

Error of the Heretic, Error of the Controversialist. Heresy and Deception in Sixteenth-Century Religious Polemics

Giorgio Caravale

Abstract: In a confessional age in which Catholics and Protestants accused each other (and for a long time) of misinterpreting the Holy Scriptures and deceiving the faithful, some churchmen made religious controversy their life's mission. One of the most famous among them was Ambrogio Catarino Politi, a Dominican polemist from Siena who lived in the first half of the sixteenth century. His entire existence revolved around the concept of error: errors of which he accused Luther and his Italian followers in some of the most effective pamphlets of the time; errors of which he himself was repeatedly accused by his Dominican adversaries before and during the Council of Trent; but also errors of which Politi accused himself in some revealing and at time merciless autobiographical reconstructions. Through the figure of the Sienese controversialist, this essay highlights all the semantic nuances assumed by the idea of error in sixteenth-century confessional controversy: from presumption to credulity, from delusion to deception.

Keywords: Ambrogio Catarino Politi, Lutheranism, justification by faith, religious controversy, immaculate conception.

In a confessional age in which Catholics and Protestants accused each other (and for a long time) of misinterpreting the Holy Scriptures and deceiving the faithful, some churchmen made religious controversy their life's mission. One of the most famous among them was Ambrogio Catarino Politi (1484-1553), also known with his latinized name Catharinus, a Dominican polemist from Siena who lived in the first half of the sixteenth century.¹ His entire existence revolved around the concept of error: errors of which he accused Luther and his Italian followers in some of the most effective pamphlets of the time; errors of which he himself was repeatedly accused by his Dominican adversaries before and during the Council of Trent; but also errors of which Politi accused himself in some revealing and at time merciless autobiographical reconstructions. Catharinus' first test as a controversialist was the writing, between the late summer and December of 1520, of his *Apologia pro veritate catholicae et apostolicae fidei ac*

¹ For an intellectual biography of Catharinus, in addition to Schweizer 1910 see Caravale 2017.

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doctrinae, directed against Martin Luther (Politus 1956). It was the occasion for him to sharpen the rhetorical and polemical arguments that he would then use extensively in the following decades, in particular the theme of the deception and the artifices with which the monster of Saxony, as he was called in Rome, had tried to deceive the unwitting faithful. The concept of doctrinal error appears from the outset to be closely intertwined in his polemic with that of deception. According to Catharinus, the Saxon reformer had lied to conceal his persistent error in his recent letter to Leo X (Politus 1956, 11 et seq.). Luther had invoked “a council of diabolic vanity,” implicitly eulogizing Christian schism (Politus 1956, 16–7) not hesitating to use the moral weakness of church leaders in order to cast disdain upon them for having introduced doctrinal errors (Politus 1956, 26 et seq.) spreading dispute everywhere and with everyone without even discussing the principal issues at stake (Politus 1956, 31 et seq.). He had flaunted a lofty vocabulary full of words like “Christ,” “Paul,” and “Pauline,” a clever stratagem to capture the attention of the weakest people (Politus 1956, 36) using aggressive, acrimonious, or the most satirical tricks of speech sure to attract the attention of “perverse human nature.” This was a semantic artifice to hide his intention of introducing new heretical blasphemies (Politus 1956, 40 et seq.; see also Preston 2003, 371–2). He continually referred to Saint Augustine, distorting his doctrine to defend his own errors,² or exaggerating divergences between interpretations furnished by the ancient doctors and by some of the more recent, such as Thomas Aquinas (Politi 1956, 51 et seq.), thus betraying the profoundest teaching of the church. Luther chose a passage from one of the Fathers to set against another, in this way obliging the faithful to choose one church father rather than another, disrupting the consensus that Rome had created among their interpretations of the sacred scriptures.³

