated under several circumstances, like exhausting fasting, continuous abstinence or severe punishment of the body.³⁸ Moreover, the main understanding of female spirituality, as it was shaped and disseminated by theologians and preachers, was centered on the Eucharist and the related topic of the humanity of Christ, which was then perceived in its corporeal dimension.³⁹ Surely not least, Dominican spirituality is Christ-centered, with a particular focus on the Passions.⁴⁰ Consequently, Catherine's Christocentrism implies embracing the redemptive suffering – *imitatio crucis* – and also Eucharistic devotion, both of them testifying to the Saint's externalized piety.

Catherine sees in pain a path towards God, since the salvation of humankind was mediated by the Cross. Through suffering an

³⁵ Romagnoli, 'Il linguaggio del corpo', p. 220. See within *Lettere* CCLVI, p. 789: „con la carne sua flagellate sconfisse il nemico della carne nostra”; CCLVII, p. 802, which resumes the idea.

³⁶ Jacques Le Goff – Nicolas Truong, *Il corpo nel Medioevo* (Roma – Bari, Laterza Editori, 2007), p. 20.

³⁷ Kristin L. Burr, 'Body in Literature and Religion', in Margaret Schaus (ed.), *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe. An Encyclopedia* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), pp. 79-82, especially 81.

³⁸ Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 388, 408.

³⁹ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 80, 114.

⁴⁰ See William A. Hinnenbusch, *Dominican Spirituality. Principles and Practice* (Washington, D.C.: 1965), accessed on 15 May, 2015 on the website of The Holy Rosary Dominican Province. (http://www.holyrosaryprovince.org/2011/media/essencial/dominican_spirituality.pdf), pp. 14 *sqq.*

intersection between the divine and the human is accomplished.⁴¹ Loving God cannot be separated from bearing pain for His sake and for the service of one's fellows; in other words, pain seems a quantifier of an unutterable feeling.⁴² The Saint points out that the most valuable struggle is the inward fatigue, and also the will to suffer.⁴³ In other words, undergoing pain transcends the physical dimension of existence, as suffering is always sublimated into an ethical value.⁴⁴ Just as the flesh implies an ambivalent understanding, suffering is, at the same time, the inevitable fate of the fallen creature and a possibility to retrieve the relation between God and his creature.⁴⁵ Answering to her wish, Christ gives Catherine the capacity of experiencing his Passions, by sending her a terrible chest pain, the worst pain ever felt by the Saint.⁴⁶ Therefore, suffering is a blessing and a consolation.⁴⁷ Despite her tremendous torments, Catherine was always calm and serene, as a consequence of the „gift of impassibility” she received.⁴⁸

⁴¹ *Il Dialogo* IV, V. God tells the Saint that, as a consequence of the inherent imperfection of human condition, man cannot be acquainted with God but through suffering. LXXXIII, p. 72. Elsewhere: „My great consolation is to suffer, because I am aware that by suffering I shall obtain a more perfect view of God.” *The Life*, pp. 141-142. In his turn, Bartholomew Dominici shows that Catherine considers herself united to Christ in suffering. *Il Processo Castellano*, p. 273.

⁴² „Molto e piacevole a me il desiderio di volere portare ogni pena e fadiga in fino alla morte in salute dell’anime. Quanto l’uomo più sostiene, più dimostra che m’ami: amando mi più cognosce della mia verità e quanto più cognosce più sente pena e dolore intollerabile dell’offesa mia.” *Il Dialogo* V, p. 5. „E chi molto ama molto si duole, unde a cui cresce amore cresce dolore.” CXLV, p. 154.

⁴³ *Lettere* CCXXV, p. 710, *Il Dialogo* III, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Jean-Claude Schmitt, ‘Trup și suflet’ [Body and Soul], in Le Goff – Schmitt, *Dicționar tematic*, pp. 772-782, especially 777.

⁴⁵ Philip A. Mellor, ‘Self and Suffering: Deconstruction and Reflexive Definition in Buddhism and Christianity’, *Religious Studies*, 27/ 1 (1991): 49-93, especially 55.

⁴⁶ *The Life*, p. 298. See also Bartholomew Dominici’s testimonial, *Il Processo Castellano*, p. 273.

