

# Michael Wright final 1-9-2023

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## SPEAKERS

Carla Long, Josh Mangelson, Michael Wright

### Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

### Carla Long 00:33

Hello, and welcome to the *Project Zion Podcast*. I'm your host, Carla Long, and today we're listening to a little subset of "Percolating on Faith". And we're not with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith today, we're with a wonderful and dear friend of mine, Michael Wright. Hi, Michael.

### Michael Wright 00:47

Hey, Carla. It's good to be with you.

### Carla Long 00:49

It's so good to have you here because Michael wrote this amazing paper about Catherine of Genoa and she was a mystic. And so, this is one of the subsets of "Percolating on Faith" where we talked about mysticism and famous mystics. And so, he is going to tell us all about Catherine of Genoa. But before he does that, I would love for you, Michael, to tell me a little bit about yourself.

### Michael Wright 01:09

Sounds good, Carla. Well, I've been on *Project Zion* a number of times before, which is really amazing, because this podcast has been a great part of my spiritual journey, especially with my conversion into Community of Christ. I joined the church in 2019, so I'm still a pretty, relatively new member of the Church, from the LDS tradition. And I tell my whole faith journey story on *Project Zion* if people are interested to hear about that. But I, one of the most exciting things that's happened in the recent weeks is that I graduated from the Community of Christ seminary with a master's degree in arts, with a focus in peace and justice studies. So, this was one of those moments that, as soon as I joined the church, I started to talk with my apostle who suggested that it might be a good journey for me. And so, I started that same year, and that's been a three-year journey. So, it feels so good to be done, and this paper is one of those things that I produced during the MAR program. I live in Rome, Italy. I don't sound like a Roman. I sound like a North American because I grew up in North America, but I've been in Rome for about 21 years with my career. And also, I live here with my husband who is a true Roman, Antonio.

**Carla Long** 02:25

Ah, I am so excited for you for finishing seminary. But aren't you just a teeny tiny bit sad about it? Like, you're gonna miss it a little bit, right?

**Michael Wright** 02:32

Oh, absolutely. Now, the 200 pages of reading per week, not always, not always. I don't want to scare people who are thinking about seminary. It's an amazing journey. It really is. I am going to miss it. I'm going to really miss the people that were in my cohort. That's one of the best parts, but also the kind of theological formation is also right up there. It's tied with the community.

**Carla Long** 02:54

Absolutely. I look back on my seminary years with so much nostalgia, but when I was in them, oh my gosh, I felt like if I didn't keep my nose to the grindstone all the time, I was gonna be, like, lost forever. So, I get it.

**Michael Wright** 03:07

Absolutely.

**Carla Long** 03:07

I totally get it. So, congratulations, and well done. Let's jump into Catherine of Genoa. So, what makes Catherine of Genoa so interesting to you?

**Michael Wright** 03:15

Well, in seminary, in "Introduction to Christian Thought I", we had to not only journey through the semester journaling with a mystic, but we also had to write a paper on a mystic's life. Since I live in Italy, I wanted to choose two different Italian saints. My journaling companion during the semester long course was St. Catherine of Siena, or her name at birth was Catherine Benincasa. She lived in the second half of the 14th century. People know her well, not only as a doctor of the church in the Roman Catholic tradition, but she's also the co-patron saint of Italy with St. Francis of Assisi. But she's the most famous for helping to reconcile the church, influencing the Pope to return to Rome from Avignon. Lesser known, St. Catherine of Genoa, so we've got two St. Catherine's here, this is the one I didn't really know very well. She was known as Caterina Fieschi, as she was known at birth, and is a saint that I hardly knew anything about, yet she was one of the mystics on the list of potential subjects for a paper. Only knowing that she was Italian, and she was from Genoa, I wrote to my professor and asked if I could claim her for my paper topic. I'm really glad I did, Carla, because I found her story to be a truly interesting subject, and today feel a real connection to her story. Catherine was born to a noble family that was connected to kings and popes. I mean, this family had a lot of power in it. Yet her failed marriage created depression, and I believe body issues for her. She lived basically in a sexless marriage with a guy that squandered all of their money on gambling, and was unfaithful to her with many women. This guy was a bum and I believe it caused much unhappiness within her, creating the seeking that was necessary for her to develop her mysticism and her desire for a divine husband in God.

**Carla Long** 05:08

Oh my gosh, that is so depressing.

**Michael Wright** 05:11

It is, it is. And, you know, like we already talked about with mystics, there's already going to be a lot of talk about body and sex. So hopefully that will keep the listener listening through this, 'cause we'll be talking about those kinds of things. But yeah, it is sad. She, she has kind of a sad story for sure.

**Carla Long** 05:27

Maybe I missed it. How long did you say she was in that marriage? Was she in it for a long time?

**Michael Wright** 05:32

I think was about five years that she was in that marriage.