Several years later, in 1540, in his *Speculum hereticorum*, he resumed the thread of that anti-Lutheran polemic by directing his attacks against Italian *spirituali* (on Italian spirituali, it is suffice here to refer to Firpo 2015). It was very easy, he wrote, to fall into error. The “ignorant crowd” is easily deceived by the many pseudo-prophets who usurp the duty of leading their faith and who are totally “vacuous” (Politi 1540, 44). The “learned men” (among whom it is easy to imagine that Politi included himself) should have guided them, teaching them how to make good judgments (Politi 1540, 35). The grossest error committed by “these heretics,” he wrote in *De perfecta iustificatione* (1541), is their belief that after this first justification by faith nothing else is required of man to reach salvation—as if this first “grace” does not soon become “vain and vacuous” without the constant nourishment of good works (Politi 1541, 197). He traced the origin of this con-

² To this end, Ralph Keen emphasized that, like other controversialists at the time, Politi “saw a distortion of the catholic tradition in the exclusive use of one Father,” that is, Luther’s exclusive reference to Saint Augustine. Keen 2001, esp. 710.

³ Keen 2001, 100–19. To this end, see also the considerations by Keen 2001, 721, underlining the centrality of the Petrine authority of the papacy in Roman ecclesiology.

fusion to an error committed by Luther. Wishing to demonstrate that the sinner can be redeemed with faith in Christ alone, without any works, Luther invented an “unheard-of distinction between gospel and law” (Politi 1541, 208–9).

The error originated in an invention or, as we have said, in a deception artificially constructed to confuse the minds of simple people. Just as the Catholic controversialist used the category of error to refute the doctrine of his religious opponents, the latter returned the accusation to sender. In the anonymous *Apologia del Beneficio di Christo* attributed to Marcantonio Flaminio and written in response to Politi’s *Compendio degli errori et inganni lutherani* (1544), we read that Politi was the real deceiver, an ignorant one who had fallen into error even before ensnaring his readers in the same mistakes (Flaminio 1996, 84). Politi had centered the accusation of deception and mystification of the truth that he flung at the Viterbo group on the question of faith and works. To such a defamatory accusation it was necessary to respond, beginning with returning to the sender an updated list of accusations. “The origin of his error,” emphasized Flaminio, “is that he doesn’t understand what justification by faith means” (Flaminio 1996). The term “to justify,” Flaminio continued provocatively, “is judicial language and signifies to absolve and to judge someone just and innocent and to oppose his condemnation” (Flaminio 1996, 85). But Politi, “having regard to the composition of the Latin word,” was unable to imagine that this word might “signify other than having been made just and good, as if to say from intemperate to temperate, from miserly to generous.” In other words, he thought “that to be justified by faith meant only having been made good and just by the gift of charity God infused in our hearts by means of the disposition of faith” (Flaminio 1996, 86). Instead, faith cannot grow “by means of the frequent exercise of good works” until a “perfection” such that “man with his innocence and saintliness can expose himself to and satisfy God’s judgment,”⁴ and this for the simple reason that “the infirmity and imperfection of our flesh” does not allow it (Flaminio 1996, 86). To be “justified by faith” thus means only that “if not by the means of faith, which receives the justice and merits of Christ freely offered to us by the preaching of the gospel, we are absolved in God’s judgment for all our iniquities,” and consequently “we are accepted as just and innocent and made heirs of the eternal life.” All this, Flaminio emphasized, notwithstanding the fact that “in ourselves we are worthy of punishment, not rewards” (Flaminio 1996, 85). Thus, it is “imputed justice,” that is, that justice “imputed to all the faithful by God’s misericordia,” not the “inherent justice” Politi defended in his writings, that guarantees eternal salvation (Flaminio 1996, 92, 95). Flaminio returned to the sender the accusation of deception, as well as the one of error.

The religious history of the early modern age is full of internal controversies between members of different religious orders, usually competing with each other to win the favor of the pope and the most influential cardinals. Even within

⁴ The reference here is to the second level of justification identified by Politi, on which see Caravale, 2017, 112.