⁴⁷ See within *Il Processo Castellano* the deposition of Thomas Caffarini, p. 149: „non soltanto desiderava le sofferenze, ma quando l’affliggevano sembrava godere di esse”; Bartholomew Dominici’s testimonial, p. 273: „Infatti essa sentiva le sofferenze comme dolcisoni del suo Sposo e, quando aumentavano, diceva che erano ancora piu dolci.”; Francis Malavolti’s deposition, p. 338: „Sofferenze che ella chiamava singolari doni di Dio.” See also, *The Life*, p. 108 and *Il Dialogo* CXXXVII, p. 142.

⁴⁸ „... il dono della impassibilità”, notion belonging to Thomas Caffarini, *Il Processo Castellano*, p. 136. This particularity is mentioned all over the narratives on her life: *Supplemento...*, p. 117; *The Life...*, passim; *Il Processo Castellano*: deposition of

On the other hand, as the Crucified Savior illustrated, suffering is serving, the greatest charitable act of all.⁴⁹ Just as Christ takes the chastisement for the sins of mankind upon his body,⁵⁰ Catherine prays that God might expiate her fellow's sins through her sufferings.⁵¹ After mystically united with Christ, the Saint will benefit from this grace.⁵² Therefore, physical pain is far from being a goal in itself; it is rather a way to empathize with God's humanity and also an understanding of his divine love, which led him to endure the most dreadful pain and death.⁵³

Bartholomew Dominici, p. 273, deposition of Francis Malavolti, p. 338; and also Barduccio's letter, *Appendix to The Life*, p. 361.

⁴⁹ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 171, 179. *Il Dialogo* IV, p. 5. From the Saint's perspective, pain is on the same par with the love of neighbour and love of God. V, p. 5.

⁵⁰ *Le Orazioni* I, p. 1: „... hai punite le nostre iniquità e la disobediencia di Adam sopra el corpo tuo...” See further prayer XIX, p. 23.

⁵¹ *Il Dialogo* II, p. 2; *Le Orazioni*: XIV, p. 19; XXVI, p. 30; *Lettere CCCXXXI*, p. 1065. Elsewhere: „Lord, [...] inflict the chastisement that this people merit on my body.” *The Life*, p. 252; „Signore, affliggi il corpo mio, conndanandolo a sopportare quante pene, ed infermitàsi possono mai provare in questa vita mortale, perchè sono pronta a sacrificare alla Giustizia tua il corpo mio, sogettandolo all'oppressione di tutti i malori per condegna soddisfazione delle colpe da questo miserabile Religioso comesse...” *Supplemeto*, p. 133. See also *Il Processo Castellano*: Thomas Caffarini's deposition, pp. 138-139; and additional details to the testimony of Bartholomew Dominici, p. 299.

⁵² Christ tells Catherine: „... but thou shalt expose thyself to every species of fatigue in order to save their souls. Follow therefor courageously the inspiration which will enlighten thee; for I shall draw, by thy aid, numerous souls from the gulf of hell, and I will conduct them, with the help of my grace, to the kingdom of heaven.” *The Life*, pp. 96-97. *Supplemento*, p. 223: „... per placare l'ira Divina, provocata per tanti ribellioni, ed iniquità offersi voluntieri di sacrificio in propiziazioni il corpo mio, sotto posto perciò dal giusto Giudice a continui gravissimi dolori [...] onde accettato avendo il clementissimo mio Sposo, questo spontaneo mio sacrificio in cambio de' casti ghidovuti a gente ambiziosa, superba e feduttrice, non vi è nel corpo mio parte alcuna, che non sia quasi da saette acuta traffita.” Caffarini further shows that, through her pain, the Saint managed to get remission for her fellows' sins. *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190. Peter of Giovanni Ventura asserts in his deposition that the Saint took upon herself his sins. *Il Processo Castellano*, p. 354. She also suffered atoning pain on account of her father's sins. *The Life*, pp. 147-148.

⁵³ Ellen Ross, 'She Wept and Cried Right Loud for Sorrow and for Pain. Suffering, the Spiritual Journey, and Women's Experience in Late Medieval Mysticism' in Ulrike Wiethaus, (ed.), *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), pp. 45-59, especially 50.

