The Wilderness Experience: Imitatio Christi and the Demonic Encounters of Italian Holy Women of the Quattrocento

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Amy Huesman entitled "The Wilderness Experience: Imitatio Christi and the Demonic Encounters of Italian Holy Women of the Quattrocento." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in History.

Robert J. Bast, Major Professor

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The Wilderness Experience: *Imitatio Christi* and the Demonic Encounters of
Italian Holy Women of the Quattrocento

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Abstract

During the fifteenth century, when Christian spirituality had become increasingly feminized, a number of women in the northern and central regions of the Italian peninsula chose to embrace fully the *vita apostolica*, and certain of them led lives of such austere piety in *imitatio Christi* that they were later deemed worthy of beatification or canonization. They were *sante vive*—living saints—revered for their miraculous powers and regarded as agents of the divine. These women took vows as nuns or associated themselves with a religious order as tertiaries, and they dedicated themselves to strict lives of prayer, extreme fasting, and physical suffering as a means of gaining spiritual intimacy with Christ, as expressed through ecstatic mystical visions. They also served their communities as healers and spiritual advisors and counseled local political figures who relied upon their prophetic powers. The Catholic Church benefited from their celebrity, for these visionaries promoted the Church as the one true faith, at a time when the laity had cause to doubt. Before these holy women became such valued members of society, however, they each endured a period of trials and temptations from the devil, just as Christ had experienced in the wilderness before he began his public ministry. After overcoming the enemy, they emerged as spiritual leaders with significant influence in their own communities and beyond.

This dissertation focuses on three such women—the Augustinian Elena da Udine, the Franciscan Caterina da Bologna, and the Dominican Colomba da Rieti—and argues that their encounters with the devil were viewed as essential to their preparation for ministry, just as they were for Christ, and gave their hagiographers material with which to portray their subjects as authentic imitators of Christ, for they had even suffered, and more importantly overcome, demonic temptations as he had. At a time when theologians had begun to apply with greater
scrutiny the principle of *discretio spirituum* to women’s devotional practices and behaviors, these three mystics successfully operated within the confines of orthodoxy while stretching the boundaries of acceptable forms of piety, and they were rewarded with veneration in life and in death.
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Introduction

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry. Luke 4:1-2

According to Christian Scripture, Jesus, when he was thirty years of age, went down to the Jordan River to receive baptism from John the Baptist. Immediately after, the Holy Spirit led him into the isolated desert wilderness, where for forty days he fasted and endured various temptations by the devil. The Christian text highlights three particular episodes of temptation, in which Satan appealed to Jesus’ human desires: for physical comfort, when he commanded a very hungry Jesus to change stones to bread; for emotional surety, when he suggested that the Son of God leap from the temple in expectation of angelic rescue; and for a psychological sense of importance, when he offered worldly kingdoms and glory in exchange for worship. The devil tried to persuade Jesus to forsake God and rely on his own powers to satisfy “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.” This period of trial and tribulation defined a preparatory phase for the public ministry of preaching and healing that would mark Jesus’ final three years on earth. The writer of Hebrews would suggest that the wilderness experience

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1 All Bible verses are taken from the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

2 See Matthew 3:13-4:11 Mark 1:9-13, and Luke 3:21-23, 4:1-13. Most translations use the term wilderness, but some use desert, the term used in many medieval religious texts. Biblical scholars agree that Scripture points to the Judaean Desert as the site of Jesus’ temptation experience. That area is also referred to as a wilderness. The two terms will be used interchangeably here, since they both refer to a place of isolation and, usually, desolation.

3 1 John 2:16
uniquely qualified Jesus to provide compassion and aid to others, having overcome his own personal temptations in the face of the enemy, Satan.⁴

According to their vitae, a number of Italian women living in the fifteenth century, from the northern and central regions of the peninsula, endured their own temptations from the devil. Having most certainly been baptized as infants, these women marked the beginning of their dedicated service to God by taking the vows of a nun or adopting the habit and lifestyle of a tertiary or lay member of a religious order. They often lived lives of extreme austerity. They slept in dark, cold cells, wore hair shirts, and inflicted various forms of punishment upon themselves. And they fasted for long periods, sometimes sustaining themselves with nothing more than the elements of the Eucharist. They performed these acts of devotion in imitation of their Lord, and just as he had encountered Satan during his most desolate time, these women also met the devil in very real and physical ways. He attacked their fleshly desires for physical pleasure, for material possessions, and for notoriety, and when they would not succumb, he tried to discourage them in their efforts to serve God. Yet each of them overcame these temptations and came out of this wilderness experience better able to minister to the needs of those in their communities—caring for the poor and sick, serving as spiritual advisors, and even counseling local political figures in matters of state.

The theme of imitation of Christ, or imitatio Christi, held an important place in Christian theology, dating back to the writings of the Apostle Paul and finding its way into the texts of Sts. Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Clare of Assisi, and Thomas Aquinas among others. Scholars have noted a shift around the early thirteenth century, coinciding with the rise in mendicant

⁴ Hebrews 2:18
activity with the founding of the Franciscan and Dominican orders, away from a more contemplative focus on the majesty of Christ as triumphant Savior and toward an experiential emphasis on the humility of Christ as suffering servant. This shift in focus from Christ’s divinity to Christ’s humanity influenced the interpretation of *imitatio Christi* and gave way to what André Vauchez has deemed “a new spirituality”—one that put physical affliction, in a very literal sense, at the heart of devotional practice. The ascetic and imitative virtues of poverty, chastity, and obedience were joined by more extreme forms of self-denial and austerity, such as prolonged fasting, flagellation, and other forms of mortification of the flesh. The Passion narrative from the life of Jesus took on a central role, for devotees often meditated on the bloody, disfigured body on the cross or even acted out in dramatic fashion scenes from the *Via Dolorosa*. At the same time new avenues opened to those members of the laity who could not, or would not, take the official vows of a monk or nun, but desired to commit their lives in service to God and those in need. Third orders grew in number toward the end of the thirteenth century and into the next, allowing men and women to practice their own form of asceticism, sometimes within, but often beyond, the confines of the cloister. Lay religious orders, such as the Beghards and Beguines, developed out of a desire to live a simple life of prayer and ministry to the poor. One such movement, the *Devotio Moderna*, emerged at the end of the fourteenth century within urban societies of the Low Countries of northern Europe, its members living in common and practicing a sort of interior devotion centered on the virtues of Jesus’ earthly existence. The principles of the movement would find full expression in the work of one of its members, Thomas à Kempis, in his *De Imitatione Christi*, or *The Imitation of Christ*, written as four pamphlets between 1420

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and 1427. *De Imitatione Christi* became the most widely circulated work throughout Europe in the fifteenth century, and the only work read widely throughout Italy written by a foreign author.⁶ With his emphasis on Christ-like humility, earthly suffering, the struggles against temptation, and Eucharistic devotion, Thomas à Kempis codified and disseminated the unofficial tenets of a tradition that had become an important element of renewal and reform within the cloister and even in society at large.

In her reading of Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell’s statistical analysis of 864 saints living between 1000 and 1700, Caroline Walker Bynum has concluded that “devotion to the human Christ was a ‘female’ theme.”⁷ She notes that women, while accounting for just 17.5 percent of saints living during those centuries, constituted approximately 50 percent of those venerated men and women “who were especially devoted to Jesus.”⁸ In the study of both late medieval religious practices among women and the theme of *imitatio Christi*, scholarship has concentrated on extreme forms of asceticism, Eucharistic piety, and Passion devotion, especially among holy women of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Real encounters with the devil or with demonic forces receive little mention, often added only for dramatic effect, and they have

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⁶ Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300-1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 288. A more detailed discussion of the influence of Thomas à Kempis’ work in Italy will appear in Chapter 3 of this study.


⁸ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 357 n. 7.
not to this point been identified as an element of *imitatio Christi*.

Yet, of the women whom Bynum has counted among those especially devoted to the human Christ, Weinstein and Bell have numbered thirty-four of them who reported “struggles with demons,” listed under the researchers’ category of analysis, “Major components of saint’s reputation.”

These women—particularly those living during the fifteenth century—remain simply a number among those statistical tables, however, for no one has presented the record of their supernatural struggles in any substantive form. In this study, I will present three women from the Quattrocento as case studies: the Augustinian tertiary Beata Elena da Udine, the Franciscan nun Santa Caterina da Bologna, and the Dominican penitent Beata Colomba da Rieti. They were regarded as mystics.

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9 One author does approach the issue, at least tangentially, in her treatment of saints of the thirteenth century. In her book *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (1994), Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff includes a brief essay entitled “Transforming the World: The Serpent-Dragon and the Virgin Saint,” in which she examines the heroism of two Italian women saints in battling serpents, and draws parallels to the legend of St. Margaret of Antioch, the martyred virgin of the fourth century who overcame a dragon and a demon in the form of a man. Petroff’s emphasis is on the saints’ abilities to move beyond traditional sex roles of female or male, passive or aggressive, in their approach to the enemy by viewing the encounters as teaching moments rather than attacks (106). In the same collection, a second essay, “‘She Seemed to Have Come from the Desert’: Italian Women Saints and the *Vitae Patrum* Cycle,” presents Petroff’s argument based on the *vitae* of four Italian holy women that their hagiographers influenced their acceptance and popularity by using the theme of the desert, drawing parallels between their experiences of asceticism, temptation, and vision as hermits or recluses and those of the Desert Fathers. Again, Petroff’s emphasis is on the women’s abilities, as portrayed by their male biographers, to transcend tradition ideals of male and female behavior and live out a more masculine-appearing form of spirituality (116). One other work worth noting is Sarita Tamayo’s dissertation, “Hiddenness and the Imitation of Christ in Caterina Vegri’s *Le Sette Armi Spirituali*” (University of Chicago Divinity School, 2002). Tamayo examines an influential devotional treatise written by the future Saint Catherine of Bologna, who appears as one of the subjects of this study, but Tamayo emphasizes the way of the cross and the Passion experience as paths to imitation of Christ and to the discovery of the hiddenness of God, and she speaks of spiritual warfare in more general terms of the struggle against one’s own will, describing the devil—in the few times that he is mentioned—as an unseen enemy.

10 See tables in Weinstein and Bell, *Saints & Society*, 123-37. Of the thirty-four female subjects who struggled with demons, fourteen were children and nine were adolescents.

11 *Beata* (or *beato*) is the honorific title given to someone who has been beatified, or named a blessed of the Church, and for whom public worship is allowed, although restricted to certain locations and devotional acts. I have used the Italian names and titles of religious figures of the fifteenth century, but for
and prophetesses in their home towns in the northern and central regions of the Italian peninsula, and their *vitae* reveal that they encountered Satan or one of his agents, in physical form, and did battle against the enemy who had come to tempt and torment. 12 I will examine how these encounters fit squarely within the framework of the tradition of *imitatio Christi* as it was understood and practiced in western and central Europe since the early thirteenth century, and how the experiences of these women positively influenced their reception as living saints in their communities. In doing so, I will demonstrate that the spiritual trials that these women underwent did not, in most cases, cause suspicion of heterodoxy or witchcraft, but on the contrary, contributed to the positive perception that both the laity and clergy held of them as true servants of God. I will argue that these visionaries earned places of honor in society and within the Church for the following reasons: first, they provided a spiritual connection to the divine sought after by a laity racked with apocalyptic fear and worry over plague and political turmoil, who saw the real benefit to themselves and their towns in having their very own local saint; second, they had aligned themselves with established religious orders, and their austere devotional practices corresponded neatly with Observant reform efforts within those orders; and finally, because they were held in such high esteem by both the political elite and the populace, they proved useful to the Church in its efforts to rebuild its reputation after years of schism.

earlier (and usually better-known) saints, I have made use of the Anglicized form of their names, particularly St. Catherine of Siena, so as to differentiate her from Santa Caterina da Bologna.

12 Weinstein and Bell provide an “Appendix of Sources,” where they list the 864 subjects of their analysis. Of the three women presented in this study, only Caterina da Bologna appears on that list.
I have employed particular criteria to determine which of the many fifteenth-century Italian religious women would prove suitable for this study. I selected those who had been active during the years between the end of the Great Schism (1417) and the eve of the Reformation, and have since been beatified or canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. They had to have been associated as nuns or tertiaries with one of the three larger religious orders (Augustinian, Franciscan, and Dominican) that had undergone reform, and had to have inspired some level of cult devotion immediately after their deaths. Northern and central Italy produced the greatest number of religious women in the Quattrocento, but the ones studied here had a confessor or biographer who recorded their *vita* shortly after their passing. Finally, each woman under consideration in this study claimed to have had visitations from demonic beings. Of the women who met these criteria—an Augustinian tertiary and an Augustinian nun, two members of the Franciscan Order of St. Clare, and two Dominican penitents associated with the Third Order—three of them stood out for their diverse backgrounds and circumstances, and they represent each of the three major religious orders and three different geographic regions of the Italian peninsula.13

13 The three other women who met the criteria are: the Augustinian nun Beata Veronica da Binasco (1445-1497), the Franciscan Santa Camilla Battista Varani da Camerino (1453-1524), and the Dominican penitent Beata Osanna Andreasi da Mantova (Mantua) (1449-1505). We know of five other Italian women who were canonized and whose documentation points to encounters with Satan: Santa Francesca da Roma, Santa Rita da Cascia, Beata Felicia Meda da Milano, Beata Paola Montaldi, and Beata Stefana Quinzani d’Orzinuovi. Santa Francesca, known as St. Frances, was a Benedictine oblate and, therefore, does not fit within the parameters of this study. Santa Rita was an Augustinian nun, but her early *vita* was lost, and the only extant biography was written nearly 150 years after her death, in 1600. According to Butler’s *Lives of the Saints*, little is known about the sources used to compile that *vita*. See Alban Butler, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints: Complete Edition*, 1756-1759, eds. Herbert J. Thurston, S.J. and Donald Attwater (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1990), 369-70. Beata Felicia Meda da Milano and Beata Paola Montaldi were Franciscan nuns whose *vitae* appear in the *Acta sanctorum*, but Felicia’s biographer is anonymous, and Paola’s documentation was compiled by authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Beata Stefana Quinzani, a Dominican tertiary, lived from 1457 to 1530, but her most active years were 1497-1530, beyond the timeframe of this study, and her original Latin *vitae* were lost.
Elena Valentini da Udine, known as Blessed Helen of Udine (1395/96-1458), lived within the Republic of Venice in the northeastern region of the Italian peninsula, and she became the first citizen of her town to take the habit of the Third Order of St. Augustine, after her husband died of illness. She lived a life of extreme austerity, wearing a hair shirt and a crown of iron spikes, and walking with thirty-three pebbles in her shoes in an effort to participate in the sufferings of Jesus. She gained a reputation for her acts of charity and gifts of healing, but she suffered great torment, for “the devil molested her, by making a frightful noise in her room while she was at prayer... [and he] used to appear to her in bodily form, chasing her round her room, and beating her until she fell exhausted with terror and fatigue.”\textsuperscript{14} Her life was recorded by a leading Augustinian scholar, Simone da Roma, who was not her confessor, but was entrusted to promote her cause to the Church as a potential saint.

Santa Caterina da Bologna (1413-1463), patron saint of those battling temptations, was born to the noble Vigri (sometimes Vegri) family of Ferrara. She grew up at court as a companion to Princess Margherita d’Este. When the princess married, Caterina left to join a lay community of women following the rule of St. Augustine. Conflict arose among the sisters over whether to adopt the stricter Franciscan rule of St. Clare. In the end Caterina became the abbess of Bologna’s house of Poor Clares. But during those years of conflict, the young woman experienced both difficult struggles with the devil and intense feelings of divine presence, which she recorded in \textit{Le sette armi spirituali} (\textit{The Seven Spiritual Weapons}). Caterina’s \textit{consorella} and disciple, Illuminata Bembo, recorded her \textit{vita}, promoting her as a saintly woman worthy of imitation.

\textsuperscript{14} Agnes B.C. Dunbar, \textit{A Dictionary of Saintly Women}, vol. I (London: George Bell & Sons, 1904), 375.
Beata Colomba Guadagnoli da Rieti (1467-1501) became a Dominican tertiary at the age of nineteen, but had practiced self-mortification and extreme fasting since her early youth. So well-known were her gifts of healing and prophecy that the citizens of Narni tried to kidnap her in order to have their own local prophetess. In 1490, she founded a convent dedicated to St. Catherine of Siena for tertiaries at Perugia in central Italy, for which she wrote her own rule. Colomba recounted to her confessor that the devil had tried to physically beat her, frighten her in the form of a giant rat, tempt her with delicious foods, and seduce her in the form of a man—all in an effort to discourage her in her commitment to the imitation of Christ. Fra Sebastiano degli Angeli, Colomba’s confessor in her later years, recorded the miraculous events of her spiritual journey to promote her case for sainthood.

Each of these women had formally consecrated themselves for service to God and the Church. They lived the vita apostolica in their efforts to renounce worldliness and serve others. They engaged in devotional practices meant to bring them to a closer union with their Lord—practices such as frequent communion, prolonged fasting, self-annihilation and deprivation, extreme weeping, and intense meditation on the events of Christ’s life from infancy to the Crucifixion. They endured face-to-face confrontations with the devil or his demons—just as Jesus had done in the wilderness. And they overcame temptation and emerged as mystics and visionaries, revered in their towns for their deep spirituality and intimate connection with the divine.¹⁵ Such a connection could be explained at least in part by those diabolical encounters that

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¹⁵ Elizabeth Petroff, in her formative essay on female mysticism, has identified seven stages through which medieval mystics progressed. The first stage was “purgative,” when the woman endured extreme forms of asceticism and sometimes suffered attacks from Satan. These attacks were seen as necessary preparation for later stages in the development of the mystic, for they helped purge the woman of all sins, both known and hidden. See “Medieval Women Visionaries: Seven Stages of Power” in Frontiers: A
each woman survived, for these devotees actively sought to imitate the life of Christ, but they were seemingly passive agents in their dealings with the devil. He came to them; they simply acted in self-defense in their struggles to overcome him. If the Holy Spirit had led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, certainly he had allowed these saintly women to endure similar trials in preparation for their ministry to the laity. In this sense, in the view of those within their communities, they had received a divine touch, marked for the service of the Lord.

These women were active at a time when Europe was still reeling from the long-reaching effects of the tumultuous fourteenth century. In the eyes of most Italians, the papacy had essentially been kidnapped and held captive in Avignon for seventy years. Seemingly as a punishment from God for the sins of the popes who reigned there, the plague swept across Europe and decimated large sectors of the population—not just during the four years of what would be labeled the Black Death, but again and again during almost every decade over the next two centuries. England and France fought each other over land and claims to the crown for more than one hundred years, and if Europe were not divided enough over political alliances with each of those countries, its people would find themselves torn over spiritual allegiances to two—sometimes three—popes when the papal office finally made its return to Rome in 1377, only to experience a schism that would last for forty years. In response to weakened Church leadership and a rising tide of religious activity deemed heretical, the early decades of the fifteenth century would give way to serious reform efforts from various institutions within the Church. Members of the Observant Movement within the religious orders—especially the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians—campaigned for a return for their brothers and sisters to the

*Journal of Women Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 34-45. These stages will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 of this study.
principles of strict discipline and simplicity established by their founders. Theologian and University of Paris chancellor Jean Gerson sought harmony within the Church by calling for single-minded obedience to Christian doctrine and strict discipline for those who would not fall in line. He would promote a discourse of *discretio spirituum*, or spiritual discernment, and would inevitably cast doubt upon the validity of (usually female) mystical experiences and prophetic messages. In the same vein, the Dominican theologian Johannes Nider wrote the *Formicarius*, or *Ant Colony* (1435-38), in an effort to address moral and ecclesiastical reform and draw distinctions between orthodox and heretical beliefs and practices. Nider’s focus on forms of female spirituality that he viewed to be questionable would inspire another Dominican, the inquisitor Heinrich Kramer, to write *Malleus maleficarum*, or *The Witches’ Hammer* (1486), a work that would help solidify the image of the female witch and cast serious doubt upon certain forms of devotional asceticism more peculiar to women. Yet the three women presented here, and others like them in Italy, escaped criticism of their spiritual encounters—at a time when female spirituality was falling under significant scrutiny by men in positions of authority. On the contrary, these Italian mystics of the Quattrocento were received, even revered, by both lay and religious figures alike—not despite, but in part because of, their encounters with both the demonic and the divine—and they played an important role in the spiritual vitality of their respective communities. They were even celebrated after their deaths as cult figures worthy of veneration. And in the end, their sanctity would be acknowledged and honored by the Church to whose service they had dedicated their lives.

André Vauchez has written that “once the Schism and the conciliar crisis passed, the simple faithful who had believed themselves to be authorized to speak on behalf of God would be asked to return to the ranks and leave the positions of leadership to the learned, who had
yielded them only temporarily and unwillingly.” I contend that these three women—at least—prove the exception, for they established themselves as spiritual authorities whose counsel was sought by powerful and influential men. The mystical experience served as a source of power for religious women in fifteenth-century Italy, and such divinely ordained agency did not threaten the men who held civic and religious positions of authority, but rather gave them validation because of their association with these women of God.

Heiko Oberman once wrote that the later Middle Ages could be designated “terra incognita—unknown while unloved,” and that “without a grasp of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the medieval history of Christian thought is not only left incomplete but, perhaps worse, Reformation and Counter Reformation seem to appear ‘out of the blue,’ or rather out of the black night of an unknown and, therefore, unbeloved period.” Since Oberman penned those words, scholars have made great strides in uncovering the various forms of religious expression in the late medieval period. Aviad Kleinberg has expanded upon Vauchez’s work on sainthood and the canonization process by examining the particular relationships between holy women and men and their respective local communities. Bernard McGinn has written extensively on mystical thought and its manifestations across the Middle Ages, revealing a definite spiritual

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16 Vauchez, The Laity in the Middle Ages, 252.


richness in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{19} Caroline Walker Bynum’s work on lay piety, the body, and the natural world has paved the way for other scholars of female spirituality.\textsuperscript{20} Dyan Elliott’s research has followed women mystics through the intersection of the spiritual and the physical, to the crossroads of sanctity and inquisition.\textsuperscript{21} With Elliott, Rosalynn Voaden, Nancy Caciola, and Wendy Love Anderson have examined the mystical behaviors of medieval women within the context of spiritual discernment.\textsuperscript{22} Sara Ritchey has recently addressed certain elements of lay devotion, such as spirituality and healing, and attempts to access the divine through the material world.\textsuperscript{23} She has also contributed to a more critical approach to hagiographical texts in her work on the \textit{Lives of mulieres religiosae} in the thirteenth century in the Low Countries.\textsuperscript{24} Other historians have also built upon the foundation laid by Thomas


\textsuperscript{20} While Bynum has authored many volumes, of particular interest here are: \textit{Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); \textit{Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); and \textit{Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).


Heffernan, with his *Sacred Biography*, demonstrating the need to examine the complexities of the relationship between female subject and male biographer—often confessor—to determine its influence on the hagiographical work produced. In the area of late medieval reform, historians such as Christopher Bellitto, Bert Roest, and James Mixson continue to widen the lens on efforts to restore order within the Church hierarchy and inspire renewal within the monastic orders, in an era that has most often been interpreted as one of ecclesiastical decline and decay.

It is my hope that this study will contribute to this growing conversation regarding religious practices of the fifteenth century—not necessarily *pre*-Reformation in nature, but part of a societal effort toward *reformatio* that had its roots in the century before Martin Luther ever put hammer to nail. Much research in the field of late medieval religious culture has focused on

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27 John Van Engen, “Multiple Options: The World of the Fifteenth-Century Church,” in *Church History* 77, no. 2 (June 2008): 257-84; here 271.
the Low Countries, especially on the activities of members of the *Devotio Moderna*. The present study should expand upon the work of scholars who within the past twenty years have begun to focus their attentions on religious practices, especially among women, on the Italian peninsula. Daniel Bornstein greatly enriched the body of research into popular devotion with his history of the *Bianchi*, and he has since edited and contributed to many volumes that treat women and religious practices in Italian cities. Gabriella Zarri, whose work most often appears in Italian, has laid the groundwork for the study of women associated with religious orders with her presentation of Dominican penitents in *Le sante vive*, or *Living Saints*, published in 1990. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner has made significant contributions to the field by cataloging several Dominican penitents and, with the help of E. Ann Matter and Daniel Bornstein, providing English translations of some of their writings. Tamar Herzig has conducted extensive research in the last decade on the influence these women had in the early years of the Reformation.

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This study will shed a bright light on the experiences of one of the Dominican tertiaries given brief coverage by these scholars, but it will also attempt to fill a lacuna that exists in terms of studies dealing with Franciscan and Augustinian mystics of the fifteenth century, whose lives have been presented thus far solely in brief devotional pieces. Small snippets of the stories of Elena, Caterina, and Colomba have been incorporated into the works of some of the scholars mentioned here, but to date, these women’s lives have not been translated into English, nor have they been integrated into the hagiographic tradition on any broad scale outside of their home country. In drawing their experiences out of the confines of the local dialect of their original texts, I have tried, using the words of their biographers whenever possible, to reveal the portraits of three Italian holy women who epitomized late medieval women’s spirituality, but also proved themselves to be almost super-human in their ability to withstand the most awful torments from the devil. Their diabolical encounters were not tangential to their careers as *sante vive*: they were central. I will demonstrate that their struggles and victories over the enemy were a significant—even necessary—element in their evolution as saints.

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33 One account of the life of Colomba da Rieti exists in English. Frederick W. Faber, an Anglican-turned-Catholic priest and devotional writer included “The Life of the Blessed Colomba of Rieti,” in *The Lives of S. Rose of Lima, the Blessed Colomba of Rieti, and of S. Juliana Falconieri*. Saints and Servants of God, vol. 5 (London: Thomas Richardson and Son, 1847), 185-319. Faber based his compilation of Colomba’s life primarily on the eighteenth-century biography by Domenico Viretti, *Vita della beata Colomba da Rieti vergine terziaria domenicana fondatrice del nobile monastero detto Delle Colombe in Perugia* (Perugia: Reginaldi, 1777), but also, if somewhat loosely (for there are some inconsistencies), on Sebastiano degli Angeli’s vernacular work and the documents of her beatification process held in the Perugian archives.
The present work has been divided into five chapters. The first details the religious landscape of what John Van Engen has labeled the “long fifteenth century”—that period of Church history that spans from the waning of the Avignon Papacy to the igniting of the Protestant Reformation, with evidence of influences that stem from as far back as the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. The chapter that follows it will narrow the focus to religious women in particular, identifying the characteristics that marked a woman as a “living saint” and presenting the stories of the three women at the heart of this study as they were told by their hagiographers, using the texts they wrote in the vernacular. Except where noted, all translations are my own. The third chapter will narrow the focus even more, examining the particular experiences with demonic forces that defined each woman’s wilderness experience in light of the tradition of imitatio Christi, especially as it was conveyed in both the art and literature of the time. At the center of the fourth chapter will be the notion of discretio spirituum and the efforts of theologians Gerson, Nider, and Kramer to apply limits to expressions of female spirituality. This chapter will demonstrate the ways in which these three holy women operated around those limits and emerged as spiritual leaders in their communities, advancing the cause of reform within their own orders as well as the reputation of the Church at large. With a nod to Thomas Head and his identification of sanctity as a social construct, the fifth chapter will discuss the making of a saint, detailing the influence these women’s lives had after their deaths and the paths upon which each of them were taken toward official beatification or canonization. The evidence presented here will solidify the case that, though these women experienced demonic

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34 Van Engen, “Multiple Options,” 260.

encounters at a time when nearly every expression of female spirituality became subject to close examination by leaders in the Church, their service as mystics, prophetesses, and spiritual advisors to their communities led to their veneration in both life and death, and ultimately to high honors bestowed by the Church itself.

Leopold von Ranke, in the introduction to his work on the Latin and Teutonic nations, famously declared: “To history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices this work does not aspire: It wants only to show what actually happened.” I have held to von Ranke’s philosophy in speaking of the spiritual encounters of these Italian holy women as actual events, without judging whether they were real or imagined—whether the devil appeared to them in some physical form, or they suffered hallucinations brought on by hunger and exhaustion. After all, each of these women believed these events actually happened to them; they believed they had wrestled with the devil or his agents. Their followers believed they had overcome some physical confrontation with demonic forces. And the Church, in determining the extent of their sanctity, gave credence to their accounts of meeting face-to-face with Satan and struggling against his temptations. Modern historians may judge these encounters as figments of the imagination, but ultimately it was belief

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36 This well-known quotation, which later garnered Leopold von Ranke heavy criticism, comes from the introduction of his first edition (1824) of Histories of the Latin and German Nations from 1494-1514 (Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494-1514). The translation presented here appears in The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present, ed. and trans. Fritz Stern (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 57. Caroline Walker Bynum has expressed a similar sentiment in writing: “…I am not concerned with whether medieval accounts of phenomena such as stigmata, levitation, miraculous bodily changes, extended inedia, visions, and food-multiplication miracles are ‘true.’…I am interested in what medieval people experienced; and while I have a historian’s skepticism about all evidence, I also, as a historian, prefer to start my study of the past with what people in the past said themselves.” Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast, 8.

37 Scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Rudolph Bell have treated the subject of visions induced by extreme fasting, and their work will be introduced in Chapter 3.
in the veracity of these encounters that shaped these women’s lives and influenced their acceptance as holy women within their communities and among the blessed and saints in the history of the Church.
Chapter 1

Women and Faith During the Long Fifteenth Century

In his presidential address to the American Society of Church History in 2008, John Van Engen acknowledged that “interpreting the fifteenth century is not easy.”¹ He suggested that because of its chronological position just before a framing moment in history, namely the Protestant Reformation, the fifteenth century has suffered from skewed perceptions among some rather influential historians, who have often viewed it as not entirely medieval, but not yet early modern; decadent and worldly, but superstitious and rigid; Catholic to a fault, and not yet Protestant; post-scholastic and pre-reform, but otherwise indistinctive. Recognizing this sort of identity crisis, scholars over the past several decades have promoted an effort to re-evaluate the fifteenth century and interpret it on its own terms—not simply as a time of spiritual ignorance among the laity and widespread ecclesiastical corruption and neglect, as Martin Luther and other sixteenth-century reformers declared it to be, nor as the bridge between the medieval period and modernity trod by irreligious humanist thinkers, as nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt maintained, but as part of a continuum, begun centuries before, of efforts to reform the Church from within and to provide for spiritual renovatio among lay members in society.²

¹ John Van Engen, “Multiple Options: The World of the Fifteenth-Century Church,” in Church History 77, no. 2 (June 2008): 257-84; here 257.

² See Jacob Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, first published in German in 1860 under the title, Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien. Regarding a continuum of reform efforts, Gerhardt Ladner’s The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959) speaks of the importance of “man’s reformation toward his original image-likeness to God (reformatio or renovatio ad imaginem Dei)” in early medieval Christian thought (3). Ladner’s work had a significant impact on his students (among whom John Van Engen can be counted) who compiled a book of essays in his honor, in which they carried on his idea of continual reform, this time through the later Middle Ages and into the Reformation era, with the central theme of “continuity with change.” See Reassessing Reform: A Historical Investigation into Church
Historians have long recognized the varieties of reform that marked the High Middle Ages, particularly those directed toward eliminating clerical abuses, eradicating heresy, and promoting the work of the mendicant orders. More recently, however, medievalists have acknowledged that there was no sharp divide between these reform efforts and those of the sixteenth century. Instead, many, like Van Engen himself, have drawn upon the tradition of Fernand Braudel and his *longue durée* in re-conceiving the period between the end of the Avignon Papacy and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation as “the long fifteenth century”—worthy of attention in its own right, especially in regard to its religious history, and marked by a “strong and distinctive meditative tone.”

Caroline Walker Bynum, in her examination of religious life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, has interpreted the period dating as far back as 1100, with the influence of the Cistercians and their affective spirituality, and stretching to 1517, as “the emergence of lay spirituality,” or “the increasing diffusion outward into society from the monastery of religious practices and values and a new willingness to define roles in the world as having religious significance.”

Scholars have come to recognize that the wide span of time between the papacy’s “Babylonian Captivity” and Martin Luther’s excommunication witnessed an active—even vibrant—religious culture, characterized by devotion, innovation, and even reformation at the individual as well as the institutional level. And increasingly, much of the research has revealed

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3 Van Engen, “Multiple Options,” 281. See also 260-61. Van Engen focuses his attention on the years from the 1370s to the 1520s.

that women often played an integral part in cultivating and promoting that religious vibrancy, and in helping to bring about spiritual renewal and societal reform. 