single religious orders there were often heated disputes. Usually, the recommendation that came from the echelons of the order was to not let the controversy come out of the convent walls: the risk to damage the reputation of the order was too high. In the case of Catharinus, however, this unwritten rule was not respected. In the summer of 1542 Politi left France precipitously to return to Italy. During the Dominicans' last chapter meeting, held at the Church of the Minerva on May 27, 1542, after the death of Dominican General Agostino Recuperato of Faenza, Bartolomeo Spina had unleashed a harsh attack against him, constraining Politi to return to Italy to defend himself (Mortier 1911, 372–4). Some years later he recalled those difficulties in a letter to Cardinal Carafa.⁵ Spina's hostility to Politi was traceable to their profound divergence of opinion on the Immaculate Conception. Where Politi had strongly attacked Cajetan for not taking an explicit position in favor of that doctrine, Bartolomeo Spina had written two tracts accusing Cajetan of exactly the opposite, insinuating an excessive acquiescence to those Immaculist theses.⁶ In the early months of 1542, Politi had sent to the press a new *Disputatio pro immaculate divae Virginis conceptione*,⁷ forcefully reaffirming his ideas on the subject, and Spina decided at that point to open a broad offensive to expose the doctrinal deviations with which Politi had stained Thomist orthodoxy. Fifteen "principal errors of the books of Ambrosio Catarino on prescience, providence and predestination of God and the predestination of Christ" were set down in black and white by Spina and most likely presented to the general chapter of the order.⁸ In the accused work, the *De praescientia, providentia, et praedestinatione Dei*, published in Paris in 1541, Politi had set forth the theory that God has predestined few to salvation. The Virgin, Christ, and some of the apostles are among the elect and for them salvation is certain. God has not predestined any of the rest, although he has foreseen their future. God wishes all to be saved, Politi had written, but everyone will be saved. Some will reach eternal salvation; others will be saved or damned to the extent that they are able to receive divine grace and increase it with their good works. Bartolomeo Spina, claiming also to be a tutor of Thomist orthodoxy, fundamentally contested the basis and the thesis of Politi's writing (Caravale 2017, 97).

We do not know if the clash between Spina and Politi had more profound repercussions within the order, if Politi's "heretical" theses had met with support from some of the chapter, in sum, whether the personal polemic between Spina and Politi had developed into a broader encounter. The question, it seems, was

⁵ Politi's letter of 1549 was published by Schweizer 1908: 8–9.

⁶ This was the *De universali corruptione generis humani ab Adam seminaliter propagati* (1525) and the *Tractatus contra opusculum Caietani de conceptione Beatae Virginis* (1533); both were republished in Spina 1535, on cc. 58v–88v.

⁷ The complete title is *Disputationis pro immaculata divae Virginis conceptione libri tres, similiter hac nova editione recogniti ab illo ac reconcinmati*, published in Spina 1535; see Schweizer 1910, 294.

⁸ The fifteen "errores" were published by Politi in his *Enarrationes* as part of a list that also included the errors added by Spina in 1546 and subsequently republished by Schweizer in an appendix of his monograph.

filed away. The rendering of accounts, however, was only put off for a few years. Four years later, in the midst of the council of Trent, when the promotion to bishop for Politi was in process, Bartolomeo Spina returned to his task, lengthening his list of Politi's "errors" in an effort to block the nomination of Politi to bishop (Caravale 2017, 142). What better occasion than the likelihood of the episcopal promotion of his bitter adversary and from what better position than the censor, the master of the sacred palace, official provost for the doctrinal control of writings published in the city of Rome? He consigned into the hands of the pope a long list of fifty "errors" taken from the works published by Politi in recent years.⁹ Spina's hostility, as already indicated, was rooted in the question of the Immaculate Conception. One of the criteria used by Spina in 1542 in the selection of "errors" was how congruent Politi's texts were with those of Thomist fundamentals. He now continued in the same way. This time, however, Spina increased the range of errors: on his list he specified Politi's theses that identified in the Virgin, in Christ, and in a few other apostles the members of that very restricted circle who were certain of predestination to salvation (Conclusio 18; Schweizer 1910, 276); and also Politi's original theory of a covenant according to which the transmission of Adam's sin to all humanity was to be traced back to Adam's transgression of the strict covenant between God and Adam; and further, Politi's affirmation on the transmission of the sin (Conclusio 37, Schweizer 1910, 280–1; see also Conclusio 26; Schweizer 1910, 278).