On the other hand, the Holy Communion, which is central to Catherine's religious experience, appears to give her the chance to be eventually united to Christ.⁵⁴ In fact, both from a theological and a devotional point of view, medieval Christianity acknowledges the real presence of the Son in the Eucharist.⁵⁵ Often, when receiving the host, Catherine feels like taking blood, raw meat, or even Christ himself in her mouth. Moreover, the Saint sometimes assists in the transformation of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity into one or is being given the host by one of them or by an angel.⁵⁶

Not least, the Eucharist nourishes the Saint, to the point where the Sacrament remains her only food. As a consequence of literally tasting Christ's blood during an ecstatic rapture – as a reward of her overcoming the disgust caused by the wound of a woman she took care of – Catherine becomes completely spiritualized. This heavenly food is, as Christ says to the Saint, „a liquor above nature”, still expressed as a feeding material, but one that nurtures the soul and the body alike.⁵⁷ Her bodily functions were completely modified and she even becomes able to live without any corporeal food.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ María del Mar Graña Cid, 'Mística feminina e semellanza das mulleres con Cristo. A propósito de santa Catarina de Siena', *Revista galega de pensamento cristián*, 16 (2009): 73-84, especially 76.

⁵⁵ Mary Suydam, 'Christian Spirituality', in Schaus (ed.), *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, pp. 779-782, especially 780. The doctrine of the Real Presence was affirmed at the Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215.

⁵⁶ Deposition of Thomas Caffarini, *Il Processo Castellano*, p. 131.

⁵⁷ *The Life*, pp. 86-87, 93, 94. As Raymond notes, Christ approached Catherine with the following words: „Never hast thou been dearer or more pleasing to me – yesterday in particular thou didst ravish my heart. Not only didst thou despise sensual pleasures, disdain the opinions of men, and surmount the temptations of Satan, but thou didst overcome nature, by joyfully drinking for my sake a loathsome, horrible beverage. Well, since thou hast accomplished an action so superior to nature, I will bestow on thee a liquor above nature. [...] Drink, daughter that luscious beverage which flows from my side, it will inebriate thy soul with sweetness and will also plunge in a sea of delight thy body, which thou didst despise for love of me.” Consequently, Catherine applies her mouth to the wound: „she drank long and with as much avidity as abundance; in fine, when our blessed Lord gave her notice, she detached herself from the sacred source, satiated, but still eager...” *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

⁵⁸ According to Raymond of Capua, Christ told Catherine: „I will difuse in thy soul such an abundance of grace, that thy body itself will experience its effects and will live no longer except in an extraordinary manner...” *The Life*, pp. 95-96, 98-102.

In other train of thoughts, Cathrine mystical experience is described by the witnesses of her life in terms of a physical or a temporal fusion, through themes such as the mystical marriage, changing hearts with Christ or the stigmatization. Therefore, we find that the proximity to the divine transcends the ideal and spiritual dimension, as it is exhibited through concrete, corporeal signs. On the other hand, as a consequence of receiving the holy grace, the Saint is considered to be in a permanent state of mental communion with the divine.⁵⁹ Despite presenting her connection to Christ as a corporeal bond, the Saint's disciples are aware that the core of her religious life is above the temporal, bodily dimensions. As a consequence, we can ascertain a sort of juggling between the two fields, as if it was no boundary between them. This is especially confirmed when it comes to the Saint's concept of food and nourishment.

The holy blood of Christ, shed on the cross is the ultimate nourishment and the substantial, physical source of salvation. In Catherine's writings,⁶⁰ the divine blood or flesh are angelic, sweet, glorious, immortal nourishment, they are the food of life (*cibo angelico/ dolce/ glorioso/ cibo di vita* etc.), taken at the housing of the Cross (*alla mensa della santa croce*). In other words, the sacrificial act turns into a feeding process.⁶¹ Besides, as an instance for Catherine's representation of body and soul as an amalgamation, the Saint asserts that the human being can be nourished by sufferings and fatigue, by the penance, by the words of God, charity, humility or prayer, as well as by the „quest for honouring God and for the salvation of souls” (*cercare l'onore di Dio e la salute dell'anime*). The Saint truly admitted the possibility of replacing bodily with spiritual food, since in her *Dialogue*, she refers to feeding in terms of a vital need of the imperfect.⁶² Regarding Catherine's particular

⁵⁹ *The Life*, p. 109. See also the letter of Giovanni di Domenico, *Schiarimenti* to Alfonso Capececelatro, *Storia di S. Caterina da Siena e del papato del suo tempo* (Roma - Tournay: Tipografia liturgica di S. Giovanni, 1886), p. 565: „...secondo il corpo, fu da Siena e lassollo a Roma; e secondo l'anima, fu e sempre sarà del Cielo...”; *Il Processo Castellano*: „la sua santa mente era inseparabilmente immersa in Dio e a Dio attualmente unita”, Stefano Maconi's deposition, p. 236; „è del tutto evidente che lo Spirito Santo era con lei e rimasse con lei per sempre”, Mino di Giovanni's testimony, p. 359.