In this “age of devotion,” women of the fifteenth century became important agents of religious expression as never before. They read devotional literature—even wrote devotional literature—and prayed fervently, meditating in earnest, all in an effort to experience a deeply interior form of spirituality. Many did so within the privacy of their own homes, as daughters, wives, and mothers, often taking a leading role in guiding the devotional and charitable activities of their family members. Some joined—willingly, and without their fathers’ insistence—one of the second orders as nuns, not “to escape the world…[but] to find God.” Others became tertiaries associated with one of the mendicant orders, living in the world but not of it. A chosen few reached a level of spirituality so deeply intimate that they became regarded as mystics and significantly influenced the faith of those who encountered them. Caroline Walker Bynum has identified the fifteenth century as a time when “a highly emotional, sentimental, frantically active yet mystical piety was characteristic of many lay folk in Europe,” and she traces its origins to the devotional practices of the women of the thirteenth century—beguines, nuns, and tertiaries living in the Low Countries, the German territories, and Italy. She also credits, as other scholars do, the mendicant orders for their influence, with their emphasis on poverty and penance, and their

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5 Van Engen, “Multiple Options,” 278.


7 William C. Creasy writes this about Thomas à Kempis in his translation of The Imitation of Christ (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1989), 25. It applies to these women as well.

efforts at pastoral care in the form of hearing confession, administering the sacraments, and offering spiritual counsel when the secular clergy fell short in their duties.\(^9\) Those same orders, in the fifteenth century, were transformed from within by the reform efforts of certain members called Observants. The Observant movement, with the call for a strict adherence to the original rules of their respective founders—rules that required members to shun worldly pleasures and possessions and to sacrifice all for a life of asceticism and evangelism—affected change on every level of late medieval society, especially on the Italian peninsula. Gabriella Zarri points out that such change was “gradual and heavily contested locally,” but it often had the support of reform-minded popes and bishops, as well as local authorities who appreciated the sociological effect of the moralizing messages delivered by Observant preachers.\(^10\) Among the most devout, new religious movements emerged, inspired by the apostolic simplicity of the Observants, and many of them, such as the Bridgettines and the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, were inclusive of both men and women. New communities of female tertiaries were organized, usually associating themselves with one of the major orders, and many existing communities adopted the Observant reform program.

Before the fifteenth century, the difference between a nun and a *mulier religiosa* in Italy was not always discernible. Some female tertiaries, women who had not taken solemn vows, lived together in community, in *bizzocaggi*, or houses sometimes referred to as monasteries. At

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9 Gabriella Zarri notes that the religious orders were given the task of pastoral care on a much broader scale—and with positive effect—during the time of schism, when the crisis of ecclesiastical leadership left local priests without guidance and free to neglect their duties. Gabriella Zarri, “Ecclesiastical Institutions and Religious Life in the Observant Century,” in *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Later Middle Ages and Beyond*, eds. James D. Mixson and Bert Roest (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 23-59; here 25.

the same time, certain nuns—especially those of the Dominican Second Order—lived without the restriction of full enclosure.\footnote{Sylvie Duval, “Mulieres Religiosae and Sorores Clausae: The Dominican Observant Movement and the Diffusion of Strict Enclosure in Italy from the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Century,” in Mulieres Religiosae: Shaping Female Spiritual Authority in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods, eds. Veerle Fraeters and Imke de Gier (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 193-218; here 193.} During the fifteenth century, the number of religious women in Italy, both domestic and enclosed, grew in proportion to the influence of the Observants. Reformers within the orders desired to transport their pristine ideals to the newly-developing lay movements, sometimes creating third orders that were put under the Rule of St. Augustine, or under the Rule of the Franciscan Third Order, issued in 1289 by the first Franciscan pope, Nicholas IV, in the bull Supra montem.\footnote{Alison More, “Dynamics of Regulation, Innovation, and Invention,” in A Companion to Observant Reform in the Later Middle Ages and Beyond, 85-110; here 89 and 107. More contends that, while Nicholas IV used the bull Supra montem to give canonical recognition to the third order founded by St. Francis himself, no evidence supports the existence of such an order, and that the perpetuation of such a mythical foundation bolstered both the ambitions of Pope Nicholas and the cause of the Observants within the order who sought to provide historical legitimacy to the tertiary communities they were sponsoring. More further demonstrates that the Dominican and Augustinian Observants created fictive histories linking their fifteenth-century third orders with their respective founders for the same reason. See also Alison More, “Institutionalizing Penitential Life in Later Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Third Orders, Rules, and Canonical Legitimacy,” in Church History 83, no. 2 (June 2014): 297–323.} The Observants also sought to promote a “normalization process” to bring uniformity to the various modes of religious life, especially among groups of women.\footnote{Duval, “Mulieres Religiosae and Sorores Clausae,” 210.} Dominican penitential women, who patterned their lives after Catherine of Siena’s model of sanctity and “mixed life” of contemplation and charity, received a formalized rule for tertiaries approved by the pope in 1405, written by Thomas of Siena (Tommaso Caffarini), who also wrote two vitae of the Sienese holy woman.\footnote{Zarri, “Ecclesiastical Institutions and Religious Life in the Observant Century,” 51.} Without a rule of enclosure, these Dominican penitents could work in the community, care for the sick and poor,
and provide shelter and guidance to young girls at risk. They instructed townspeople in the discipline of mental prayer and in the interpretation of Scripture, often through letters and treatises. They attended Mass at the local Dominican church, and received spiritual direction from the friars there, to whom they would confess their sins, sometimes daily. They also gathered there together every day with the nuns to observe the seven canonical hours and recite prayers. In the privacy of their own rooms, the penitents practiced various forms of asceticism, whipping themselves with the scourge, depriving themselves of food and sleep, and subjecting themselves to harsh physical discomfort. While their Rule required that extreme acts of penance receive the approval of a prelate, the example of Catherine of Siena opened the way for the more earnestly devout women to stretch the bounds of moderation significantly.

Many Dominican Observant friars pressed their charges to become nuns and subject themselves to enclosure—at least those tertiaries who were unmarried or widowed, for some were still married, often to husbands who had joined them in their devotional practices. These confessors offered two models for achieving the highest degree of piety: the life of St. Catherine of Siena, whose sanctity proved nearly impossible for most to emulate; and the life of the cloistered nun, whose separation from the outside world put her on higher ground than the unenclosed penitents. Toward the end of the fifteenth century, a number of tertiary communities enclosed themselves, whether by their own choice or due to pressure from the friars, and became nuns of the Second Order. Some of these communities were inspired by the growth and success

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17 Duval, “Mulieres Religiosae and Sorores Clausae,” 210-11.
of the first Dominican Observant female monastery, founded in 1385 at Pisa by Chiara
Gambacorta. This monastery of San Domenico served as a model for Raymond of Capua and
Giovanni Dominici, leaders of the Observant movement who encouraged the spread of convents
to Venice, Florence, Ripoli, and Genoa. Other tertiary houses had enclosure imposed upon them,
such as the women of Santa Lucia in Florence, who fell under the direction of the Dominican
preacher Savonarola. The Dominican tertiary whose life forms part of this study, Colomba
Guadagnoli, founded a penitent community that was able to avoid forced enclosure.

The Observant movement among the Franciscans evolved from the fourteenth-century
poverty dispute between the pope and the Spirituals within the Franciscan order over the
question of strict apostolic poverty. A leading voice in that effort, Fra Paoluccio Trinci, began
promoting in 1368 an effort “to reclaim pristine Franciscan ideals of evangelical poverty and
Christocentric spirituality,” influencing at least twenty hermitages and convents over the next
twenty years to return to their founding precepts. In 1388, he assisted a relative, the noble
widow Angelina da Montegiove, in founding Sant’Anna, a tertiary community for bizzoche at
Foligno, and with the help of another Trinci family member, Pope Boniface IX, gained a special
exemption from a 1317 decree that had restricted the establishment of semi-religious
communities. Because of this exemption, as well as the social standing of the noble women who
had joined Sant’Anna, other tertiary communities sought association with Angelina’s, until a
network of third-order bizzocaggi developed, receiving official recognition from Pope Martin V

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18 Duval, “Mulieres Religiosae and Sorores Clausae,” 198, 212.

Christianity in Western Europe, c. 1100-c. 1500, eds. Miri Rubin and Walter Simons (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2009), 446-57; here 447.
in 1428 with Angelina as the congregation’s minister general.  

However, Franciscan friars, both Observant and Conventual, saw the need to curtail the level of independence of this network of unenclosed female houses under the command of a woman, and by 1466, after numerous struggles, the Observants succeeded in having the tertiaries put under their control, bringing the period of autonomy for these Franciscan women to an end. In most cases, Franciscan Observants supported the existence of Third Order houses. In fact, Giovanni da Capistrano wrote *Defensorium tertii ordinis* in 1440, in which he recognized tertiaries as “full members of the Franciscan family.” However, as was often the case with the Dominicans, many argued for enclosing female tertiary communities and putting them directly under clerical authority, as part of a broader program of reform within the order and an idealized vision of an ordered Christian society as a whole. The preacher Bernardino da Siena, a leader of the Franciscan Observant movement, included in his sermons a call for religious women to live an enclosed life, using language reflective of Pope Boniface VIII’s bull of 1298, *Pericoloso*, to suggest that unenclosed women were in danger of corrupting, and being corrupted by, the men who could gain access to them. During the last decades of the fifteenth century, the Franciscan Observants adopted a policy of withdrawing spiritual care from any third-order community that had not accepted full enclosure.

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21 Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 178.

22 More, “Dynamics of Regulation, Innovation, and Invention,” 95.

23 Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 179.

24 Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 186.
While tertiary houses were subjected to pressures to enclose, the fifteenth century saw a growth in the number of reformed second-order monasteries of Franciscan women, as well as a revival of the image of St. Clare of Assisi as a model of the Franciscan ideal of feminine virtue. Plague and warfare had ravaged a number of Clarissan convents across Europe the century before, and many of them re-opened as reformed houses under the influence of the Observants. New houses in northern and central Italy were founded with the support of local rulers and aristocratic families, with women from those families joining the Poor Clares and some serving as abbesses. Convents of the Observance spread outward from the mother houses established in eight major centers: Milan, Mantua, and Ferrara in the north; Foligno, Pesaro, Perugia, and Urbino in the central region of the peninsula; and Messina, on the island of Sicily. Because these congregations successfully recruited from noble families, who wanted their educated virgin and widowed daughters to live honorably in security, they developed into important intellectual centers, producing literature for spiritual education and edification written by and for Clarissan women. The Franciscan nun presented in this study, Santa Caterina da Bologna, became well-known for her religious treatises, particularly Le sette armi spirituali (The Seven Spiritual Weapons), in which she recorded her experiences of both difficult struggles with the devil and intense feelings of divine presence. This treatise played an important role in her elevation to sainthood.


Roest, Order and Disorder, 166.

The Hermits of St. Augustine, who had become the officially authorized mendicant order of the Augustinians in 1256, formed their first Observant community in 1387 at Lecceto, near Siena, and with the support of important intellectual leaders within the order, expanded to eleven congregations over the next century in Italy, Spain, Germany, and Ireland.\textsuperscript{28} During the late Middle Ages, the Augustinian Hermits experienced a sort of renaissance, with a renewed interest in identifying themselves more closely with St. Augustine and in evangelizing society at large. Augustine, who had been led to convert after hearing the story of St. Anthony of the Desert, provided a model of the ideal amalgamation of the vita apostolica with the vita eremetica, the vita activa with the vita contemplativa, inspired by Jesus’ desert experience that initiated his public ministry.\textsuperscript{29} Augustinians of the Observance revived what Eric Saak has referred to as “Augustine’s cultural ethic, founded on the monastic life, the highest good, and brotherly love in imitation of Augustine himself.”\textsuperscript{30} This new cultural ethic was called the religio Augustini, and to live in imitation of Augustine was to live in imitation of Christ. A true Augustinian, or son of Augustine, was marked more by this religio Augustini than by association with the Ordo.\textsuperscript{31} Similarly, groups of pious women who wished to live a religious life, but chose for whatever reason not to associate themselves with the Franciscans or Dominicans, could adopt the Rule of

\textsuperscript{28} Roest, “Observant Reform in Religious Orders,” 449.


\textsuperscript{31} Eric Saak, \textit{Creating Augustine}, 195.
St. Augustine without being formally associated with the Augustinian friars. In doing so, they had greater freedom in choosing the particulars of their lifestyle, such as habit and house statutes. In 1399, Pope Boniface IX issued the bull *Ad perpetuam rei memoriam*, formally authorizing Augustinian Third Order houses that had already been in existence, and declaring that women called *mantellatae* or *pinzochere* who associated themselves with the Augustinians would be recognized as part of this Third Order, dedicated to Monica, the mother of St. Augustine. After Pope Martin V ordered Monica’s remains to be moved to Rome in 1430, the cult of St. Monica spread rapidly throughout Italy, and a network of Augustinian tertiary houses grew along the peninsula.

The Observant program of reform proved successful across the orders in the fifteenth century in part because of the appeal of mendicant preaching and the wide-scale production of religious texts. While Observants often shunned many of the philosophical principles of Quattrocento humanism, they did embrace the ideal of *ad fontes*, contributing to the recovery of ancient religious texts in the original Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and making possible their translation and circulation in the vernacular. New penitential groups, which inspired self-reflection and examination of conscience among their own members and the population at large, had at their disposal hagiographic texts—especially the lives of the Desert Fathers translated into Italian—as well as spiritual treatises and printed sermons that were instrumental in the formation

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32 More, “Dynamics of Regulation, Innovation, and Invention,” 107. More points out that some women did not affiliate themselves with the other orders because sometimes those friars begrudged them the necessary *cura*.

of what Gabriella Zarri has identified as “a more ‘modern’ spirituality.” Zarri also notes the influence of the new Dutch spirituality, with its emphasis on moral discipline and interior devotion, on the religious orders, which disseminated the movement’s ascetic literature throughout Europe and incorporated its principles of imitation into their own texts, particularly comportment books meant for literate urban women desiring to live a holy life. The Sisters and Brothers of the Devotio Moderna, the late fourteenth-century lay reform movement that began in the Low Countries, lived out a self-reflective, meditative spirituality, and from their ranks emerged Thomas à Kempis, whose De Imitatione Christi nearly eclipsed the Bible itself in popularity throughout Europe during the fifteenth century, receiving wide circulation along the Italian peninsula. The Imitation of Christ consisted of four pamphlets that offered spiritual instruction in the form of proverbial sayings, calling the believer to a conversion experience to become a homo internus, or “interior person.” Thomas wrote: “’Turn with your whole heart (Conuerte te) to the Lord and forsake this wretched world….Learn to despise outward things and to give yourself to inward things, and you will see the kingdom of God come in you.’” He concluded his work with “The Book on the Sacrament,” in which he identified the sacrament of the Eucharist as a means of perfect union with the Savior, a state for which the faithful should burn with desire.

37 A more detailed discussion of the influence of Thomas à Kempis’ work in Italy will appear in Chapter 3 of this study.
Such affective devotional literature influenced religious expression throughout Europe in a significant way. The growth of a thriving print culture—even before the printing press revolutionized the literary world—made self-examination, like that encouraged in Thomas à Kempis’ work, a theme of increasing importance in the lives of the truly devout. As Daniel Hobbins explains in his presentation of the impact of Jean Gerson’s circulated works: “Print did not create demand, it responded to it.”\textsuperscript{38} Amidst a growing population of literate lay members there developed a hunger for print materials, especially those written in the vernacular. A great number of devotional works circulated throughout European towns: the Book of Hours, containing Psalms and prayers meant for recitation; books of virtues and vices, such as the \textit{Fior di virtù}, based in part upon St. Thomas Aquinas’ \textit{Summa Theologiae}, and unique in its defense of women against the charge of leading men astray with their feminine wiles; saints’ lives, such as \textit{Le vite dei Santi Padri} on the desert fathers, and Jacopo da Varazze’s \textit{Legenda aurea}, the expansive collection arranged according to the liturgical calendar and made available in every language, with stories of local saints often added by individual translators; inspirational tracts on the spiritual themes of mercy, humility, love, and the like, such as \textit{Trattato dell’amore di Gesù Christo}, written by the Dominican Observant Savonarola; and meditational treatises, such as the mid-fourteenth-century Franciscan work, \textit{Meditationes vitae Christi}, from which the section on “la Passione” gained the broadest appeal.\textsuperscript{39} The widespread popularity of Passion meditations

\textsuperscript{38} Daniel Hobbins, \textit{Authorship and Publicity Before Print: Jean Gerson and the Transformation of Late Medieval Learning} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 184. Discussion of Gerson’s works will appear later in this study, in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{39} Paul F. Grendler, \textit{Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300-1600} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 278-86. Sarah McNamer has argued that the \textit{Meditationes} should be included in the genre of affective meditations specifically for women. See Sarah McNamer, \textit{Affective Meditations and the Invention of Medieval Compassion} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,
reflected a shift in devotional focus that had occurred in the early part of the thirteenth century—a shift from the majesty and glory of Christ on his heavenly throne to his earthly humanity and corporeal suffering as the wounded, even bloody, sacrifice. Meditational tracts offered a means for believers to contemplate the blood offering made on the cross, the contorted body of the Savior suspended in agony, his face anguished from the overwhelming pain. Through meditation and prayer, they could enter into the bloody wounds, partaking in the suffering with their Lord. This kind of meditation could make reception of the Eucharist the kind of unifying experience that Thomas à Kempis and other writers thought it should be. John Van Engen effectively argues that the fifteenth century placed the Passion at the very center of devotion, with the result being “to de-center the church’s central spiritual treasure, to open it up to participation in innumerable ways, some extravagantly vivid, some creatively personal, some non-ecclesiastical.” Such devotion to the Passion and to the Eucharistic experience provided worshipers, particularly devoutly religious women, another vehicle for the imitation of Christ in his human suffering.

As Caroline Walker Bynum has demonstrated, medieval spirituality, more so than at any other time in Christian history, associated woman with the flesh, or the physical body. Likewise, Jesus’ humanity was identified as corporal, or fleshly, and, therefore, female. Much of the

2009), 86-115. More coverage will be given to the Meditationes and other texts of affective devotion in Chapter 3 of this study.


41 Van Engen, “Multiple Options,” 278. Van Engen points to Caroline Walker Bynum’s important work, Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), in which she discusses a number of blood cults and shrines that came into existence in the fifteenth century, as well as the centrality of the blood of Christ in late medieval devotional art and literature.

Passion literature of the late medieval period was meant to teach the devout “how to feel,” to inspire one to feel compassion (from the Latin *com* + *pator*, “suffering with”) for the anguished Jesus, even to perform compassion, and for such a performance, women were at a symbolic advantage. Women, because of their more physical nature, could identify more closely with the humanity of Christ and his torment, feeling his misery as their own. As Dyan Elliott explains, women’s ability to embody the suffering of the Savior “had the effect of rendering the female body a special medium for communication with the incarnate Christ, ushering in forms of religious expression grounded in physicality.” Quattrocento holy women, especially those regarded as mystics, lived out such forms of expression in their devotional experiences. At the same time, the female body was viewed—at least among men—in misogynistic terms, as a source of temptation. And temptation served as a form of torment—a cause of suffering. As the writer of Hebrews indicated, Jesus suffered when he was tempted. For religious women of the fifteenth century, their bodies did not represent temptation, but rather the capacity to achieve greater communion with God through the experience of temptation as a form of Christ-like suffering. By enduring temptation and overcoming it, they could move beyond the earthly confines of their carnal bodies toward a deeper spiritual experience. Forms of extreme asceticism, such as extended fasting and fervent prayer, provided a means, not of overcoming the

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43 Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 2-15. McNamer argues that to perform compassion was “to feel like a woman.”


45 Hebrews 2:18
sinful flesh by denying the body, but of celebrating the female body’s potential for transformation through religious expression, as well as for influence in society.\textsuperscript{46} Women were thought to possess weaker reasoning abilities than men, but in correlation, more imaginative minds, making them more suited to receiving mystical visions and revelations. As Elliott concludes: “…the female body, hitherto regarded as a spiritual limitation or liability, was metamorphosed into a supple instrument for communicating with the divine.”\textsuperscript{47} The three women whose lives form the basis of this study endured temptations that involved intense physical suffering, but their experiences allowed them to identify more intimately with the humanity of Christ and prepared them to serve as a mouthpiece of God.

André Vauchez, in his examination of lay religious practices of the Middle Ages, notes that from the early thirteenth century, women gained a much more visible presence in the work of the Church, particularly during times of institutional crisis, notably during the years leading up to the Great Schism through the period of conciliarism.\textsuperscript{48} The reputation of the papacy had suffered tremendously as a result of its time in Avignon, and the Church’s excessive spending and inability to meet the spiritual needs of its people during famine, plague, and war inspired a significant lack of confidence and growing resentment among the Christians of Europe. At the same time, a new kind of religious figure emerged from this ecclesiastical crisis: the holy woman, the living saint. While such women had certainly existed in the past, albeit on a much smaller scale, the mid-fourteenth century witnessed what Vauchez has identified as “a stream of

\textsuperscript{46} Elliott, “Flesh and Spirt,” 21.

\textsuperscript{47} Elliott, “Flesh and Spirit,” 23.

\textsuperscript{48} André Vauchez, \textit{The Laity in the Middle Ages}, xix.
female prophets and visionaries,” with St. Birgitta of Sweden at its fountainhead.\(^49\) But St. Catherine of Siena had the most far-reaching influence among these holy women, for her sanctity served as a model for countless devout women, particularly those of fifteenth-century Italy. Like Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine received revelatory visions from an early age, lived an austere life devoted to service to God and the less fortunate, and sought to influence reform within the Church, most notably by encouraging the pope to return his office to Rome. Both women were so highly regarded within their communities and among members of the Church hierarchy that they were able to use their reputations as saintly women to influence the politics of both Church and state. Gabriella Zarri explains, regarding the influence of such women, that “‘forged in the imitation of Christ and earlier saints…the saint was no longer simply a model to be imitated, but a singularly effective ‘social operator.’’”\(^50\)

The Dominican theologian Raymond of Capua served as spiritual director to Catherine of Siena, and in recording the future saint’s life, he gave special attention to the development of her intimate relationship with Christ. In a chapter dedicated to her victories over temptations, he wove a thread that connected temptation, imitation, and intimacy when he wrote:

“So, when the old serpent [Satan] saw Catharine, so young, mounting to such a high degree of perfection, he feared lest, with her salvation, that of many others would be secured; and that she might assist the Church by her virtues and her teaching. He therefore sought in his infernal malice, every means of seducing her; but the God of mercy, who permitted these attacks, in order to augment the glory of his spouse, gave her such excellent weapons wherewith to combat, that the war proved more profitable to her than peace. He first inspired her with the thought of asking God for the gift of fortitude: she did so continually during several days; and God to recompense her prayer, gave her the following instructions:

\(^49\) Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 220.

‘Daughter, if thou wilt acquire fortitude, thou must imitate me. I could have, by my divine power, arrested the efforts of Satan, and have taken other means of overcoming them, but I was desirous of instructing thee by my examples, and teaching thee to overcome by means of the Cross….Choose, therefore, to have trials and afflictions; endure them not only with patience, but embrace them with delight; they are lasting treasures, for the more thou wilt suffer for me, the more thou wilt be like me.’”  

Raymond believed that Satan had made Catherine his target, because of her pursuit of holiness and her ability to influence the salvation of others. He also regarded these attacks as an opportunity provided by God, who would supply the necessary spiritual weapons to allow Catherine to overcome and emerge stronger for her efforts. She had requested fortitude, and God answered with a call to imitate Christ, and to welcome these trials—to count it all joy—as a means of becoming more like him.  

Temptation would inspire imitation and foster deeper intimacy with the divine.  

Raymond recounted various attacks from Satan and episodes of attempted seduction that Catherine had to endure. He called them “humiliating temptations” that came whether she were sleeping or awake. The young woman responded bravely, mortifying her flesh with an iron chain, drawing great amounts of blood. Satan sent voices to sway her to give up her efforts to please God, and tried to convince her that she could be virtuous without such heroic dedication. When Catherine would not surrender to these temptations, demons were sent to scream loudly at her, and to invite her to join them in their evil delights. But Catherine continued fasting and praying, and denying herself every earthly comfort, and she was rewarded with a visit from Jesus

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52 Raymond of Capua makes reference here to James 1:2-4, where Christians are told to consider trials and tribulations a joy, for they lead to patience and perfection.
himself, in crucified form, who said to her: “I created thee in my own image and likeness, and I have assimilated myself to thee, in taking thy nature. I never cease rendering thee like to me, so long as thou dost offer no obstacle, and what I did during my mortal life, I strive to renew in your soul as long as your pilgrimage endures.” And then Jesus promised that he would visit with greater frequency and familiarity. Catherine’s Savior used her tribulations—her direct encounters with the enemy—to craft her spirit to be more like his, and as long as she persevered, he would draw closer to her as a help and a reward. Again, temptation was to inspire imitation and to cultivate deeper intimacy with the Lord.

Catherine herself dictated a dialogue she had with God the Father during a state of ecstasy, in which He explained to her:

"I have appointed the demons to tempt and trouble my creatures in this life. Not that I want my creatures to be conquered, but I want them to conquer and receive from me the glory of victory when they have proved their virtue. No one need fear any battle or temptation of the devil that may come, for I have made you strong and given your wills power in the blood of my Son….Indeed, temptation will strengthen you, provided you open your mind’s eye to see my charity, which lets you be tempted only to bring you to virtue and to prove your virtue. You cannot arrive at virtue except through knowing yourself and knowing me. And this knowledge is more perfectly gained in time of temptation, because then you know that you are nothing, since you have no power to relieve yourself of the sufferings and troubles you would like to escape."

Raymond of Capua followed his account of the temptations of Catherine of Siena with details of her espousal to Jesus at the hand of the Virgin Mary, who blessed the young woman with a beautiful diamond ring. Raymond then concluded his chapter with these words: “With this first part of her story terminates her silent and retired life. We shall see in the second what she


did among men for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls.”

According to her confessor, Catherine was to leave her life of seclusion to be an apostle to a corrupt world. But first she had to be tested and proved—subjected to many trials and temptations, with God’s blessing, and able to emerge victorious through much prayer and fasting. Just as Jesus had been led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, where he fasted and prayed and resisted temptations from the devil before calling his disciples, Catherine would be prepared for her ministry to the world by first struggling against the same enemy. And after fighting courageously with God’s help, she, too, would gather disciples and minister to the spiritual and physical needs of others.

Other holy women and men had preceded Catherine of Siena in experiencing similar bouts with Satan in preparation for their public ministries. In his biography of Catherine, Raymond of Capua compared his subject to perhaps the most well-known saint to have battled demonic temptations, Anthony the Great, one of the Desert Fathers of the fourth century, who tried to live an ascetic life as a hermit in Egypt, but was tormented by the devil in many forms before he left seclusion to minister to persecuted Christians during the reign of Diocletian. The stories of St. Juliana of Nicomedia and St. Margaret of Antioch, both martyred in 304 after refusing to marry and experiencing torment from Satan, appeared in Jacopo da Varazze’s *Legenda aurea*, the expansive collection of saints’ lives widely circulated throughout medieval Europe. But in the century after Catherine’s death, a number of women on the Italian peninsula consecrated themselves unto God and to a life in imitation of Christ, and then faced difficult,

55 Raymond of Capua, *Life of Saint Catharine of Sienna*, 77.

56 In *Life of Saint Catharine of Sienna* (71), Raymond of Capua compared Catherine to St. Anthony when she asked Jesus where he had been during her time of torment. More coverage will be given to St. Anthony’s story, as well as the stories of other tempted saints, in Chapter 3 of this study.
even terrifying, encounters with Satan and his agents. Like Catherine, they overcame these tribulations and began their own public ministries, which in every case involved mystical experiences, spiritual advising to members of the laity, and care of the sick and poor. And after their deaths, their sanctity would be officially recognized by the Church in whose service they ministered.

Vauchez identifies the Great Schism, that forty-year period after the papacy made its return to Rome only to have the Catholic realm divide into two—at one point, three—obediences, as the single most important crisis that “made possible an efflorescence of visionary prophesying and its emergence to public view.” He argues that women took center stage in their spiritual influence over societal and political affairs during the critical period from 1370 to 1450, from the time when a significant number among the Church hierarchy realized that the papal Curia needed to leave Avignon to the end of the Council of Basel, which essentially spelled defeat for the conciliarist effort to bring about institutional reform within the Church.

However, on the Italian peninsula, particularly in the northern and central regions, the entire span of the fifteenth century provided a series of crises that often left cities in turmoil and townspeople in need of spiritual solace. Both Venice and Florence carried out aggressive campaigns of territorial expansion through conquest of neighboring towns. Venice vied for maritime power, first in war with Milan, then with the Ottoman Turks. Florence, despite experiencing great prosperity in the textile and banking industries, suffered from violent struggles within and among powerful merchant families and between the political factions of the

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57 Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 221.

58 Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, xix.
Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The destructive plague of the fourteenth century refused to die out completely and struck several Italian cities in the first part of the fifteenth century, while famine was responsible for increased mortality in certain towns in the latter part. The Hundred Years’ War, fought between England and France, required a great number of mercenary soldiers, who traveled through the Alps and disrupted merchant activity and social tranquility in northern Italian towns. When a renewed France invaded the peninsula in 1494, Italian citizens were gripped with apocalyptic fear and heeded the call of reform preachers to renounce their worldly ways and commit their lives to God. In the absence of any real lasting political and socio-economic stability, the townspeople of northern and central Italy often yearned for at least spiritual security, anchoring themselves to some charismatic religious figure, whether it be a preaching mendicant or a woman mystic, and seeking some assurance of peace in the ever after. Elizabeth Petroff has suggested that from the time of St. Clare of Assisi to the Counter-Reformation, Italian society was marked by a “new mood of female piety” in which women mystics demonstrated a unique ability to meet the particular needs of the laity.  

Similarly, E. Ann Matter has identified “a common pattern of social class, religious patronage, and the struggle between worldly sophistication and rigorous idealism that characterized medieval Italy” and made the peninsula fertile ground for holy women who would earn respect in their local communities and play a vital role in the story of Italian Christianity. Francis Oakley has noted that the forty years of schism so weakened the foundation of Church leadership as to cause the


dismantling of any truly international Church and to give way to regional churches influenced by local rulers and operating with a significant level of autonomy. As powerful families gained control of strategically important regions of central Italy—the Malatesta family in Rimini, the Sforzas of Milan and Pesaro, the Bentivoglio family of Bologna, the Bagoni of Perugia, and the House of Montefeltro in Urbino—any significant papal authority became confined to the coastal area of Lazio surrounding Rome. As a result, in the towns of Quattrocento Italy, holy women were often able to exercise considerable spiritual authority—even in the absence of any legal or familial authority—especially if they proved useful to the religious and political powers over them.

Only in the last twenty years or so have scholars begun to examine the contributions of holy women to fifteenth-century Italian society, and even then, usually in the broader context of female piety of the medieval and early modern periods. In fact, medieval religious women in general have been the subject of research efforts for less than forty years. Herbert Grundmann laid the groundwork with *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women’s Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, originally published in German in 1935, but under-appreciated until its second edition appeared in 1961. Grundmann’s influence in the study of medieval religious women would become clear in the

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work of Caroline Walker Bynum in the 1980s, but in the interim, Elizabeth Petroff published in 1978 her seminal piece on the seven stages in the development of the woman mystic and her visionary power, followed a year later by *Consolation of the Blessed*, her translation of the biographies of four Italian women saints who represented an outpouring of feminine spirituality and mystical activity in the thirteenth century. Elizabeth Petroff published in 1978 her seminal piece on the seven stages in the development of the woman mystic and her visionary power, followed a year later by *Consolation of the Blessed*, her translation of the biographies of four Italian women saints who represented an outpouring of feminine spirituality and mystical activity in the thirteenth century. Bynum’s scholarship dominated the field of medieval religious women’s studies a decade later. Her monograph, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987), synthesized the vitae and mystical texts of devout women over three centuries to distill the ascetic practices, especially fasting and Eucharistic devotion, that provided those women a means of power and control. She introduced a new interpretation of gender and the body as they were understood by such women, and she drew attention to the creativity they applied in their various modes of religious expression. Since then, scholars in the fields of history and theology have contributed in significant ways to the conversation regarding female devotion and spirituality, particularly in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. Bernard McGinn began in the 1990s an in-depth series on mysticism as theology, dedicating one volume to the women and men of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries responsible for introducing new forms of mysticism to medieval society. Barbara Newman, with *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*

64 Elizabeth Petroff, “Medieval Women Visionaries: Seven Stages of Power” in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 34-45; and *Consolation of the Blessed* (New York: Alta Gaia Society, 1979), which provides the lives of Gherardesca of Pisa, Umiltà of Florence, Margarita of Faenza, and Aldobrandesca of Siena. The seven stages of power will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this study.


