In the public square, St. Catherine taught and practiced a statesmanship that was new in her time, and still is—certainly more novel than the “new modes and orders” another Tuscan would introduce a century and a half later. Machiavelli’s teaching about the way “the prince of this world” (Jn 14:30, 16:11) would conduct his affairs is not really a new teaching at all. It is as old as the city of man. Catherine’s teaching is intended for one who would overcome that “world” by serving a truly new Prince, Jesus Christ. Catherine rebelled against the old princes because their statesmanship could only produce violence and turmoil.

What Pope John Paul II said about St. Elizabeth of Hungary\(^1\) applies just as well to Catherine: “She thought in dimensions that went beyond her times; with a penetrating heart she realized the unifying power of love and the deep necessity for unity.” The parallel is not accidental, for this is the wisdom common to all the saints. As G. K. Chesterton observed, “…the greatest saints have thrown themselves between the swords and daggers of contending factions.”\(^2\) Catherine did it with words.

Although she could not have held public office in the circumstances of her time, close involvement with high matters of state in fourteenth-century Europe enabled her to see and proclaim a new science of statecraft. It took a “mystical activist”\(^3\) to correct the falsehoods about public affairs which Machiavelli was to support so persuasively. Like his, Catherine’s science came from experience and reflection, not formal training in philosophy or the social

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\(^1\) Discourse, 12 Nov. 1981.
sciences. Her travels in Italy and France, her persistent mediation of disputes, her courageous intrusions into courts and palaces bear witness to a disposition for heroism that is rare among teachers of politics.

While the work of Machiavelli is hardly news today, what Catherine said and did in the public square is still known to few. She needs a wider audience, especially among students and practitioners of statecraft. As St. Catherine’s latest editor has observed, “today’s world is ready to meet Catherine,”⁴ even if that meeting is many centuries overdue. Our times present a sufficient parallel for us to learn much from her about political uncertainty, unrest, and corruption, materialism and sensuality, disregard for moral norms, and the cowardice in high places that permits dissension and distortion to thrive. For us, as for her, the only recourse is to a genuinely human statesmanship.

How was this simple young woman able to achieve such deep insight into the science and art of public leadership? Surely it is because she looked for it in the much loftier “science” of soul. Catherine’s only rule was to orient every human subject to the soul, created and redeemed by God. All this required was to open one’s ears and listen to Him communicate it. The richness of her thought and experience in soul matters is what made Catherine so eloquent and persuasive a teacher.

It also enabled her to cut through intransigent political problems that reduced her contemporaries to impotence—and ours, too. By raising political problems above the narrow dimensions of particular institutions and policies to larger issues like the relation between authority and obedience, Catherine could provide a clear alternative to the manner in which conventional wisdom addresses them.

The center of Catherine’s life in that turbulent world of the fourteenth century was her insatiable love for souls fed by a desire to free them from enslavement to sin. In her dealings with public leaders, as well as her family and friends, Catherine saw only souls—equal and without distinction before

God. One measure of her sanctity was this ability to merge love for God with love for souls. She was only applying to others in the circumstances of their lives what her own experience proved: No soul can live without orientation to Truth. Nothing in life, private or public, can succeed apart from truth. Falsehood always obscures minds and divides wills. Everyman’s obligation to find, declare, and defend the truth can never be diluted without doing grave harm to oneself and others, especially if one occupies a public office.

Catherine owed her passion for truth to the habit of contemplation she cultivated in the period of retirement that preceded her public career. Besides self-knowledge and a right will, it gave her the capacity to see the origin of public ills in self-deception and hypocrisy. Without the same interior order and peace, no one could expect to promote external order and peace. When lies are set before truth and hatred before love, politics can be nothing but a staging area for strife. This is the position of strength from which Catherine was able to deal with the dignitaries who were her contemporaries. She demanded nothing short of a revolutionary change in their understanding of public duty.

Catherine liked to contrast the “manliness” expected of her followers to the effeminacy of men who follow the prince of this world. Whoever abstains out of weakness from correcting others becomes an accomplice and assumes partial responsibility for the disorders caused by their errors. Effective correction always presumes respect for the dignity of persons and their offices because it is a manifestation of charity. But there is also an obligation to the truth, which must be spoken firmly, clearly, and nobly, and in practice this often means giving oneself and others a hard time. Social conventions can never excuse complicity in error out of simple human respect.

Catherine’s manner of offering correction assumes several key principles: Political disorder is the result of personal moral disorders; political reform has to begin with moral reform; what deforms societies and regimes is sin; moral evil is further inflamed by attempts to repel it by violence; it can be repelled only by personal holiness. Corrections aim at the causes of disorder, for unless those are addressed no amount of patchwork can curb their baneful effects.
Catherine’s respect for souls and her universal outlook made her long for a climate of mutual understanding in a world of misunderstanding, enmity, and danger. That reality only stimulated her to confront it by word and example. Rather than being intimidated, she set out to form public opinion by transferring to it with clarity and objectivity the truth she found in her personal dealings with God. Catherine’s example is so timely and compelling because modern mass communications have such vast power to deform public opinion by concealing and obscuring the truth in matters of great political moment.

The historical record contains little evidence of successful implementation of Catherine’s brand of statesmanship. But she never lost heart and kept up a vigorous campaign of prayer-fortified action over the ten-year period (1370-80) she was busy with the affairs of the day. She also formed a small band of loyal “sons”—her “beautiful brigade,” as she called them—who might continue her work. She communicated to them the same strength and wisdom she drew from Christ, exhibiting herself, in effect, as the model of a statesman.

In this respect Catherine also transcended another famous Tuscan, Dante. While agreeing with him that the aim of human life is rightly ordered love, and that disordered love is the fount of evil in souls and in cities, she was not content to comment on the human condition, however beautifully. Her message is more forceful than Dante’s, and she engages in direct action to influence the course of events.