⁶⁰ Specifically in the *Dialogue*, but also in the *Letters*, passim.

⁶¹ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 175.

⁶² „perché pure dell'erba non vive il corpo della creatura, parlando comunemente e in generale di chi non è perfetto...” *Il Dialogo...* CXLIX, p. 159. Furthermore, Catherine

case, her disciples pointed out that her subsistence derived from the abundance of grace.⁶³

Metaphors of the body, expression of the soul

The body language is central as a means of expression in Saint Catherine's writings.⁶⁴ The words „body”/ „flesh” are frequent occurrences in the *Dialogue*, in which the body is depicted as corrupt (*corpo suo corrotto, massa corrotta d'Adam*), tenebrous (*tenebre del corpo*) mortal (*mortale*), mortified (*mortificare il corpo*), tortured (*macerando la carne/ il corpo*), punished (*gastigare il corpo loro*), killed (*uccidere il corpo suo*), injured (*cicatrici nel corpo suo*), being hit (*percotendo il corpo*), burning (*dessi il corpo mio ad ardere*), sweating, bleeding (*il corpo sudava, escire del corpo suo sudore di sangue*).

But just as numerous are the references to the resurrected beatified body (*la beatitudine del corpo dopo la resurrezione*), to the mystical body of the Church (*corpo mistico della santa Chiesa e l'universale corpo della Cristiana religione*) or to the glorified body of Christ (*il corpo glorificato ne*

had already known that grace: „davo e do una disposizione a quell corpo umano, in tanto che meglio starà con quella poca de l'erba, o alcuna volta senza cibo, che inanzi non faceva col pane e co' l'altre cose che si danno e sono ordinate per la vita de l'uomo. E tu sai che egli è così, ché l'ài provato in temedesima.” Ibid. There is also mentioned that it is the forthcoming of good Christians to benefit from a transfer of grace upon the body: „...l'anima darà beatitudine al corpo: darà dell'abbondanza sua, rivestita nel'ultimo dì del giudicio del vestimento della propria carne la quale lasò. Come l'anima è fatta immortale, fermata e stabilita in me, così il corpo in quella unione diventa immortale: perduta la gravezza è fatto sottile e leggiero.” Ibid.XLI, p. 34.

⁶³ *The Life*, pp. 101-102; *Il Processo Castellano*, passim (depositions of Bartholomew Dominici, Francis Malavolti, Peter of Giovanni Ventura and many others).

⁶⁴ An analysis of Saint Catherine's body-related language was one of the main issues I have addressed in my Bachelor Thesis, *Hrănirea mistică între pathologic și devoțional. Studiu de caz: Sfânta Ecaterina de Siena. Post și subzistență spirituală* [Mystical Feeding between Pathologic and Devotional. Case Study: Saint Catherine of Siena. Fasting and Spiritual Subsistence], Bachelor Thesis, Manuscript, Department of Medieval History, Early Modern History and Art History, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, 2015, pp. 66, 79-84. I have concluded that, on the one hand, mystical experience is described as body-centered in Western medieval Christianity, since it regards the individual as a whole and body-related images like hunger or marriage are simple, natural ways of expressing an intimate connection with God. On the other hand, I have also observed that, in the specific case of Saint Catherine, bodily notions like feeding/hunger or illness were mainly used figuratively.

l'umanità glorificata de l'unigenito mio Figliuolo): embodied Word (*corpo del Verbo del dolce mio Figliuolo*) and sacrificial lamb (*la morte della colpa nostra tolse la vita corporale allo immaculate Agnello*). This duality perfectly corresponds to the ambivalent representation of the body in medieval Christianity, which we have discussed before. But a particular metaphor reveals another common aspect of medieval thought, namely imagining the Church and the society as a body. While advocating for the importance of charity, there is an eloquent depiction of the ideal society as a perfectly functioning body.⁶⁵