(1995), examined spiritual treatises from 1100 to 1500 to determine strategies of virtue, such as chastity and taking of monastic vows, that religious women, many of them mystics, employed to become “virile”—often accepted as an “honorary male” and revered for their capacity to suffer—while adopting uniquely feminine approaches to imitating Christ.\textsuperscript{67} Anneke Mulder-Bakker focused on public recluses of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and their positions of authority from the cell in her \textit{Lives of the Anchoresses} (2005), in which she demonstrated that these living saints were sought out for their spiritual guidance, serving as a sort of priest in their respective communities and functioning as “common theologians.”\textsuperscript{68} With her work on fifteenth-century convents in Florence, Sharon Strocchia established the essential role that religious women and their houses played in the socio-economic recovery of the city after the devastation of the plague, and the influence they exercised in political matters and civic development.\textsuperscript{69} Walter Simons and John Van Engen explored the devotional practices of women who chose to live in the world, but not of it, associating themselves with urban religious movements in the Low Countries that embraced the \textit{vita apostolica}, while living and working among their fellow townspeople.\textsuperscript{70} More recently, Bernard McGinn has issued another volume of his series, covering vernacular mysticism in the late medieval period, with a section devoted to women


\textsuperscript{70} Walter Simons, \textit{Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); and John Van Engen, \textit{Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life}.
mystics on the Italian peninsula.\textsuperscript{71} Mary Harvey Doyno and Janine Larmon Peterson have conducted important research on the proliferation of saints on the Italian peninsula during the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{72} Doyno has focused on lay saints from the working population of merchants, midwives, craftsmen, and the like, while Peterson has brought attention to those individuals who were revered as saints by local clergy and members of the laity within their towns, but whose sanctity was disputed or discounted by inquisitors and popes. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, as part of her work on religious women of the Great Schism, has provided a case study of Ermine de Reims, an illiterate French widow whose Augustinian confessor recorded her many visions of demons in both human and animal form.\textsuperscript{73} Blumenfeld-Kosinski has used this singular woman’s \textit{vita} to explore the dynamic of the “holy couple,” made up of the saintly woman and the man who serves as both confessor and biographer, as well as the reception of such a woman in late medieval European society, at a time when women’s particular spiritual behaviors were increasingly judged to be heretical. Rosalyn Voaden, Nancy Caciola, Dyan Elliott, and Wendy Love Anderson have shed a great deal of light on that particular period in late medieval history, when a flowering of female mysticism intersected with a growing desire


\textsuperscript{72} Mary Harvey Doyno, \textit{The Lay Saint: Charity and Charismatic Authority in Medieval Italy, 1150-1350} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); and Janine Larmon Peterson, \textit{Suspect Saints and Holy Heretics: Disputed Sanctity and Communal Identity in Late Medieval Italy} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

among clerics and theologians to “test the spirits,” to determine whether certain women’s claimed mystical experiences were of divine or demonic origin. Sherri Franks Johnson has examined the growth, decline, and recovery of women’s convents in Bologna from the early thirteenth century to the middle of the fifteenth, with a focus on their shifting relationships with the monastic and mendicant orders and their role in the urban development of the city. Alison More has examined the penitential lives of non-monastic women who chose to associate themselves with third orders, sometimes to escape scrutiny, and the innovation with which they practiced their faith in a public manner, beyond the confines of a cloister, and influenced both lay and religious society. More and others have recently brought to the fore the role of women in the Observant Reform movement of the fifteenth century. Lezlie Knox has explored the complexities of the association between the historical Clare of Assisi and the female communities that bore her name, and Bert Roest has chronicled changes within the Poor Clares that reflected a commitment among late medieval Franciscan women to a certain purity of

74 See Rosalynn Voaden, God’s Words, Women’s Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries (Suffolk, UK: York Medieval Press, 1999); Nancy Caciola, Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Dyan Elliott, Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Wendy Love Anderson, The Discernment of Spirits: Assessing Visions and Visionaries in the Late Middle Ages (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). “Test the spirits” is a reference the exhortation given in 1 John 4:1. Much more will be written on the discernment of spirits in Chapter 4 of this study.


practice in their devotion to Christ and to the intentions of their founders. Dominican penitents have gained the greatest attention, however. Gabriella Zarri’s *Le sante vive* (1990) has proved foundational for others. Zarri examined the *vitae* of Italian women—most of them Dominican tertiaries, including Colomba da Rieti covered here, but also the Augustinian nun Veronica da Binasco—active during the final years of the Quattrocento and the early part of the Cinquecento, who were regarded as “living saints” in their respective communities, known for their mystical gifts, prophetic visions, and influence at court. She surveyed their particular devotional practices that pointed to their sanctity, and the efforts among their devotees to promote their cults after their deaths. Each of the women eventually received formal recognition of their holiness with the title of blessed or saint from the Catholic Church. Since then, Tamar Herzig has greatly expanded the field of knowledge regarding the social and spiritual influence these women had in the early part of the sixteenth century. Most recently, Herzig has focused her attention on the relationship between the Dominican inquisitor Heinrich Kramer, author of the *Malleus Malificarum* (1487), and Cinquecento penitents of the same order.

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Interest in the spirituality of late medieval Italian women has followed a similar course among Italian scholars. Giovanni Miccoli provided a foundation with a thousand years of religious history in his *La storia religiosa* (1974), part of the series, *Storia d’Italia*. Just a few years later, Massimo Petrocchi produced a three-volume work on the history of Italian spirituality, in which he covered the thirteenth through the twentieth centuries and devoted significant space to a discussion of the themes of imitation and mystical experience that marked the Quattrocento. Daniel Bornstein has noted that a great deal of Italian scholarship on religious culture has resulted from published proceedings of conferences called to commemorate the many Catholic saints from the peninsula. In 1979, conferences were held in Assisi, on women among the Franciscans of the thirteenth century, and Todi, on fourteenth-century female mysticism. In the early 1980s, conferences in honor of St. Catherine of Siena, Clare of Montefalco, Angela of Foligno, Filippa Mareri, and the Umbrian women’s religious movement produced essays that contributed to a growing body of knowledge, particularly concerning Italian women of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But the 1990s witnessed the greatest proliferation of research in the field of female spirituality in Italy. Anna Benvenuti Papi, who had

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81 A sampling of the works of major Italian scholars is provided here, for most of them have been prolific writers, producing a significant number of articles for edited collections, conference proceedings, exhibit catalogs, and the journals of religious orders and historical societies. Daniel Bornstein points out that, since the Italian market has little demand for scholarly monographs, historians working in this field tend to disseminate their work through essay. See Bornstein, “Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy: History and Historiography,” in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, 11.


84 Bornstein, “Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy: History and Historiography,” in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, 10-11.
previously written on the early thirteenth-century Beata Umiliana de’ Cerchi and recluses in the hagiographic tradition, published *In castro poenitentiale: Santità e società femminile nell’Italia medievale* in 1990. In 1992, Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi brought together the work of Benvenuti Papi and other Italian scholars in *Mistiche e devote nell’Italia tardomedievale*, releasing a new edition for an English-speaking audience four years later. Among the contributors to their volume were Enrico Menestò, Mario Sensi, and Anna Esposito. Menestò and Rusconi worked together on a study of Umbrian women in *La strada delle sante medievali* (1991), and Sensi has most recently published essays on both the Observant movement and Italian anchorites of the Middle Ages. Esposito has devoted much effort to research in the archives of Rome, particularly on the life and influence of the fifteenth-century mystic Santa Francesca Romana (St. Frances of Rome), as well as the charity relief efforts of women within Roman confraternities and hospitals. Esposito has also contributed to Nicholas Terpstra’s


88 See Anna Esposito, “St. Francesca and the Female Religious Communities of Fifteenth-Century Rome,” in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, 197-218; “Non è Francesca. Un miracolo contestato di s. Francesca Romana (a. 1460),” in *Roma nel Rinascimento, 2016: Bibliografia e note* (Rome: University of California Rome Study Center, 2016), 289-305; and “Le religiose mulieres e la carità pontificia del sale,” in *Incorrupta Monumenta Ecclesiam Defendunt: Studi offerti a mons. Sergio...
collection, *The Politics of Ritual Kinship: Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (2000), as has Giovanna Casagrande, with her essay, “Confraternities and Lay Female Religiosity in Late Medieval and Renaissance Umbria.” Casagrande, known for her work on penitential movements and female monasticism, has also edited, along with Enrico Menestò, an essay collection from the conference in Perugia held in 1989 to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Beata Colomba da Rieti to that city. Lucetta Scaraffia, a scholar of Santa Rita da Cascia, has worked with Gabriella Zarri on *Donne e fede: Santità e vita religiosa in Italia* (1994), now available in translation, to bring together researchers from both American and Italian institutions, and some French, to consider the variety of ways in which Catholic women over several centuries have negotiated sanctity and power within the confines of an institutional Church so characteristically masculine.

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Despite the wealth of literature produced over the last thirty years in both the U.S. and Italy, a lacuna exists where fifteenth-century religious women are concerned. A large body of scholarship continues to expand on female spirituality in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly because St. Clare of Assisi and St. Catherine of Siena inhabited those centuries. And sixteenth-century women’s religious history has become a rapidly growing field, with studies of Tridentine efforts to strengthen the Church—even while tightening enclosure requirements for women—and of the development of new, often female, religious orders. But for the years from 1418 to roughly 1498, our understanding of women’s spirituality—not just in Italy, but across western and central Europe—comes by way of the biographies of a select few, usually those whose stories have endured through the canonization process. And these individual sketches do not provide enough material to allow for a much broader interpretation of both the religious and social contexts within which these women operated.  

Because of recent scholarly interest in the Observant movement of the fifteenth century, records of institutionalized communities of women have been brought to light in an effort to reconstruct the lives of those within such communities. Even so, while scholars such as Roest and Herzig continue to research women’s participation in reform efforts among the Franciscans and Dominicans, respectively, precious little work has been conducted on Augustinian women of the fifteenth century. The late professor Francis Xavier Martin, O.S.A., and Eric Saak have contributed significantly to the growing discussion of the Observant movement by bringing to the fore reform efforts among the

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92 Roberto Rusconi addresses the need for more research in “Women Religious in Late Medieval Italy: New Sources and Directions,” in Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy, 308-9.

93 Rusconi explains that convents kept very careful records, largely out of a need to protect both their civil and ecclesiastical rights, and many of those records have survived to the present. See “Women Religious in Late Medieval Italy,” 306-7.
Augustinian Hermits, but they have dealt almost exclusively with the order’s male leadership and
their pastoral mission, with no coverage of the devout women who formally associated
themselves with the order.\textsuperscript{94}

The stories of the three women presented here were compiled by men and women who
believed their subjects to be worthy of veneration after their deaths, because of the holy lives
they had led, the miracles that took place before and after their deaths, and the lasting impact
they had on the religiosity of their local communities—not to mention their contribution to the
reputation of their respective orders. The documentation of the lives of would-be saints belonged
to a longstanding hagiographical tradition that existed well before the canonization process
became more formalized in the early thirteenth century, but this kind of biography was
particularly suited to the Quattrocento, when intellectuals of the Renaissance celebrated heroic
virtues and revived the classical tradition of preserving the histories of noble figures for the sake
of the humanist ideal of \textit{imitatio}. As Gabriella Zarri notes: “The move from stories of illustrious
men to stories of a religious order’s saints was an easy one, as the classical concept of ‘illustrious
man or woman’ merged with the tradition of Christian sanctity.”\textsuperscript{95} The medieval biographer
usually had one primary aim: to present the subject as a candidate for canonization, portraying
her in such a way as to appeal both to a less-educated lay population at the local level to establish

\textsuperscript{94} Reverend Martin’s work on the Augustinian Observant Movement was limited to a broad survey
contained in a singular essay. See Francis Xavier Martin, “Augustinian Observant Movement,” in
\textit{Reformbemühungen und Observanzbestrebungen im spätmittelalterlichen Ordenswesen}, ed. Kaspar Elm
(Berlin: Dunker and Humblot, 1989), 325-345. Also see Eric Saak, \textit{High Way to Heaven: The
Augustinian Platform between Reform and Reformation, 1292-1524} (Leiden: Brill, 2002); and \textit{Creating
Augustine: Interpreting Augustine and Augustinianism in the Later Middle Ages} (Oxford: Oxford

\textsuperscript{95} Zarri, “Ecclesiastical Institutions and Religious Life in the Observant Century,” 49.
or support a cult following, and to the Church hierarchy at all levels charged with making
determinations of sainthood. Certain conventions existed that provided a sort of template for the
_vita_: it must include evidence of moral virtue, extreme asceticism, a contemplative prayer life,
and active service, as well as details of visions and miraculous powers. The potential saint’s life
was exhibited as worthy of imitation, but impossible to imitate fully. Writers of hagiographic
texts were usually educated—often professors and theologians—and familiar with the protocol
for submitting an acceptable record, even having it notarized as a legal document to provide
authentication of its contents. However, saints’ lives were in effect “instruments of religious
propaganda,” and since they were written by members of the religious orders, they also served as
a demonstration of a certain standard of excellence for the author’s own order. So naturally,
there might be incentive to embellish. The Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye, in his introduction to
hagiography, wrote that the hagiographer of the Middle Ages certainly intended to write history,
but just as in the time of classical antiquity, there was little that separated the historian from the
rhetorician. He explained that as “inheritors of the literary tradition of the ancients…their
tendencies were not in the direction of criticism. When the historian no longer desired to be
restricted to the _rôle_ of annalist or witness he became a compiler, one lacking discernment, and
far more preoccupied with his readers’ tastes than with a laborious quest after truth.” And he
added: “They were devoid of guile, and they never suspected that a written testimony might be

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false….History, in the Middle Ages, meant everything that was told, everything that was written in books.”

A number of scholars have written recently on the problematic nature of hagiographic sources in the interpretation of saints’ lives, particularly concerning the biographer’s efforts to idealize the subject and manipulate facts to paint a more heroic image of a virtuous man or woman worthy of the highest recognition of the Church. Most have arrived at the same general conclusions: that sanctity is a social construct, and that the historical “reality” that these texts provide lies not in the details of the individual lives, whether real or imagined, but in the perception of the sanctity of these figures in the minds of medieval Christians. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, who place themselves in the camp of the Realists, rather than the Nominalists who strive to discern fact from fable, have declared: “We study saints in order to understand piety; we study piety in order to understand society, for it is one of our basic premises that the pursuit as well as the perception of holiness mirrored social values and concerns.”

Many modern historians have shown little interest in the veracity of seemingly impossible ascetic practices or of miraculous phenomena—even violent struggles with demons sent to tempt and torment—but more for how these extraordinary events, as they have been recorded by pious men and women, speak to the religious mentalities of the period. Thomas Heffernan, in his

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Sacred Biography, demonstrated in the 1980s the value of hagiographic texts, which historically had been disregarded as works of “pious fiction.” In examining the structure and content of the texts themselves, rather than the saints whose lives they presented, Heffernan sought to identify the various elements of persuasion used to promote an individual’s worthiness of veneration. In tracing the development of a narrative tradition that has contributed to the expansion of the body of texts deemed sacred, Heffernan determined that authors of sacred biographies, in their efforts to demonstrate their subjects’ holiness, committed themselves to the theme of imitatio Christi, portraying the man or woman as an imitator of Christ, and therefore, worthy of imitation by others—a model of behavior. A decade later, Aviad Kleinberg presented the process of making a holy man or woman a saint as a series of interactions, even negotiations, between “performer” and “audience,” who joined in a collaborative effort. Kleinberg asserted that “the medieval perception of sainthood was fluid,” and “communities shaped their ideas of sainthood around specific individuals.” But he was less willing to gloss over questions of the historicity of marvels and wonders, suggesting a more critical reading of such inclusions as part of the fashioning process. More recently, scholars have focused on the particular relationship between male biographer and female subject, as Elizabeth Petroff did in her essay, “Male Confessors and Female Penitents,” in which she examined the shift in the power dynamic that occurred when the man, charged with offering spiritual direction, looked to the holy woman for instruction, intercession, or a prophetic message from the one who had an intimate connection


with the divine. Both Jodi Bilinkoff and John Coakley have called attention to the symbiotic relationship of a number of pairs of holy women and their male collaborators, noting a sort of partnership that existed: the priest providing sacraments, most importantly the Eucharist, as well as spiritual counsel, while gaining favor and advantage for his spiritually intimate association with a vessel of God. Bilinkoff, in particular, rejects the notion of a repressive relationship, one marked by control and censorship, between male confessor-turned-biographer and woman saint, and instead makes the argument for a complex, nuanced alliance—a courtship of sorts—that provided friendship and spiritual rewards for both. She views the resulting hagiographic texts as the life story of both the female saint and the male confessor.

While the confessor often served as the biographer for many medieval holy women, such was not always the case for the women presented here. In fact, just one woman in this study, the Dominican penitent Colomba Guadagnoli da Rieti (1467-1501), had her vita recorded by her confessor, Sebastiano Bontempi degli Angeli. In the case of widowed Augustinian tertiary Elena Valentini da Udine (1395/96-1458), Augustinian Hermit Simone da Roma published her vita in the same year of her death. But he was not her confessor. The prior of Elena’s convent, Santa Lucia, invited Simone, a professor at the University of Padua, to write her vita, most likely because of his elevated position in the order and his familiarity with the application process. The life of the Franciscan Santa Caterina da Bologna (1413-1463) was recorded by one of her

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106 Frazier, Possible Lives, 231-34.
disciples, the Venetian nun Illuminata Bembo, as *Specchio di illuminazione* (*The Mirror of Illumination*) in 1469. There also exist a number of letters, sermons, and treatises written in Santa Caterina’s own hand.

Scaraffia and Zarri have asserted that during times of institutional crisis or in the development of religious movements, “it was women who offered the principal discourse on reform,” often “more as mediators than revolutionary protagonists,” and they cite the mystics Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila as proof. But they continue:

“In periods in which the ecclesiastical and hierarchical fabric is being put together again, such women develop models of role reversal and opposition….Thus, while in the first case women exert themselves in the same direction as history in general—indeed often accelerating it and giving it direction—and are thus accepted and glorified by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, in the second they are swimming against the current and are thus marginalized and repressed.”

Similarly, Daniel Bornstein, has contended that:

“[The Church’s] openness to female influence, and to experimentation with novel religious roles and unconventional devotional attitudes, may have been due to cracks in ecclesiastical structures….It was when the male hierarchy was in obvious disarray that prominent churchmen were most willing to listen to strange voices, disregard decorum and timeworn proprieties, and concede to these women a place at (or near) the altar….The restoration of institutional order meant a rejection of eccentric female models, a remasculinization of religious images.”

Bornstein marks the time around 1500, when the Italian Wars disrupted life on the peninsula and generated ecclesiastical and political turmoil for the next sixty years, as the point when female mystics once again garnered attention for their prophetic voices and visionary experiences. But the women presented in this study were active at a time when, if viewed through a wide lens, the

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107 Scaraffia and Zarri, “Introduction,” in *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present*, 4-5.

political landscape appeared comparatively tranquil and ecclesiastical institutions seemed relatively stable. However, along the Italian peninsula, disorder and strife could usually be spotted just over the horizon. As localities vied for land and political control over one another, and braced themselves for confrontation with powers abroad, they often sought ways to assert their own autonomy. The presence of a living saint in their midst, prophesying and providing spiritual direction, could serve as a mark of divine favor for a town, and there was no better expression of sovereignty. Every town wanted its own saint. And these women satisfied that need for their communities. Not only did these holy women provide a spiritual connection to the divine during times of crisis, but their austerity and sanctity bolstered the reform efforts of the Observants who sought spiritual renewal among the laity, and they proved useful in matters of both Church and state in their service to the religious and political authorities over them. And their reputation for sanctity rested upon their effort to live a life in imitation of Christ. A close examination of their individual *vitae* will demonstrate that their success in combat against the tempting powers of Satan contributed to the perception of these women as holy and Christ-like, and “was credited to them as righteousness,” even at a time when, across Europe, women were coming under increasing scrutiny by ecclesiastical authorities for their visionary experiences and charismatic behaviors.
Chapter 2
Three Living Saints and Their Vitae

“A Typology of Female Sanctity”

In her seminal work, *Le sante vive: profezie di corte e devozione femminile tra ’400 e ’500* (1990), Gabriella Zarri identified a typology of the “living saint,” a term used by their contemporaries to characterize certain holy women deemed worthy of reverence during their lifetimes in the late medieval and early modern periods.¹ These charismatic women, endowed with the gifts of prophecy and often thaumaturgy, performed an intercessory role in both society and in politics. They prayed without ceasing for powerful individuals and the city at large, providing a sort of buffer between its citizens and the God whose wrath they greatly feared. These *beate* used their divinely inspired insight to offer counsel, for their intimate relationship with the Deity privileged them with visions of future events. Zarri noted that these prophecies and revelations guaranteed the women a place of influence within political circles and in the wider community.² They often served as prophets at court, where members of the nobility witnessed their remarkable righteousness. But the artisan and the laborer, those who had received their healing touch, could also attest to their virtue and formed a large part of the crowd of followers who surrounded these miraculous women. Their sanctity was offered by their confessors as a model meant to be imitated by others. But of their extreme forms of devotion,

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² Zarri, “Living Saints,” 221.
there could be no imitation—at least not among the average laypeople. They forsook all forms of nourishment for very long periods, sustaining themselves on the Eucharistic wafer alone, which they often received from the hand of God Himself or one of the heavenly angels. They fell into rapturous ecstasies, which brought them great joy because of the overwhelming intimacy they experienced with the divine, but also physical exhaustion because of the toll these episodes took on their bodies. Indeed, the body took center stage in the devotional practices of these living saints, for the body bore the suffering they endured in their “tenacious imitation of Christ.”

Some sustained invisible blows to their flesh during ecstatic reenactments of the Passion. Others were blessed with the marks of stigmata, which caused excruciating pain, whether or not they were apparent to the human eye. But all endured the corporeal suffering associated with the violent struggles of spiritual combat with the devil, and such encounters formed part of the traditional narrative in the vita of the saintly woman of the Quattrocento.

As if a reward for such earthly affliction of the body, the living saint died in the odor of sanctity, her corpse emitting a pleasing aroma for the benefit of the followers who mourned her passing. In an effort to have her officially recognized by the institutional Church, a confessor or disciple wrote her vita, which usually followed a standard hagiographic template:

“Born of Christian parents, from childhood on the future saint feels a calling, which is expressed by her renunciation of the world and intention to serve God alone. She exercises her virtues and combats the devil, and is rewarded by God

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4 Zarri, “Living Saints,” 244. Zarri connects the inclusion of the theme of spiritual combat with “the growing concern with magic and the inquisitors’ commitment to define in theory and combat in practice the complex phenomenon of witchcraft.” I will argue that the theme of combat with the devil was included as part of the construction of the holy woman’s life of imitatio Christi, an element of imitatio deemed necessary even before theologians became concerned about women and witchcraft.
with supernatural gifts. She suffers persecution, which she bears patiently, to be universally recognized as a saint at the moment of death crowned by miracles.”

The reputation for sanctity of these holy women was built squarely on those supernatural gifts: the ability to live in perfect abstinence, to experience rapturous ecstasies, to prophesy, and to imitate Christ in his sufferings. They were perceived as having been endowed by their Creator with mystical powers through a transformative process of meditations and visions meant to bring their souls into perfect union with the divine. In their research, scholars such as Bynum, Vauchez, Weinstein, and Bell have determined that Italy produced more *vitae* of saintly women than any other region of Europe in the late medieval period, and that the lives of those saints fell into “a consistent and predictable pattern.” A pioneer in the study of medieval female mysticism, Elizabeth Petroff first identified in the 1970s the seven distinct stages that make up that pattern—stages in the transformation of the timid young girl, accepting of the limitations of being female, to wise woman, capable of heroic virtue and emboldened by divine grace. Those stages were: 1) purgative; 2) psychic; 3) doctrinal; 4) devotional; 5) participatory; 6) unitive; and 7) ordering. The essential first stage, meant to purge the sinner of every evil thought, word, or deed, involved a zealous mortification of the flesh in an effort to subdue both body and conscience. An austere life of prayer, accompanied by violent self-punishment, made the woman

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6 Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 140.

aware of every possible sinful action or habit of the mind, and her ability to endure such physical torment pointed to her holiness. To achieve complete purgation, the woman sometimes subjected herself to public humiliation, but in private, she faced the devil himself, who visited her in her sleep and in her prayers, often disguised as a frightening or sexual being, but always intent on luring her from her path toward spiritual purity. Employing temptation, fear, and shame, Satan attacked his subject at the core of her human nature, and her capacity for perseverance proved her almost super-human. These visitations changed the woman by strengthening her spiritually, for she gained might through combat.  

In the psychic stage, the holy woman had premonitions about life events, such as births and deaths, and looming political crises. She was granted a special intuition that allowed her to discern the spiritual condition of others and offer them appropriate counsel, which put her in the position of a spiritual authority. In the doctrinal stage, she received visions of images meant to instruct, equip, and inspire meditation, and which made possible the devotional visions of the fourth stage. The devout nun or tertiary committed her mental energies to imagining herself to be physically present as a witness to the historical episodes of Jesus’ childhood, his ministry, and his Crucifixion. When she passed from bystander to active participant in his suffering, she had transitioned to the fifth stage, participatory. This was the moment for which the holy woman had fervently prayed. The ultimate end of her meditations was to realize the absolute agony of the Crucifixion itself, when she could immerse herself in the redeeming sufferings of the Savior—a spiritual gain which came at a significant physical cost. Her ability to suffer horrific pain while serving others contributed to the image of the afflicted woman as a saint, for she was identified

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with Jesus, who suffered all-consuming pain while redeeming the souls of humankind. Emotional and physical participation in the Crucifixion also allowed the woman to transcend the boundaries between male and female, which proved “enormously liberating, for in the Crucifixion women saw a powerful male figure saving the world by suffering passively, as women suffer. The opposites of passive and active, female and male, were reconciled in this single act.”

The participatory stage empowered the holy woman to begin an active ministry of miracles and healing in her community. The Holy Mother would appear to her to welcome her as an apprentice saint, bringing her together with her son Jesus. Mary might first allow the woman to hold the infant Christ in her arms, but later would offer his adult hand to her in mystical marriage. When this happened, the new bride was usually ushered into the sixth, or unitive, stage, where she achieved complete union with the divine, expressed through the sensation of erotic love. After having fully identified with Christ through imitation of his earthly life, and being perfectly united with him through rapturous ecstasy, the woman could now comprehend the divine cosmic order in the final ordering stage, near the end of her life on earth.

The three women of this study share in common the experience of having begun their formation as mystics with a purgative stage marked by visitations from Satan or his demonic agents, bent on tempting and tormenting the devout woman to the point of forsaking her mission to serve God and others with her whole being. They also share in common their victory in

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overcoming those temptations and becoming vital spiritual leaders in their communities. In the words of their biographers, here are their stories.¹¹

**Beata Elena Valentini da Udine, Augustinian Tertiary**

Elena Valentini da Udine (1395/96-1458) began her devotional life as an Augustinian tertiary several years after the death of her husband. Born of a noble family, she had been given in marriage at the age of fifteen to a Florentine knight, Antonio Cavalcanti, and together they had six children. When her husband died in September, 1441, after falling ill upon his return from a visit to Venice as ambassador, Elena, according to her biographer Simone da Roma,

> “cut the noble hair on her head, with all the other ornaments that she wore on her head, and she threw them into the coffin where her dead husband lay, saying: ‘Here are your hair and ornaments, take them with you below the earth, because for your love I wore these and all other ornaments and splendors. You, dead, abandon me and I renounce you as husband and so choose for myself as my husband and spouse my Lord Jesus Christ; to whom I bind myself and offer to be his servant and bride, promising to my Lord never again to take another husband, but to serve him God alone, because the Scripture says ‘To serve God is to reign.’’” ¹²

¹¹ I relate the story of each woman as it was told by her original biographer. I have relied upon the first *vita* written about each of them soon after their deaths, in an effort to present the testimony of those who were closest to them. In each case, this first, original *vita* provided the source material for subsequent hagiographic texts. Those texts are covered in Chapters 4 and 5 of this study.

¹² “Tagliose li soi nobili capelli del capo, con tutti soi altri ornamenti che in testa portava, e si li buttò sopra la cassa dove morto iaceva el suo marito dicendo: «Ecco li toi capelli e ornamenti, cun ti soto terra gli porta, perché per tuo amore li ò portati questi e ogni altri ornamenti e pompe. Tu, morto, mi arbandoni e mi te renuncio per marito e si me elezo per mio marito e sposo il mio signor Giesù Christo; al quale me obligo et offerisco de esser sua serva e sposa, prometendo al mio Signore mai più altro marito tore [togliere], ma solo ad esso Dio servire, perché dice la Scrittura ‘Servire Deo regnare est’».“ Simone da Roma, *Legenda della beata Helena da Udene*, 128. “Servire Deo regnare est” comes, not from Scripture, but from the “Collect for Peace,” a prayer in the book of liturgy, *Sacramentary of St. Gelasius*, and the line, which is attributed to St. Augustine, is based upon Mark 10:35-45 and II Timothy 2:12. Venice had captured Udine in 1420, and Elena’s husband had been vocal in his opposition to Venetian control. See Frazier, *Possible Lives*, 227. Dyan Elliott addresses the democratization of the *sponsa Christi* with the emergence of the sensual spousal relationship between Christ and, not just monastic women, but women with various sexual histories, as found in the hagiographic texts of the Beguines. See Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women*, 200–
She spent several years caring for her children and living a penitential life, committing herself to the care of her neighbors, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, providing shelter to the poor, and helping loved ones bury their dead, all the while exhorting them to practice prayer, confession, good works, and forgiveness. In 1452, eleven years after becoming a widow, Elena formally associated herself with the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine as a tertiary. She had been inspired by the preaching of Augustinian theologian Fra Angelo da San Severino, who visited the Church of Santa Lucia in Udine and spoke of the marvelous blessings of grace and forgiveness bestowed upon those who take up the habit and devote themselves to a life of discipline and contemplation. Simone da Roma recorded that upon hearing the sermon, Elena looked up to see the heavens open, and “immediately with tears, with weeping she threw herself at the feet of the preacher begging him to grant her that glorious habit she desired.” Fra Angelo gladly consented, and with her vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience, Elena became the first Udinese citizen to become an Augustinian tertiary. She returned to her home one last

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13 Simone da Roma devoted a very short chapter to Elena’s “caritade” (133), but Tilatti explains that a later biographer, Giacomo da Udine, committed greater space to her good works. See Tilatti’s comments in Simone da Roma, *Legenda della beata Helena*, 38-39.

14 While Elena’s hagiographers did not always date the key events of her life—especially her husband’s death and her initiation as a tertiary—notarial documents often provide such information. See Tilatti’s comments in Simone da Roma, *Legenda della beata Helena*, 24-25.

15 “…subito con lacrime, con pianti se gitò ai piedi de lo predicatore, pregandolo che quello glorioso habito a lei concedere volesse.” Simone da Roma, *Legenda della beata Helena*, 130.

16 Tilatti points out that tertiaries were not required to take a vow of poverty as nuns were. He suggests that Elena’s biographer likely credited her with taking such a vow because he believed that she had certainly lived a life of poverty as any beata would have. See Tilatti’s comments in Simone da Roma, *Legenda della beata Helena*, 45-46.
time to gather her belongings, sell them all, and distribute the proceeds to the poor. Then she tied a rope around her neck, in remembrance of Jesus being bound and led away to his trial and execution, to be led to the house of her widowed sister Profeta, who had also become an Augustinian tertiary, where she entered a cell to begin her life as a recluse. Because her Lord had born the punishment for the sins of humanity all over his body, and because she had contributed to his burden with her own youthful vanities, Elena sought to inflict similar pain upon her own body with symbolic implements of penance and imitation: a hair shirt, a crown of iron spikes, a whip, ropes for her neck and wrists, and thirty-three stones in her shoes for the thirty-three years Jesus walked the earth. She slept on a bed of stones and pebbles as a reminder of the three days and nights he slept in the tomb. Simone da Roma lauded Elena: for her grande l’abstinentia, because she lived on bread and water, and on rare occasions the roots of herbs; for her fervente oratione, because she prayed and wept copious tears every day for nine hours—seven for each canonical hour, one for confession and communion, and one for the remission of sins for all sinners; and for her solitaria vita, silentio et obedientia, because she took a vow of silence, speaking to no one without the permission of her confessor, except on Christmas, taking literally the words of James, who submitted that anyone who does not offend a neighbor with words is perfect. At a time when Christians took Communion only annually in most cases,

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17 Giacomo da Udine records this episode in his vita. See Tilatti’s comments in Simone da Roma, *Legenda della beata Helena*, 48-49. Giacomo da Udine and his vita will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 of this study.