**Carla Long** 05:35

That's a long time. But also, you know, pretty short when it comes to your lifespan. So hopefully, hopefully, she has some better news coming up in her life. So, I'm sure we're gonna hear all about it in a little bit later. So, I love why you chose her too, you know, like you're feeling a kinship with her. I think that's very...

**Michael Wright** 05:49

Yeah.

**Carla Long** 05:49

...cool. So, what can we learn from Catherine of Genoa today?

**Michael Wright** 05:53

Well, in my paper, you'll hear me take Catherine's story and liken it to our Community of Christ journey. I think that's one of the things that makes it interesting for the podcast and for us, and bringing her to our modern times as well. We have lots of examples of mysticism in our own tradition. I believe that our Enduring Principle of Continuing Revelation keeps us seeking God in a way that allows for mystical experiences to happen. Those experiences can be very personal, but I, as a relatively new member of the church, found that the spiritual expressions that happened at World Conference in 2019, helped to show a sort of communal mysticism at work in our church. Also, working with my evangelist to prepare for my evangelist blessing, and for LDS people listening, that would be like the patriarchal blessing, demonstrated to me that there are forms of mysticism in our priesthood offices too, as we seek for blessing or connection with God, and providing confirmation of worth and love from God, a hallmark of Community of Christ, and one that points towards mysticism. And, as I will mention later, I believe that trauma was part of St. Catherine's story toward her sainthood and her ultimate union with God. I'm not saying that mystics have to have trauma, or have, or have had mental health issues to act in mystical ways, but I do think that, as St. John of the Cross describes, "the dark night of the soul" ignites the necessary seeking for the mystic. If all times are great times, Carla, it doesn't leave a lot of darkness in which to seek light. Even in our own tradition, we have seen this historically. Joseph Smith, Jr., for example, had mystical aspects to his prophetic calling, which produced experiences like the first vision and his production of *The Book of Mormon*. But Joseph was not a prophet due to perfection. He had plenty of trauma in his physical and spiritual journey. But it is in this trauma that Joseph continued to

seek the God of love. And on *Project Zion* episode, a former one, David Brock spoke about David Hiram Smith as being a mystic from the Reorganization period. David had apparent mental health issues, but he kept seeking God through his challenges and expressed those desires for God through beautiful hymnody and art that continues to inspire us today.

**Carla Long 08:13**

I think you're absolutely right. After me doing all these podcasts about mystics and mysticism that a lot of these people, if not all these people, have had pretty traumatic experiences in their lives. And, like, in order, and I don't know if it's just too simplistic to say, you have to have the lows to know the highs. But I think that there's a pretty much, a brilliance to that as well. And I think that's probably true also. I mean, it's just so horrible to have to hear about it.

**Michael Wright 08:40**

Absolutely. Yeah, I do think it is those experiences in life that keep us seeking. I think we can seek also in great times, as well, but I think that human tendency when things are really good, we do a lot less seeking. There's not so much of a need for seeking. It's in kind of the bottomed-out times that we really start to search for something that gives us some hope.

**Carla Long 09:02**

Oh, that's very true. You said it much better than I did. I am fully behind you, Michael. That is beautifully said. Thank you so much. I think that's absolutely, absolutely true. So, you talked about mysticism a little bit. So, tell me about how her mysticism influences her.

**Michael Wright 09:18**

So, I'll tell you a couple of pieces that are unique to her experience. There's a, the first word is beguine. Have you ever heard this word before? Well, it comes from French and it is a 12th century term that comes into fashion to describe new-fangled nun-like individuals who live celibate lives, take vows and help their community, like their city community, without living in a monastic community, okay? So, in a world where women's roles and spirituality were accepted within limits in a patriarchal society, this expression of religious living, provided some additional freedoms to women, living as beguines in their communities. These mystics were seen as prophets in their community, as long as they lived within the acceptable limits that their status allowed. As you will hear in my paper, Catherine is a mystic who is protesting the world she lives in. She must do this in a way that is acceptable to her community and society, so she does not tip over into a space of being accused of being a witch and burned or tortured for her excessive protest. There's also this idea of the dualism of the soul and the body. Catherine's confessor is the writer of her, "The Spiritual Dialogue". You may have heard of purgation before, the inward looking of the mystic to find out what is keeping them from the union with God. This work shows her intense discomfort of the two parts of her being: the soul and the body. In the paper, you'll hear more about this, but her experiences in life show that Catherine did not end up with a healthy balance between soul and body, but she allowed her soul to take over. For her, the soul's only desire is to return to be in union with God, and by allowing the soul to take over the body, the body will end up starving of its own needs, ultimately ending in death. You can read "*The Spiritual Dialogue*", which is quite enlightening and amusing, it sounds dark but there's some fun things in it, in many ways by simply searching for it on the internet, or I read it in a great tome by Amy Odin called, *In Her Words: Women's Writings in the History of Christian Thought*. And then another subject is protest. There's a lot of