However, Catherine's body-related metaphors and allegories are much more than that. The adjective „sweet” is frequently referred to, being related to the holy, to those people or qualities she highly appreciates (*dolce e amoroso Verbo, Maria dolce, dolce Verità, dolce bontà di Dio, cognoscimento dolce, dolce pazienza, dolcezza della mia carità, and so on*). In fact, there are plenty of metaphors the Saint often used: for example, the metaphor of dressing (*vestire di pene/ della carità/ della verità/ della dolce volontà di Dio*), of bathing in Christ's blood (*bagnatevi nel sangue di Cristo crocifisso*), of residing within the knowledge of God (*stando nel cognoscimento di Dio*), of espousal (*questo dolce sposo, Cristo*), of inebriation (*inebriarse del sangue di Cristo crocifisso/di questo prezioso sangue, il quale sangue inebria l'anima*), of giving birth (*partorisceivizi/ le virtù, la superbia nasceed è nutricata da l'amore proprio sensitivo*), of the eye of intellect/ eye of mercy when referring to God (*levandol'occhio dell'intelletto nella dolce Verità, prendo l'occhio dell'intelletto; vollendo l'occhio della sua misericordia/ l'occhio della pietà*), of the bridge that links the human to the divine (*questo ponte, unigenito mio Figliuolo/ è levato in alto, e non è separato perciò dalla terra*). All these expressions bear witness of the tendency to express religion-related concepts and emotions through concrete, temporal or bodily actions.

⁶⁵ „Le membra del corpo vostro vi fanno vergogna, perché usano carità insieme, e non voi; unde, quando il capo à male, la mano il soviene; e se 'l dito, che è così piccolo membro, à male, il capo non sireca a schifo perché sia maggiore e sia più nobile che tutta l'altra parte del corpo, anco el soviene co' l'udire, col vedere, col parlare e con ciò ch'egli à; e così tutte l'altre membra. Non fa così l'uomo superbo che vedendo il povaro, membro suo, e infermo e in necessità non il soviene, non tanto con ciò che egli à ma con una minima parola...” *Il Dialogo CXLVIII*, p. 158. In medieval culture, Christ was the head of the Church, whose limbs were the believers; similarly, spiritual leaders were the heads of their people, and men were head to women, represented as body. Burr, „Body in Literature and Religion”, p. 79.

In addition, the disciples currently call the Saint „sweet Mother” (*dolce Mamma, dolcissima Mamma*), so that Catherine is vested with the temporal hypostasys of maternity, besides being portrayed in a maternal stance towards the infant Jesus, as she holds Him in her arms.⁶⁶ Moreover, they use a broader range of metaphorical language – namely bodily metaphors.⁶⁷

Such linguistic structures derive from the conception that claims the complementarity between the various human faculties. Thereby the soul’s corrupt attitudes are rather linked to the physiologic and the elevating potential of the body to the spiritual.⁶⁸ Back then the human being was perceived as an inseparable unit. In this respect, scholars have pointed out how the Middle Ages has witnessed an „overlapping of physical and mental states”.⁶⁹ Consequently, the mystical experience describes the encounter with the divine as takes place in intellectual, affective and, not least, sensorial plan.⁷⁰

Just like any other human experience, the religious practices are also mediated by the physical dimension of existence and expressed through it. In Christianity, perceiving the divine message cannot be merely an inner fact in as much as the divinity itself is conceived as embodied Word which resides at the very heart of creation as God the

⁶⁶ *Supplemento...*, p. 170.

⁶⁷ For example, Thomas Caffarini refers to „the viscera of charity” (*viscere della carità*), the fact that the Saint was „inebriated by the Spirit” (*inebriata dallo Spirito*) and that she was fed by „the perfect food of the perfect knowledge and the perfect charity of God” (*cibo perfetto del perfetto cognoscimento e della perfetta carità di Dio*). *Il Processo Castellano*, pp. 98, 101; *Lettere dei discepoli, in Lettere I*, p. 1286. In its turn, an unnamed man, who sends a letter to Raniero Pagliaresi talks about „the eye of understanding” (*occhio de lo intendimento*), being „dressed in darkness” (*vestito di scurità*), „hunger and appetite for the good” (*fame et appetito de cosa buona*). Batholomew Domenici also uses expressions like: „our sweet Saviour that inebriates us with His precious” (*nostro dolce Salvatore che c’inebria di questo prezioso sangue*) or „the soul who is in love and comforted by Christ’s blood” (*l’anima adunque innamorata e confortata nel sangue di Cristo*). *Ibid.*, letter VIII, p. 1297; letter XX, p. 1321.