19 Simone da Roma, *Legenda della beata Helena*, 139, 141, 149. James 3:2 states: “For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.”
Elena received the holy Eucharist daily, with such weeping and lamentations that her cries could be heard in the streets outside the church. She joyfully went for days without eating, her hunger having been satisfied by the Eucharistic wafer.\(^\text{20}\)

Elena’s biographers credited her with numerous miracles during her life as a holy woman. Simone da Roma recorded in his *vita* five different miracles that resulted from Elena’s fervent prayers: a woman named Domenega was healed of epileptic seizures; the son of a man named Orlando, falsely accused of theft, was found innocent and released from prison; Elena’s sister Profeta was healed of an infirmity that caused debilitating fatigue; a woman named Benvenuta, whose husband of three years had begun to beat her for her inability to produce a child, saw peace restored in her home and the birth of a daughter, nine months after visiting the beata; and an important Udinese citizen, Signor Cristofalo, was healed, when on the brink of death, of an illness for which the doctors could find no cure.\(^\text{21}\) But Elena received no healing for her own physical malady, for she lay sick on her bed of stones—now padded with a bit of straw at the insistence of her prior—for three years, until she finally succumbed to her illness on April 23, 1458, surrounded by her Augustinian brothers and sisters.\(^\text{22}\) Her biographer recorded that just before taking her last breath, Elena had elevated her head and leaned toward the direction of the Crucifix, and miraculously, after her soul left her body, her head remained in that position.\(^\text{23}\)

\(^{20}\) Simone da Roma, *Legenda della beata Helena*, 145. Caroline Walker Bynum addresses the practice of subsisting on the Eucharist alone in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. The subject is given extensive coverage in Chapter 3 of this study.


\(^{22}\) Simone da Roma, *Legenda della beata Helena*, 175-76. Tilatti explains that Elena likely became ill from two broken legs, a condition that was confirmed when her body was examined as part of the canonization process (69).

Simone da Roma wrote that, upon the death of the *beata* Elena, the prior of Santa Lucia, Fra Francesco dei Rosi da Venezia, called upon him to preach on her life and miracles and to record her *vita*.24 Traditionally, a potential saint’s confessor would transcribe his encounters with her to compile a *legenda*, but in Elena’s case, her order turned, not to her highly-regarded Dominican confessor Leonardo da Udine, but to an Augustinian theologian and professor at the University of Padua. If Simone da Roma had ever met Elena or heard her confession, he did not mention it. Perhaps the Hermits chose him because he was one of their own, and well-acquainted with the application process for canonization because of his position at a major university. While he made no reference to a confessor’s notes or documentary evidence recorded by eye witnesses, Simone’s direct quotations of Elena’s words and the enumeration of her trials and visions reflected the common format used by members of religious orders when cataloging the experiences of a holy man or woman. He completed his work the same year Elena died, and the Udinese Hermits had it notarized as a legal document and endorsed by their provincial, Andrea da Ferrara. However, Simone da Roma had broken with convention when he wrote Elena’s biography in the vernacular, rather than Latin. Perhaps he did so to promote her cult in the Friuli region of Italy, and to appeal to local women who might become inspired to dedicate themselves as tertiaries to the relatively new Augustinian Third Order in Udine.25 But for Elena’s cult to receive formal recognition from Rome, her case had to be presented with documents recorded in


25 Frazier, *Possible Lives*, 231-33. Frazier notes that vernacular accounts were often meant for a female audience.
Latin. Alison Knowles Frazier has proposed an explanation for the lack of a Latin account written by a confessor on Elena’s behalf:

“But what looks like disorganization may actually reflect a plan. Similar cases of what appears to be poorly managed paperwork characterize most of the Hermits’ interactions with religious women in the northern Italian cities during the Quattrocento. The Latin vitae of Maddalena Alberici (d. 1465) and Cristina the Penitent (Agostina Camozzi, d. 1458), for example, were composed not by confessors but by learned Hermits with more exalted positions in the order: Paolo Olmi…wrote on Maddalena and Ambrogio da Cora on Cristina. So it is possible that the Hermits managed the difficult sanctity of charismatic women by encouraging the production of local vernacular lives as both propaganda and legal [notarized] documents and then treated these documents as source material on which to base the official vitae required by Church tradition to secure formal recognition of sanctity.”

According to Frazier, Paolo Olmi (1414-1484), a well-respected Augustinian Hermit and theologian from Padua, also produced a vita Helenae utinensis, no longer extant but mentioned in the work of Giacomo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo (1434-1520), another of Elena’s biographers and considered a reliable source. Frazier has speculated that, because of Olmi’s position of authority as seven-time vicar general over the Hermits and his promotion of other Augustinian women through his writings (including a biography of Augustine’s mother Monica), his account of Elena’s life could possibly have served as the authoritative Latin version meant to accompany Simone’s vernacular account to Rome. Because there is no record of any fifteenth-century pope’s formal recognition of Elena’s cult, there can be no certainty as to the nature or purpose of Olmi’s lost text.

26 Frazier, Possible Lives, 233-34. Frazier also cites the case of Rita da Cascia, for whom there is no extant contemporary vita.

27 Frazier, Possible Lives, 240-44.
Demonstrating the significance of trials with demonic forces in the formation of the holy woman and the efficacy of her work as an agent of the divine, Simone da Roma opened his *vita* of Elena with these words: “[This work] deals with her holy life, with her great penitence, temptation and tribulation.” He entitled one of his fifteen chapters, “*Della temptatione a lei date e percussione dal diavolo,***” in which he detailed eight different episodes of temptation and physical assault that Elena endured from the devil. He introduced them by explaining:

“Considering that whom God loves he corrects and chastens and receives unto himself every good child as the good father does, the Lord wanted his servant to prove how strong and persevering she was in his service. For this reason he gave the Devil power over the body of the blessed Elena, as he allowed with long-suffering Job….And the more the creature is an important servant of God, the more the Devil strives to tempt her. Therefore with Satan seeing the blessed Elena to be a great servant of the Lord, God permitted many temptations, and scourges visible and invisible he (Satan) gave her, of which there are many, but for the sake of brevity we will look at only eight.”

Simone perceived that Satan would not waste his time on those whom he already had firmly in his grip, but sought to render useless those who would serve as vessels of the Lord. Just as Satan recognized the identity of Jesus as Savior of the world and endeavored to tempt him into forsaking his mission, he also was able to recognize the sanctity and service of Elena, and he made every effort to lure her from her intended purpose. Simone wanted his reader to see that,


29 “Considerando che quello che Dio ama correze e castiga e riceve a sé ogni bono fiolo come fa el bon padre, volse [volle] il Signore la sua serva provare como in lo suo servitio era forte e perseverante. Per la qual cosa dette al Diavolo podestà sopra el corpo de la beata Helena, como se leze del patientissimo Job….E quanto più la criatura è mazor serva de Dio, tanto più el Diavolo de temptarlo se sforza. Vedendo adonca [dunque] Satanasso Helena beata essere grande serva del Signore, Dio permetete molte temptatione, e flagelli visibilmente et invisibili gli dette, le qual sono molte, ma solo otto per brevità vederemo.” Simone da Roma, *Legenda della beata Helena*, 153.
for her imitation of Christ, Elena was treated as a threat to the devil’s plan to see evil prevail. And just as Jesus was able to resist temptation, so was his faithful servant Elena.

In his vita, Simone da Roma recorded eight of Elena’s encounters with demonic forces immediately after he presented the details of her vow of silence, where he explained that she lived a very solitary life, never leaving the isolation of her cell except to go to Santa Lucia every morning for prayers. Her cell was her desert, and the devil pursued her there, just as he had pursued Jesus in the solitude of the wilderness. Andrea Tilatti explains that, from the presentation of each of the beata’s biographers, “one understands that the cella and the tertia militia are respectively the place and the means by which comes to pass the holiness of Elena Valentini; but in every case she models herself on the criteria of imitatio Christi.”

The devil chose first to torment his subject by sending his demons, who remained unseen, to fly over the roof of her sister’s house, and then directly into her cell while she prayed during the night. They caused such a clamor that the roof tiles seemed to fall to the ground, and they made terrible noises within her cell. Elena called for her sister Profeta to help her search the house, but they could find no one, and when they inspected the roof the next morning, nothing had been disturbed. This great racket happened many other times, not just to Elena, but to her sister and their companions. While the demons succeeded in disrupting the holy woman’s prayers, they failed in instilling fear in her, for she declared to them that her God was with her and she would not be afraid. In introducing the second temptation, Simone made reference to

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30 “…si intende come la cella e la tertia militia siano rispettivamente il luogo e il tramite per cui si adempie la santità di Elena Valentini; ma in ogni caso questa si modella sui criteri dell’imitatio Christi.” Tilatti in Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 50.

31 Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 154.
De opificio Deo, by the early Christian writer Lactantius (ca. 250-325), who suggested that victory over the enemy was impossible without combat. In Elena’s case, combat came in the form of the chase, for on many occasions while the woman was praying in her cell, the devil appeared and tried to beat her, forcing her to run around and around in her cell to escape his grasp, until she fell in exhaustion before the Crucifix, saying: “Oh, my sweet love Jesus, help me and give me succour, because I can’t go on any longer.”

God always came to her aid and forced the devil to flee. Elena related these episodes to the prioress Antonia and to her fellow tertiaries when she was on her sickbed. It was during a time of sickness and distress that Satan came to her with a third temptation. This time he told her to throw herself over a balcony, but recognizing the source of this urge, she made the sign of the cross and forced the devil to leave her. In a similar episode, Satan tempted her to hang herself, even showing her how to wrap the cord to make a noose, but again, with fortitude and the sign of the cross, Elena told her tormentor to leave her alone, and he did. She shared her secret of this encounter with her sister Profeta.

While any modern reader would believe that the tertiary suffered from a mental condition, likely induced by malnutrition and sleep deprivation, which caused her to struggle with suicidal thoughts, Simone portrayed her as a devout woman targeted by the devil and encouraged to take her own life because of her potential to be used to draw others to Christ, his mortal enemy.


33 Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 155-56.

34 Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach address mental illness brought on by austerities in The Mystic Mind: The Psychology of Medieval Mystics and Ascetics (London: Routledge, 2006). The subject receives extensive coverage in Chapter 3 of this study.
In recording a fourth mode of temptation—and perhaps the most important in Elena’s efforts to live a life in imitation of Christ—Simone demonstrated that Elena succeeded in overcoming her enemy in the same manner in which Jesus had: she used Scripture as her weapon. The biographer related a time when Satan disguised himself as a good angel and tried to appeal to Elena’s vanity, or vanagloria, and he drew a parallel between this encounter and the temptation in the Garden of Eden, when Satan used vanity to gain victory over Adam and Eve by proposing that they could be like God with a knowledge of both good and evil. Simone wrote:

“He [the “angel”] appeared to her and said: ‘Oh, my Elena, why don’t you go throughout the land, shouting your good works, displaying them so that people, hearing your great penitence and the good life that you lead, will come to God and convert? Don’t you know that the Savior says that our life and works have to be shown to every person? “In this way your light shines before men, so that you might be seen by them.”’”

Here Satan offered his own rendering of Matthew 5:16, which actually reads: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” This “good angel” made no mention of glory to God, but made Elena and her glory the focus of his efforts. Satan had manipulated the words of God when he appeared to Eve as a serpent to tempt her to eat of the forbidden fruit. Unlike Eve, who entertained the crafty serpent’s questions and allowed him to press on, Elena immediately recognized the evil before her and did not engage her tempter, but simply said: “‘But don’t you know what the Savior says, …

35 “…gli aparše e disse: «O Helena mia, perché non vai per la terra cridando le tue operatione bone, manifestandole accì che le persone, aldendo [audire] la gran penitentia e bona vita che tu fai, a Dio se vegnano a convertire? Non sa’ tu che dice il Salvatore che la nostra vita et operatione deve essere manifesta ad ogni persona? ‘Sic luceat lux vestra coram hominibus ut videamini ab eis’”. Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 156.

36 In Genesis 3:1, the serpent asked Eve, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” when he knew that God had allowed Adam and Eve to eat from every tree except the one.
‘Don’t inform your left hand what your right hand does’? Go away, Satan.” She quoted the words of Jesus to cause her enemy to flee. When Satan tempted Jesus from the temple’s highest point, he also distorted the meaning of a psalm when he suggested that the Son of God throw himself down in anticipation of angelic rescue, but Jesus responded tersely, quoting Deuteronomy 6:6: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” In relating the details of this particular temptation, Simone accomplished two goals. First, he separated Elena from Eve, who failed in resisting temptation and was held responsible for making sin a part of the human condition, thus tarnishing the image of women for centuries as weak and easily deceived. By recognizing the devil for who he really was and confronting him without falling into his trap, Elena provided a moment of redemption for women by, in this instance, overcoming the stigma of Eve. Second, the biographer portrayed his subject as Christ-like in her response to temptation, for in imitation of Christ, she repelled the enemy with a proper rendering of Scripture. Simone portrayed Elena as a victor in both her role as a woman saint and as an imitator of Christ.

According to Simone, the devil, “seeing that he could not overcome the blessed Elena with slaps and words,” took more drastic measures to throw—quite literally—the holy woman off her intended course. Recording a fifth temptation, he wrote that Elena encountered the devil

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38 Satan twisted the meaning of Psalm 91:11 when he suggested that the Son of God throw himself from the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, for God would “give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways” (also quoted in the temptation narrative in Luke 4:1-13, in verse 10). But the author of the psalm intended that such protection was provided from danger to those who “dwell in the shelter of the Most High,” not to those who test God’s protection from the highest point.

as she crossed a bridge to get to Santa Lucia for prayers one winter morning. As she reached the center of the bridge, the devil picked her up and tossed her into the water that flowed beneath. She would have drowned, had she not called out for help from the Lord and received it. Upon exiting the water, she declared: “‘You, enemy of human nature, do not have so much power that you can impede me this morning from going to Mass and receiving my Lord.’”\textsuperscript{40} Elena continued on to the church, soaking wet, and stayed for the entire service.

Simone grouped a number of physical assaults from the devil’s agents into a sixth temptation, lamenting: “Oh, glorious beata, and who could ever tell of the great beatings and whippings given to you by the demons? Considering that many times day and night they attacked her, giving her heavy beatings.”\textsuperscript{41} He explained that when these attacks occurred, Elena would invoke divine authority and call out to her fellow tertiary, Domenica. Each time Domenica arrived to her cell, the demons fled. Elena would beg her friend to stay, so that the demons would not torment her, since the presence of another seemed to keep them at bay. But the noises that Domenica could hear when she approached the cell frightened her enough that she was too afraid to walk through the house. In another instance, marking the seventh temptation, demons grabbed Elena and carried her up high, only to let her body fall to the ground, causing her limbs and feet to be badly bruised and sprained. Domenica heard the noise and came running to Elena’s cell and

\textsuperscript{40} “‘Tu, inimico de la humana natura, non sarai de tanta possanza de impedirme che questa matina vada a messa et a ricever lo mio Signore.’” Simone da Roma, \textit{Legenda della beata Helena}, 156-57.

found her friend lying on the ground, as if dead. She lifted the battered figure into bed and was surprised to hear Elena speak: “‘Blessed be the name of God.’”

The last of the eight temptations recorded by Simone da Roma likely led to Elena’s long illness and eventual death. The Hermit wrote: “Finally the demons broke the bones [femurs] of the blessed Elena in half, and immediately the prior of San Antonio was sent for, who knew how to treat the bones. [Her bones] having been treated, the demons returned the following night, and again broke her bones in two parts. When the blessed Elena saw this, she did not want her bones to be treated anymore, saying: ‘Since it pleases God, so I am content with his will.’” She suffered with great patience for three years, continually assaulted by demons but always giving glory to her God. She suffered in gratitude for the pain her Lord had endured on her behalf as he hung on the cross, and she prayed that her pain would be found pleasing to him.

Simone explained that God allowed these temptations, but then gave marvelous visions to his servant as a way of comforting her. He recorded ten such visions. In the first—and foundational—vision, which Elena experienced on many occasions, Jesus instructed her to go to her little chapel, constructed specifically for her, in the corner of the entrance of Santa Lucia every morning, and to stay until every Mass and every prayer of the Divine Office had been said. When she asked him how she would be able to stay that long, he told her to begin the morning

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with the priest for confession and the Eucharist, and her Lord would make himself visible to the
eyes of her soul as well as the eyes of her physical body, and that would sustain her. Other
visions often came to her during the late hours while she was in prayer, awaiting the arrival of
her sister Profeta with her nightly glass of bile and vinegar. Profeta would find her sister in a
state of overwhelming joy, because she had received some magnificent vision—of the great
splendor of Jesus, of heavenly paradise, or of visitations from her Savior, his Holy Mother, St.
Augustine, his mother Monica, and St. Nicholas of Tolentino, who was the first Augustinian to
be canonized, in 1446 during Elena’s lifetime. The two blessed women, Mary and Monica, also
visited their devoted friend while she was confined to her bed with sickness. As promised, Elena
was rewarded for her devotion with visions of Christ’s fully-formed body rising above the altar
during Mass, as well as visitations in her chapel from the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Andrea Tilatti has suggested that the brothers in religious orders were able to live a life that
reflected the “true and proper” imitation of Christ, for their work put them in contact with the
world outside the convent walls. They lived the vita apostolica within the confines of their cells,
but also through their ministry among the citizens in their towns—the sick, the poor, and anyone
in spiritual or material need. Religious women, however, were encouraged to remain isolated.
Even Elena confined herself to her cell or her little wooden chapel. So they could live the vita
apostolica in the way that it required simple living, fasting, and prayer. But in place of an active
apostolic ministry among the people, Tilatti argues that women embraced the sufferings and
passion experience of Jesus as their form of imitatio Christi. Their suffering allowed these


women to imitate the work of Christ that ultimately led to the salvation of humankind. But the suffering they endured while being tormented by demonic agents ultimately proved that they, in particular, were chosen by God, who allowed the trials to occur for his divine purpose.

**Santa Caterina Vigri da Bologna, Franciscan Nun**

Caterina Vigri (1413-1463), who would become St. Catherine of Bologna—patron saint of artists, but more importantly here, against temptations—belonged to a noble family, and her father served the Marquis of Ferrara, Niccolò III d’Este, whose family governed the city as vicars of the pope. The Virgin Mary appeared to her father the night before her birth to tell him that he would have a daughter who would be a light to the world. As evidence of her future sanctity, the baby Caterina neither cried upon her arrival nor took in any sustenance for three days after. Young Caterina lived at the court of the Este family, performing the duties of a lady-in-waiting to the marquis’ wife Parisina, and providing companionship to his daughter Margherita. In 1426, at age thirteen, Caterina left the Este court to answer a calling to the religious life. She entered the monastery of Corpus Christi at Ferrara, a semi-religious house of *pinzochere* who informally followed the Rule of St. Augustine. She arrived not long after the founder Bernardina Sedazzari (ca. 1370-1425) had died, and the house members had become divided over whether to maintain their lay status or formally associate with the Augustinians by taking vows as professed nuns. Ultimately, when a pious noblewoman of Ferrara, Verde Pio da Carpi, became patron of Corpus Christi and petitioned for official papal approval—receiving it in

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1431—of the monastery in expanded form as a Clarissan house associated with the Observant Franciscans, Caterina and her sisters would become Poor Clares.\textsuperscript{49} The Observant Franciscans held great influence in Ferrara.\textsuperscript{50} Reformed preachers Bernardino da Siena and Giovanni da Capistrano visited the city on a number of occasions. Fra Bernardino, who advocated for enclosed convents for women, usually stayed at the Franciscan Church of Santo Spirito, where the sisters of Corpus Christi attended Mass, and where Caterina made confession. His emblem for the name of Jesus, YHS, could be found on the facades of many buildings in the town. In 1431, Niccolò III requested Bernardino assume the bishopric of Ferrara, and though the preacher refused the position, the townspeople continued to hold him in very high regard.\textsuperscript{51}

During those early years of strife, from roughly 1429 to 1434, Sister Caterina began to experience significant spiritual struggles directly related to the divided alliances within the house.\textsuperscript{52} Not only had she been forced to take sides in the dispute over which rule to follow, but

\textsuperscript{49} Mary Martin McLaughlin discusses the issue of the monastery’s status in “Creating and Re-creating Communities of Women: The Case of Corpus Domini, Ferrara, 1406-1452,” in \textit{Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages}, ed. Judith M. Bennett, Elizabeth A. Clark, Jean F. O’Barr, B. Anne Vilen, and Sarah Westphal-Wihl (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 261-88. McLaughlin refers to the monastery by its present-day name, but Kathleen Arthur points out that its name throughout the fifteenth century was Corpus Christi, and so it will be identified as such in this work. See Kathleen G. Arthur, \textit{Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety: Caterina Vigri and the Poor Clares in Early Modern Ferrara} (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 17.

\textsuperscript{50} A number of holy women of the Quattrocento were associated with the Observant Movement and reform efforts. See Tamar Herzig, “Female Mysticism, Heterodoxy, and Reform,” in \textit{A Companion to Observant Reform in the Later Middle Ages and Beyond}, 255-282. This relationship will receive coverage in Chapter 4 of this study.


\textsuperscript{52} In her treatise, \textit{Le sette armi spirituali}, Caterina mentioned a period of five years in which she passed through a trial of inadequacy from a diabolical source: “…passato la sopra dicta infernale penuria, la quale durò per spatio de cercha anni cinque…” Caterina Vigri, \textit{Le sette armi spirituali}, ed. Antonella Degl’Innocenti (Firenze: SISMEL, 2000), 21 (VII.36). Family therapist Marilyn Hall, as part of the
in doing so, she had had to align herself against the will of her loving Mother Lucia, who had fought to preserve the community’s lay status. And the woman who eventually made a more austere rule possible, Verde Pio, had used her financial means and social influence to impose her will upon the sisters as a whole, seemingly with greater regard for her grand vision for a Clarissan house to rival the one in Mantua than for the wishes of the founder and her successor. It was during this period of turmoil that Caterina encountered the devil, who disguised himself once as the Virgin Mary, a second time as Christ crucified, and a third as the Virgin with the Christ child in arms, in an effort to trick the young woman into betraying her own conscience. But Italian scholar Cecilia Foletti has suggested that Caterina also dealt with “the devil in flesh and bone: that is the pious woman, Verde Pio da Carpi.”

Caterina showed great care for the souls of the novices in her charge, whom she called le spose [brides] del mio signore Ihesu Christo, instructing them in the ways of loving God through humility, and in humility, obedience, especially obedience through suffering evil, as Jesus did on the cross. She lived out those central tenets of humility and obedience before them, introduction to Hugh Feiss’ translation of The Seven Spiritual Weapons, has examined Caterina’s life and writings for evidence of depression, using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, and has determined that the nun did exhibit classic signs of depression, including a sense of worthlessness, excessive tearfulness, inability to concentrate, and loss of energy. Hall believes that The Seven Spiritual Weapons provides a record of three episodes of depression and the spiritual resources Caterina employed to bring herself out of each of them. See Feiss, “Introduction,” in Catherine of Bologna, The Seven Spiritual Weapons, 21-28.


54 For one example, see Illuminata Bembo, Specchio di illuminazione, ed. Silvia Mostaccio (Firenze: SISMEL, 2001), 10 (II.2).
referring to herself with terms such as “worm, stench, filthy carcass, ingrate, ignoramus, sloth, full of sin, worthy of hell.”

She was credited with “desir[ing] always to adhere herself in all things to the divine will.”

She taught the necessity of prayer in avoiding temptation, and rather than engaging in the more unusual forms of asceticism, Caterina made fervent prayer—”devout and humble and continual and violent prayer”—the focus of her devotional life.

She prayed day and night, forsaking sleep and crying copious tears. When she struggled to fight an overwhelming need to sleep, she stood with the outstretched arms of the cross, as a form of penance, until she could feel her soul begin to leave her body. From that point on, she was able to resist sleep without issue.

She conceded that in her efforts toward perfect obedience, in not giving into the devil, she wrestled with deep bitterness, weeping to the point that tears stopped flowing, and blood flowed in their place.

She suffered from intense headaches, or “dryness of


57 “…la divota e humile e continua e violente oratione…” Illuminata Bembo, Specchio di illuminazione, 33 (VI.2). Hugh Feiss calls Caterina’s ascetic practices “discreet and moderate.” See his “Introduction,” in Catherine of Bologna, The Seven Spiritual Weapons, 15. However, Sabadino degli Arienti, in his biography of the saint, wrote: “She continually humbled herself under the necessary scourges, and she bore them with mental peace, for this purpose she was able to find Christ in them.” “Humiliosse continuamente sotto li occurrenti flagelli, et quilli con pace mentale sostenea, a ciò potesse in loro Cristo trovare.” Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, “De Catherina Beata da Bologna,” 209.

58 Illuminata Bembo devoted a chapter entitled “Cum quanta asseduità se dava alla oratione,” to Caterina’s prayer life in her biography of her friend, Specchio di illuminazione, 33-51 (VI). Caterina related her struggle with sleep in Le sette armi spirituali, VII.111-12.

59 Caterina Vigri, Le sette armi spirituali, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 18 (VII.23). This episode is reminiscent of Jesus’ time of prayer in the Garden of Gesthemane just before his arrest, recorded in Luke 22:44, when “being in agony, he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.”
the head,” that sometimes made prayer horribly painful, if not impossible. It was during this trying time that God chose to test the devout woman by removing from her “the flame of divine love” and depriving her mind’s eye of “the sweet presence of Jesus Christ,” which had always been a great comfort to her. After a short time of terrible suffering, during a night of prayer on the feast of the Nativity, the Virgin Mary suddenly appeared before her holding her newborn baby, and she placed the Christ child in the arms of the praying nun. At the sight of the divine presence in her very arms, all bitterness melted from her heart, and she knew that this was her reward for remaining steadfast in prayer.

The population of Corpus Christi at Ferrara grew steadily from 1433, when it housed just ten nuns, to 1455, when one hundred five nuns were registered as residents, in response to Caterina’s growing reputation as a teacher, visionary, and miracle worker. Certainly word had spread that Caterina had left the convent’s bread in the care of her Lord to bake for four hours while she went to listen to an Observant preacher’s sermon, only to return to beautiful loaves that appeared as roses, sought after by the townsfolk as a sign of a miracle. Surely many knew of

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61 “…voldendola Idio provare, li sostroe la fiama dell’amore divino e privoe le ochi soi mentalle de la dolce prexentia de Christo Iesù, dal quale spese volte soleva esser consolata.” Caterina Vigri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 41 (VII.114). Caterina also mentioned this time of being deprived of the consoling “flame of divine love” earlier in VII.24, when she discussed the headaches and the tears of blood.


64 Illuminata Bembo, *Specchio di illuminazione*, 17-18 (III.4). The preacher was Alberto da Sarteano, disciple of Bernardino of Siena and vicar general of the Observant Franciscans. Silvia Mostaccio cites Cecilia Foletti’s work in her critical edition of Caterina’s *Le sette armi spirituali* (167-70) in determining that Fra Alberto visited the convent in 1442. See 17n.33.
her efficacious prayers for errant souls who had been convinced by the enemy to stray, but saw
the enemy now depart from them with their own eyes. Caterina’s prayers, the cornerstone of her
devotional life, brought recognition to the convent of Corpus Christi, contributing to its
development into a center of Observant reform among the houses of the Poor Clares.65

When the Franciscan Observants sought to establish a new Clarissan house at Bologna,
they elected Caterina, now considered un’altra seconda sancta Chiara, to serve as abbess.66 The
duke of Ferrara, Borso d’Este, who had grown up with Caterina when she served as companion
to his sister Margherita, tried in vain to use his political might to keep the city’s holy woman
from leaving.67 Caterina departed Ferrara in July of 1456 with at least a dozen sisters and set out
to establish Corpus Domini. This, too, quickly became an important spiritual center, attracting
the daughters of aristocratic families throughout the region.68 Caterina continued teaching
humility, obedience, and the importance of suffering evil in imitation of Christ. Having endured
encounters with Satan herself in her days as a young nun, she now possessed the spiritual
strength to wrestle with him in an effort to protect the souls of those in her care, though at this
point in her life her physical strength was beginning to fail her. One particular episode illustrated

65 Cecilia Foletti’s comments in the appendix of Le sette armi spirituali, ed. Foletti, 165.

66 Illuminata Bembo, Specchio di illuminazione, 53 (VII.7).

67 Arthur, Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety, 17. Arthur refers to correspondence held at the
state archives of Modena between the duke’s secretary, Ludovico Casella, and the bishop of Ferrara,
Francesco dal Legname, in which Borso d’Este assured him that he would make sure they did not lose
their dona santa. Aviad Kleinberg, in Prophets in Their Own Countries, discusses the ways in which
medieval communities identified living saints among them based on personalities, rather than on set
criteria. Caterina was one such personality, and the reverence paid to her during her life and after her
death will be discussed in Chapter 5 in this study.

68 André Vauchez, “Santa Caterina Vigri (1413-1463) e il suo processo di canonizzazione (1586-1712),”
in Pregare con le immagini: il breviario di Caterina Vigri, edited by Vera Fortunati and Claudio Leonardi
(Firenze: SISMEL, 2004), 3-7; here 4.
the abbess’s divine ability to overcome the enemy in the struggle for souls. Sister Samaritana, a most devout nun and the first to pass away at the new Corpus Domini, lay close to death in her bed, seized with pain and torment by an evil spirit that tore at her body and mind for two days and two nights, frightened the young sisters who were praying for her. But Caterina entered the room with her cane and confronted the evil that had been attacking the dying nun, saying: “Oh, wicked enemy of the human species…you don’t have such strength that you can disturb the souls of such creatures that remain discouraged, since I am certain that this soul is saved and has been a faithful servant of Jesus Christ….Now leave, evil one, and have no more power here!” After having exorcised the demon from Samaritana’s soul, Caterina told her charge to go in peace to eternal life, and she watched the angels carry her soul away.69

Ultimately, on 9 March 1463, the abbess Caterina, who had for decades administered care with her little box of medicines to so many fellow nuns in need of physical healing, succumbed to her own illness, having suffered from a hemorrhage for many years.70 Sister Illuminata Bembo (ca. 1417-1493), a woman of Venetian nobility who took vows in 1430 and became Caterina’s close companion and disciple, wrote her friend’s vita in the vernacular very soon after her death. But her expanded version, completed in 1469 under the title Specchio di illuminazione, held greater influence, despite its lack of wide circulation until its first print run in 1787, for it provided the source material for the other biographies of Caterina written over the next decades.

69 “‘O malegno inimico de la humana generatione…tu non harai tanta força che tu perturbi l’anime di tante creature che remanighino male edifichate, peroché sono certa che questa anima è salva et è stata fidelle serva de Ihesu Christo….Or partirte, malegno, e qui più non havere posanza!’” Caterina’s words as recorded by Illuminata Bembo in Specchio di illuminazione, 58-60 (VII.28-37).

70 Illuminata Bembo, Specchio di illuminazione, 13 (II.12); 60 (VII.40); and 69-71 (VIII.5-12). Also Sabadino degli Arienti, “De Catherina Beata da Bologna,” 225-27.
Sister Illuminata, who had been with Caterina during much of her time at Corpus Christi in Ferrara and had moved with her to Bologna, did not record details of the demonic temptations her abbess had endured in her early years. Instead, she focused on the earthly struggles she had faced in her efforts to practice obedience to her superiors and, at the same time, to God’s will. Perhaps she chose to allow the future saint to speak for herself, for certainly she knew of Caterina’s little book, her Libro devoto, that she had written in the Ferrarese dialect with advice for the novices in her charge, in which she discussed extensively her face-to-face encounters with the devil and how he tried to deceive her. Her own trials with the enemy had inspired her to compose this manual “for the comfort of those persons who have entered this most noble battle of this obedience and, being strongly opposed and tormented by their own will…sadden themselves greatly, thinking that, for this, they lose every merit of obedience.” She had experienced that very fear, and so she sought to arm others with the weapons necessary to do battle against the cunning evil one. She wrote what would later be titled Le sette armi spirituali in 1438, but made changes to it sometime between 1450 and 1456. Caterina kept the only copy hidden for her personal use, referring to it for the lessons and sermons she delivered to her nuns, but when she knew the end of life was near, she turned it over to her confessor and asked that he send it to Corpus Christi in Ferrara. After her death, the treatise was copied and circulated widely.

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71 Silvia Mostaccio in her introduction to Illuminata Bembo, Specchio di illuminazione, L.

72 “…per conforto de quelle persone le quale sono intrate a questa nobilissima bataglia de essa obidientia, ed esendo fortemente combatutì e molestati dalla propria voluntade…se contristano fortemente, pensando per questo perdere ogno merito de obedientia.” Caterina Vigri, Le sette armi spirituali, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 4 (Prefazione 7).