Catharinus indignantly rejected all of Spina's insinuations. According to Politi, the errors that Spina accused him of were not such. On the contrary, Politi went even further, those who embraced the point of view of his accuser were easily chargeable of Pelagianism or of falling into the "error of the Jews:" "I have been sent the errors noted by Your Reverence and presented to the pope. I have considered them and don't recognize a single one of them, seeing that some of them have been imputed to me and some I do not consider errors; whoever wishes to maintain the opposite I think is either a Pelagian or a Jew."¹⁰

The accusations made against him by Bartolomeo Spina were not the only ones Politi received while he was in Trent. Spina's implicit accusations of Lutheranism against the Sienese controversialist were in the same register used by the theologian Domingo de Soto. "This opinion," Paolo Sarpi would recount, referring to the doctrine of the absence of merit in works preceding justification that Politi defended before the council, "was impugned by Soto with much acrimony. He went on to cry heresy because it inferred that man was not free

⁹ The list of the "errores" published by Politi in his *Defensio doctrinae auctoris in quondam magistrum falso et calumniose deferentem ad S.D.N. Paulum III pontificem maximum* [1546], in Politi, *Enarrationes*, 353–64, was republished by Schweizer in the appendix of his book (1910), 271 et seq., without the text of Politi's defensive comments. There is a manuscript copy of the same list in BNF_i (Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale), Conv. Soppr. I.IV.14, unnumbered pages; and another in AAV (Vatican City, Archivio Apostolico Vaticano), Cart. Farn. Est. 14, fols. 95r–105r.

¹⁰ The letter is published in Schweizer 1910, 254–6. There is also a copy of the letter in BNF_i, Conv. Soppr. I.IV.14, fols. not numbered (but 1r–2r).

to do good and could not follow his natural objective, [and] thus, with the Lutherans, denied free will” (Sarpi 1974, vol. I, 332). By a kind of historical retribution, the most noted Catholic controversialist, the most praised adversary of the “Lutheran plague,” found himself for the second time the object of the same accusations that for decades he had hurled from the pulpits. The paradox was only apparent. In the “inexorable logic of the final encounter” (the expression is used by Prosperi 2000, 65) that soon would be imposed at Trent, anyone who pronounced the word faith too emphatically would be silenced for conniving with the enemy. Anyone carrying a doctrinal patrimony diverging from that of the traditional theological schools, anyone who had ever employed a vocabulary dissonant from scholastic language, risked being accused at the criminal bench. In the course of that first phase of the Tridentine debates the accusation of Lutheranism had fallen on the heads of prelates close to reformed ideas, such as Tommaso Sanfelice, bishop of Cava, but also on religious who had nothing in common with the reform vision, the Benedictine Luciano degli Ottoni above all. In fact, what brought Politi into harmony with the Benedictines was a common, profound aversion to rigid schemes of scholasticism and a common attitude of freedom in the study of theological questions, as well as strong admiration for the works of the theologian Duns Scotus, and, not least, a sincere aversion to Lutheran doctrine (Caravale 2013). In various times and ways these attitudes drew the censure of such strenuous defenders of scholastic theology and Thomist language as Bartolomeo Spina against Politi, and Domingo de Soto against the representatives of the Benedictine order at Trent and against Politi as well. The charges shifted in character. Sometimes their writings and remarks were taxed with Pelagian error; other times, with Lutheran deviations. This is because the object of the censors was not to comprehend the coherence and the complexity of their doctrinal thought in order to criticize its theological basis or dominant register. The censors instead chose single instances, sentences, or affirmations to determine their dissonance from Thomist orthodoxy.

What makes the figure of Catharinus particularly suitable for studying the different semantic uses of the category of error within the religious disputes of the early modern age is that in his intellectual biography error does not appear only in the form of an accusation made against his lifelong adversaries (Luther and the Italian *spirituali*) or as an accusation (of heresy) made against him by his adversary Dominican brethren. The centrality of the category of error emerges also and above all from the fact that Catharinus uses it to accuse himself. On 5 April 1517, he entered the Dominican convent of San Marco, where he took the habit at the hands of fra Filippo Strozzi, choosing the name of Ambrogio Catarino in honor of the blessed Ambrogio Sansedoni of Siena and of St. Catherine.¹¹ A