⁶⁹ Danielle Jacquart – Claude Thomasset, *Sexualité et savoir médical au MoyenÂge* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), pp. 83-84, quoted in E. Ann Matter, ‘Theories of the Passions and the Ecstasies of Late Medieval Religious Women’, in Lisa Perfetti (ed.), *A Representation of Women’s Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), pp. 23-42, especially 26. The author recalls the same observation in the works of Dyan Elliott. *Ibid.* See also Schmitt, „Trup și suflet”, pp. 779-780. For the particular case of Saint Catherine’s *Dialogue*, see Kristine Fleckenstein, „Incarnate Word”, *passim*.

⁷⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 151. See also Romagnoli, „Il linguaggio del corpo”, p. 219.

Son.⁷¹ From the complementary manner of understanding the relationship between body and soul originates the conviction that the qualities of the soul are displayed on the body.⁷² Moreover, the Christian is called to turn his body into a mirror of Christ's virtues, as proved during his bodily existence, so that the whole body is involved in the spiritual growth.⁷³ Under these circumstances, medieval Christian authors favor bodily metaphors.⁷⁴ Therefore, objectifying the spiritual in physical terms is a commonly used, highly coherent communication proceeding.

The mystical experience is lived as a voluptuousness, being equated with tasting ineffable delights, impossible to translate in the common language.⁷⁵ Mystics intend to present their meeting with the divine in a form understandable for the profane audience, so that they appeal to sensorial imagery.⁷⁶

In fact, through her *Dialogue*, Catherine discloses a new dimension of corporality, one that corresponds to the order of the spirit. For her, the word is more than the basic unit of speech; she believes in the objectifying effect of the word, as her permanent reference is the embodied Word.⁷⁷

The theological perspective: the place of the flesh in the quest for Godlikeness

The ultimate aim of mystical spirituality is the perfect immersion into God's will, preceded by self-surrender. Saint Catherine currently expresses her exhortation to comply with Christ the Crucified. This aspiration has a strong vocation of the concreteness, both from the Saint's perspective – eager to take upon her body the punishment for her

⁷¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, apud. Philip A. Mellor, „Self and Suffering”, p. 54.

⁷² Schmitt, „Trup și suflet”, pp. 776-777.

⁷³ Thomas Cattoi, 'Conclusion. The Virtues of Sensuality', in Cattoi – McDaniel (eds.), *Perceiving the Divine through the Human Body*, pp. 223-236, especially 224.

⁷⁴ Schmitt, „Trup și suflet”, p. 780.

⁷⁵ Cristina Mazzoni, 'Italian Women Mystics: a Bibliographical Essay', *Annali d'Italianistica: Women Mystic Writers*, 13 (1995): 401-435, especially 405. See also Rick McDonald, 'The Perils of Language in the Mysticism of Late Medieval England', *Mystics Quarterly*, vol 34/ 3-4 (2008): 45-70, especially 45. On the other hand, Grace Jantzen reconsiders this concept: when evoked by mystics, the ineffable refers not to their subjective experience, but to God's nature. *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 304.

⁷⁶ McDonald, „The Perils of Language”, p. 63.

⁷⁷ Romagnoli, „Il linguaggio del corpo”, pp. 209-210, 211-212.

fellows' sins –, and from her disciples' point of view – who present the familiarity between Catherine and her divine Spouse as a nearness validated in temporal and physical terms, through themes like marriage and change of hearts.

Yet, in Catherinian theology, earthly and bodily existence is miserable and alienated from God.⁷⁸ With the aim of achieving the union between the human soul and his Creator, one must abandon his own selfish will;⁷⁹ from this perspective, particularly reluctant is the sensitive will (*volontà sensitiva*), which is understood as fondness to the evanescent reality and to carnal pleasure, giving rise to the vices. In this regard, Catherine shares the Thomistic perspective, according to which the sin occurs due to the exaggerated, inordinate appetite – *inordinatu appetitu* – for worldly goods, which resides in the measureless self attachment (S.T. I, q 77, art.4). True to this doctrine, Catherine currently uses the locution *disordinato* as a reference to what is contrary to God's will and to the calling of mankind, which is becoming Godlike.