73 Kathleen Arthur points out that Caterina’s autograph “‘clean copy’” was written in 1455, with a colophon stating that she composed the work in her cell at Corpus Christi in 1438. See Arthur, Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety, 76.
among other Clarissan houses and beyond. With its first printing in 1475, it gained even greater influence and became an important element in the effort to have Caterina canonized, as well as in the diffusion of vernacular mysticism in the century after her death.\footnote{McGinn, \textit{The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550)}, 296. McGinn notes that the treatise survives in eighteen manuscripts and has been translated into Latin and five other languages.}

Caterina prefaced her book on the seven spiritual weapons by likening the religious life of obedience to combat with the enemy, which can be won only by imitating Christ in his taking up the cross. She wrote:

“Whatever person is of so graceful and most gentle heart that she wishes to take up the cross for Jesus Christ our savior, who died on the field of battle in order to give us life, first take up the weapons necessary [for] such battle…: the first is diligence, the second distrust of oneself, the third confidence in God; the fourth memory of the passion, the fifth memory of one’s own death, the sixth memory of the glory of God, the seventh and last is the authority of sacred Scripture, as Christ Jesus gave the example of this in the desert.”\footnote{“Qualuncha persona fosse de sì elegante e zintilissimo core che pilgiare [pigliare] volese la cruce per Iesù Cristo nostro salvatore, lo quale fo morto in campo de bataglia per nui vivificare, prima prenda le arme necessarie e talle bataglia…: la prima si è dillizentia, la seconda propria difidentia, la terza in Dio confidarsie, la quarta \textit{memoria passionis}, la quinta \textit{memoria mortis propri}, la sesta \textit{memoria glorie Det}, la setima e ultima si è l’auctorità della santa Scriptura, si como de zò ne dè esemplo Cristo Iesù nel diserto.” Caterina Vigri, \textit{Le sette armi spirituali}, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 5 (Prefazione 12).}

Bernard McGinn has noted that while Caterina’s first six weapons, receiving only brief coverage in her treatise, demonstrate that she had studied the works of important Christian writers such as Anthony the Great, Augustine, Francis, Clare, Franciscan poet Jacopone da Todi, and Catherine of Siena, they also reflect very little originality in content. But her extensive coverage of the seventh weapon, which takes up four of the book’s ten chapters and includes autobiographical material concerning her own struggles against Satan’s deceits, offers lessons in temptation and
discernment, spiritual warfare and divine grace, and the importance of reliance on God and meditation on his Holy Word in the battle against the enemy.\textsuperscript{76}

Caterina began her seventh chapter with an explanation: “On the seventh weapon, I will expand more at length. And this I will do in order to reveal a very subtle deception which one of these first sisters [of Corpus Christi] received from the enemy of our salvation.”\textsuperscript{77} She spoke of herself in the third person, for Caterina herself was that first sister to whom she referred, and though she seems to have identified—if only subconsciously—with Eve, by the end of her story, she would be wholly aligned with Christ in her approach to that deceitful enemy. But first, she named the weapon and its purpose: “memory of sacred Scripture, which we must carry in our hearts and from it, so as from a most faithful mother, take counsel in all things we have to do….And with this weapon our savior Jesus Christ vanquished and confounded the devil in the desert, saying: ‘It is written.’”\textsuperscript{78} Here, for a second time, Caterina referenced Jesus’ desert experience, when he was tempted by Satan and fought him with words from Scripture. She warned her charges that they would be approached by the devil, and that he would likely disguise himself as some righteous being, but they could be prepared for his wiles if they would commit

\textsuperscript{76} McGinn, The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550), 296-98.

\textsuperscript{77} “Della settima arma, sopra la quale me extenderò più defuxamente [diffusamente]. E questo farrò per manifestare uno sotilissimo inganno lo quale recevete una de queste premetive sorele dallo nemico della nostra salute…” Caterina Vigri, Le sette armi spirituali, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 13-14 (VII.1).

\textsuperscript{78} “…memoria della santa Scriptura, la quale dovemo portare nel core nostro e da essa, si commo da fidelissima madre, predere consilgio in tute le cosse nue abiamo a ffar….E con questa arma el nostro salvatore Christo Iesù vinse e confuxe lo diavolo nel disserto dicendo: Scriptum est.” Caterina Vigri, Le sette armi spirituali, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 14 (VII.2).
themselves to reading and meditating on the Gospels and the letters of the apostles.\textsuperscript{79} She then related her own experiences of fending off the devil and his tricks.

Satan appeared to young Caterina on at least six different occasions. First, he came to her as the Virgin Mary, and said: “‘If you part from your selfish [or wicked] love, I will give you the virtuous [love].’”\textsuperscript{80} She believed that Mary wanted her to abandon her own passions and opinions, particularly those concerning the benefit of strict clausturation, so Caterina devoted her efforts to unquestioning obedience to Mother Lucia, who desired a more relaxed rule for the house. But this only gave way to resentment in her mind against her superior, so she recommitted herself to prayer. When the devil saw that he had not succeeded in causing Caterina to lose her hope in God, he appeared to her in church in the form of the crucified Christ. With outstretched arms, he accused her of being a thief, offering up obedience and then taking it back when she had thoughts of infidelity toward her abbess. He admonished her to have no other will but that of her superior. Through many bitter tears, Caterina resisted every temptation to judge or contradict her abbess’ wishes. Though she suffered mightily from headaches and felt such poverty of spirit as to compare herself to Job, she did not give in to her despair and continued to battle the temptation of disobedience within herself.\textsuperscript{81} Seeing this, the devil visited her a third time, appearing as the Virgin Mary with the Christ child in arms, and issuing a grave threat: “‘You did not want to part from your wicked love of self and I will not give you the virtuous [love], namely

\textsuperscript{79} Caterina Vigri, \textit{Le sette armi spirituali}, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 14 (VII.3).

\textsuperscript{80} “‘Se tu parti da ti l’amore vicioxo, io te darò lo virtuoxo’.” Caterina Vigri, \textit{Le sette armi spirituali}, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 16 (VII.10).

that of my Son.””

At this, Caterina fell into such utter despair that she could hardly stand, sustained only by the knowledge that she had not lost her desire to please God.

After failing three times to tempt Caterina to turn away from her God, Satan—who had also failed three times to tempt Jesus—changed his strategy and tried to frighten her into submission. One night, while the other sisters slept, he roamed around the convent, shouting with the loud and dreadful voice of a madman. Caterina perceived that the devil wished to tear the convent to the ground. This happened to be during the period when Verde Pio was implementing changes and making modifications to the structure for her plans of expansion. Caterina employed the weapon of prayer to sustain her during this difficult time, when she was subjected to “many and diverse tribulations both in herself and in those near her”—so many that she did not name them, because the list would be too long. However, as the building project neared

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82 “«Tu non ài voluto partire da tti l’amore vicioxo e io non te darò lo virtuoxo, cioè quello del mio Fiolo».” Caterina Vigri, Le sette armi spirituali, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 19 (VII.28).

83 Claudio Leonardi, in his essay “Caterina Vegri e l’obbedienza del diavolo,” has suggested that, while poverty was the primary virtue for Francis, obedience became the primary virtue, superseding poverty, for Caterina. Leonardi writes: “The theme of poverty had been exhausted in the inter-Franciscan and inter-ecclesiastical polemics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. And it is on the different theme of obedience that Caterina’s originality can be measured.” “Il tema della povertà si era esaurito nelle polemiche inter-francescane e inter-ecclesiastiche dei secoli XIII-XIV. Ed è sul diverso tema dell’obbedienza che l’originalità di Caterina si può misurare.” Claudio Leonardi, “Caterina Vegri e l’obbedienza del diavolo,” in Forme e vicende per Giovanni Pozzi, ed. Ottavio Besomi, Giulia Gianella, Alessandro Martini, and Guido Pedrojetta (Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1988), 199-22; here 120. He also points out that in 1431, when Caterina’s convent received permission to be an enclosed house of Poor Clares—as Caterina wanted it to be—Joan of Arc was burned at the stake for choosing obedience to the voices of dead saints over obedience to clerical authorities (122).

84 Caterina Vigri, Le sette armi spirituali, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 20 (VII.31-32). Foletti discusses Verde Pio’s construction project, which included modifying the building to make strict enclosure possible but also forced Caterina and several other sisters to relocate temporarily. Caterina recorded feelings of great distress during this time. See Foletti’s introduction to Le sette armi spirituali, ed. Foletti, 50-51.

85 “…molte e diverse tribolazioni e in si e in le soe propinque…” Caterina Vigri, Le sette armi spirituali, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 21 (VII.34).
completion, Caterina was able to declare that the enemy had lost the battle and remained confounded. She also learned during this time that God had allowed these trials for her own benefit, so that she would have a greater understanding of herself, and having been humbled, would know the power she possessed through God to detect and overcome the devil’s tricks.  

Indeed she developed great powers of discernment, writing of herself: “And so at her cost, she became rather expert in the diabolical deceptions and also in the true and divine appearance.”

On two other occasions, the devil tempted Caterina, and in both instances, he tried to persuade her to betray those values most important to her: obedience and humility. In both instances, he failed. He approached her in her sleep one night, whispering the suggestion in her ear that she disobey God by blaspheming him, but she refused. On another night, while she was saying prayers at church, she had the thought that, since she possessed free will and yet had willingly endured the hardships of remaining obedient and avoiding sin, she should receive as reward a status higher than that of Jesus Christ himself, whom she believed had no free will and, therefore, could not sin. She immediately recognized the source of such prideful thinking, and she humbled herself, acknowledging God’s gift of good will to her. Eventually Caterina had developed such spiritual might that one biographer wrote of her, upon her acceptance of the position of abbess of the new convent in Bologna: “But she did not fear [the devil] on account of the strength of her prayers; so that the demons began to have fear of her and went howling and

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86 Caterina Vigri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 21 (VII.35-36) and 49 (IX.5-6).


roaring, like rabid dogs, in order that [she] not be able to harm them.”\(^{90}\) Perhaps the writer had in his mind an image of Jesus driving the demons from the possessed man into a herd of pigs when he penned these words about the future saint.\(^{91}\) For Caterina, God had prepared her for her ministry as abbess by first allowing her to be tempted of Satan, just as Jesus was tempted before he began his own ministry of preaching and healing.

Though she strove to live a life in imitation of Christ, Caterina did not use the language of “imitation,” but instead of “taking up the cross” and “suffering evil for Christ.” She wrote: “Because, having received from [the Lord] this highest gift of being called to his service, it follows that I should with the greatest care put all my strength with true diligence into making myself conform to him, that is to desire to submit to every torment and to go the way of the cross, refusing every joy and consolation”—words that echoed those spoken by Jesus to his disciples when he told them, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up the cross and follow me.”\(^{92}\) For Caterina, obedience—that virtue which she held so dear and upon which the devil challenged her at every turn—meant living in imitation of Christ by taking up his cross and suffering evil. On at least ten occasions in *Le sette armi spirituali*, she referred

\(^{90}\) “Ma lei non el temeva per la forza de le sue oratione; per modo li diavoli incominciaron havere di lei spa\v{v}ento, et andavano ululando e rugiando, come cani rabiati, per non poterli nocere.” Sabadino degli Arienti, “De Catherina Beata da Bologna,” 222-23.


\(^{92}\) “Perz\`o che, abiendo da esso recevuto questo altissimo donno de esser chiamata al suo servizio, dequita che io dovea con somo studio ponere tuta la mia forza con vera dillizenzia a doverme confor/marme a lui, cio\`e a volerme sotoponere a ogno pena e andare per via de croce, refudando ogno alegreza e consolatione…” Caterina Vigri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 57 (X.13). The words are Jesus are found in Matthew 16:24. Caterina also quoted this verse directly in VII.72 and referenced it in VII.88.
to walking the way of the cross. She counseled her novices that one could arrive at true perfection only “by carrying the painful cross, passing by the way of many temptations.” She reminded them that the devil seeks to destroy those who are marked for divine service, those who hold promise for producing much fruit for the Lord, and so “God loving them out of fatherly love…begins to put them in the way of the cross and, he allowing this, they are assaulted secretly by the infernal enemies, that is under the semblance of good.” Caterina admonished her sisters, in their desire to be true brides of Christ, “to go by the thorny way, following [in] his footprints,” but also to welcome battles and temptations, and to rejoice in them—to count it all joy—for they are a necessary part of true obedience.

Clearly Satan’s efforts to deceive Caterina—especially when he appeared to her in the form of the crucified Christ—had a significant impact on her spiritual development and the way in which she viewed herself, for she referred to herself in her booklet on at least six occasions as “the religious to whom the enemy appeared in the form of the crucified.” These temptations, and her ability to overcome them through fervent prayer, helped to shape her identity as a true follower of Christ, whose own trials reflected his. She repeatedly reminded her novices that the

93 See Caterina Vigri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, Prefazione 15; VII.42,61,62,72,88,89,91,100,102; and X.13.

94 “…se no per lo portare della penoxa croce, passando per la via delle molte tenptatione.” Caterina Vigri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 23 (VII.42).


96 “…andare per la via spinoxa, seguitando le sue vestigie…” Caterina Vigri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 37 (VII.100) and 38 (VII.103).

97 “…la sopra dicta relizioxxa, alla quale aparve lo nemico in forma de crucifixo…” Caterina Vigri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Degl’Innocenti, 39 (VII.109). Also see: VII.73,95; VIII.1; IX.1; and X.3.
enemy of Christ had visited her with the intent to tempt her away from her true calling, just as he had done to Jesus himself. But just as Christ conquered Satan with Scripture, so Caterina employed her seventh weapon, sheathed in prayer, to do the same, in imitation of her Savior. Caterina also delivered an entire sermon to her sisters on *Le tentazioni*, which provides just one illustration of the kind of theological grounding she possessed. In it she detailed the devil’s efforts to tempt Jesus in the desert and drew parallels between the three forms of temptation he used and those he would use against the followers of Christ. She began: “The greater assaults in both number and type that the Devil can make and does make on us and against us are three principle ones, that is those same that he exercised against the Son of God in tempting him in the desert, and then [Jesus] permissively allowing him to take him above the pinnacle of the temple, and then above the highest mountain…in order for us to learn the other tricks of this most astute Devil…”. She explained that the devil’s purpose was “to persuade [Jesus] to command the senseless things…in order for it to be clear that he was not the Messiah.” Caterina then outlined the symbolism of Satan’s efforts to tempt Jesus in three different ways. He tempted him

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98 Bert Roest has this to say about Caterina’s sermons: “Several of these sermons are full-blown theological treatises in their own right…. [They] show Caterina’s command of the biblical texts and the major tools of literal and figurative exegetical reading. The way in which she backed up her own biblical interpretation with the authority of the church fathers and the major theologians of the *via antiqua*, is not so different from the use of authorities in the much-praised sermons of Bernardino of Siena and other male ‘pillars of the Observance.’” Roest, “Female Preaching in the Late Medieval Franciscan Tradition,” 148.


100 “…s’industriava almeno in persoderlo di commandare alle cose insensate…per esser poi chiaro egli non esser il Messia.” Caterina de’Vigri, “Sermon XIII: Le tentazioni,” 100.
toward infidelity, or unfaithfulness, using stones, which represent the devil’s efforts to make sinners hard and obstinate in their unwillingness to give up their wicked ways. He tempted him to despair, using the pinnacle of the temple, which represents sinners’ errant belief that they can save themselves when death nears, or that even though they have lived a life draped in sin, God will be merciful. And he tempted him toward vanity, using the highest mountain, which represents the height of earthly pleasure and sensuality, which the devil uses to trap sinners in a life of always striving for more. Caterina cautioned her listeners that with these same methods, Satan would try to tempt them, attacking them both spiritually and corporally. Spiritual temptation was aimed at luring the soul into infidelity, which would destroy its foundation. Corporal temptation struck at physical and material well-being, causing loss of health and possessions, much like the tremendous loss Job experienced before he fell into despair. A third kind of temptation, which involved both spirit and body, led to possession of the individual by demonic forces, requiring exorcism of those spirits through prayer and fasting. But then Caterina reminded them that Jesus had overcome all such temptations with his divine actions and words, providing both spiritual and physical healing—never one without the other—to all those who would come unto him, as he did so many times in the Gospels. She provided them with a number of verses on faith and the pardon of sins, which illustrated both her command of the biblical text and the seriousness with which she treated her seventh spiritual weapon, memory of Scripture.

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102 Caterina de’ Vigri, “Sermone XIII: Le tentazioni,” 105-6. Caterina also wrote a number of pieces collected as Laudi, trattati e lettere, edited by Silvia Serventi (Firenze: SISMEI, 2000). During her time at both Corpus Christi and Corpus Domini, she illustrated and compiled a breviary, about which Kathleen Arthur has said: “[It] reveals a complex web of word-initials, saints’ portraits, marginal prayers and rubrics that give nuanced interpretations of the scriptures and Caterina’s favorite saint…” See Arthur, Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety, 154, and Pregare con le immagini: il breviario di Caterina.
Beata Colomba Guadagnoli da Rieti, Dominican Penitent

Colomba Guadagnoli da Rieti (1467-1501), often referred to as “the second Catherine” and invoked against sorcery and temptations, was born within the Papal States in the Umbrian region of central Italy to a family of cloth merchants. According to her biographers, she appeared to have been marked from her time in the womb as a future instrument of God. Her mother became so disgusted by food in her last trimester that she could digest nothing but a few particular fruits, a diet similar to the one Colomba would adopt as a tertiary. When the women attending her birth witnessed angels singing songs of joy in a magnificent chariot outside the window, they abandoned the newborn to the hard floor while they took in the spectacle, yet she uttered not a single sound of discomfort, as she already seemed destined for the rigors of austerity. At her baptism, a white dove flew around the font and landed on her head as a sign that the infant would be filled with the Holy Spirit. As news spread of this marvel, crowds gathered to see the blessed baby. Her mother worried that, on Fridays, the infant took the breast only once in the day, not recognizing this as an early effort at fasting. At the age of three, Colomba spread pieces of wood and thorn under her bedsheets as a form of mortification. At age four, she began to fast every Friday, and on certain other penitential days, taking in only bread and water. At age five, she fashioned a coarse undershirt of hair and pieces of broken sieves to wear against her bare chest. Her biographer noted that “when her mother asked what she wanted to make from

Vigri, edited by Vera Fortunati and Claudio Leonardi (Firenze: SISMEL, 2004). Caterina is also credited with writing Rosarium metricum and I dodici gardini, but Bernard McGinn has questioned the authenticity of these two works. See McGinn, The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550), 304, 594 n. 30.
those broken sieves, she responded that she wanted them for the house, for she was of the house; and so she did not lie.”103 Apparently deception for the sake of austerity could be overlooked.

Throughout her youth, Colomba visited the church every day for Mass and prayers. At age seven, she begged the sisters of the Third Order of St. Dominic to teach her how to recite the canonical hours. She visited the penitents’ house often to read spiritual books and engage in related discussions, especially on the virtues of their beloved St. Catherine of Siena, for they all desired to imitate her piety in every way. Young Colomba adopted the forms of the penitential life to the greatest extent possible, fasting during Church holy days, exchanging her underclothes of linen for those of wool, whipping herself until her back was swollen and bloody, and meditating constantly on spiritual matters. At the age of ten, she beheld Christ sitting on a throne of gold, surrounded by Sts. Peter, Paul, Jerome, and Dominic. She fell to the ground and begged the Lord’s blessing, and she promised to remain a virgin and take no spouse other than her Savior. However, her parents had other plans for their daughter.104

Despite witnessing Colomba’s serious commitment to a life of piety, and even benefiting from her sanctity and prayers, her parents arranged a marriage for her when she was twelve.105 Her biographer suggested that they were prompted by Colomba’s enemy, Satan, when he wrote:

103 “E quando la matre andemandava que volesse fare de quille staccie rocte, respondea le volea per casa, inperoché le de casa era; et cosi non mentia.” Sebastiano (degli) Angeli, O.P., *Legenda volgare di Colomba da Rieti*, ed. Giovanna Casagrande, Maria Luisa Cianini Pierotti, Andrea Maiarelli, and Francesco Santucci (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 2002), 55 (V, c. 5r). The other events in Colomba’s infancy and early childhood are recorded by Fra Sebastiano, 48-55 (I-V).

104 Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 56-61 (VI-VIII). Sebastiano also mentioned that Colomba had a brother, Giovanni, approximately two years younger, who followed her in her efforts to live a life of piety at a very young age. He later became a Dominican friar.

105 Sebastiano related one instance when Colomba’s mother approached her, crying that the family had no bread to eat. Colomba knelt to pray before the small altar she had made, and as soon as she rose, women appeared at the door with bread. See Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 59 (VII, c. 6v).
“You know well that that malicious and twisted devil secretly directed the deceits in order to make her perish, for he more shrewdly urged the parents on until they gave her to be married.” Horrified at the prospect, Colomba declared that she was already espoused to her Lord Jesus Christ and must remain a virgin for the rest of her life. Yet her family members went about planning the wedding. The morning of the appointed day, a distraught Colomba visited her confessor, who with great compassion told her: “‘St. Catherine of Siena in this case indeed cut her own tresses, [so] you do the same, daughter, and now.’” When everyone had gathered that evening for the ceremony, Colomba excused herself and returned with her locks in hand, declaring that she already had a spouse who cared nothing for such vanities. Needless to say, the wedding was off. Colomba suffered mightily at home, insulted and threatened by her uncle and half-brother for bringing shame to the family. Even in the face of such affliction, the young virgin remained obedient, and for her patience and long-suffering, she was rewarded with occasional glimpses of her guardian, St. Dominic, overhead. However, these same virtuous qualities caused her to incur the wrath of Satan, who came to her at night, sometimes with violent attacks, and other times with enticing visions meant to lure her from her commitment to abstinence from both food and the flesh.

106 “Ben sai che quillo malitioso bistorto del demonio ordinava sottomano li inganni per falla perire, inperoché più astutamente stimolava li parente che la dessero a marito.” Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 63 (IX, c. 8r).

107 “‘Santa Caterina da Siena in quisto caso si se tagliò le treccie, così fa’ tu, filiola, et ora’.” Sebastiano degli Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 65 (X, c. 9r). Sebastiano degli Angeli, author of Colomba’s *vita*, was her confessor toward the end of her life, from 1494 to 1497, so the confessor referenced here would have been another. See Giovanna Casagrande’s *Introduzione* in Sebastiano’s *Legenda volgare* (5-6).

Colomba continued to live a rigorous life of penance, gradually making fasting a part of her daily life by giving up bread and eating unripe fruits and sour grapes in very small quantities. In doing so, she received all she needed to make her “fortified and fattened” against the insults and molestations of the devil and his human agents.\textsuperscript{109} She also continued to beat herself with a metal whip of five chains, every day and night, thrice each time, in imitation of Sts. Dominic and Catherine of Siena, who had whipped themselves for their own sins, for the sins of those living, and for those sentenced to Purgatory. To her standard penitential garb—the coarse hair shirt—she added a chastity belt, which over time made her flesh hardened and calloused. She lost sleep at night to long hours of prayer and meditation, particularly on the Passion, shedding an abundance of tears and often falling into such a rapturous state that she became like stone. This bride of Christ had frequent visions of celestial beings and events. She told her confessor that on one occasion, the Holy Spirit allowed her to see a desert, and to hear sweet melodious sounds, as three holy men appeared to her: Benedict, Dominic, and Francis. And the Holy Spirit told her to choose one of the three, but to imitate the sanctity of each of them, saying: “This desert is the way of the holy fathers that you will follow.”\textsuperscript{110} She easily chose St. Dominic, who, with St. Catherine of Siena, had appeared to Colomba in a number of visions to offer encouragement and counsel. In fact, when she turned nineteen, just before Lent began, they came to her to reveal that soon she would attain the habit of their holy order, and that he who had provided the greatest resistance to her way of life would also provide, at his expense, the cloth and necessary items for

\textsuperscript{109} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 79-80 (XVI, c. 13v-14r). Sebastiano referred to Colomba as “fortificata and ingrassata.”

\textsuperscript{110} “«Quisto deserto è la via de li santi patri che sequitarai>.” Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 74 (XIV, c. 12r).
her religious attire.\textsuperscript{111} She desired more than anything to be officially conferred the habit of the Third Order of St. Dominic, but her enemy the devil did all he could to prevent that from happening, with the help of those close to her: her spiritual father, who tried to deny her pleas for a strict Lenten fast in preparation; the master of the penitents’ house and the sisters living there, who were annoyed by her determination; her uncle—the one who managed the family textile business—and her brother, who continued to harass her at home; and a citizen from the town bent on ruining her, who eventually came to venerate her. When none of these people succeeded in deterring Colomba, evil spirits began to torment her in a variety of ways.\textsuperscript{112} Ultimately the devil, who had labored for nearly forty days and forty nights, could not prevail against the saintly woman and her divine protectors, and on Palm Sunday, 1486, Colomba received her habit, crafted from cloth procured by her uncle from his warehouse, in front of a great multitude of people, including townsfolk, members of the Dominican order, and her parents.\textsuperscript{113} Now officially marked for service unto the Lord, having successfully endured a “desert” period of fasting and diabolical trials of biblical proportions, Colomba was prepared to begin her public ministry.

Colomba’s biographer wrote of her, after she received her habit: “Surrounded by the order of spiritual militia and admitted into the fight of the penitents, the innocent servant of Christ, so much more powerful, made every effort to imitate and join herself to the king Lord

\textsuperscript{111} Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 87 (XIX, c. 16rv). Colomba turned 19 on 2 February 1486.

\textsuperscript{112} Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 87-88 (XIX, c. 16v). The ways in which Colomba was tormented by demons during this period will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{113} Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 89-90 (XIX, c. 17r).
Jesus Christ. “And imitate she did, offering one of the finest displays of self-fashioning among holy women of the Quattrocento. She began with a pilgrimage to Viterbo to visit the image of the Madonna of the Oak, and she chose twelve companions to travel with her. On their way, they were greeted as angels of God by the people of Narni, and one citizen offered Colomba her colt (the animal associated with Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem) to relieve her swollen feet. When the pilgrims reached the church at Viterbo and saw a great crowd gathered there to witness a demoniac, Colomba approached the young woman and invoked the name of Jesus, and though the demon resisted giving up the body he had inhabited for eighteen years, Colomba eventually succeeded in forcing him to flee. Word quickly spread throughout the region of the holy woman’s power, and the town officials in both Viterbo and Narni sought to keep her from leaving, but in both instances, Colomba departed with her companions under the cover of night. Satan chose to exact his revenge for the exorcism as the group escaped these towns, sending sudden and violent storms to engulf them. On the first occasion, all thirteen travelers stayed dry as Colomba sat in ecstasy upon her colt. On the second, when they were traveling by boat, Colomba awoke from her sleep and rose up, and with a glance caused the waves to calm and the water to become tranquil. As her biographer noted: “…this wonderfully exhibits then some things of the grand master Jesus Christ, when he was in the small boat with his disciples.”

114 “Accinta adonqua de la regola de spirituale militia e amessa nella sciera de li penitente, la innocente serva de Cristo, quanto più podette, se sforzò ymitare e giongnerse al re Signore Yesu Cristo…” Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 90 (XX, c. 17rv).

115 Colomba’s biographer noted the significance of “el numero al misterio del senato apostolico” in describing the group she had assembled. The twelve included her own mother and uncle. Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 93 (XXI, c. 18r).

116 “…essa exponea in poi mirabemente alcune cose del grand maestro Yesu Cristo, quando era nella navecella cum li suoi discipuli.” Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 97 (XXI, c. 19v). The preceding events were recorded in the *Legenda*, 95-97 (XXI, c. 19rv).
Back in her hometown of Rieti, Colomba encountered those who out of familiarity or jealousy did not revere her, but others recognized her great sanctity and came to her in time of need.\footnote{Her biographer noted “la molta familiaritá” and “uno certo livore de emulatione e invidia” (with emulation here taking its less common meaning of jealous envy) as cause for some of Colombia’s compatriots to deprive her of her due reverence (98, XXII, c. 20r). Sebastiano did not directly draw a parallel to Jesus’ rejection by some in his hometown of Nazareth, to whom he said in Luke 4:24, “no prophet is acceptable in his own country,” but if he wrote this \emph{vita} to promote her cult and canonization, there would be no other reason to suggest any level of unpopularity except to make her appear Christ-like in the rejection she experienced by some of her own people.} She interceded for a convicted murderer, who was then released. She healed a fifteen-year-old boy near death by pressing her face to his, mouth-to-mouth and eye-to-eye, and blowing breath into him three times.\footnote{This method of healing, in which the healer aligns her face or body with that of the infirmed, reflects the manner in which Elijah healed the widow’s son (1 Kings 17:21), Elisha brought the dead boy back to life (2 Kings 4:34), and Paul revived the boy who fell out of the window (Acts 20:10).} She miraculously provided bread for a widow named Barbara who had none to feed the workers in her vineyard. And her prayers brought a child to a pious woman named Cecilia, married for eight years but plagued with infertility.\footnote{These and other miracles were recorded in Sebastiano Angeli, \emph{Legenda volgare}, 98-101 (XXII).} Many other miracles were wrought at the hands of blessed Colomba, or through her intercessory prayers. But the time came when she would have to leave Rieti—forever. Sts. Dominic and Catherine appeared to her in a marvelous vision and showed her a wide and straight road that would lead out of Rieti toward her destination, an illustrious Dominican church where Jesus, his mother Mary, and a host of saints awaited her. Colomba ruminated on this vision for some time, and when she fell into a rapturous state, others in her vicinity could hear her discussing her departure with a bodiless voice and began to believe that the young saint would soon be taken from the earth. They did not realize that she would just be leaving town.\footnote{Sebastiano Angeli, \emph{Legenda volgare}, 102-3 (XXIII, c. 21rv).}
Colomba’s biographer wrote of the events leading to her departure:

“The day before the appointed transit, that is Thursday, as the Holy Spirit had taught her, according to whose instruction she purely governed herself, again by way of mystical sign he announced it, for he wanted her to procure a lamb, with which she set the table that evening and invited twelve people closest to her in affection to dinner at her house and she feasted very cheerfully and after the meal she washed everyone’s feet. During that time she exhorted them, she narrated and spoke verse expounding the mysteries of the supreme Master which he had performed in the Last Supper; and she did not want any of them to leave until to all she had said: ‘Farewell and pray to God for me.’”

He did not have to point out the obvious parallels between Colomba’s feast and the Last Supper of Christ. Any Christian in medieval Europe would have known that the Church recognized Thursday as the night Jesus gathered with his disciples to celebrate Passover with a meal of lamb, and that he washed his disciples’ feet after the meal. Colomba had recreated the scene perfectly, but she was not finished. The next day, when she failed to come out of her cell, her mother called for the master of the penitents’ house, who “with the more powerful hand…removed the door of the oratory and went inside and found her clothes spread out on the ground in the form of a cross, like the shed skin of the wise serpent…and through the fissures and narrow slits she had passed…[and] there was no other sign of the virgin Colomba.”

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121 “El dì avante el nominato transito, cioè el giovedì, como l’avea maestrata lo Spirito Sancto, secondo la quale instructione puramente se governava, anchora per signo mistico el dechiarava, inperoché volse che se procurasse uno agnello, el quale la sera appareciò e invitò dodece persone a lei più proximi in carità a cena in casa sua e molto alegra le convivò e de po’ la cena lavò a tucti li piede. Intra el tempo le exhortava, narrava e rimava exponendo li misterii del supremo Maestro che havea facte nella ultima cena; e non volse che se partissero perfino che a tucte havé facto e dicto: «Valete e pregate Idio per me».” Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 104 (XXIII, c. 22r). “Again by way of mystical sign” is likely a reference to previous signs that seemed to point to her departure. Her parents saw the crucified body of Christ over Colomba’s bed with blood dripping from his hands, and on another occasion, a comet appeared over her house, with rays pointing toward the west, where Perugia lies.

122 “…con la mano più poderosa levò la portecella de lo oratorio e intrò dentro e trovaro le vestemente suoi strate in terra in modo de croce, como la spolia del prudente serpente…et per le crepacce e strete fessure fosse transita…; altro inditio de essa vergene Colomba non era.” Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 105 (XXIII, c. 22r).
her last meal in Rieti with her twelve friends and family members, Colomba had retired to her cell, a veritable tomb, and disappeared early the next day by passing through walls, leaving her cloth habit stretched out in a shape symbolic of the one whom she was imitating, who had abandoned his linen wrappings when he arose and exited his sealed burial place.\textsuperscript{123} Her parents were distraught, and many gathered to marvel at the circumstances of her departure and to lament the loss of their town’s revered living saint.

Never one to miss an opportunity to identify his subject with a saint of old, Colomba’s biographer used her departure from her hometown to compare her to Abraham, \textit{el patre}, to whom God said, “Leave your land and your relations and come into the land that I will show you,” for the \textit{beata} did not know where the road she traveled would take her.\textsuperscript{124} In one instance during her travels, she encountered an old man who lured her to a small house under the pretense of offering her rest and a visit with his wife and daughters, but instead summoned some nefarious young men who planned to molest the poor girl. When they laid hands on her, she became as rigid and immovable as a marble statue, and when they began to strip her clothes from her, they saw the implements of her self-mutilation. The sight of her Crucifix which clanged against her flagellum, the iron belt around her bare hips, the hair shirt laced with bits of metal, and the two iron chains crisscrossed over her chest, and no doubt the marks left on her body by these devices, “spooked and repulsed” the young men such that they ran away and died shortly.

\textsuperscript{123} “The account of the linen burial cloths in the empty tomb can be found in John 20:1-10. While Sebastiano did not identify the date of these events, other biographers place them in summer, 1488, when Colomba was twenty-one years of age. See especially Maria Luisa Cianini Pierotti, \textit{Colomba da Rieti a Perugia: “Ecco la Santa. Ecco la Santa che viene”} (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2001), 30.