protests in Catherine's mysticism. Her struggle with her body is one of the important factors that makes her such an interesting subject for this conversation and paper. She suffers from depression and she has issues with her feminine body. She will protest in diverse ways that traditionally hold patriarchal privilege, such as starving her body except for consuming the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the sacrament of communion or the Lord's Supper. In the Catholic tradition this would be a consumption of the male body in its transubstantial shift from bread and wine to Christ's body, along with daily communion being reserved traditionally only for priests who were male. This next protest is hard to hear. I hope you're not currently eating or drinking, Carla, but Catherine also protested life through the consumption of pus from her plague victims. She envied their illness as she worked to cure them. But in another way of protest, where the Eucharist symbolized life through death, Catherine is consuming with her patients by taking on death, so she might have life in union with God beyond this life. Then there's the mystical language of fire. Mystics use language to express their desire for union with God, which can sound strange to the modern reader. The language can sound like romantic or even sexual desire in this type of sacred union with God. Bernini, a Baroque sculptor, master, who lived in Rome, sculpted St. Teresa of Avila, which is here in my city where I live, in her ecstatic moments, or ecstasy, with an angel penetrating her heart with an arrow. I was recently in Oklahoma for Christmas, driving between Oklahoma City and Tulsa, that's my native state, where I came upon a Christian station. But it took some time for me to realize that it wasn't a pop rock station, but it was Christian music indeed. Only the occasional mention of God helped me understand that this was a Christian song and not a romantic love song to another human. So, we have these same types of expressions in our own time that do not spill over into the blasphemous, but remain in a border territory of human desire for union with God. Fire is also a difficult term in her mysticism. Fire can be the flames of passion that we use in romantic expression between human beings, but we also use fire for expressions of the Spirit. Think about confirmation and the baptism of fire in the sacraments. Or think about "The Spirit of God Like a Fire is Burning" in our hymnody. One of the things I think we can learn from mystics like Catherine is the need to read between the metaphorical and symbolic without reaching towards literalism. The language is poetic, and is not supposed to be literal in its expression. So, Catherine desiring to die by fire could be extremely dangerous for a modern person who wants to live out Catherine's mysticism in a literal way.

**Carla Long** 14:43

Oh my gosh. I mean, she sounds like she lives pretty intense life.

**Michael Wright** 14:50

Yeah, I think pus drinking is probably also...

**Carla Long** 14:53

Oh, my gosh.

**Michael Wright** 14:53

...always gonna be an intense way of living.

**Carla Long** 14:56

That's a lot to take in, Michael.

**Michael Wright** 14:58

I know. I know. That's why I wanted to make sure you weren't consuming food when I...

**Carla Long** 15:01

Very kind of you.

**Michael Wright** 15:01

...when I mentioned that.

**Carla Long** 15:02

Yes, a gentle listener, I hope that you weren't consuming food either. I mean, she just sounds like she is just so intense. And that's one thing, well, at least me, as a modern person, I don't live that intense of a life, I don't think, and I don't know if everyone, way back when, would live that intense of life. Maybe TV has taken us out of that intense place or something, or all of the other distractions that we have, but she just sounds like once she had an idea in her head, she just totally went for it.

**Michael Wright** 15:28

Absolutely. Yeah, she did. She did. And there's some paradoxes too, which I'll talk about in a minute with you, too. But, yeah, exactly. To the modern person this sounds freakish or crazy, not things that we would ever do. So, yeah, I agree with you.

**Carla Long** 15:44

I'm really, really sad to say that I'm probably going to take that pus drinking away from this podcast, and while I've learned a lot, I'm sure I'm gonna learn a lot about Catherine Genova, that's probably one thing that's gonna stick right there in my brain. So, wow! Okay, so okay, let's keep going. So, what do you think a faithful response to this call looks like in church today, and I'm going to quote you, and I'm going to quote the last part of your paper. You say, "Our calling is to give peace to these bodies so they can find union with God in a spiritually inflamed Christian community, rather than protesting their lonely bodies and unjust systems, by seeking union with God through death." So, what do you think a faithful response to that call looks like today?