As for the scholastic philosopher, Catherine considers the sin as a primarily mental deed, without denying its effective, factual reality.⁸⁰ In a similar way, the availability or – in other words – the desire (*desiderio*) is a crucial component of the fact, which defines it, since its sense emerges in the field of conscience. From a quantitative perspective, this concept is probably as frequently used as the notions of body and flesh, or even more. This is the prerequisite of perfection since it has an infinite potential; and God, who is infinite, cannot be reached through finite actions.⁸¹

Thus, perfection is a state of mind, of knowledge and will alike.⁸² Therefore, mortification of the flesh must be accompanied by the

⁷⁸ *Il Dialogo* CLXVII, p. 186; *Le Orazioni* XVI, p. 20. See also *The Life*, p. 9; *Supplemento*, pp. 114-125.

⁷⁹ *Il Dialogo* IV, p. 5; CXXVI, p. 121. See also *The Life*, pp. 44-45.

⁸⁰ *Il Dialogo* VI, p. 6.

⁸¹ „Ma è vero questo: che col desiderio dell'anima si soddisfa, cioè con la vera contrizione e dispiacimento del peccato. La vera contrizione soddisfa alla colpa e alla pena, non per pena finite che sostenga, ma per lo desiderio infinito; perché Dio, che è infinito, infinito amore e infinito dolore vuole.” *Il Dialogo* III, p. 3.

⁸² „ Questo medesimo amore ti costringa ad illuminare l'occhio dell'intelletto mio dell'umedella fede acciò che io conosca la verità tua manifestata a me. Dami che la memoria sia capace a ritenere i benefici tuoi, e la volontà arda nel fuoco della tua carità; il quale fuoco facci germinare e gittare al corpo mio sangue, e con esso sangue dato per amore del sangue, e con la chiave dell'obediencia io diserri la porta del cielo.” *Il Dialogo* CLXVII, p. 185.

annihilation of the perverted will (*macerando il corpo suo e uccidendo la volontà*).⁸³ As Thomas Caffarini stresses, self-love is equally reprehensible, be it sensitive or spiritual;⁸⁴ self-love and divine love being totally opposites.⁸⁵ In other words, Saint Catherine also envisages an illicit spiritual bond. In fact, in the Saint's writings, the vice – like any other category of human affairs – is both corporeal and spiritual; the two adjectives are often mentioned conjunctively, as they are, for example, in the phrase „dirt of body and mind” (*immondizia di corpo e di mente/ corporale o mentale*). Furthermore, we can notice that, for Catherine – faithful to the Thomistic representation of the soul, of an Aristotelian origin – the human soul is primarily an intellectual principle. Moreover, any action has a mental foundation, initiated within the inner cell (*cella del cognoscimento di sé*).

As a result of all the above considerations, Catherine of Siena – like her disciples and, in general, her contemporaries – does not consider a fundamental distinction between body and soul; the real discrimination she perceives and describes is between the divine and the worldly. The first is the field of perfection, of true goodness, love and bliss. On the other hand, the man who disregards God's will is the slave of his body, lives in a profane, selfish, sinful, contemptible horizon, under the power of the devil.⁸⁶ Any means to reach God is welcomed and ontologically

⁸³ *Ibid.*, CLVIII, p. 171.

⁸⁴ „Da questo capriccioso amore spirituale deriva quell'attacco biasimevole a qualche santo, e virtuoso esercizio, fingiamo al digiuno: ma costoro pertinaci nel proprio sentimento non si fanno scrupolo alcuno nell'contradire all'ubbidienza, che non li vorrebbe così astinenti, perchè desidera di vederli più docili.” *Supplemento*, pp. 225-226.

⁸⁵ „Il quale cognoscimento spoglia l'anima del proprio amore, e vestela d'odio santo e d'un amore divino, cercando solo Cristo crocifisso, e non le creature, nè le cose create, nè se medesimo sensitivamente...”. *Lettere CXXVI*, pp. 401-402.