\textsuperscript{124} “«Escie de la terra tua e de la cognazione tua e viene / nella terra che io te monstrarò»,” from Genesis 12:1. Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 113 (XXV, c. 24rv).
Colomba’s biographer used this event to identify his subject with several other holy women who, with divine help, had escaped the evil designs of men: St. Lucy of Syracuse, the fourth-century martyr who, when forced into prostitution, became like stone and could not be moved; St. Agnes of Rome, who like her contemporary Lucy, was sentenced to work as a prostitute, but watched every man who tried to assault her become struck with blindness; and St. Colomba of Sens of the third century, who was imprisoned in a brothel, but rescued by a bear when a guard tried to attack her. On yet another occasion during her travel toward Perugia, Colomba came upon a group of young hunters who were whistling and making obscene comments to her. They tried to block her path, but she was able to disappear completely from their sight. Her biographer neglected to point out the obvious similarity in this instance to the episode in the life of Jesus, when he was confronted by a hostile crowd threatening to throw him over a cliff, “but passing through the midst of them he went away.” Instead the writer likened her experience to those of the prophet Elisha, who prayed that God would blind his enemies and saw his prayer answered, and St. Clement, the early pope who evaded arrest by the Roman

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125 Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 108-12 (XXIV, c. 23r-24r). Sebastiano wrote, “dal terrore de Dio spaventati e rebactuti,” to describe the reaction of the men. Rudolph Bell recounts this episode to illustrate his point that, in his assessment, *vitae* before 1500 portrayed women as heroic, whereas those written after 1500, like Colomba’s, served to warn confessors of the pitfalls to which women were susceptible. See Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 152-54. However, Sebastiano’s account clearly suggests heroic virtue rather than victimhood.

126 Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 109-10 (XXIV, c. 23rv). All three women received their punishment for refusing to marry, for they considered themselves betrothed to Christ.

127 Luke 4:30. Bible commentators agree that Jesus likely did not make himself invisible in order to escape the hostile crowd, but that he had such a divine presence that he was able to overpower the human passions of his attackers and depart without violence or struggle. Similarly, Colomba was able to escape without any kind of physical confrontation.
prefect Sisinnio and his soldiers when God struck the men with blindness.\textsuperscript{128} When Colomba’s life experiences did not directly imitate those of her Savior, they at least reflected the lives of the saints before her.

When Colomba finally arrived in Perugia, the citizens there greeted her with great fanfare, crying out: “\textit{Ecco la santa, ecco la santa che viene,}” or, “Behold the saint, behold the saint who comes.”\textsuperscript{129} The Perugians viewed her as an “angel of God,” for they had observed her rapt in ecstasy, witnessed her kind acts of charity, and beheld the miracles that took place at her hand.\textsuperscript{130} When Cesare Borgia, son of future Pope Alexander VI and a young law student at the school in Perugia, paid a visit to Fra Sebastiano Bontempi degli Angeli, who would later become Colomba’s confessor, they passed by the church in time to see a great crowd gathered and to hear a man announce loudly that the \textit{beata} had miraculously resuscitated a three-month-old infant at the point of death from a long illness. Her mother, a merchant’s wife, had heard of the new sister in town who did not eat food and who worked great miracles, and she had brought her child’s deformed body to Colomba for healing.\textsuperscript{131} This event would influence Cesare Borgia later to petition his father on Colomba’s behalf when the verity of her sanctity was called into question.

\textsuperscript{128} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 116 (XXVI, c. 25r). Elisha’s story is found in 2 Kings 6:8-19. Sebastiano recorded other encounters with men who threatened Colomba’s safety, but the ones reported here best illustrate the biographer’s use of those encounters to highlight his subject’s sanctity and divine touch.

\textsuperscript{129} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 122 (XXVII, c. 27r).

\textsuperscript{130} Sebastiano wrote that the Perugians treated Colomba as if they had received “uno angelo da Dio.” Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 124 (XXVIII, c. 27v). Nancy Caciola, in \textit{Discerning Spirits}, discusses the efforts of theologians of the late medieval period to distinguish, especially in the presence of extreme bodily behaviors such as ecstasies, between divine and demonic possession. The subject of spiritual discernment will be presented in Chapter 4 of this study.

\textsuperscript{131} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 129-31 (XXIX, c. 29rv).
In 1490, Colomba took her solemn vows as a fully-professed penitent of the Third Order of St. Dominic. The ruling Baglioni family of Perugia built a convent for her to keep her there as their own local saint, and thanks to her widening reputation, the convent of St. Catherine of Siena attracted many women, both young and old. Wealthy families in Perugia and from towns throughout central Italy sent their daughters there, and Colomba’s own mother joined a number of widows who chose to spend their remaining days there under the holy woman’s influence. Colomba certainly had her detractors, but those who revered her, in Perugia and beyond, believed she had received a divine touch, and so they sought her out when they were in need of healing. When they could not gain access to her, they sought out objects with which she had come into contact. Her bed chamber in her childhood home in Rieti attracted numerous devotees, particularly parents whose children had fallen ill or had entered the world with some deformity. When placed on the table that young Colomba once used for a bed, they received miraculous healing. One woman, possessed by a demon, found immediate liberation of her soul upon entering the room. In the convent of St. Catherine in Perugia, the sisters lamented one evening that they had very little bread—not nearly enough for everyone to eat. Hearing their distress, Colomba, who once before had worked a miracle with bread, began to distribute the

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132 Colomba arrived in Perugia at a time of serious political turmoil, when the Baglioni were solidifying their power and warring against neighboring towns. Colomba’s reputation, like that of her patron saint Catherine of Siena, was positively influenced by the political circumstances surrounding her. Thomas Luongo, in *The Saintly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), asserts that the War of the Eight Saints between Florence and the papacy made Catherine of Siena’s career as a living saint possible. The relationship between Perugia’s state of affairs and Colomba’s reputation for holiness will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this study.

133 Those detractors will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this study.

134 Sebastiano recorded these miracles in Rieti in chapter XXXIX of the *Legenda volgare* (182-86).
available loaves, until every one of their great number had received plenty. There was so much
left over that many of the sisters saved pieces as relics, and those relics were later used to bring
healing to several individuals with infirmities, including Pope Alexander’s master of the house,
who had received some crumbs from a Perugian priest. So objects touched by the holy woman
apparently held the power of thaumaturgy.\(^{135}\) While her biographer did not make the obvious
comparison between these objects and the hem of Jesus’ garment, by which a woman was healed
of a twelve-year malady, he did note that people sometimes cut at her vestments in the hope of
obtaining a holy relic.\(^ {136}\)

Colomba prophesied on a number of occasions concerning the future welfare of
individuals and of political entities, but perhaps the most marvelous prophecy that Colomba
uttered was when she made known: “I know that, thirty-three years completed, I will die.”\(^ {137}\)
Surely she knew that her spouse Jesus Christ, and her patroness Catherine of Siena, had both
died at the same age. But prophecy aside, Colomba still had work to do. In the summer of 1497,
she finally accepted the position of prioress of the convent, a title that out of humility she had
refused many times before, and that same year she wrote her own regola for the house, one that
encompassed the principles of the vita apostolica and communal living and would both attract
new women to the convent and influence the form of life in communities in other parts of

\(^{135}\) Sebastiano recorded these miracles with bread in chapter XLI of the Legenda volgare (191-96).

\(^{136}\) Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 163 (XXXVI, c. 39v). The episode between Jesus and the woman
is recorded in Matthew 9:20-22. Similar healings are recorded in Matthew 14:35-36.

\(^{137}\) “E beata Colomba dixe: «io so che, forniti trentatre anni, io morirò».” Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda
volgare, 153 (XXXIII, c. 36v).
Italy. However, Colomba’s gentle spirit was not well-suited to the task of maintaining discipline among her charges, and she often had to rely upon the master confessor to impose correction upon those who showed disdain for the rigors of poverty and penance. The complaints of such women, and the claims they made against their new prioress, set off a terrible chain of events that would ultimately lead to Colomba falling under ecclesiastical censure and into despair. After nearly a year-and-a-half “in the desert,” unable to perform her duties as prioress and suffering under the spiritual weight of the Church’s pronouncement, Colomba was reinstated on Easter of 1500, and this being a Jubilee year, she and the sisters of her convent obtained full indulgences on the occasion. Colomba was now thirty-three years old, and she had foretold that she would go to live with her spouse for eternity at that stated age, but he must have come to her and asked her to postpone her trip. On the feast day of Epiphany, 1501, the beata was rapt in ecstasy, her shrunken frame without weight or color, and her sisters, thinking her dead, called for her confessor, who arrived in time to hear his charge saying: “Lord, since you wish to defer it still until the Ascension, let it be done according to the approval of your majesty.” She spent her final months, still sustaining herself with nothing but the Eucharist,

138 Gabriella Zarri discusses the impact of Colomba’s rule on religious reform in “Colomba da Rieti e i movimenti religiosi femminili del suo tempo,” in Una santa, una città, ed. Casagrande and Menestò, 89-108. Colomba’s rule is printed in the same volume as an appendix to Giovanna Casagrande’s essay, “Terziarie domenicane a Perugia,” (109-41, 142-59).

139 Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 206-7 (XLIV, c. 53rv).

140 Tamar Herzig, in Savonarola’s Women, discusses the trouble Colomba encountered because of her connection to the condemned preacher. That relationship, and other circumstances that led to her censure, will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4 of this study.

141 Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 251-52 (LIII, c. 68r).

142 “Signore, da puoi che volete deferire anchora fine a la Ascensione, sia facto secondo el beneplacito de la maiestà tua.” Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 256 (LIV, c. 69v).
devoting herself to contemplation and observing a penance of silence. She still punished her own body for the well-being of the people of Perugia, and frequently in a rapturous state, she prophesied that great calamity would fall upon the city.\textsuperscript{143} She called together her sisters one last time to deliver a sermon, encouraging them to stay together in the convent and live a life of complete devotion to Christ and his Virgin Mother.\textsuperscript{144} For thirty-three days, the dying woman endured headaches, toothaches, and stomach pains; she vomited blood; and she suffered high fevers while resting on a hard table, wrapped in a hair shirt, taking in only a bit of water.\textsuperscript{145} On her last day, she asked her confessor to read the Passion narrative from each of the four Gospels. When he read from Matthew that Jesus took his final breath, Colomba echoed the words of Christ, saying: “’Nelle mano tuoi, Signore, recomando lo spirito mio.’”\textsuperscript{146} Upon hearing these words, her “ancient enemy” called upon his legions to torment her mind, and they filled her head with lies about the sincerity of her faith and humility. She fought them with the Crucifix she held in her hand and repeated, “‘Credo in Deum,’” while her sisters watched and prayed. Finally, at midnight, as the Day of the Ascension arrived, Sister Colomba cried out, “O sposo mio! O sposo mio!…receveme,” and she took her last breath, her cheeks full of color as if she were sleeping.\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{143} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 258-59 (LIV, c. 70v).

\textsuperscript{144} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 268 (LVI, c. 73v-74r).

\textsuperscript{145} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 263-64 (LV-LVI, c. 72rv).

\textsuperscript{146} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 280 (LIX, c. 78r).

\textsuperscript{147} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 280-81 (LIX, c. 78rv). Sebastiano, despite his training as a mathematician, recorded Colomba’s age at her death as “anni triginta tre, mese tre e di quindici,” or thirty-three years, three months, and fifteen days, but he was actually one year off—most likely knowingly so. Certainly her biographer would want to keep her age at her time of death in line with her own prophecy.
The Dominican Fra Sebastiano Bontempi degli Angeli (1447-1521), librarian and master of theology and philosophy, had served as Colomba’s confessor from 1494 to 1498 and had performed the duties of prior of the convent San Domenico at Perugia in 1480, 1497, and 1507.\footnote{Casagrande, “Introduzione,” in Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 1-31; here 5, 9. Casagrande records that Sebastiano was Colomba’s confessor from 1494 to 1497 (p. 5), but then dates his removal from that post in December, 1498 (p. 9).} He later served as prior over the entire Roman province from 1510 to 1515. He assumed the role of spiritual father to the young woman when her official confessor fell ill, which put him in a position to investigate the authenticity of her behaviors and gifts. Approaching her initially with an attitude of distrust, he eventually became convinced of the veracity of her sanctity, to the point of being the one confessor among many to ultimately “take possession of her.”\footnote{Giovanna Casagrande, “Introduzione,” in Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 1-31; here 8-9. Casagrande writes: “Certo è che Sebastiano si ‘impadronisce’ di Colomba, unico in una schiera di confessori.” She also draws comparisons between the relationship of Sebastiano and Colomba and that of Raymond of Capua and Catherine of Siena, noting that Sebastiano had at his disposal Raymond’s \textit{vita} as a model (11-17). Sebastiano devoted Capitolo XXXIII, entitled “De certa secreta investigacione de la vita sua” in the \textit{Legenda volgare}, to his assumption of the role of confessor and his efforts to determine the authenticity of Colomba’s visions and ecstasies (148-53).} He penned Colomba’s official biography immediately after her death, between the years 1501 and 1506, and he translated his own work into Italian very soon after.\footnote{Enrico Menestò discusses the manuscripts of both of Sebastiano’s works at length, in “La legenda della beata Colomba e il suo biografo,” in \textit{Una santa, una città}, ed. Casagrande and Menestò, 161-75. Sebastiano’s Latin work was published by Daniel Papbroch, S.J., of the Bollandists in the \textit{Acta Sanctorum}, but the manuscript he used has since been lost. See Sebastianus Perusinus, “De b. Columba Reatina, virgine tertii ordinis S. Dominici, Perusii in Umbria,” in \textit{Acta Sanctorum}, vol. 5, Maii to mus quintus (Antwerp: Michaelem Cnobarum, 1685), 319-98. Rudolph Bell refers to the version found in the \textit{Acta Sanctorum} as a “faulty transcription” with “numerous points that are obscure or simply incorrect.” See Rudolph Bell, \textit{Holy Anorexia} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 209 n2. For this reason, and because of the accessibility of Sebastiano’s vernacular text to the general public, I have relied upon the Italian version here, as it has been presented as a critical edition by Giovanna Casagrande (2002). The original unedited manuscript is held in the Biblioteca Augusta of Perugia, and was written sometime between 1507 and 1521, the year of his death. See Francesco Santucci, “La lingua della \textit{Legenda} volgare della Beata Colomba,” in \textit{Una santa, una città}, ed. Casagrande and Menestò, 177-97.} Sebastiano intended his
Latin version to promote his subject’s cult and to make a case for her canonization. However, he wrote the vernacular version in true Tuscan dialect—a dialect used by the general population and widely understood—to make the extraordinary life of the blessed virgin accessible to the greatest number of people. His language has been described as colorful, conveying both familiarity and vitality at the same time. True to his scholarly background, he peppered his vernacular text with Latin vocabulary, spellings, and sentence structures, but not at the expense of mass appeal.\textsuperscript{151} He divided this comprehensive work into sixty-three chapters, devoting the first twenty-five to Colomba’s development as a young living saint, and the remaining thirty-eight to her time in Perugia. His work provided the foundation for all other biographies written about the Rietan holy woman.

Sebastiano degli Angeli made the devil a main character in the drama that was the life story of his protagonist. Just as Satan is identified as the enemy of Christ throughout Christian Scripture, Sebastiano established him as Colomba’s chief nemesis throughout her \textit{vita}, thereby portraying his subject as Christ-like, since she, too, was considered a threat and targeted by the forces of evil. And in the confessor’s narrative, the devil usually came on the scene just after the young virgin had experienced some kind of transformational moment, much like Christ’s baptism, which marked the beginning of his desert experience. Early in his story, Sebastiano opened a chapter entitled \textit{De le insidie del dyavolo contra la innocentia de beata Colomba} with:

\begin{quote}
“Black, dark, that wandering exile from paradise, enemy of virtue, envious of his lost glory, tries to twist whoever follows innocence and to rebuke those who go toward God with turmoil and with his diabolical suggestions to debase and suppress spiritual desires. But in truth one defeats the prince of pride with
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{151} Santucci, “La lingua della \textit{Legenda} volgare della Beata Colomba,” 179-80, 184-85.
He then explained that Colomba was able to draw young people to Christ by her good example, for she despised the vanities of youth and pledged her virginity to Christ forever, which was a transformational moment in her life. The devil used her half-brother to try to hinder her, for in his annoyance at her renunciation of the world, he began to murmur against her confessor; he tried to entice her with ornaments that other girls desired; he persuaded her parents to buy her lovely clothes; and he influenced the mother to urge her confessor to make the young girl relax her time in prayer and penitence. But Colomba resisted, saying: “Father, truly I follow tirelessly and desire to imitate my master Jesus Christ and the venerable mother Saint Catherine.”

After recording the circumstances surrounding Colomba’s broken engagement—an event that transformed her from potential bride to probable nun—Sebastiano began a chapter entitled *De certi insulti del diavolo contra beata Colomba* by re-emphasizing the devil’s efforts to attack the girl’s innocence. He wrote:

“The most noxious enemy of pious souls, that crude spirit of Satan even more maliciously counter-posed himself to the innocence of blessed Colomba; and that which by means of others he had not been able to do, he himself tried to prevail, for he attacked her in the house and struck her with many slaps on the cheeks, while he caused them to break a tooth and made her fall to the ground and she faithfully invoked Jesus Christ, and that wild beast fled. And this happened to her other times.”

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152 “Negro, geço, quillo vago forescito del paradiso, inimico de le vertù, invidioso de la sua gloria perduta, se sforça de storcere chi sequita la innocentia et quilli che andano verso Idio sgridare cum li tumulti et cum le suoi diabolice suggestione desbassare et reprimere le volati spirituale. Ma in verità el principe de la superbia se vence cum la humilitade, se rompe cum la oratione, se caccia cum la resistentia et se gecta in terra et fasse come uno grado al piede casto.” Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 59 (VIII, c. 6v).


154 “Nocentissimo inimico de le anime pie, quillo crudele spirito de Satanasso molto più malitiosamente se contrappuse a la innocentia de beata Colomba; et quillo che per altrui meço non avea poduto, lui
According to the priest, because Colomba’s half-brother had failed in tempting the young girl with trinkets and finery, Satan took it upon himself, once it became clear that there was no turning back for her, to use scare tactics to compel her to give up her vow of chastity. He tried to suffocate her, but she called upon Christ, which angered the demon, so he left a mark on her cheek for all to see. He tried to drown her, but she called out to the Virgin Mary. One night he made her room appear to be on fire, and another night he created so much smoke that the entire city seemed to be in flames. Both times her parents ran to their daughter and sought refuge with her in her cell. The *misero demonio* came to her in the form of a giant rat, and he gnawed at the threads of her towels and vestments and scattered the fibers around her room. He also extinguished her lamp to annoy her. Seeing that Colomba remained unwavering, the devil brought her bread, sausage, nuts, and apples to tempt her to betray her routine of abstinence, but she told him to take the food away and eat it himself. So he made an appeal to the other human appetite—for the sensual. He made appear before her naked women and men who moved about and embraced in indecent ways. Then the demon pretended to be a handsome young man, and presenting himself to her in the nude, tried to seduce her with an invitation: “Here, take delight and pleasure in the parts of my body.” Horrified, the young virgin spit in his face and fled to her little oratory, where she prayed in earnest and beat herself with a whip along her back, punishing her flesh while she invoked the name of her holy spouse to overcome her enemy. Her

medesimo se sforçò a prevalere, inperoché lui la assaltò in casa et la percosse de molte guanciate, intanto che li fé stolçare uno / dente et fecela cadere in terra et lei invocò fedelmente Yesu Cristo, et quilla belva fugì. Et quisto l’avea facto altre volte.” Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 69 (XII, c. 9r-10v).

155 “«Ecco, pigliate voluptà et placere de le parte del corpo mio».” Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 71 (XII, c. 11r). At this point in her life, Colomba was in her teens, in the throes of puberty, so such erotic images would have been typical for a young woman her age.
biographer likened her valiant efforts in the face of temptation to those of St. Anthony of the Desert, who endured a similar series of torments when the devil tried first to entice him with memories of wealth and comfort, then to assault his physical being, and then to seduce him in the form of a lustful woman. St. Anthony offered praise to the Lord and declared that he had no fear of that despicable menace, the devil.\textsuperscript{156}

Colomba’s \emph{vita} asserts that Satan continued to harass her regularly, with physical blows, insults, and deceptions.\textsuperscript{157} However, her spiritual enemy poured considerable effort into that forty-day period of Lent, when Colomba was preparing herself to receive the official habit of the Third Order of St. Dominic. The conferring of the habit would mark the greatest transformation in Colomba’s life as a servant of God, for immediately after, she began her public ministry. That Lenten period, when Colomba abstained from all food but the Eucharistic wafer and suffered torments from the devil, served as her desert experience, her preparation for ministry, just as Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness prepared him for his own ministry of preaching and healing. Again, Satan used human agents, or \emph{li satelliti}, often those closest to the young woman, to do his bidding.\textsuperscript{158} When these humans failed to unnerve her, the devil took matters into his own hands. Whereas he had acted alone when Colomba was younger, this time he called upon a multitude of demons to carry out his plans to derail her in her commitment to Christ. He had deployed this

\textsuperscript{156} These efforts on the part of the devil to tempt Colomba to sin made up chapter XII in Sebastiano’s \textit{Legenda volgare} (69-71).

\textsuperscript{157} For examples, see Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 82-83 (XVII, c. 14v-15r).

\textsuperscript{158} On more than one occasion, Sebastiano used the term “satellites” to identify the humans Satan used to hinder Colomba. See, for example, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 108 (XXIV, c. 23r), in reference to the men who sought to harm her on the road to Perugia, and 219 (XLVII, c. 57r), in reference to the women who accused her confessor of practicing astrology.
multitude in the recent past, just after Colomba had received permission from her confessor to receive daily Communion, and in an effort to stop her, the demons attacked her and twisted her mouth, leaving her unconscious and unable to eat. This time, just after that disgruntled citizen recognized the holy woman’s sanctity and began to revere her, the evil multitude returned for a full-scale assault:

“Then those malicious spirits, not able by means of others, tried themselves to be able to hinder her so that she might not continue; and they formed into different figures of persons and noticeably they presented themselves with ugly and dishonest acts trying to beat and batter the mind of the virgin. And they put forward now pious things, then sorrows, and now in the form of angels they came to her aid; then as holy brothers of St. Dominic and as the Crucifix she had and then as Jesus with the Apostles.”

But Jesus shone his holy light upon them and revealed their true identity. In a last-ditch effort, the demons threw Colomba to the ground and dragged her by her hair, all the while saying rude things. Ultimately, they took flight and the virgin triumphed, and even her uncle, whom the devil had used to harass her, came to appreciate her steadfast faith and commitment to holiness.

Sebastiano degli Angeli recorded that the newly-invested tertiary, “confident in the help of God, desired to be afflicted and she chafed more in the pressures and troubles and prayed to God that he would give her more of them.” He compared her to Job of the Old Testament, who, during his own desert experience, lost everything he had when God allowed Satan to test

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159 Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 83 (XVII, c. 15r).

160 “Alora quilli spiriti maligni, non podendo per meço de altri, se sforçavano da sé se avessero poduto i(m)pedirla che non sequitasse; et finxero diverse figure de persone e sensiblemente se presentavano cum acti bructe e dehoneste sforçandose bactere e allidere la mente de la vergene. E proponevano mo’ le cose pie, puoi le tristitie e mo’ in forma de angnioli la succurrevano; puoi como frati de Sancto Domenico sancti e como Crocifixo s’avia e po’ como Yesu cum li Apostoli.” Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 88 (XIX, c. 16v).

161 “…confidando de lo adiutorio de Dio, desiderava essere tribulata e più atrita nelle pressure e guai e orava Dio che li ne desse più.” Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 90 (XX, c. 17v).
him to prove his faithfulness. Her confessor explained that God had granted permission for his
honorable servant Job to be tested, because he knew that he could withstand whatever trial to
which the enemy subjected him. Sebastiano believed that Colomba, like Job, would not collapse
under the spiritual and emotional strain that accompanied the devil’s intense persecution, and
that she would be able to stand against the most serious of temptations, that is, to abandon, out of
desperation, her faith in God.162 When the beata did not cave, her enemy threatened someone
close to her, just as he had taken all of Job’s children from him. He warned that he would hurt
her confessor, so that she could not receive Holy Communion from him, but she replied that
nothing could separate her from the care of her loving spouse.163 Later in his narrative, Fra
Sebastiano wrote: “Satan asked to tempt and like the grain to sift, to winnow and drive away all
the saints, from which the saints cannot be exempt, for God whom he loves he chastens and
disciplines every child whom he receives.”164 Here the theologian referred to the words of Jesus,
when he said to Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift
you like wheat,” and to the words found in Hebrews reminding Christians that God’s discipline
demonstrates his love.165 He then named lo innocente Iob and Pietro papa as two among others
who had been sustained by the all-merciful God, the same God who came to Colomba’s aid
when others tried to smear her reputation, and when the devil attempted to “contaminate her

162 Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 91-92 (XX, c. 17v-18r).
163 Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 91 (XX, c. 18r).
164 “Satanasso dimandò de tentare e como el grano crevellare, ventolare e sgurlare tucti li santi, dal quale
li santi non possono essere exempti, inperoché Idio quilli che ama gastiga e flaggella ogni figliolo che lui
receve.” Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 138 (XXXI, c. 32r).
modesty” by inflicting her with a terrible and painful sore on her knee that swelled into a tumor, much like the boils with which Job was afflicted.166

The devil found his way into the titles of two other chapters in Sebastiano’s work. His fortieth chapter, De lo insultu del diavolo contra beata Colomba, related various tactics the devil used to torment Colomba and her convent after the many miracles performed by her hand and in her name. His forty-eighth chapter, De lo scrutinio del precedente capitolo in corte romana e nuovo insultu del demonio, detailed Sebastiano’s efforts to defend Colomba and himself in Rome, and the devil’s efforts after that defense was successful to set in motion the events that would ultimately lead to Colomba’s censure. Because the tormented woman endured such grave insults and threats from Satan’s “satellites” during that time, Fra Sebastiano considered hers a life of martyrdom, and he was careful to note that she was never deprived of the word of God or the sacrament.167 He then reminded his reader of Christ’s response to the devil, al tentatore, linking Colomba’s trial and her reliance on Scripture with Jesus’ experience in the desert: “‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’”168

That year-and-a-half-long period when Colomba was disciplined by officials in Rome counted for the beata as a second desert experience, and Sebastiano identified it as such:

“Therefore in that time blessed Colomba was in the left [or in a bad way], that is in the adversities of the present life, in the middle of the desert, that is of the penitential order in white tunic and black mantle; as Ambrose said: ‘No one is admitted to the battle of virtue if not washed of the stains and consecrated by grace’; and Christ in the desert provokes the devil and within his fighters and

166 “[I]ntentava contaminare la pudicitia sua…” Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 139 (XXXI, c. 32r).

167 Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 227 (XLVIII, c. 60r).

strong soldiers he demonstrates the fight, which in eternity, finally victorious, he crowns the head[s] of the saints.”

Sebastiano considered his *forte beata Colomba* one such fighter, and the biographer spoke of the trials she faced as a professed penitent, a full member of the Third Order. Her first period in the wilderness occurred just before she took the habit, and her second after she had taken her official vows, for it was after that transformational event that she fell under the suspicion of those envious or doubtful of her mystical powers. When she was put under ecclesiastical censure and stripped of her duties as prioress, she was left, in the words of her discharged confessor, “like an infant, the mother hidden, and like a little lost lamb without a shepherd, and like a disabled little old man, devoid of every support.” During this dark time, however, she took refuge in the protection of her beloved spouse. In setting the stage for Colomba’s reinstatement as a full sister of the Order, Sebastiano explained: “The maid of Christ had legitimately fought and therefore angels came who attended her. So said St. Hilary [of Poitiers] that ‘[with] the head of the devil conquered and overcome by us, the ministry of the angels and the services of heavenly power are not lacking in us’ which thus were yet foreshadowed in Christ.” Fra Sebastiano

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169 “Era adonqua in quillo tempo beata Colomba nella sinistra, cioè nelle adversità de la vita presente, in meço del deserto, cioè de la regolare penitentia in veste candida e mantello negro; imperoché, come dice Ambrosio: «Niuno se admecte a la batalglia de la vertù se non sia lavato da le macule e de gratia consacrato»; e Cristo nel deserto provoca el dyavolo e nelli suoi co(m)bactente e militi forte indice la pugna, el quale in eterno vencetore finalmente el capo de li sancti corona.” Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 244 (LVI, c. 65v). Sebastiano was quoting from Ambrogio, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, IV, 4.


171 Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 246 (LI, c. 66r).

172 “Legitimamente havea co(m)bactuto la ancilla de Cristo e inperò vennero li angeli che li ministravano. Così dice sancto Ylario che «victo e superditato da noi el capo del diavolo, li ministerii de li angeli e li
viewed Colomba’s time of censure, removed from almost all manner of support, as a wilderness experience on par with Jesus’ forty days without human contact or nourishment, and at the end, after they had overcome the temptations of their common enemy, both were tended by angels from God.

Satan made regular appearances throughout Sebastiano’s work on Colomba’s life, often referred to by names found in Christian Scripture, such as principe de le tenebre, or prince of darkness, or patre de le mençogne, meaning father of lies, but the friar most often referred to the evil one as inimico, or enemy: sometimes rabbioso inimico, or reprobo inimico, but frequently vechio (old) inimico. By giving the devil so much space on the pages of his narrative, Sebastiano demonstrated what a menace he was throughout the life of his saintly subject. By portraying il demonio as the virgin’s chief nemesis, the biographer paralleled her struggle—and victory—with that of Christ himself. The hagiographer, however, followed the lead of the saint, for Colomba da Rieti devoted her life, with intention, to the imitation of Christ, and her confessor Sebastiano dutifully played his role in recording every episode in which she patterned herself after Jesus. Clearly, Sebastiano understood what imitation meant and the integral role that temptation played in it, for he devoted much time to documenting the episodes throughout the virgin’s life when the devil tried to derail her in her purpose. By demonstrating how the devil attacked the beata at every turn, how he made her his personal enemy, her confessor painted his
subject as a Christ-like figure, for as Christians understood it, Satan’s ultimate enemy was Christ himself.

Elena da Udine, Caterina da Bologna, and Colomba da Rieti consecrated themselves to Christ, committing to a life of extreme asceticism and sacrificing worldly pleasures and physical comforts for the sake of devotion through imitation. After a period of fasting and intense prayer, they encountered the devil, who sought to frighten them, discourage them, seduce them, and ultimately derail them in their efforts to model themselves after Christ and minister on his behalf. However, these very circumstances provided a unique opportunity for these devout women to imitate the life of Jesus through his wilderness experience, when he, too, fasted and prayed, and then faced and fought off temptations of the devil. Their own experiences with the enemy and their ability to endure his afflictions would both fortify them and contribute to their perception as holy women touched by God.
Chapter 3

Imitatio Christi and Temptations in the Wilderness

The Catholic Church has traditionally held that all Christians will experience temptation in one form or another, often through the seduction of earthly vanities and passions, throughout the course of their everyday lives. After all, Jesus warned his disciples: “Temptations to sin are sure to come.”¹ The holy women of the late medieval period, however, experienced temptation almost exactly as Jesus had: after a transformational event, during a time of fasting and isolation, and at the hands of the devil himself, present in physical form. In this sense, their imitation of the life of Christ was quite literal, for they encountered Satan under circumstances very similar to those that made up Jesus’ own wilderness experience. For them, imitation came through both temptation and resistance.

The ideal of imitatio Christi originated in the teachings of the apostles. Jesus told each of his disciples to “deny himself and take up his cross” and follow him, but his apostles instructed Christians, as disciples of Christ, to imitate him.² Giles Constable has identified seven verses from the New Testament Epistles that provided the foundation for the spiritual practices of Christians in medieval Europe, and they all pertain to the act of imitating.³ To the church at Corinth, Paul wrote twice, “Be imitators of me,” for he was of Christ, and to his brothers and sisters at Philippi, “Join in imitating me.”⁴ To the church at Ephesus, he wrote: “Be imitators of

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¹ Luke 17:1

² Matthew 16:24


⁴ I Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1; Philippians 3:17
God.”⁵ On two occasions, Paul praised the Christians at Thessalonica, telling them: “You became imitators of us [Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy] and of the Lord,” and “you…became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea.”⁶ The writer of Hebrews admonished Christians to become “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”⁷ In each of these cases, if Christians were not encouraged to imitate Christ himself, they were directed to imitate those who had proven faithful in living according to his example.