**Michael Wright** 16:28

Yeah, I'm going to take you through what I was thinking with that. You know, in Tony's papers, you have a word count. You have to have really good quotes that boil down everything that you're thinking about into small amounts. So, you know, I'm neither a historian nor a physician, and barely a theologian, so my thoughts here are truly my own opinion along with being informed by my theological training. I must say that I found Catherine of Genoa to be a tragic character. I was rarely uplifted by her story, but rather I found empathy with her and her sense of otherness in this world, and her extreme desire for union with God. Yet the constant expression of wanting illness and death to come upon her, made me think at first, why the heck is she a saint? And then I remember thinking more about this and the thought came to my mind, well, Michael, why are you a saint? This thought made me think about my own self, as one who has experienced otherness in this world, has been confused about my own body as a queer person, while having this ongoing seeking for God. Now, she is a medieval Saint with a capital S, right, whose struggle and wisdom were confirmed by the Roman Catholic tradition, making her a name that we still think about and speak about today. If I can call myself, in lower case, a Latter-day saint, a Christian person living as a believer in Christ in this particular moment in time, to

differentiate my present time from her medieval time, then I have to think about why someone on this podcast would tune in to listen to me. So why would anyone be interested in my particular story of faith and struggle? It is because we are all connected in this human journey. What I have found in my journey can be helpful or inspiration to others seeking, and Catherine's story of her struggle with her own embodiment, in her own time, makes her a living example of the worth of all persons, and one desperately loved by God. What I see in Catherine are some paradoxes. One is that she is a healer working in a hospital with plague victims, and even becomes a female rector of the hospital. This is big, yet she does not want physical healing for her own body, as it only stands in the way of her soul getting her back to heavenly realms to be in communion with God. Her status as a beguine, a sort of individual monastic person, was still not without community. Her own ex-husband, I mean, this is crazy, but her own ex-husband lived with her in a celibate religious arrangement, and she had a following in the hospital as well. But the nature of the beguine was not living in monastic quarters or in a church. Tony Chvala-Smith, mentioned in an earlier episode, the importance of community to the mystic. But while she shows signs of community, she also is showing signs of escapism through her beguinness, if I can call that a word, and her active desire to escape this earthly realm to return to God. As you'll hear from the paper, some of her actions are actions of protest, but I also think that her early life possibly created some trauma for her. Mental health issues were often seen as other problems like possession, or even a sign that she was a witch. So, like many physical remedies in a time where there were no antibiotics nor modern medical surgeries, spiritual care was sometimes the only possible solution or hope for healing. Also, so much of our otherness has to do with our bodies as our existence or our being in this earthly realm, is one of embodiment. Think about it. So many of our modern expressions of othering a person has to do with sex, with skin color, with ability or disability. It is how we are manifested by our bodies that creates a distinguishing category for us as humans, used often to belittle the worth of those who do not carry privilege. Now, in Community of Christ, we have a particular calling and care-ism for Zion, the peaceable kingdom of God. Although the idea of building Zion is an idea that is quite modern, our Restoration roots and our continued calling have us actively working in community, taking full advantage of our embodiment to be expressions of God's love and build a more peaceful and just world. Jesus brought Heaven to Earth, thy kingdom come, and God dwells within each of us. Again, in another episode, Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith said that, "One thing that we share with the Divine is that the divine chooses to dwell within each of us. It is being that we have in common with God." So, we often hear the phrase, "Be the hands and feet of Jesus". We have to let those who are othered in our communities and societies, who are possibly seeking escapism from this life, know their inestimable worth, help to get them the physical and spiritual care they need, and invite them to embrace their embodiment, and to join the work of changing the world, turning it upside down, the way that Jesus did. What does, "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last in the kingdom of God", we find in Matthew 20, actually mean? The notion that one might feel as though they are last, entitles them to being first in God's loving kingdom. If we can use the metaphorical language of fire that Catherine of Genoa uses, we do not want those who despair in this life to want to die by literal fire, as Catherine desired. But rather, we want inflamed Christian community, a community infused with the Spirit of Christ, God's love, and the Spirit of revelation to be present to give peace and recognize the dignity and worth of all marginalized bodies. Community of Christ, and all Christians are called to this work. Let us seek union with God in the here and now, among other disciples, and look deep within, where God is already in union with us, and look at our neighbor who is a reflection of God among us.

**Carla Long** 22:30

Oh, that's beautiful. That is beautiful. I always appreciate the references to flipping things on their head and looking at it in a completely different way, like Jesus did. And it's really uncomfortable to do and it's really hard to do. And it makes you feel like, wait, this isn't right. But in the upside-down kingdom, that's exactly what it is.

**Michael Wright** 22:51

Absolutely. Well, I just had a long car ride conversation with my mom about this. And she was just so intrigued about thinking about Christmas even as a time of flipping the world upside down. And we had a lot of those conversations. Not sure when this podcast will be coming out, there's a lot of Christmas speak because it's still December when we're recording, but it was a lovely theological discovery together, as mom and son, as we talked about what Christmas meant to us, and what it could mean to the world.

**Carla Long** 23:20

Absolutely. You know, like, it's so, so, so much bigger than what we make it. Like, we just make it so small and insular, like, it's about family, it's about gifts. No, it's actually about something much, much, much bigger than that.

**Michael Wright** 23:34

Yeah, exactly.