¹¹ Florence, Archivio del convento di S. Marco, *Liber vestitionum conventus Sancti Marci de Florentia*, fol. 9r: «Fratrus Ambrosius Bernardini de Politis de Senis, prius Dominus Lancilottus in seculo dictus, accepit habitum clericorum a reverendo priore fratre Philippo Stroza, nostro generali, 5 aprilis circa horam vigesimam quartam»; Cf. also Faldi 1994, 562, note 51. On fra Filippo Strozzi cfr. Verde 1983, 181; Ughelli 1720, VI, 620–1.

few years later, in a letter dated 5 May 1520 and addressed to the young Marcello Cervini, the future Pope Marcellus II, Catharinus gave a first account of his momentous decision. He had been disgusted by the moral corruption, the pride and vainglory he had frequently observed in the world of the Curia, and this had encouraged him to abjure his previous worldly life and to seek out the spiritual and contemplative dimension that he felt his profession lacked and that would guarantee his eternal salvation.¹² The works of Savonarola he had chanced upon gave voice to a sense of unease and dissatisfaction that he had long felt to be growing within him (Politi 1548, fol. 8v). Over twenty years had gone by since the zenith of Savonarola's influence in Florence and over twenty-five since the Ferrarese friar had first preached the need for a spiritual rebirth of Christianity, but the revolutionary charge of his message remained intact, capable of attracting those restless spirits who remained intolerant of corrupt times: nothing, or hardly anything, had changed in the corruption and abuses that Savonarola had so vehemently denounced.

But there was more. Alongside these feelings and behind his sudden and belated religious conversion lay another layer of motivations, one less easily ascribable to the sphere of spirituality or to his inner struggle, but nonetheless equally decisive in orienting his decisions. To enter the order of St. Dominic through the influence of Savonarola's message meant for Catharinus that he could participate in the project of reforming the Church from a privileged position. Catharinus was irresistibly attracted by Savonarola's presumption of possessing the truth, by his certainty of belonging to the community of the elect. Savonarola's "teaching of the articles and dogmas of the faith" appeared to him "good, holy and without error;" also, there was "the opinion and fame of his good and holy life," that is, the moral example of his life to which everyone who had known him could confidently give witness (Politi 1548, fols. 3v, 5v). In particular, the "intrinsic belief that Savonarola had in his own innocence," that "serenity of conscience" and "that great certainty of his prophecies," in other words "that testimony he gave of his own self," had appeared to Catharinus "excessive," but they had also made him timorous and "credulously willing to receive them" (Politi 1548, fol. 3v). An ambitious man like him, dominated by "an innate curiosity about human pride," so bold as to wish "to know the things of the future, usurping what is proper only to God," could not fail to be almost hypnotically attracted by the allure of that "little man" from Ferrara, by the force—and, as we shall see, the illusion—of his prophecy (Politi 1548, fol. 6v).

That doctrine, which initially appeared to be "without error," seemed to him with the passing of the years to be increasingly illusory and deceptive. About thirty years after he entered the Dominican Order, Politi gave an account of the long and troubled journey that led him to rethink his youthful choices, an account in which error once again played a central role. In fact, the *Discorso contro*

¹² Politi's letter to Marcello Cervini, Firenze 5 maggio 1520, in ASF, *Carte Cervini* 49, cc. 32r sgg., in Schweizer 1910, 245–8: 247.

la dottrina di fra Girolamo Savonarola, published in 1548, was not only one of the most famous manifestos of sixteenth-century anti-Savonarolism, but also a strongly autobiographical text, one that marked the culmination of a long personal travail. “In the first [part],” Politi began, “I will give all the reasons that persuaded me to believe, and for a long time nourished me in that faith” (Politi 1548, fol. A2r). The first fifty pages were entirely devoted to reconstructing the motives that had brought him to commit what in retrospect he considered the greatest mistake of his life, that is, his decision to enter the lists on the side of the friar of Ferrara (Politi 1548, fols. 1r–25v). “I am not so indignant toward him as toward myself. What a wretch, what a fool I am!” (Politi 1548, fol. 24r). In conclusion he added, “Everything I have written I have written against myself because I don’t forgive myself anything, and I want to imitate the just man of whom it has been written ‘The just man is the first to accuse himself’” (Politi 1548, fol. 25r). It was an act of personal liberation rather than an exercise of controversial polemic that as the pages unfolded became an increasingly tormented discourse on self-knowledge and self-purification before God’s severe tribunal (Politi 1548, fol. 25r). That same “foolish credulity” that had convinced him that he had earned “the light of grace and . . . our salvation,” Politi confessed, was also the greatest obstacle to be removed on the road to recovering reason (Politi 1548, fol. 19r). The fear of losing that ardently desired “salvation” had “held him bound” for “a long time”: “I believed that he who freed himself from that faith would fall back into darkness, would lose the Grace of God, would be reprobate, ruined, publicly indicted and left to perish in the flood far from the safety and the shelter of the arc” (Politi 1548, fol. 23r; cf. also Politi 1548, fols. 17v–18r).