**Suffering as Imitation**

The Apostle Paul emphasized *suffering* as an essential component of imitation. Having suffered tremendously himself under a variety of circumstances in his mission to spread the Gospel, he wrote to his fellow Christians that “we are children of God…fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”⁸ He associated suffering with imitation when he wrote: “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things…that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”⁹ St. Peter, considered chief among the apostles, counseled Christians to “rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings,” with *sharing* being understood as *participating in* for the medieval Christian, whose Latin Vulgate would have read

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⁵ Ephesians 5:1

⁶ I Thessalonians 1:6 and 2:14

⁷ Hebrews 6:12

⁸ Romans 8:16b-17

⁹ Philippians 3:8b, 10
communicantes [sharing or participating in] Christi passionibus.\textsuperscript{10} For both Church leaders, suffering was a participatory event, one that would lead to unity or oneness with Christ.

Of course, the greatest imitator of Christ in the period of the early Church was the martyr, who indeed suffered to the greatest possible extreme for the faith. St. Ignatius of Antioch (ca. AD 35-110/117), who was executed under the emperor Trajan, understood the ideal of \textit{imitatio Christi} in the sense of practicing gentleness, patience, and humility in the treatment of others, for he instructed the Christians at Ephesus to imitate their Lord—meaning the historical Jesus—when faced with injustice and contempt from non-believers.\textsuperscript{11} However, he also demonstrated the form of \textit{imitatio} to which all martyrs aspired, that is the imitation of the divine Jesus and his sacrificial work on the cross. By participating in Christ’s redeeming suffering through the pain of his own trial and execution, St. Ignatius achieved the fullness of his purpose as a follower of Christ. He wrote just before his death: “To share in his Passion I go through everything, for he who became the perfect man gives me the strength.”\textsuperscript{12} In pleading with his fellow Christians not to intervene in his cause, he asked: “Let me imitate the Passion of my God.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} I Peter 4:13. Some modern translations do substitute “participating in” for “sharing” in both this verse and the one above.


For the early Church, the concept of *imitatio Christi* stemmed from the belief in divine filiation, that having been created in the image of God and redeemed by the work of Christ, Christians become children of God and, as Peter wrote, “partakers [or participants] of the divine nature.”  

The belief in divinization, or deification—becoming divine—as expressed in the works of early Christian writers such as Justin Martyr, Athanasius, and Hilary of Poitiers, contributed to the understanding of *imitatio* as a pathway to participating in the divinity of Christ as God.  

While theologians of the Patristic era expected that imitators of Christ would seek to follow in their Lord’s footsteps and embrace his human behaviors of obedience, charity, humility, and suffering, they also believed that true imitation—of the divine Christ—penetrated much deeper into the soul, “involv[ing] man’s being rather than his doing, what he was rather than what he did.”  

For the martyr, divinity was ultimately achieved, after a lifetime of conforming to the will of God and the example of Jesus, through human suffering unto death in the name of the Savior. Origen (ca. AD 184-253), who authored *Exhortation to Martyrdom* (ca. 235), gave much weight

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14 Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought*, 146. Instead of referencing 2 Peter 1:4, as I have done, Constable refers to words attributed to Augustine: “‘God was made man in order that man might become God’” (from *Sermo spurius 128, 1, in Patrologia latina*, XXXIX 1997). Very similar words—"For the Son of God became man so that we might become God”—are attributed to St. Athanasius and incorporated into the Catechism of the Catholic Church (460). See St. Athanasius, *De incarnatione*, 54, 3: PG, 192B.  

15 I include the concept of divinization here for the purpose of demonstrating the teachings of leading Church theologians regarding the ultimate end of imitation. By the later Middle Ages, the issue of divinization had become a topic of debate, especially in light of the beliefs held by those who had embraced the ideas of the Free Spirit movement that had emerged in the thirteenth century. The women in this study, and other mystics like them who were associated with the major religious orders, appear to have been less concerned with becoming divine, and more so with being one with the divine, particularly through a spousal relationship with Jesus Christ expressed through the mystical ecstatic experience.  

to the words of Paul to the church at Corinth in emphasizing the participatory nature of Christian suffering. He wrote:

“We should be extremely eager to share in Christ’s sufferings and to let them be multiplied in us if we desire the superabundant consolation that will be given to those who mourn. This consolation will not perhaps be the same for all, for if it were, Scripture would not say: ‘The more we share in the sufferings of Christ, the more we share in his consolation.’ Sharing in his consolation will be proportionate to our sharing in his suffering.”17

Origen interpreted Paul’s words to mean that some would suffer more than others, but that their reward would be commensurate with their level of participation. Origen was the first of the early Church writers to cite 2 Peter 1:4 in building a case for participation to mean more than sharing in the positive attributes of God, such as goodness and mercy, but rather participating in an active and dynamic way in response to those attributes.18 His teachings greatly influenced later theologians, especially Athanasius and Jerome in the fourth century, and Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth, all of whom contributed to the shaping of monastic thought that defined imitative practices for the medieval Church.19

In the twelfth century, with few opportunities for Christians in Europe to suffer religious persecution at the hands of the state, monks and nuns became the new martyrs. Instead of sacrificing their lives for the faith, they sacrificed all worldly pleasures and comforts for a life of


19 Constable, Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought, 152, 170 n. 157.
austerity, adopting the *vita apostolica* in an attempt to imitate Christ and his disciples. At the same time, the Carolingian portrayal of Christ as triumphant Redeemer King faded into images of Jesus, the suffering Servant, hanging in all his humanity upon a rugged wooden cross.\(^{20}\) This renewed interest in the wounded Savior, flesh torn and body distorted, altered the ideal of *imitatio*, for now imitation became quite literal. Christ was still “Emmanuel, God with us,” but even more so, he was the Lamb of God, led to slaughter for the sins of others.\(^{21}\) And many who chose to pattern their lives after him rewrote the norms of affective piety, taking it beyond meditation, contemplation, and the associated emotional anguish to involve real corporeal—usually self-inflicted—suffering. For some who had chosen the cloistered life—and even some beyond the monastery walls—a vow of chastity, poverty, and obedience did not go far enough. True imitation meant bearing his pain, experiencing his sorrows—*becoming* the suffering servant. As Caroline Walker Bynum has explained, referencing two well-known saints of the early thirteenth century: “Whereas Bernard of Clairvaux taught that we identify with Christ by extending our compassion to his humanity through pitying the suffering humanity of our

\(^{20}\) Jaroslav Pelikan, in his *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), has delineated the various ways that the figure of Christ has been depicted throughout Christian history. He notes a transition from “The Cosmic Christ,” or Christ in his divinity, of the early Church to “Christ Crucified” in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and he explains that the cross of the Crucifixion was seen as the embodiment of the power of God and the wisdom of God, for it was the instrument of Christ’s ultimate victory over the enemy (99-100). Pelikan goes even further, however, in establishing categories for the representation of Christ in later centuries. He was “The Monk Who Ruled the World” during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the monastic orders dominated western European society. He was “The Bridegroom of the Soul” during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Bernard McGinn’s period of “the flowering of mysticism.” And he was “The Divine and Human Model” during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when St. Francis—the “second Christ”—inspired imitation of Jesus’ life, with particular emphasis on his sufferings on the cross (133-39).

\(^{21}\) Matthew 1:23
neighbors, Francis and Mary of Oignies became Christ on the cross while a seraph looked on.”

Again Paul’s writings served as the inspiration for such imitation, for when he wrote to the Galatians, he spoke of being nailed to the cross with Christ, having crucified the flesh, and bearing the marks of the Lord Jesus on his own body. Paul could have been speaking metaphorically, but during the later medieval period, those seeking to imitate Christ took his words regarding the marks of the Lord quite literally. Such marks could be created through self-mortification with the whip of the flagellant, or with chains similar to those worn by Colomba da Rieti, or with other implements such as a crown of thorns pressed into the flesh. However, a chosen few, including St. Francis of Assisi and St. Catherine of Siena, claimed to bear marks of divine origin—or at least to suffer the pain from invisible marks—in the form of stigmata.

**Woman and Christ’s Suffering Body**

Caroline Walker Bynum has established through her research that medieval spirituality was “peculiarly bodily,” and for women it often found expression through unique ascetic practices that adversely affected the condition of the body, such as self-inflicted punishment and food deprivation. During the three centuries from 1200 to 1500, female spirituality in particular reflected the association of woman with Christ’s flesh—his physicality and his humanity. In the words of the twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen: “’Man…signifies the divinity of the

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25 The theme of female spirituality and Christ’s humanity can be found especially in Bynum’s chapter on “Woman as Body and as Food,” in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (261-76), and in two essays in *Fragmentation and Redemption*: “…And Woman His Humanity” (151-79) and “The Female Body and Religious Practice” (181-238).
Son of God and woman his humanity.”

26 The dualities of male and female, spirit and body, that had traditionally permeated philosophical, theological, and even medical thinking, influenced this association of man with the soul and woman with the flesh, which of course correlated the male with divinity and the female with carnality. With the emphasis in the later Middle Ages on the humanity of Christ, and the parallel development of what Dyan Elliott has called “a vigorous penitential culture,” the body increasingly came to be viewed as an instrument of salvation. 27 The body bore the curse of Adam and Eve’s sin, with men fated to toil and sweat and women to suffer in childbirth, and both ultimately to die and return to the dust, but it would be a human body that would provide the means for the souls of humankind to be saved from eternal damnation. Therefore, if woman was associated with the body, then she—particularly her body—could also be identified with the work of salvation, which required physical suffering. Bynum has chipped away at the commonly accepted notion that medieval devout women saw themselves as the redeemers of the female image of frailty and lasciviousness cast by Eve and her sin, adopting chastity and extreme piety as a means of extinguishing carnal desire. Instead, she has argued, these women were motivated in their austere religious practices primarily by a deep desire to imitate Christ—by a belief that they could imitate Christ. 28 As Bynum has noted, they did not feel the need to limit themselves to imitation of female models of piety, particularly


28 Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption, 149, 152-55.
the Virgin Mary, or somehow to become more male in their attitudes and practices in order to gain legitimacy as holy women. They did not think of themselves, as their male confessors so often did, in gendered terms as female, and therefore limited in their spiritual potential, but in physiological terms as human, as *matter* even, “redeemed and expressed by a human God.”

And if, as Sara Ritchey has demonstrated, the material world was re-created—and made holy—through the Virgin Mary with the Incarnation of God, then woman was both the means by which God became flesh, and the result of that most pivotal event, holy matter.

Barbara Newman has pointed out in her book, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* that baptism, as it was intended in Christian Scripture, was the great equalizer, erasing divisive labels such as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, making everyone simply Christian. She reminds us, however, that men, particularly those in positions of authority, generally saw clear divisions between male and female, even in the realm of spirituality. Newman has argued

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29 Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 153. Bynum uses the example of St. Clare of Assisi, whose male biographer portrayed her as an imitator of Mary. However, her own writings pointed to a decided effort to imitate Christ. Catherine Mooney has expounded upon this point in her essay, “*Imitatio Christi or Imitatio Mariae?* Clare of Assisi and Her Interpreters,” in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 52-77.

30 Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 149; also 156 and 166-67.

31 See Sara Ritchey, *Holy Matter: Changing Perceptions of the Material World in Late Medieval Christianity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); here 8-10. Ritchey includes the body as part of the material world, but her work takes us beyond the body to elements of nature and how they embodied God’s Incarnation for medieval Christians.


33 Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 245.
convincingly that the same scriptural tenet that allowed all baptized Christians to become one in Christ extended to the taking of monastic vows, often seen as a second baptism that marked spiritual rebirth. The vow of chastity, in particular, allowed the woman to render unnecessary that which made her distinctly female and to accomplish almost heroic spiritual feats that rivaled her male counterparts. Newman uses the words of St. Jerome to explain a fourth-century attitude that had lasting influence: “As long as a woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called man.”34 With this status of virago, or honorary male, the medieval devout woman could imitate Christ, particularly in his afflictions, in ways regarded as more feminine, perhaps more affective, as a womanChrist. And her body was an instrument in this imitation. She flagellated herself, fasted for long periods, prayed in anguish to the point of weeping copious tears, wore devices that caused physical torment, and reenacted the Passion in all its physicality. Her body, able to endure long bouts of starvation and intense pain, was a means of becoming a womanChrist.

At the same time, women were viewed as more emotional, and more susceptible to the powers of the imagination.35 Therefore, the female body was seen as an appropriate vessel for communication with the divine. If man was rational, then woman was intuitive, and by extension, more sensitive to dispatches from the supernatural realm. Since medieval theologians

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35 Discussion on this topic can be found in: Bynum, “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages,” in Fragmentation and Redemption; Catherine Mooney, “Imitatio Christi or Imitatio Mariae?” in Gendered Voices; and Dyan Elliott, “Flesh and Spirit: The Female Body,” in Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition.
considered the Virgin Mary to be a mediatrix, or the conduit for salvation since she had borne the Savior, saintly women were also regarded as channels through which God could reveal Himself to humankind.\textsuperscript{36} Women, much more often than men, received celestial visions or fell into ecstatic trances and prophesied as if a mouthpiece for God, and their bodies performed the message in the process, often causing them great pain and resulting in physical exhaustion. In the earthly realm, the female body was an obstacle; in the spiritual realm, at least for the consecrated woman, it was an instrument that gave others access to a word from God that they could not hear on their own.

The female body also served as the means by which the holy woman could perform imitative suffering that had a substitutionary, redemptive purpose. Like Christ, who “took our infirmities and bore our diseases,” she accepted both physical and spiritual pain for the sake of making atonement for personal sins and the sins of others.\textsuperscript{37} By sharing in Christ’s Passion, she also willingly participated in his redemptive suffering endured for human souls, imitating him in his obedience to God’s will.\textsuperscript{38} Again Paul’s writings provide the foundation for the doctrine of redemptive suffering, this time found in his letter to the Colossians: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the

\textsuperscript{36} Mooney, “Imitatio Christi or Imitatio Mariae?” in Gendered Voices, 69.

\textsuperscript{37} Matthew 8:17, quoting Isaiah 53:4

\textsuperscript{38} Paula M. Kane addresses redemptive suffering in “’She Offered Herself Up’: The Victim Soul and Victim Spirituality in Catholicism,” Church History 71.1 (March 2002): 80-119. In the Catholic tradition, a victim soul is someone chosen by God to suffer to a greater degree than the ordinary Christian, for the sins of humankind and in imitation of Christ and his work of redemption through suffering. Kane references the work of French priest Paulin Giloteaux, Victim Souls: A Doctrinal Essay (London: Burnes Oates & Washbourne, 1927), who first provided extensive coverage of the subject. He explained that the term “victim soul” came into use in the late nineteenth century, but that the concept has existed since the beginning of Christianity. See Kane, 83n8. The women in this study, while they did not identify themselves as victim souls, certainly behaved as they would have had the term existed in their day.
sake of his body, that is, the church.” In Origen’s passage given above from his Exhortation to Martyrdom, he expounded upon the verse, “as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation,” to suggest that some will suffer to a much greater degree than others, and thus receive a greater consolation. Ariel Glucklich, in his work on Sacred Pain, refers to the pain suffered on behalf of others as shared pain, vicarious and sacrificial in nature, co-suffered with Christ, with the victim fulfilling the role of the scapegoat that carried away the sins of the Hebrew community in the text of the Pentateuch and foreshadowed for Christians the purifying work of Christ on the cross.

Each of the women presented in this study believed that their suffering was shared with Christ and redemptive in nature. Elena Valentini da Udine, who punished her body with whips and spikes and stones, subjected herself to terrible bodily afflictions primarily for the expiation of her own sins, for she carried such guilt for her worldly lifestyle as a young woman and the contribution she had made to Jesus’ suffering on the cross. But she prayed daily to the point of weeping for the sins of others. While she was known for her many miracles of healing amongst the members of her community, she sought no healing for her own infirmity, which she acquired from a bout with the devil—an infirmity that plagued her for three years, the length of time Jesus spent in ministry, and ultimately brought an end to her life. In bearing the agony of her own illness, she suffered vicariously in a very real sense for those whom she had healed, so that they

39 Colossians 1:24

40 See reference above to Origen’s Exhortation to Martyrdom (Nn. 41-42: PG 618-619) and 2 Corinthians 1:7.

could be released from their own pain. She became a suffering servant, like the one portrayed in Isaiah 53 and considered a foreshadowing of Jesus, who “has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases.” Caterina Vigri da Bologna viewed her struggles against the enemy—both human and supernatural—as her responsibility in protecting the spiritual well-being of the young nuns in her charge. She experienced a five-year period of darkness, a depression even, where she seemed to internalize the emotional strain of the conflict within her convent’s walls, suffering from severe headaches and feeling as if God had removed from her the flame of divine love—a forsakenness similar to that which Christ felt on the cross as he bore the weight of humankind’s sins. She recorded her desire to suffer vicariously for the sins of others in her *Seven Spiritual Weapons*: “…many times I have prayed with heartfelt tears…that in the bottom of the infernal abyss…I, as the ultimate and most blameworthy sinner, may be placed as hell’s accused upon whom the forge is plied incessantly in order to satisfy the guilt of all the sinners who ever were, who are in the present, and who can be in the future.” Colomba da Rieti, who saw the city of Perugia through the plague of 1494, brought miraculous healing to many who had been stricken, but she became gravely ill with the pestilence herself, having offered herself as a host for the disease in order to spare the townspeople. Her biographer wrote: “The virgin of Christ patiently bore [the sickness] for the love of her neighbor as she had begged.” She refused all remedies and waited for healing from the Lord. She endured the full affliction of the plague upon her body, the blisters as marks of Jesus’ physical suffering, and she offered herself as a willing

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42 Isaiah 53:4 from the NRSVCE

43 Catherine of Bologna, *The Seven Spiritual Weapons*, 86 (IX.20).

44 “Tolera la vergene de Cristo patientemente per la carità del proximo como se havea i(m)petrato…” Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 137 (XXX, c. 31v).
victim, happy to carry the burden of the sins of the people for their atonement. All three women, dedicating themselves to a life of imitatio Christi, sought to suffer as Jesus did, thereby participating sacrificially in his work of both physical and spiritual salvation for the benefit of others, and in the process, advancing their own efforts at becoming closer to the divine.

**Eucharistic Piety, Fasting, and Suffering**

Caroline Walker Bynum, in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, has demonstrated the centrality of food in the lives of medieval women and in their devotional practices, drawing attention to the numerous images in medieval Christian art and literature of the suffering body of Jesus as nourishment—as food. According to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, when the priest blesses the bread upon the altar of the Eucharist, a miracle takes place, and that bread, having been broken, becomes in substance the literal body of Christ, the Real Presence. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is reenacted on the altar, his flesh torn and his blood poured out, so that when the recipient takes the bread and eats, she is partaking of the actual crucified flesh of Jesus, who commanded: “Take, eat; this is my body.” He offered his disciples food to eat—his body—at the Passover meal that would be his Last Supper, an act that aligned with the lesson he had given shortly after the miraculous feeding of five thousand, when he told his listeners: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood

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45 Pierotti, *Colomba da Rieti a Perugia*, 93.

46 Matthew 26:26b. I limit my discussion here to the bread of the Eucharist, and not the wine, since the women in this study, like all other medieval Christians, received the bread alone, with the wine usually reserved for members of the clergy.
abides in me, and I in him.” Here Jesus used the Greek verb *trogo*, to chew or gnaw, and so the Christian who consumes the bread of the Eucharist takes in his body as food, masticating his flesh as he intended. For the medieval holy woman, consuming the Communion wafer was taking in and digesting the flesh of Jesus himself. Bynum has taken the doctrine of transubstantiation to its furthest conclusion, writing: “To eat God was to take into one’s self the suffering flesh on the cross. To eat God was *imitatio crucis*. That which one ate was the physicality of the God-man.” For this reason, Eucharistic piety became a cornerstone in the devotion of nearly every saintly woman of the later Middle Ages. Many of them, including the three women in this study, sought to receive the Eucharist daily, at a time when most Christians partook just once each year. They often had to go to great lengths to convince their confessors that they should receive it more frequently, as Colomba da Rieti did. Bynum has called these women “intensely literal in their *imitatio Christi*,” for they desired to consume the body of Jesus as a means of partaking in his agony on the cross and “fusing” with his human flesh. Holy Communion was a unitive experience for these mystics, who saw themselves as brides of Christ, for it provided a way for their flesh to become one with his as the bread, his body, dissolved into theirs as they chewed and digested. For the medieval nun or tertiary who had committed herself to a spousal relationship with Christ, his body in the form of the Eucharistic wafer provided her both physical and spiritual sustenance, as well as the opportunity to become physically and spiritually one with her groom—“flesh of his flesh.” Why would she need anything else?

47 John 6:54-56


Fasting, required of all Christians by the medieval Church on certain days throughout the liturgical year, became a way of life for most medieval mystics. Modern scholars have labeled the phenomenon of extreme fasting *inedia*, or *inedia prodigiosa*, *anorexia mirabilis*, “holy anorexia,” miraculous abstinence, or “Eucharistic starvation,” but the young women who refused to eat a sustaining diet did so in the name of *imitatio Christi*. They and their confessors referred to their restricted intake of food as fasting or abstinence, using the language available to them through the Church and its doctrines, but they saw it as something much deeper than just sacrificing food; it was a rejection of the material world, denial of self, subjugation of the flesh, preparation of the soul, surrender of the will, and total reliance upon Christ for all needs, both physical and spiritual. Above all, it was an emptying, an elimination of any matter that might stand in the way of the mystic achieving complete unity with her spouse when she received the Eucharist. The medieval Christian fasted because Jesus fasted, and so it was an imitative act. It was also preparatory in nature, a way of centering the mind on the suffering of Jesus and creating a spiritual hunger for his presence in the Eucharist. And fasting was sacrificial, an offering of the physical body that had been denied all worldly passions, worthy of participating in the Passion or suffering of Christ. The medieval mystic went one step further, for by fasting continually, not just on the assigned holy days, she ensured that the only substance and sustenance that she consumed was Christ himself. He was both literally and figuratively “her everything.” By fully emptying herself, the mystic experienced an ecstatic transformation upon receiving the Eucharist, for she lost herself in what Caterina da Bologna called *el divino dispensacio per lo

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50 For terminology used to describe extreme fasting, see Bynum’s *Holy Fest and Holy Fast* and Bell’s *Holy Anorexia*, as well as: Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Julie Hepworth, *The Social Construction of Anorexia Nervosa* (London: Sage Publications, 1999).
fusa l’unione d’amore, a divine fusion of souls between the bride and her groom.\textsuperscript{51} This was the mystic’s greatest desire: to be united as one flesh and spirit with Christ, even to \textit{become} Christ through his suffering.\textsuperscript{52}

Beata Elena Valentini’s dietary restrictions were primarily motivated by a deep desire to do penance for the delicacies she had enjoyed in her youth. Admired by many in Udine for her great powers of abstinence, she subsisted on bread and water, with a rare indulgence of herb roots, and a nightly mixture of bile and vinegar, in remembrance of the only hydration Jesus was offered as he hung on the cross. While she ate very little, certainly not enough to maintain good health, she suffered more from what she did consume: the same concoction offered to Jesus as his tormented body hung on the cross.\textsuperscript{53} He did not drink it, but Elena did, so that she could take in his corporeal suffering. She substituted nourishing and satisfying food with filth, similar to Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena before her.

Santa Caterina Vigri da Bologna, modest to a fault, did not make her practices of austerity, including fasting, a central theme in her writings, nor did her biographer, Illuminata Bembo, highlight her dietary restrictions. Caterina prioritized obedience and prayer, spending long hours every day praying the Divine Office and making petitions for her own sins and for others. She committed herself to the biblical mandate to “pray without ceasing,” and she

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\footnote{\textsuperscript{52} Bynum addresses the idea of becoming through imitation as it related to Eucharistic piety in \textit{Holy Feast and Holy Fast}, particularly 256-57.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{53} Simone da Roma, \textit{Legenda della beata Helena da Udene}, 139, and Matthew 27:34.}
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instructed her novices on how to conduct their own prayer lives with the same intention.\textsuperscript{54} Illuminata reported that her sister spent hours upon hours in prayer, making great gestures and movements with her body, oblivious to those around her, but fixated on the Crucifix.\textsuperscript{55} Under such exhausting circumstances, Caterina would have devoted very little time to nourishment, and we know that she preferred to live under the strict Rule of St. Clare, which required sisters to “fast at all times,” with two meals allowed at Christmas.\textsuperscript{56} She recorded in \textit{The Seven Spiritual Weapons} that one of her greatest temptations involved her doubts regarding the presence of Christ in the host. She struggled mightily with these doubts until God spoke to her mind to assure her that he was present in both his divinity and his humanity in the bread of the Eucharist. She wrote that she was glad to have suffered such a temptation, because of the great consolation she received for it, and she quoted 2 Corinthians 1:7, where Paul spoke of sharing in Christ’s sufferings and consolations. Caterina then declared her overwhelming desire to receive Holy Communion frequently, and her experience of tremendous pain and sorrow when she could not.\textsuperscript{57}

Beata Colomba da Rieti began fasting at a young age on the Church’s holy days—even in infancy, according to her confessor. When she was ten years old, her mother begged her confessor to persuade her to relax the rigors of her penitence, including fasting throughout Lent,

\textsuperscript{54} Illuminata Bembo, \textit{Specchio di illuminazione}, 28-51 (V-VI), and I Thessalonians 5:17.

\textsuperscript{55} Illuminata Bembo, \textit{Specchio di illuminazione}, 28-29 (V.1).

\textsuperscript{56} “The Form of Life of Clare of Assisi,” made available at https://franciscantradition.org/clare-of-assisi-early-documents/the-form-of-life-of-saint-clare/284-ca-ed-1-page-113. Rudolph Bell has determined that Caterina was not an anorectic, and has called her “pleasantly plump,” which some, including myself, might find a bit offensive. See Bell, \textit{Holy Anorexia}, 117.

\textsuperscript{57} Catherine of Bologna, \textit{The Seven Spiritual Weapons}, 77-79 (VIII.1-9).
but Colomba insisted that she was simply living in imitation of Christ and St. Catherine of Siena. When her mother made her a light soup to eat, the girl modified it with water, ashes, and dirt, so as not to enliven her taste buds. As a penitent, she gradually increased even more the restrictions she imposed upon herself, especially after she was given permission for daily Communion. Her strictest fast was that which lasted for the entire Lenten period of forty days, in imitation of Jesus’ time in the desert, when she lived on the Eucharistic wafer alone. Colomba did not consider her efforts to be punishing; instead, she regarded her abstinence from regular food and her reliance on the Eucharist—‘the true bread’—to be a time of feasting, not fasting. She did, however, ultimately die of starvation. All three women, having emptied themselves of any earthly sustenance, met Jesus in the Eucharist, falling into ecstasy upon consuming his body in the bread. For them, fasting and feasting on the bread of Communion provided the unitive experience every mystic craved.

Rudolph Bell, in *Holy Anorexia*, has argued that medieval holy women who severely restricted their own food intake did so as a way of exercising control in the only way they could—over their own bodies—within the confines of a patriarchal system that limited their means of power and expression. From an examination of the documentation related to 170 Italian women from 1200 to the present, including the three women presented here, he has determined that more than half of them suffered from what modern-day medical experts would label *anorexia nervosa*, which is categorized as a mental illness. Bell has found common among the

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58 Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 61 (VIII, c. 7r-v).

59 Bell identified 261 holy women honored by the Catholic Church and catalogued in the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, but he determined that only 170 of them had enough source material to support his study. See Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, x.
women in his study whom he determined to fit the profile of an anorectic, “the drive to destruction of her body—for the flesh cannot be tamed and therefore must be obliterated.” In his view, with the female saint both at war against her own body and in a struggle against the patriarchy, “autonomy demands freedom from the shackles of sexual desire, hunger, and weariness.”

He notes a parallel growth in the influence of the mendicant orders and the number of women finding religious expression through self-denial. In his analysis, Bell has concentrated his efforts on the psychological causes of food restriction, especially in relation to the dynamic of control for women trapped within male-centered power structures like the Roman Church. However, he has given little attention to the important theme of asceticism in medieval Christian devotion and the integral role fasting has played historically in the efforts of saints, both male and female, to seek God in earnest. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, in Fasting Girls, rightly calls Bell’s argument reductionist, writing that his characterization of medieval holy women who practiced extreme fasting as anorectics only serves to “flatten differences in female experience across time and discredit the special quality of Eucharistic fervor and penitential asceticism as it was lived and perceived.”

Bell has also made the broad assumption that all holy women fashioned themselves as such in defiance of male authority, and that they claimed for themselves the status of bride of Christ as a means of legitimizing their own efforts at autonomy, making them answerable to no other man, or woman, but Christ. For Bell, abstinence was about control and resistance. That might have been true of some women, and to build his case he has made an obvious choice in Catherine of Siena.

60 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 115.

61 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 116.

62 Brumberg, Fasting Girls, 48.

63 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 116.
However, for many medieval devout women, abstinence was about imitation, and imitation for them necessitated suffering. Caroline Walker Bynum has countered Bell’s argument with this:

“Fasting was not merely a substitution of pathological and self-defeating control of self for unattainable control of circumstance. It was part of suffering; and suffering was considered an effective activity, which redeemed both individual and cosmos. Women’s imedia was therefore not so much bizarre behavior affecting a few individuals, as part of a broader pattern that included eucharistic devotion, food multiplication miracles, devotion to Christ’s humanity, the theology of purgatory, and care of the sick. Such fasting can be understood only if we understand the late medieval notion of *imitatio Christi* as fusion with the suffering physicality of Christ, and late medieval notions of the female as flesh.”

Through the complementary practices of fasting and frequent reception of the Eucharist, the medieval mystic reduced her every physical and spiritual need to just one object: the wafer. By emptying herself of earthly food, she suffered hunger just as Jesus suffered in the desert. And by taking in his broken body as bread, she participated in his suffering on the cross. Both forms of suffering brought redemption, for her soul and for the souls of others. As Bynum so eloquently stated: “The notion of substituting one’s own suffering through illness and starvation for the guilt and destitution of others is not ‘symptom’—it is theology.” The female body was uniquely qualified for this kind of sacrifice, because woman represented Christ’ humanity, and therein lay the source of the holy woman’s empowerment.

Elena Valentini da Udine lived as a widow for eleven years, performing works of charity in the care of her neighbors, before she dedicated herself to a life of austerity. Inspired by an Augustinian preacher’s sermon on meritorious works and grace, she took the habit and crafted a devotional life that reflected the physical sufferings of Jesus, in a very literal way, which

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64 Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 207.

included fasting. While many widows joined a convent out of necessity, with no means of support for themselves, Elena waited eleven years, during which time she cared for her own children as well as others. A preacher’s words drove her to dedicate herself to an ascetic life, where she submitted herself to the close oversight of a confessor, indicating a concern for devotion over autonomy. Caterina Vigri da Bologna seemed drawn to the religious life early on, leaving her position at court at age thirteen to join a house of penitents. But even there, she pressed for her sisters to adopt the strict Rule of St. Clare, seemingly out a desire for the vita apostolica. Her biography, written by a fellow sister, paints a portrait of a devout and humble woman concerned most with caring for and instructing the novices in her charge, and not at all with asserting herself as a figure of authority. Colomba Guadagnoli da Rieti’s pathway to sainthood was, indeed, scattered with bread crumbs and sour berries, and one could make the argument that she used her ascetic practices, including extreme fasting, to make herself undesirable for marriage. If that is the case, then she gave herself quite an early start, because she began causing herself great physical discomfort as early as the age of five, according to her confessor. If we can believe his account, she hung out at the local church for pleasure as a young girl and yearned to be like the penitents she witnessed there. While her parents did arrange a marriage for her, and were sorely disappointed when she spoiled her own chances of becoming a bride, her family members ultimately supported her in her efforts to live a devout life, her uncle providing the cloth for her habit, and her mother and sister eventually joining her order. Did she starve herself and punish her flesh out of a desire to exert control where she had none? Perhaps. But if she did, she likely acted, possibly out of resistance to male authority, but more importantly out of resistance to her own fleshly desires that stood in her way of living a life in complete imitation of Christ. Was that imitation driven by a desire for attention and notoriety? Quite
possibly. Colomba did craft a narrative for herself that demonstrated her flair for the dramatic, especially with her “last supper” before taking the road to Perugia. If she sought celebrity, her methods worked, for she was considered a living saint throughout the region, but she paid a very high price, for she died at a young age, just past the age of thirty-three, and her body had suffered tremendously in the process. Mental illness or vainglory—or both—might have played a role in the way Colomba’s life unfolded, but extreme piety took center stage, and her followers were blind to any other motives that might have inspired her eccentric behavior.

**Heroic Asceticism and Demonic Attacks**

Rudolph Bell does provide some useful insight regarding the psychological effects of extreme asceticism, which leads to a pivotal point in the present study. In his treatment of what he calls the holy anorectic’s war against her own body, he writes: “She surrenders active control over the battle to the depths of her psyche….Changes in hormonal balance, fueled by the psychic effect of sustained mental prayer, suppress the life-preserving needs for nourishment and rest.”66 And then in his discussion of Colomba da Rieti, he notes: “As with most holy anorexics, Colomba went through phases of diabolic torment…”67 I would argue that that was precisely the point. Through their extreme ascetic practices, these women created the ideal circumstances to bring on demonic molestation. Through their physical suffering—particularly by means of self-harm, intense prayer, and extreme fasting—done in the name of imitation, they put themselves in such a physical and mental state that visitations from the devil were bound to happen, whether in reality or by means of hallucination. They suffered as Christ did to be tempted as Christ was.