**Carla Long** 23:36

Well, I'm really excited about hearing this paper. And listener, we will be hearing the paper in just a little bit. So, before we jump into that, Michael, is there anything else that I should know before hearing this paper?

**Michael Wright** 23:46

Yes, I just want to talk a little bit about her context because, you know, remember when we got into seminary, I think it's like the first thing that everybody talks about is context, context, context. That makes theologians, I think, historians, human beings, better people when we understand who people are. And I think that we can have a really myopic view of what the Middle Ages is. So, I want to talk about the Middle Ages first. So, mysticism begins before the Middle Ages, but many of the mystics that are famous to modern people live in the medieval period. The Middle Ages is always a difficult time to put dates to, but for simplicity we'll use the end of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, to the Renaissance that is developing in the 15th century, especially in Italy. We have like 1000 years of time that often gets clumped into one, stereotypical, Monty Python-like expression, what was happening in the Middle Ages, you know, like, "Bring out your dead," kind of stuff, right? So, for non-European, it can be difficult to envision. It is easier for us who live in places like Italy, as we have many medieval centers all over the country, still in really good shape for us, like Siena, Pisa, Orvieto and even Genoa, where St. Catherine is from. Now, St. Catherine of Genoa lives on the cusp of the late medieval period and the new dawning of the Renaissance. There were some terrible things that happened in the Middle Ages. One thing that comes to mind always is the bubonic plague. No one wants to have lived during that time, which killed most likely a third of the European continent in the 14th century. Plus, to connect it to her, Genoa is the naval fleet that brought the bubonic plague back to Europe. So, it's the rats on their boats that is bringing that plague into Europe. Religious wars and crusades were also tragedies of the



medieval period. Yet there were great developments too, that happened during the Middle Ages. Monasticism grew, which created centers for community, religion and education. The first universities are born. The first is Bologna, in my country, in the 12th century. Genoa's University was founded in the 15th century when she would have been living in that city. There's a rebirth of philosophy on the European continent, which is translated from Greek into Arabic in the Islamic world, and the Islamic world infuses Europe with science and technology. Great architecture survives today. Banking is invented and perfected, and exploration begins with naval technological advances. In fact, St. Catherine's Genoa will be one of the most important naval powers in the Mediterranean. Like in anytime, there are those who believe they are living in a dark time while others believe otherwise. The Italian medieval writer Petrarca, Francesco Petrarca, is one who perceived living in a dark time. I'll remind you that he wrote a very famous book called *The Decameron*. Now, if you don't know this, this is a really naughty book. It's a naughty tale of young, mixed, coeds who flee the plague in Florence to go to the hilltop town of Fiesole where they tell dirty stories to each other until quarantine is over, and it's safe to go back to their plague-ridden city. As modern, post-pandemic people, we can now understand this type of lockdown that was happening while misery was happening all around them. And in the 19th century, when our denomination was born, the Victorians saw the Middle Ages as a cruel, torturous, dark time, due to their own sense of elevated-ness and advancement over the medieval period and their fascination with the macabre. We can still see this today. If you go to the medieval town of San Gimignano, near Siena, you see amazing churches with frescoes of saints, stunning art from the medieval period in the art gallery. You walk through the town seeing cistern technology, and tall towers where families who dyed silk, hung their textiles to dry before selling them to wealthy Tuscan families. But you'll also see today, the torture museum, which has been created for tourists looking for macabre shock factor items from this time period. In St. Catherine's Genoa, in the 15th century, I already told you that it's a giant naval hub, but what's her town like? Well, Italy was not the Italy you know today in the 15th century. Modern Italy was created in the 19th century. So, during Catherine's time, Genoa was its own republic or city-state. This powerful city-state reached beyond the city limits of Genoa which is located in the northwest of the Italian peninsula. Genoa's naval power brings lots of cultural influences from other places in the world. Genoa will set up colonies from Crimea and Syria that will be established in Turkey, especially in Constantinople, and own islands in the Mediterranean, such as Corsica, and have a fluid exchange of goods between the Middle East and North Africa. This brings much wealth and a lot of diversity to a city like Genoa. And remember that guy, Christopher Columbus, who has a hard relationship these days in North America? Well, he's a native-born Genoese explorer who has just found the Americas during the time of Catherine's life. Does America have an influence on her and her fellow citizens? I would say, "Yes", and this is the reason. Christopher donated 50% of his earnings from the American explorations to the city of Genoa to keep taxation of food at a minimum, to help poverty in the city. I mentioned the Black Death before too, but it was a normal occurrence of plagues to pop up every once in a while. In fact, as you'll hear from my paper, Catherine worked in Genoa's main hospital, treating plague victims from an outbreak in the 1490s. This hospital was Genoa's main hospital all the way until the 19th century. The chapel in this historic building can still be visited today where her remains are kept. So needless to say, Catherine of Genoa was Catherine of Genoa and her city of Genoa was a bustling, wealthy, European city in the 15th century, full of diversity, but also despair.