⁸⁶ „Or così pensa, carissima figliuola, che diviene a l'anima: o e' si con viene che ella serva e spera in me, o serva e spera nel mondo e in se medesima, però che tanto serve al mondo fuore di me di servizio sensuale, quanto serve o ama la propria sensualità [...] Mentre che esso spera in sé e nel mondo none spera in me, perchè l' mondo, cioè i desiderii mondani de l'uomo, sono a me in odio e in tanta abominazione mi furono che Io diei l'unigenito mio Figliuolo a l'obrobriosa morte della croce” *Il Dialogo CXXXVI*, p. 141. See within *Lettere*: XXVIII, p. 80, in which the world, the flesh and the devil are all presented as enemies of man; and also CLXXXII, p. 557; CCXVIII, p. 680. The medieval mind was used to the opposition between – on the one hand – fleshly, temporal, material, and – on the other hand – the spiritual. Schmitt, „Trup și suflet”, p. 781.

positive, irrespective of its significance on the secular scale of values. When it comes to the ideal of Godlikeness, suffering equates enjoyment.⁸⁷

Consequently, the body and soul differentiation is only valid insofar as it takes the form of the confrontation between the temptation of worldliness and the ascent to the divine. The Saint acknowledges the potential of the soul to receive God's grace and the contrary drive of the fleshiness, so that the rational soul must rise against it.⁸⁸ Man was given both sensuality and reason, but God expects him to serve the soul and to practise virtue even by means of flesh.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The Christian perspective on the flesh is ambiguous: it is the foundation of original sin, as it is its counterweight. Similarly, suffering is inherent to the fallen human condition and also a path to redemption. Thus, Saint Catherine of Siena undertakes various austerities and deprivations in order to repress lust and treasures pain as a chance to experientially merge with Christ's humanity. On top of that, mortification of the flesh has to be complemented by the desire to annihilate the perverse will and to entirely surrender to God.

As regards Catherinian figurative representation of the body – namely bodily metaphors for yearning and finding the divine –, it is a paradox only from a contemporary standpoint. In a culture that regards

⁸⁷ „Sai come sta il vero servo di Dio, che si nutrica alla mensa del santo desiderio? Sta beato e doloroso, come stave il Figliuolo di Dio in sul legno della santissima croce: perocchè la carne di Cristo era dolorosa e tormentata, e l'anima era beata per l'unione del desiderio nostro in Dio, ed essere vestiti della sua dolce volontà; e dolorosi per la compasione del prossimo, e per tollere a noi delizie e consolazioni sensuali, affiggendo la propria sensualità.” *Lettere* LXV, *ibidem*, p. 199. Coupling the two notions, apparently antithetic, also appears in: *Le Orazioni* XVI, p. 20; *Il Dialogo* LXXVIII, p. 68.

⁸⁸ The Saint states that only the rational soul can receive divine grace. *Le Orazioni* XVI, p. 21. This is due to the Christian belief according to which the rational soul never ceases to bear the seal of the divine, despite all the limitations imposed on the human nature by the original sin. Schmitt, „Trup și suflet”, p. 773. Catherine also underscores that „La sensualità e contraria allo spirito, e però in essa sensualità pruova l'anima l'amore che à in me, suo Creatore. Quando il pruova? Quando con odio e dispiacimentosì leva contra di lei.” *Il Dialogo* XCVIII, p. 89. See also *Le Orazioni...* XI, p. 11: „ribbelione della carne contra lo spirito”; *Lettere* LXXXIV, p. 265.

⁸⁹ „La sensualità è serva, e però è posta perché ella serva all'anima, ciò è che con lo strumento del corpo proviate ed esercitate le virtù.” *Il Dialogo* LI, p. 46.

human faculties as a continuum, religious experiences and emotions, piety and grace, were expressed through references to the body and through allegories. Therefore, medieval mentality does not perceive bodily and spiritual dimensions as self-dependent, but as interdependent. In the light of Catherine's intimacy with Christ – portrayed by her disciples as a virtually physical union –, this junction is accurately reflected by her purely spiritual subsistence.

In conclusion, it must be observed that Catherinian focus on the corporeal is not first-hand, as the body is nothing but a means of expression, both factually and figuratively. The true meaning of human experience, be it bodily or spiritual, externalized or internalized, is revealed to the extent that it is directed towards the divine.