

Obeying the Truth: Discretion in the Spiritual Writings of Saint Catherine of Siena. By Grazia Mangano Ragazzi. New York: Oxford University, 2014. Pp. xvi + 197. \$45.

Ragazzi tells us that her aim here to establish whether “discretion” (usually translated as “discernment”) is a key concept through which all of Catherine of Siena’s works can be interpreted. She proposes to accomplish this task through four parts. Part I reviews traditional European scholarship regarding authorship of Catherine’s wisdom, which is problematic, given that her works were almost exclusively dictated. R. does not include more updated English-language works such as Jane Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others* (2009). Most significantly there is no reference to the scholarship on this matter by Suzanne Noffke, translator of Catherine’s works into English, who adds a significant contribution to the issue of Catherine’s authorship (*Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol. 1 [2000] xlvii–xlvi).

Part II involves a comprehensive textual analysis primarily by examining the use of the term *discrezione*, with a different chapter each for the *Dialogue*, the *Letters*, and the *Prayers*. At the end of each chapter the author elaborates her interpretation of Catherine’s teaching on discernment, namely, that discretion unites knowledge of the truth (who God is, who we are, and what we owe to God and others) with “compelling” the person to accomplish what is perceived in “virtuous action” (77). Discernment as a virtue “compelling” action is “truly new” (74) and is, indeed, the central concept that unites all of Catherine’s thought in that it brings together the mystical and ethical—that is, a “mystical understanding of God as true and good Being” and an ethical understanding “of the wretchedness of human sins and the consequent necessity of virtuous moral action for salvation” (177).

Part III presents a useful anthology of key patristic and medieval authors who wrote about the virtue of discretion. Their thought is explained, followed by a comparison to Catherine’s teaching. The final part offers a schematic discussion of mysticism and morality as context for elaborating on the conclusions already offered in part II.

R.’s monograph essentially presents a virtue ethics reading of Catherine’s teaching based on Aquinas’s doctrine of prudence and the patristic view of the virtue of discernment. In general, this is a plausible interpretation and a useful contribution to scholarship on Catherine, but problems with R.’s argumentation and scholarship detract from her case. For example, it is difficult to understand where her view of virtue as “compelling” or “driving” action (as opposed to making action possible) comes from. Whether R. has a theoretical framework for this interpretation of virtue and how she finds such an interpretation in Catherine’s works are unclear. The distinction between *discretio*, the capacity to make a right judgment, and the virtue of *discretio*, meaning that the right judgment discerned can be carried out, was already noted by Cassian and other authors discussed in part III. Catherine’s notion of the virtue of discernment follows in this tradition.

The virtue ethics interpretation would have been strengthened had R. stated in so many words that this is her theoretical framework, and then from this perspective

gone on to address the connection between the spiritual journey and the living of the moral life. Such a discussion might have offered support for her interpretation and explicitly distinguished it from established treatments of discernment in Catherine that follow the language and constructs of spirituality and spiritual theology. However, R. does not address or dialogue with different interpretations such as that in my “Discernment in Catherine of Siena” (1997), where I argue that Catherine’s contribution to the history of discernment involves the way she intimately ties her teaching about this notion to her wisdom regarding progression in transformation through union with God. That is, discernment involves recognition of the truth about God and self that motivates a journey of transformation. Through unfolding transformation, the whole person—her memory, understanding, and will—becomes progressively freer to see and act according to God’s love and truth; there is no question of “compelling” action.

Indeed, differences from established scholarship are not always noted. For instance, R. simply asserts that she will translate *discrezione* as “discretion” because this word offers a more complete meaning of discernment as implying virtuous action rather than merely recognizing it. There is no note indicating that linguist Suzanne Noffke, in her well-recognized English translations of Catherine’s works, translates *discrezione* as “discernment” (and documents agreement by other scholars on this) even when Catherine uses it to refer to the virtue of discretion (Noffke, ed., *Dialogue* [1980] 40 n. 25).

Scholars of Catherine of Siena will want to read this virtue ethics interpretation of discernment, especially parts II and IV, which offer R.’s original perspective.

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The Catholic Rubens: Saints and Martyrs. By Willibald Sauerländer. Translated from German by David Dollenmayer. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2014. Pp 311. \$45.

In-depth analysis and images in this study of the world of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) reveal his influence on church life and schools of spirituality as well as on political and religious conflicts. After some years in Italy, Rubens returned to his Flemish homeland. With large paintings for both a civic building and for a new, prominent church of the Jesuits in Antwerp, his reputation grew. He was seen as a painter whose colors and lines betrayed the Catholic approach to the graced person and whose figures showed the mystic or the activist empowered by the Holy Spirit through the church. Commissions from Bavaria emphasized the event of Pentecost or the person of St. Peter, themes of the new Catholic renewal.

S.’s book presents Rubens not as an artist reluctantly at work for ecclesiastical authorities, but as a painter and believer knowledgeably involved with the new directions of Catholic life after 1600. His paintings emphasize the reality of being a saint