**Carla Long** 29:50

I don't know if this was your goal or not, but I desperately need to go to Italy. Like, I've never, I've been all over Europe, but I've never been to Italy and this makes me want to go so bad and see those buildings, and see those frescoes, and see all of those places. What an amazing experience you've had living in Italy for the last 20 years. It's really exciting.

**Michael Wright 30:08**

Well, you're always welcome. And I promise I'm not working for the tourist agents, but I hope that people will want to come to visit Italy. And there's all of these great, great things that you can still visit today that will help connect the context of so many time periods, as Italy has been influential in western civilization for millennia.

**Carla Long 30:29**

Absolutely, absolutely. Okay. Well, this has been the best setup for a paper I've ever heard, Michael, ever, and I'm super excited to hear this paper. So, I'm just gonna let you take it away.

**Michael Wright 30:40**

Okay. Now, I hope I didn't let everybody down. I hope the beginning wasn't really good and now here's the paper. But here is my humble academic research that I hope will be meaningful to those who want to learn more about her and her mysticism and its connection to us in Community of Christ. My paper is called "Catherine of Genoa: A lifelong struggle with the body". Historical context: The mystical St. Catherine of Genoa was born in 1447 to the Fieschi family from Liguria. Both of her parents were of noble birth. Her father, Jacopo, who was related to two different popes, Innocent IV and Adrian V, was made Viceroy of Naples, a post he kept until his death. Even though Catherine was born into a wealthy and connected family, from an early age she lived a life of protest and battle with her body. Her confessor notes that as early as the age of eight, she hated the soft indulgence of her bed and preferred to, quote "...lay herself down humbly to sleep on straw with a block of hardwood under her head", closed quote. As a young teenager, she is said to have received the spiritual gift of prayer and to desire to enter a convent. But her father tried to persuade her against such a decision, using the fear of austerity and religious life, and remind her of her delicacy that was her body. At age 16, she was forced into marriage with Giuliano Adorno, a husband that caused her to suffer. He was unfaithful and truly absent during the first five years of their marriage. He caused her to become poor, not only by his absence, but because of his irresponsible spending. Her confessor says that Giuliano was quote, "the opposite of Catherine in his mode of life", closed quote. Catherine lived in a self-constructed, lonely, religious life in the absence of her husband. Her depression, expressed as distress of mind and mental suffering by her confessor, along with her prayer, "Pray to God for me, O St. Benedict, that for three months, He may keep me sick in bed," might be an indication that she is developing a personal theology of illness, a grace that leads to full union with God. Catherine and Giuliano then had a change in their marriage. Giuliano had a conversion experience, and Catherine had a life changing revelation during her Lenten confession, where quote, "God revealed to her the greatness of divine love for her, even in the light of her own sinfulness," closed quote. Giuliano and Catherine continued to live together in the city of Genoa, but taking a vow of chastity in the relationship. Their marriage, in effect, had become a sort of religious community. Catherine would then dedicate her life to the sick at Genoa's Pammatone Hospital. She had become a beguine, a particular female religious innovation in the late Middle Ages. Beguines were a combination of continued acceptance of lay spiritual activism in the Middle Ages, and the increasingly important nature of urban spaces. Historian Chris Wickham