The process of emancipating himself from the Ferrarese friar’s yoke, then, was a long and difficult one, necessitating a gradual demystification of Savonarola’s character and prophecies, a task that claimed every moment of his thought and activity. The memory of, or rather, we might say, the obsession with what he soon identified as a strong delusion would shape his mental universe. The exposure of this early mistake would become, in the years that followed, his daily mission, as his personal experience soon overlapped with the spread of heretical doctrines in Italy. Just as he himself had been deceived by Savonarola when he was yet “simple and ignorant” (Politi 1548, fol. 7v), so many other “idiots and simpletons” now ran the risk of being deceived by the new Lutheran word. Politi therefore set himself a dual agenda. If on the one hand he pursued his emancipation from the illusory nature of the Savonarolan prophecies that had tricked him in the past, on the other he aimed to prevent other believers from getting entangled in the Lutheran deceit. The category of deceit, in other words, became for him the interpretative key with which he came to read not only his own biography but also the danger represented by the emerging heresies.

What most alarmed Politi was the power of suggestion that Savonarola and the Lutherans held, their ability to captivate the masses of the simple and the unlettered—just as had happened to him when he first entered the Dominican order. Politi saw this as a characteristic of Bernardino Ochino, the great Capuchin preacher who was also the other true protagonist of his *Discorso*, shared with

Savonarola (on Bernardino Ochino, see now Camaioni 2018). In 1542, Ochino, the esteemed general of the newly-founded Capuchin order, had shocked both friends and enemies by dropping the mask he had worn up to then, fleeing beyond the Alps and revealing to everyone his supposedly true religious beliefs. Ochino had repeatedly referred to a “new light,” an inner brightness to which he appealed to lend strength and forcefulness to his doctrines. This same light, Politi was convinced, animated those passages in which Savonarola boasted of possessing “a celestial doctrine, a new light descending from Heaven” (Politi 1548, fols. 27v and 39v). Savonarola, Politi maintained, attributed to himself “the power to give new articles of faith,” which he did not hesitate to “consider equal to the Sacred Books and the Catholic faith” (Politi 1548, fol. 39v). So Politi was able to trace in Savonarola’s writings the same arrogance and presumption that Ochino was currently displaying in affirming the validity of his own doctrines. Like the Capuchin general, Savonarola had “exalted his doctrine above that of the Church,” affirming that “true spiritual salvation laid in the belief in this doctrine.” “As if the Christian doctrine were not in itself sufficient to produce every Christian effect, he wished to prove that his axioms were indeed superior to those of the Church” (Politi 1548, fols. 27r–v). It was, in other words, that very “haughtiness and pride, common to all heretics and schismatics” (Politi 1548, fol. 4r), that in his eyes rendered the doctrines of Ochino (and of the Lutherans) as dangerous as those of Savonarola. Furthermore, Politi underscored, it was nothing other than “his presumption” that inspired “brother Girolamo” to “mock the Canons of the popes, and it was for this reason that Luther later dared to burn them publicly” (Politi 1548, fols. 18r–v).

In the central years of the religious crisis of the sixteenth century, these two aspects of Politi’s spirit—anti-Lutheranism and anti-Savonarolism—grew in parallel until they found a unitary interpretative key in the *Discorso* of 1548. It was only then, therefore, that the many different meanings in which the category of error had been declined in the course of his biographical story—from presumption to credulity, from delusion to deception—found an unprecedented convergence.

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