expresses that, quote, "There was more of a social space for self-fashioning in towns. Urban communities also often valued having a recluse or other ascetic figures in the town as a sign that the town was special," closed quote. And while Evelyn Underhill describes medieval Christian mysticism, which is mostly taking place within religious communities as, quote, "...a protest against the laxity of the average religious life," closed quote, then Catherine's beguinness must be a double protest: mysticism happening in struggling solitude, through contemplation and service to the poor and sick in Genoa. Wickham describes increased ambiguities in the hierarchy between men and women in the high Middle Ages, as a pragmatic necessity in a culture that was becoming economically more complex. In the religious world, lay piety gave a new, even if restricted, space to female religious sensibility. This is at least a partial explanation for important mystical figures during this age. A generation before Catherine Fieschi, lived Catherine Benincasa, the famous saint from Siena, who convinced Pope Gregory IX to return from Avignon to Rome. Yet these courageous women were always on guard. Whether a queen, a noble woman, a religious, or a peasant, accusations of illicit sex for women could end in death. Women's bodies were seen as liminal to the male religious world, the locus for demonic power, and spiritually weaker than their male counterparts. For this reason, mystic women experimented carefully with acceptable ambiguities concerning gender expectations, and body-based categories. This type of experimentation was fraught with risk, as women who noticeably created chaotic effects on the male order were often accused of being witches. Anna Antonopoulos, notes that the burning of women's bodies in the Middle Ages is not just a mystical literary function, but is a reality for women who break traditional gender roles. Catherine of Genoa's life was one of intense suffering of the body, not only by serving the sick and becoming sick with the plague, but she had a constant desire to escape her body, which ended in a mysterious, burning illness that would become a doorway to her final union with God through death in 1510. Catherine's theology of the body and soul: In Catherine's, *The dialogues of the soul and body...*, she introduces us to the struggle between body and soul. The body and soul decide to each take one week retreat and, without offending God, do as they please. These dualistic parts of the person bound "each to each", as she says, will take turns being in control. A third character is also present in this representation of the journey of life: self-love. Now, self-love becomes the arbiter or the judge, at first seen as fair and interested in creating a just and unselfish person. However, self-love will become more aligned with the body as the dialogue continues, leaving the soul isolated in its pursuit for union with God. Using the mystics' language of opposites, which they call the *via negativa*, we learn that self-love is actually self-hate. Self-love tries to temper the soul by reminding it that it is aiming so unreasonably high and reminding it to moderate yourself. At first, this sounds like reasonable advice, but as we will find out, the real voice of Catherine in this work is that of the soul. Antonopoulos demonstrates Catherine's self-hatred through her writings about her own despair and self-loathing in her question of: What worth am I? She sees no beauty in herself, no earthly joy. Thus, she declares war on the self-love that has survived within her. The soul takes the first week of seeking, to which it is drawn to heaven. The body admits to an advantage at being at home on Earth, while the soul declares to be the stronger of the two. The body reminds the soul to act reasonably, but the soul spends the entire week in contemplation. Quote, "I want my joy, my food, to be in things invisible," unquote, declares the soul. The soul spent the week looking, quote, "...on things below," and seeking to make its way to heaven. After the week was over, the soul checks back in with the body in self-love, who have nearly starved to death. While the soul was seeking its beloved country of heavenly realms, it nearly left the body to die on Earth. Self-love reminds the body and soul that they are neighbors and must follow God's commandment to, quote, "Love our neighbor as ourselves." For self-love, this requires moderation by the soul. The body then reminds the soul that it has needs. It likes food, drink, sleep, and

dress. Without these needs being fulfilled, it can hardly pay attention to the needs of the soul. The soul, barely convinced by the body's needs, finally concedes and tells the body, quote, "I will provide for your needs," closed quote. The body then takes its week of searching for what it desires. Now, because it nearly died due to the soul's fasts, it decides to fortify its starving self. But because the body over indulges and easily rationalizes further material needs, the soul is upset and declares that the body and the self-love are its mortal enemies. Being illumed by seeing the body's sinfulness, the soul admonishes the body to get rid of superfluous things and to tend to just means, which will allow for endless joy and peace to flow from the soul to the body. For the soul, this requires less debate and more deeds. The body's rebuttal is that excess on either side causes both to suffer. The body reminds the soul that love of neighbor begins with a love of the body. And when the body is healthy, the powers of the soul are apt to properly receive the light and inspiration of God. And above all, when joy overflows into the body," closed quote. The soul considers the body's rebuttal and understands that there is a balance between God's light in the soul, and the voice of reason in the body. But just as the soul has declared before that it is stronger than the body, it decides it will definitively take control. Catherine, as the voice of the soul, declares a hierarchy where she takes on the role of a feudal lord. Again, that's a male position, quote, "...through your deceit, you then bound yourself to me and we agreed to do good together, to neither lord it over the other. Now I will once more be in charge. If you wish to serve me, I will take care of all your needs. If not, I will still be mistress and be served. If needs be, I will compel you to be my servant," closed quote. In the end, Catherine's soul will have her way. William Anderson describes the mystical experience as quote, "The patient pilgrimage of the soul," closed quote. Yet Catherine's pilgrimage seems to be determined and impatient. Beyond her battle with self-love, as previously shown, she fought with her body. Wickham says there was a complex relationship with food for mystic women. Catherine, like Catherine of Siena, experimented with consuming pus and eating lice off her patients. Antonopoulos will describe this as part of the pathology of protest for the mystic. As Catherine was in the process of dying from her inflaming illness at the end of her life, she refused to eat or drink anything except for the Eucharist. Her daily consumption of the sacrament was rare, often reserved only for priests. This pathological relationship with food shows a protest to body and patriarchy. She desired to starve, die like her patients, in order to have ultimate Eucharistic union with God. Her obsession with death, as a means of liberation from her body and full union with God, will be expressed through the language of fire, a common practice as an expression of desire for union with God. Yet the mystical pyre is a protest to the burning of women's bodies in a patriarchal hierarchy happening in the Middle Ages. By reversing the role of fire from demonic to divine, Catherine protests the murderous events of burning women's bodies by desiring a divine all-consuming fire, which still ends in death, but promises to unite her soul with her loving God. As she was dying, her confessor wrote, quote, "The burning flames within even change the color of the flesh about her heart. And if fire was applied to her body, she did not feel it. So much more powerful was the interior flame. But there is this difference between material fire and flames of divine love that the one consumes and destroys, while the other sustains and strengthens," closed quote. As she burned and died, she begged for the same water to quench her that Christ gave the marginalized Samaritan woman. Catherine suffered even more on the feast days of, quote, "Our Ladies and of the martyrs," closed quote. Her soul's longing was to leave her female body and return to her God. For Catherine, her body is a site of marginalization, an obstacle to the soul's desire for union with God. The worth of all bodies: In June 1829, the revelation was given, quote, "Remember, the worth of Souls is great in the sight of God," closed quote, which is the foundational scripture for Community of Christ's 21st century Enduring Principle, the Worth of All Persons. At first glance, the scripture seems to be about souls and not

bodies. If we look at those to whom the revelation was destined, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, it may seem with our present eyes that this revelation was given to privileged members of society, white males. However, examining closer the context of these 19th century men, we realize that they were not men of the upper class, but were instead of humble farmer stock. And the bodies of these men had been sites of divine revelation, as they were the three witnesses of *The Book of Mormon*. *Doctrine and Covenants* section 16 (Section 18 for our LDS listeners), is a call to build the body of the fledgling church by calling ordinary men to be apostles with the charge to remember that there is inestimable worth in all people, including poor bodies. Nathan Hatch, speaking of early founders of American faith movements, including Joseph Smith, Jr., says, quote, "However diverse their theologies and church organizations, they all offered common people, especially the poor, compelling visions of individual self-respect, and collective self-confidence," closed quote. In the 21st century, Community of Christ', the Worth of All Persons, holistically incorporates Catherine's dualism of body and soul. Catherine of Genoa started out trying to balance body and soul, but her marginalized body in the world kept her from valuing her incarnated experience, even if her body was the site of revelation. Our denomination's call to recognize the worth of all persons, calls us to have a solid theology of the body. Contextual theologian, Angie Pears, says, quote, "Yet, body theologies argue that, for many, the human body is seen as problematic as the site of human experiences, and especially as the site for experiencing God. In theological terms, the body is often seen as taboo, or problematic or simply irrelevant to Christian theology," closed quote. Yet Christianity has everything to do with incarnation, as the ultimate revelation of God happened through a fully human body. Jesus, our ecclesiology, sees us with other Christians to be part of the body of Christ. Our temple in Independence calls our bodies to be sites for the pursuit of peace and the reconciliation and healing of the Spirit. This is done through, quote, "...an attitude of wholeness of body, mind and Spirit," as noted in *Doctrine and Covenants* section 156. It is no coincidence that section 156 declares this about temples and bodies, also calls women to priesthood ministry. The patriarchal dualism of Catherine's day is finally over. The understanding of bodies is furthered in 2010 in revelation section 164, after Prophet-President Veazey reads the body equalizing passages from Galatians 3:27-29, and is inspired with these words, quote, "Former ways of defining people by economic status, social class, sex, gender, or ethnicity, no longer are primary. Through the gospel of Christ, a new community of tolerance, reconciliation, unity in diversity, and love is being born as a visible sign of the coming reign of God," closed quote. Marginalized bodies in Community of Christ are being equalized, whether female, disabled, diseased, queer, of color, or poor. Our calling is to give peace to these bodies so they can find union with God in a spiritually inflamed Christian community, rather than protesting their lonely bodies and unjust systems, by seeking union with God through death.

**Carla Long 48:18**

Wow. Well, that paper definitely did not disappoint, Michael. It was really, really beautifully written, really. And I love where you got to at the end. I really appreciate talking about marginalized people and how Catherine of Genoa's story took you to that place. Just a beautiful, beautiful job.

**Michael Wright 48:35**

It's true. Understanding the context in which Catherine lives, she doesn't become this insane character who is doing irrational things. They may still seem irrational to us, but being able to understand who she is, and what she's gone through, and where she's going, and what her desires are, that connects with our own internal struggles, the struggles we see in the people in our community, in our congregations,

and also to be able to identify it the mystical part of the journey as well. And I think also, as we as a denomination, continue to work towards a humanism and interfaith relationships, seeing ourself as part of the Christian journey, is really important. And we are, we have a care-ism and a vocation in our own denomination that is special and has been around for 200 years, and it connects us in a special way with those who are struggling.

**Carla Long** 49:33

Well, I am so appreciative that you offered to share that paper with us, that you shared your knowledge about Catherine of Genoa, a wonderful mystic, with us. And thank you so much, Michael. It's just been a wonderful experience.

**Michael Wright** 49:44

Thanks so much, Carla. It's really good to be with you. And thank you for having me.

**Josh Mangelson** 49:56

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