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After all, Matthew recorded in his Gospel that the Holy Spirit had led Jesus into the desert for the purpose of being tempted by the devil.\textsuperscript{68} So by recreating a desert experience, with all the entailed austerities, these aspiring saints, in imitation of Christ, brought about conditions very similar to those under which Christ encountered the enemy. The Christian could argue that, with the assent of God to allow for purification and preparation, Satan sought to be physically present in the temptation of these women, just as he had been with Jesus, because they had proved themselves a threat to his mission with their sincere piety and their influence upon others, and that these mystics willingly submitted to such trials as a means of demonstrating their worthiness as a servant of God. The skeptic could argue that these women drove themselves to such a weakened physical and psychological state that they became subject to hallucinations of a diabolical nature, and going one step further, that perhaps they did so intentionally, for the express purpose of bringing on such episodes. Bynum points out that medieval Christians did not draw clear distinctions “between miraculous and self-induced or between visible and invisible” (as in the case of the stigmata and other wounds). Instead, “the point was the pain because the pain was Christ’s.”\textsuperscript{69} In either case, why would a woman cause herself to be vulnerable to attacks from the devil, whether real or imagined? Because she recognized that, since Jesus had endured face-to-face temptations from Satan, any true imitator of Christ would have to do the same. At a time when Christian spirituality placed great emphasis on Jesus’ humanity and his earthly

\textsuperscript{68} Matthew 4:1: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

\textsuperscript{69} Bynum, \textit{Holy Feast and Holy Fast}, 212. Ariel Glucklich identifies three categories of pain suffered by religious women: voluntary, or self-inflicted pain, which was most often the result of imitating the suffering of Christ; pain inflicted by demons, who threw their victims down stairs or bit them and beat them, causing injuries that Glucklich suggests might have been “nonconscious forms of self-mutilation”; and the natural pain associated with illness or disease, which was often transformed into a meaningful and sacred pain. See Glucklich, \textit{Sacred Pain}, 82-84.
endeavors, the medieval holy woman set herself apart from the ordinary Christian, not only by way of her extreme austerities that caused Christ-like suffering, but also by way of her endurance against struggles with the real presence of Satan. Having already overcome the temptations of worldly treasures and the desires of the flesh, she emerged victorious in the battle against temptations from the devil himself. The medieval woman who had devoted her life to piety, consecrating herself through a vow of chastity, expected temptation, and perhaps even invited temptation, for she knew that true *imitatio Christi* meant enduring all that Jesus had endured, which included combat with the devil. If imitation involved physical and emotional suffering, then it also involved the suffering that came with resisting the devil and his schemes. Extreme forms of asceticism, and the associated changes brought upon the psyche and the physical body, provided the battleground. Whether Satan sought out the holy woman, or the holy woman sought out Satan, the same conclusion can be reached: temptation from the devil himself was considered an important, even necessary, element of *imitatio Christi*, and therefore an important building block in the construction of the religious identity of the living saint.

Wayne Proudfoot, whose *Religious Experience* helped shape the modern approach to religious studies, has identified two components in the process of preparing for a mystical experience, one being directed and intensive study under a spiritual guide in the religion’s system of doctrines and beliefs necessary to interpret the experience, and the other, “a disciplined activity designed to produce a change from the physiological and mental equilibrium that constitutes normal consciousness.”  

He explains that a variety of methods, including meditation, fasting, and sensory deprivation, can lead to an altered state, and that the results may differ in

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any given situation. Proudfoot emphasizes that the mystic brings with her a set of beliefs and expectations that give form and meaning to what she experiences. Ultimately, however, passivity, as well as transience, marks the mystical encounter, for the subject finds herself controlled by some power beyond her own, unable to alter the course of events beyond the preparatory stage. Proudfoot maintains that while activities meant for preparation can stretch the limits of both body and mind, the mystic does not view such exercises as causative. Instead, he writes:

“Mystics judge their experiences to be revelatory… and not artifacts or projections of their own subjective mental states. This is an important feature of the experience…. [A] novice engages in elaborate preparations. Not only is he fully steeped in the attitudes and beliefs of his tradition but he subjects himself to manipulations that he knows will have a considerable effect on his physiological and mental state.”

According to Proudfoot, the mystic understands the purpose of the preparatory exercises and anticipates that they will allow for some desired altered state. However, what happens in that altered state is not viewed by the mystic herself as a product of the activity; rather, the activity simply provides a stimulus that makes the altered state possible. He continues:

“[H]e might engage in prolonged fasting, chanting, orison, dancing, sensory deprivation, or various forms of yogic meditation. The seeker is not unaware that these exercises might contribute powerfully to the resultant experience, but it is a conditio sine qua non of that experience that he view these manipulations as catalysts, not as sufficient causes. The experience must be perceived by the subject as providing access to some reality beyond himself and his conscious preparations. He must attribute the experience not to the fasting, the exercises, or the chanting alone, but to some power that transcends these natural causes.”

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71 Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 136-37.

72 Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 137.
In the case of the late medieval nun or tertiary committed to a life of austerity in an effort to reach unity with Christ, she would not have considered mortification of the flesh, or sleepless nights in prayer, or abstinence from any food but the body of Christ, to be the direct cause of her encounters with the demonic or the divine, but rather the necessary measures to make her mind and body suitable for whatever God had planned for her, whether it be a trial against the enemy or a rapturous trance with visions of the celestial kind. God was the “power that transcends,” and He alone determined what happened to the body and mind of his willing servant.

Professor of psychiatry Jerome Kroll and historian Bernard Bachrach, in their study of *The Mystic Mind*, have examined the religious practices of medieval mystics and the physiological and psychological effects of what they call heroic asceticism—particularly self-injury, sleep deprivation, and extreme fasting—and the role such practices played in the achievement of an altered state of consciousness. They note, in their coverage of religious figures throughout the thousand-year period known as the Middle Ages, that self-harm intersected with efforts to attain a mystical state to a much greater extent in the centuries from 1200 to 1500. They reject as “too limiting” the traditional notion that medieval devout men and women tortured their own flesh only for the sake of *imitatio Christi* or *contemptus mundi*, which they label “symbolic goals,” and recommend instead the consideration of “a matrix of motives” in attempting to understand the drive behind self-harm of the sacred sort.73 Acknowledging the difficulties presented by such an undertaking, especially in extracting biological effect from psychological intention, in grappling with issues of authenticity, and even in determining the meaning of consciousness, Kroll and Bachrach have attempted to study their subjects within their

historical context and to dispel modern notions regarding austere ascetic practices and mental illnesses such as depression, schizophrenia, and hysteria. Their research proves useful here in demonstrating the physiology behind extreme forms of piety and the coinciding effects on states of consciousness. In the case of each form of asceticism that they have considered—self-injury, sleep deprivation, and extreme fasting—the mystic’s first task is to eliminate the mental clutter that stands in the way of achieving an altered state.74

Anyone who has had a bad toothache or a deep cut knows that the pain associated with the injury occupies the mind and makes concentration on anything else quite difficult. Causing torment to her own body allowed the medieval mystic to push out the mental clutter of worldly thoughts and focus her attention on the reason for the agony—her devotion to Christ. Maureen Flynn, in her work on the use of pain among Spanish mystics, called the holy woman’s self-inflicted pain “the necessary psychic shackle,” for through outward punishment of the flesh and inward fixation on the Crucifixion, she was able to chain her mind by canceling out all other distractions.75 As Kroll and Bachrach explain, because the human brain has a limited capacity in a conscious state, an inverse relationship exists between the severity of pain and the brain’s ability to maintain concentration on other information. Therefore, when pain intensifies, focus on other stimuli diminishes. After the initial sensation of acute pain brought on by the injury to the flesh, a second form of pain sets in—a dull, sometimes throbbing, generalized aching. This delayed pain soon manifests as a secondary hyperalgesia, or enhanced sense of pain, as swelling around the damaged tissue causes hypersensitivity to temperature and touch. For the individual

74 For their discussion of mental clutter, see Kroll and Bachrach, The Mystic Mind, 47-54.

who employs methods of self-torture on a regular basis, wounds have no time to heal and will become infected, and the flesh is subjected to overlapping abuses from the acute pain of new injuries and the chronic pain lingering from old ones.  

And if general health and immune response are compromised, especially because of undernourishment and sleep deprivation, the cells that release endorphins to mediate analgesia in inflamed tissue become impaired, thus increasing sensitivity to painful stimuli.  

Elena da Udine demonstrated how a penitent might layer the pain inflicted upon herself by adopting various forms of self-punishment, ensuring that every part of her body suffered simultaneously. As Ariel Glucklich has suggested of other religious women who experienced chronic suffering, Elena’s very identity became tied to her pain, yet this sacred pain had a transformative effect, for destruction of the physical self became a means of reaching transcendence.  

She flogged herself with a whip, which caused whelps and bruises, if not oozing sores. After receiving the Eucharist, she stood before the Crucifix for long hours, beating her chest with a rock until blood poured out.  

Upon her beaten back and bloody chest she wore a coarse hair shirt, which irritated, or even stuck to, the marks of flagellation and likely caused hair splinters, which become infected if not removed. She walked around the house

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76 Kroll and Bachrach, *The Mystic Mind*, 67-68.


78 Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 6, 52. Glucklich devotes a chapter entitled “Pain and Transcendence: The Neurological Grounds” (40-62), to the phenomenon in which the practitioner of regular self-affliction for sacrificial religious purposes becomes accustomed to the effects of injury to self, because the acts of self-harm are wrapped in psychological, philosophical, and cultural motivations that are interpreted by the central brain, which mediates the body’s response to pain. In the end, suffering from such religiously-motivated pain is actually reduced, because it is seen as having real purpose.

led by a rope around her neck and another around her wrists, which most certainly caused rope
burn and back strain, and she walked with thirty-three stones in her shoes, which gave her
intense pain and bruising, making every step excruciating. Elena wore a crown of iron spikes
upon her head during the day, but also at night, which would have made sleeping nearly
impossible. She also lay upon a bed of stones and pebbles, causing significant bruising of the
flesh and soreness to her bones, for she was likely quite thin from eating so little. She inflicted
some sort of injury to every part of her body from head to toe, and then she deprived herself of
sleep, choosing long hours of prayer instead, which further interfered with her body’s ability to
heal itself.

Kroll and Bachrach cite research conducted on the effects of sleep deprivation and pain
thresholds, which demonstrates that just as pain can disrupt sleep, so can lack of sleep influence
the perception of pain. The researchers determined from their study that total sleep deprivation,
as well as selective sleep stage interruption (of both REM sleep and slow wave sleep), caused
their subjects to experience greater musculoskeletal tenderness and a lower threshold of pain
tolerance. Other studies have focused on the link between sleep loss and the mind, particularly
in regard to psychotic experiences such as hallucinations. Subjects who have been put under

82 Onen et al., “The Effects of Total Sleep Deprivation,” 36, 41.
83 Ariel Glucklich attributes hallucinations, or “expansion of mental experience,” to sensory deprivation, which would include deprivation of sleep and nourishment. He links sensory overload, which would include self-inflicted pain, with “reverse” hallucination, or a shrinking of mental experience and a weakening of both body and self, or ego. See Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 58-59.
conditions of restricted or disrupted sleep have developed negative affect, or feelings of failure, a negative sense of self, anxiety, cognitive disorganization, paranoia, and hallucinations. Some have reported episodes of hallucination—sometimes visual, auditory, and/or somatic, but most often visual—triggered by lack of sleep, physical or mental exhaustion, and low caloric intake, and accompanied by strong feelings of negative emotions. Subjects have often noted that symptoms such as anxiety, perceptual distortions, and hallucinations worsen in relation to the number of hours without sleep, to the point of resembling acute psychosis or toxic delirium. In almost every case, subjects without pre-existing psychological conditions recovered to a state of normalcy after regular sleep was restored. In a meta-analysis of sleep studies, psychologists examined the effects on mood, cognition, and motor performance, of short-term and long-term (more than forty-five hours) total sleep deprivation, as well as partial sleep deprivation that allowed for less than five hours of sleep in a twenty-four-hour period. They concluded that lack of sleep had the most significant impact on mood, and that, surprisingly, partial sleep deprivation


had a more profound effect on ability to function than total sleep deprivation did.\textsuperscript{87} The kind of sleep experienced by many medieval penitents and nuns who adhered to a life of strict austerity, particularly those presented in this study, could be identified as partial sleep deprivation. Not only did such devout women construct their daily and nightly activities around the canonical hours of prayer, but they often sacrificed sleep during the night to pray alone in their cells. In most cases, they did not simply pray; they prayed actively, with dramatic movements of their torso, head, and arms, sometimes swaying or rocking in a repetitive motion, further exhausting their already sleep-deprived minds and bodies. Caterina da Bologna prayed in such a manner. She prayed with \textit{uno grandissimo gusto} and \textit{grande fervore}, most often with abundant tears, committing herself to \textit{continua e violente oratione}.\textsuperscript{88} She sometimes fell into a trance-like state, which can be reached when meditation or prayer is accompanied by rhythmic or kinetic stimulation (such as chanting or rocking), fixed staring, or isolation and restricted movement.\textsuperscript{89} Caterina engaged in all three. After devoting one chapter of Caterina’s \textit{vita} to her unwavering dedication in praying the Divine Office, her biographer Illuminata gave her longest chapter of the nine—Silvia Mostaccio has called it a treatise within a treatise—the title, \textit{Cum quanta asseduità se dava alla orazione}, or “With how much diligence she gave to prayer,” in which she detailed the saint’s perfection through unceasing prayer, and how it gave her the capacity for spiritual discernment, clairvoyance even, and the necessary tools to overcome the devil’s


\textsuperscript{88} Illuminata Bembo, \textit{Specchio di illuminazione}, 29-29 (V.1-2), 33 (VI.2).

\textsuperscript{89} Kroll and Bachrach, \textit{The Mystic Mind}, 60-62.
temptations and move toward a profound and contemplative knowledge of God.\textsuperscript{90} According to Illuminata, Caterina made prayer the cornerstone of her devotional life—the focal point of her every thought, word, and deed. She recorded her consorella as saying: “The perseverance of prayer has been my life, my wet nurse, my teacher, my comfort, my refuge, my rest, my good, and all my wealth.”\textsuperscript{91} At one point Caterina cried out: “‘Oh, dear, oh dear misery…I need my body to be a lion, so that I might day and night stay in prayer!’”\textsuperscript{92} One of the temptations with which she struggled was the desire to sleep instead of pray, and she fought mightily against the urge. Her efforts led her to an out-of-body experience, and she ultimately succeeded in being capable of staying awake at will. She admonished her charges: “O, dearest sisters, do not regret the lack of sleep and the other austerities, because through their merits, you will merit to reach eternal rest.”\textsuperscript{93}

Research and human experience have demonstrated that malnutrition and starvation can have effects similar to extreme pain and sleep deprivation on the body and the mind. When the body does not take in enough calories, once it burns through its fat stores, it begins to feed upon itself, and muscle tissue is the first to be sacrificed. Cardiovascular function begins to suffer, and with a decrease in blood flow, vital organs cannot receive adequate oxygen and nutrients to perform properly. Weakened intestinal muscles slow digestion, which can result in pain and

\textsuperscript{90} Silvia Mostaccio in her introduction to Illuminata Bembo,\textit{ Specchio di illuminazione}, LII.

\textsuperscript{91} “E dicea: ‘La perseverantia della oratione è stata la mia vita, la mia balia, la mia maestra, la mia consolatione, mio refugio, mio riposo, mio bene, e tuta la mia richeza.’” Illuminata Bembo,\textit{ Specchio di illuminazione}, 40 (VI.40).

\textsuperscript{92} “‘Oimè, oimè misera…mi saria bisogno questo mio corpo fusse uno leone, aciò potesse lo giorno con la notte // stare alla oratione!’” Illuminata Bembo,\textit{ Specchio di illuminazione}, 39 (VI.37).

\textsuperscript{93} Catherine of Bologna,\textit{ The Seven Spiritual Weapons}, 72 (VII.113).
unstable blood sugar levels. The neurological system relies upon fat to provide insulation for neurons, and upon electrolytes to transmit signals throughout the body. Without these essential elements that come from food and hydration, the human body will experience tingling and numbness, muscle cramps, and seizures. Each of these conditions contributes to an inability to sleep. Fat also enables the body to maintain proper hormone levels, and without it, an individual risks low thyroid function, a decrease in bone density, brittle skin and hair, decreased body temperature, and even hypothermia. Improper nutrition can cause a decrease in red blood cells, which leads to anemia and the associated issues of fatigue, shortness of breath, weakness, and increased risk of fainting. White blood cell count also declines, which leaves the individual susceptible to poor immune response and infection.94 In one study on the psychological effects of short-term fasting, researchers determined that while such restricted eating did cause irritability, it also resulted in positive affective experiences, including a greater sense of achievement, pride, and control.95 They concluded that such positive reinforcement enabled their subjects to maintain their restricted diets. Of course, the women in their study likely experienced the positive emotions associated with thinness and perceived physical attractiveness. However, in the case of the young medieval virgin, shrouded in a robe and tunic and disinterested in making herself sexually appealing, similar positive affect was most certainly the result of having limited her food intake for the sake of taming her flesh and preparing herself to receive Christ. Colomba da Rieti, who both mortified her flesh and restricted her hours of sleep, also denied herself basic

94 The National Eating Disorders Association in the U.S. has outlined these negative physiological effects of insufficient caloric intake in their “Health Consequences,” at https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/health-consequences.

sustenance to such an extreme level that she caused her own death at the age of thirty-four. At one point, the penitents in her order had worried that she would starve herself to death, and they tried in vain to get her to take in more satisfying foods, but as her biographer recorded:

“The virgin of Christ desired above all else the true bread, that is the sacrament of the altar, because this is that which makes perfect the virginal life and sustains and comforts the soul along the way, causes grace and increases [it], rouses to the battle and sanctions [it], frightens the demons and drives [them] out, impedes sins and annuls [them], obtains innocence and purity and preserves humility, chastity and all the other virtues; multiplies the merits and finally makes man look forward to glory and transforms him into something divine.”

Upon her death, not only was her body deeply scarred all over from the heavy metal implements of torture she wore, but her skeletal frame carried very little weight of its own. Colomba embodied heroic asceticism in its most extreme form, enduring the pain of self-mortification, the sleep loss associated with zealous prayer, and the physiological effects of long-term fasting, and she did so using methods that were not necessarily approved by the Church, but were at least condoned by the Church, for she and others like her were viewed as holy mystics anointed by God. These women sought an intensely personal communion with Christ that could not be

96 “Ma la vergene de Cristo sopradesiderava / el vero pane, cioè el sacramento de l’altare, perché quisto è quillo che fa perfecta la vita verginea et sostenta et conforta l’anima in via, causa la gratia et acresce, aresvegna a la bataglia e conferma, spaventa li demonii et caccia, i(m)pedisce li peccati e cassa, obtiene la innocentia e purità e conserva la humilità, la castità et tucte le altre vertù; multiplica li meriti et finalmente fa lo homo pregustare la gloria et trasformalo in dio.” Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 72 (XIII, c. 11v). “Transformalo in dio” looks as if it should be translated as “transform him into a god,” but the singular term “dio” is used in the Italian language to refer to the deity of the monotheistic religions, and is capitalized. When not capitalized, it is used as a superlative to mean exceptional, and can be translated as “wonderful,” marvelous,” or some similar term to denote excellence. See the entry for “dio” in Giacomo Devoto and Gian Carlo Oli, Vocabulario della lingua Italiana (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1986).

97 Colomba’s confessor had allowed her to partake in Communion monthly and on the feast days of St. Mary, but when a bishop from Spain visited Rieti to examine the young virgin, he perceived her sanctity and granted her request to partake daily. See Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 73 (XIII, c. 11v) and 79-80 (XVI, c. 13v-14r). Surely the bishop understood the physical ramifications of allowing such a practice, as Christians customarily fasted before celebrating the Eucharist.
achieved by means of traditional devotional methods, and they had the drive and the fortitude to withstand the kind of physical anguish that might lead to a divine encounter. While their behaviors might have seemed unconventional, and most likely led to conditions that appeared to be some form of psychosis, they did not necessarily indicate any sort of mental illness. Kroll and Bachrach have concluded from their research that:

“[M]odern attempts to diagnose medieval mystics and ascetics out of context to their environment and disregarding a commitment to God that constituted the urgent and central feature of their lives is an exercise in cultural insensitivity and conceit. The medieval mystics and ascetics did not have the major forms of mental illness such as schizophrenia and manic-depressive disorders and their drive to God cannot be explained by recourse to such formulations. The question of whether they displayed abnormal personality traits is itself almost a rhetorical question, for most persons who distinguish themselves in the intensity and even ferociousness of the pursuit of some form of excellence or exceptional experiences are by definition different from the crowd of persons with normal desires and drives. The mystics carried the ideals of their society beyond what most others would consider, and in doing so defined their specialness.”

The women in this study, and other mystics like them, were portrayed by their biographers as special, because they were shown to be capable of withstanding self-inflicted pain of various sorts, and because in the altered state that resulted from their extreme ascetic practices, they came face-to-face with the devil. These women practiced heroic forms of asceticism in imitation of Christ, whose body was tortured, who prayed to the point of sweating blood, and who fasted in the desert in preparation for his earthly ministry. During his forty-day fast, he encountered Satan and resisted his temptations. These women, and those who revered them, saw their personal encounters with the same enemy under similar physical circumstances as another form of imitatio Christi, and a necessary part of their own preparation for ministry. By imitating Christ in their austerities, they also imitated him in their victory over temptation.

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98 Kroll and Bachrach, *The Mystic Mind*, 208.
Temptation as Imitation

According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, all humans are tempted to sin against God, and all are called to resist the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Satan tempted Jesus with worldly power when he told him to cast himself down from the temple mount so the angels would catch him; with fleshly desires when he instructed him to turn the stones into bread to satisfy his hunger; and with worship of the devil when he promised him the whole world in exchange. Christians generally view the devil as the source of temptation, but acknowledge that he uses wealth, power, sex, illicit substances, and even other people to lure individuals into the trap of sin, and all must engage in the struggle against these common, or ordinary, attacks. However, throughout the history of the Catholic Church, certain individuals, particularly those who would come to be recognized as saints, have been subjected to rather intense, or extraordinary, attacks.\(^9\) St. Benedict of Nursia survived violent sexual temptations, near death by poisoning at the hands of his own monks, and an encounter with an angry devil engulfed in flames. St. Dominic of Osma escaped an assassination attempt by the Albigensians and fought off the devil on more than one occasion as he tried to infiltrate the friar’s convent. In similar fashion, St. Francis of Assisi had to combat demons who tried to harass his brothers, and he struggled against his own diabolical thoughts that gripped him with fear and terror. He also survived physical assault from the devil by way of beatings, collapsing walls, a demon-infested

\(^9\) Here I have borrowed the language of modern Catholic theologians who specialize in demonic expulsion, or exorcism. They differentiate between ordinary attacks, common to all Christians, and extraordinary attacks, unleashed against those who have dabbled dangerously in the occult or those who have proven themselves sincerely righteous. See Fr. Gabriele Amorth, *An Exorcist Tells His Story* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), and Fr. Mike Driscoll, *Demons, Deliverance, Discernment: Separating Fact from Fiction about the Spirit World* (El Cajon, CA: Catholic Answers Press, 2015). Fr. Amorth (1925-2016) served as Chief Exorcist of the Vatican. Fr. Driscoll’s book is the product of his dissertation on demonic possession and mental disorders for the Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision.
pillow, and an infestation of mice in his cell. St. Catherine of Siena was tormented by demons in her sleep and in her waking hours. They tried to seduce her; they screamed at her; they battered her body; and they appeared as individuals concerned for her well-being who tried to convince her to give up her calling. St. Colette of Corbie, the fifteenth-century reformer of the Poor Clares, witnessed the devil’s torments in the form of pestilence, for he filled her cell and oratory with sometimes ants, sometimes flies, and other times crawling creatures such as snails and spiders. St. Nicholas of Tolentino, the Augustinian hermit who was canonized in 1446, was beaten numerous times by demons—the same demons who would blow out his lamp and sit upon his rooftop, screaming and rattling the tiles. Like Job of the Old Testament, these saints and others like them endured external assaults, such as physical punishments or infirmities, loss of wealth, or destruction of reputation or relationships, meant to cast doubt and fear in the minds of God’s most trusted servants and cause them to falter in their devotion. Elena da Udine and Colomba da Rieti suffered in such a way. Others experienced internal attacks upon the mind that sometimes mimicked mental illness, and caused them to fixate on evil or harmful thoughts. Caterina da Bologna appeared to suffer from such attacks, for she was plagued with doubts about her own spiritual condition, to the point of falling into depression. When the devil failed in these extraordinary attacks upon God’s chosen, he sometimes resorted to terrifying the victim with strange noises or moving objects: doors slamming, windows rattling, books flying through the air, crucifixes being smashed to the floor. Elena da Udine was terrorized in such a way when demons flew through her house and made the sound of roof tiles crashing to the ground. The medieval women who were considered living saints were subjected to, and overcame, these more

\[100\] I have not included the obvious choice, St. Anthony, in this list of afflicted saints, for his experience appears in greater detail later in this chapter.
violent demonic assaults, which set them apart from the average lay Christian. They had seemingly eradicated all means of ordinary temptation in their personal lives by living the *vita apostolica* and cleansing their spirits through self-mortification, meditative prayer, and fasting. Therefore, like the Apostle Paul, who was given “a thorn...in the flesh, a messenger from Satan” to harass him, they left themselves open to much more intensive attacks from the devil and his demons, and they suffered mightily for it.\(^\text{101}\)

I have made the point that, according to Christian Scripture and Catholic doctrine, the imitation of Christ entailed suffering, and that suffering implied participation in the salvific work of the divine Christ. I have also asserted that ascetic practices allowed for participation in the human suffering of Jesus, and that they were instrumental in initiating demonic molestation in the spiritual experience of the holy woman. I also contend that temptations from the devil constituted a part of the suffering necessary to imitate Christ, and that there existed in Church history a long tradition of suffering through temptation. For women and men designated as blessed or saints by the Church, such suffering came in the form of attacks by the devil himself, and their ability to emerge with their commitment to God intact, and usually with greater spiritual fortitude, demonstrated their sanctity and became an important part of their story.

The writer of Hebrews in the New Testament wrote about Jesus: “For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”\(^\text{102}\) Medieval Christians understood that Jesus suffered when he was tempted by the devil. To imitate Christ in

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\(^\text{101}\) 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

\(^\text{102}\) Hebrews 2:18. I have used the English Standard Version here, for like most other translations, it renders the original Greek as “suffered when tempted.” The RSVCE renders it, “has suffered and been tempted.” Regardless, the independent clause makes reference only to those being tempted, not those who are suffering, so the implication is that the suffering in the dependent clause comes from temptation.
the fullest sense of the term meant to suffer through temptation. St. Ambrose (A.D. 340-397) considered resistance against temptation to be a type of martyrdom, the greatest form of suffering, for he wrote:

“As there are many kinds of persecution, so there are many kinds of martyrdom. Every day you are a witness to Christ. You were tempted by the spirit of fornication, but...did not want your purity of mind and body to be defiled: you are a martyr for Christ. You were tempted by the spirit of avarice...but remembered God’s law...: you are a witness to Christ....You were tempted by the spirit of pride but saw the poor and the needy and looked with loving compassion on them, and loved humility rather than arrogance: you are a witness to Christ.”

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) devoted a question in his Summa theologicae to Christ’s temptation, in which he argued that Christ’s victory over Satan’s temptations came through his suffering. He wrote: “Christ came to destroy the works of the devil, not by powerful deeds, but rather by suffering from him and his members, so as to conquer the devil by righteousness, not by power.” According to Aquinas, suffering was required for Jesus to emerge as the victor in the contest against the devil, for suffering brought the righteousness that caused his defeat. The theologian then defined the intent of such suffering, writing that “Christ wished to be tempted; first that He might strengthen us against temptations. Hence Gregory says in a homily (xvi in Evang.): ‘It was not unworthy of our Redeemer to wish to be tempted, who came also to be slain; in order that by His temptations He might conquer our temptations, just as...
by His death He overcame our death.”\textsuperscript{105} Aquinas saw a parallel between the human Jesus’ voluntary suffering through temptation in order that Christians would be able to overcome temptation, and his willingness to die on the cross so that they could be rescued from eternal damnation. Following this logic, temptation in itself was a form of redemptive suffering, since Christ was able to endure temptation for the sake of others. Aquinas also addressed the role that fasting played in strengthening Jesus before his temptation in the desert, explaining that Jesus fasted, first to set an example, and second, “to show that the devil assails with temptations even those who fast, as likewise those who are given to other good works.”\textsuperscript{106} If Jesus set the example, then certainly imitation entailed fasting, and such fasting, along with other good works, which would have included the austerities of strict piety, was expected to precede assaults from the devil in the form of temptation. He further explained: “…as Hilary says (Super Matth., cap. iii.): ‘The temptations of the devil assail those principally who are sanctified, for he desires, above all, to overcome the holy. Hence also it is written (Sirach 2): Son, when thou comest to the service of God, stand in justice and in fear, and prepare thy soul for temptation.'”\textsuperscript{107} Devout Christians, committed to holiness and service to God, were to expect temptation and to prepare for it through fasting and other sacrificial works. According to Aquinas’ theology, which significantly influenced religious philosophy in the centuries after his death, temptation required suffering, but Christ did so willingly and with a redemptive purpose, and he fasted in preparation, knowing that the devil would try to attack him in his human condition of hunger. The holy women of fifteenth-

\textsuperscript{105} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae} III.41.1.

\textsuperscript{106} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae} III.41.3.

\textsuperscript{107} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae} III.41.1.
century Italy, who strove to live in *imitatio Christi*, also viewed temptation as a necessary form of suffering, to prove themselves as victims for the redemption of others—in this case bearing the weight of the worst of temptations—and they prepared their bodies through fasting and other ascetic practices, knowing that the devil would try to prevent them from accomplishing their work, just as he had tried with Christ himself. Long before Aquinas penned his *Summa*, Origen had recognized that some Christians were called to suffer through extraordinary encounters with evil, much greater than the ordinary human temptations experienced by all. In his treatise on martyrdom, he wrote:

> “Whether *our wrestling be against the flesh that lusts* and wars against the spirit, or against *the soul of all flesh* (an expression used to designate the guiding principle which dwells in the body and is called “heart”), and this wrestling is by those who are tried by human temptations; or whether, as trained and perfect athletes, who no longer struggle *against flesh and blood* and are not tested by temptations that are human (which they have already trampled under their feet), *our wrestling is against principalities and powers and the rulers of the world of this darkness and the spirits of wickedness*—in either case we are not free from temptation.”

The mystics in this study, and others like them, had proved themselves to be “trained athletes”—soldiers even—and now they found themselves engaged in spiritual warfare against an enemy that sought to weaken their resistance and discourage them in their efforts to reach union with Christ and to draw others to him.

**Temptation in Hagiography**

Earlier saints in Church history endured similar extraordinary trials, and their *vitae* that record those episodes also reflect their efforts to live a life of *imitatio Christi*. Thomas Heffernan explains the importance of the theme of *imitatio Christi* in the development of sacred biography:

“The lives of the saints were sacred stories designed to teach the faithful to imitate actions which the community had decided were paradigmatic. Christ’s behavior in the Gospels was the single authenticating norm for all action. For actions (res) narrated in the lives of the saints to be binding for the community, they had to be an imitatio Christi….The repetition of actions taken from Scripture or from earlier saints’ lives…ensured the authenticity of the subject’s sanctity.”

Richard Kieckhefer has looked at vitae written between the fourth and thirteenth centuries, what he calls the “classical period of hagiography,” and found that they often follow a common pattern, modeled after the life of Christ found in the Gospels of the New Testament. He writes:

“The Gospels center on the death of Christ: he foretells his dying and goes deliberately toward it; he consoles and instructs his disciples just before the event; his passion is recounted in detail; and after death he is exalted in glory. Echoes of this theme occur frequently in the saints’ vitae.” Indeed, the vitae of the women in this study more or less followed such a pattern.

Colomba da Rieti certainly foretold her own death, even if she missed the mark by several months, and she delivered a final sermon to the women in her charge. Her biographer detailed the horrific agony she endured for thirty-three days before she was taken up to be with Christ. If the Gospel narratives provided a formula for the composition of medieval vitae, I would suggest that the temptation of Christ served as a meaningful episode deemed worthy of inclusion.

Kieckhefer points to Athanasius’ life of St. Anthony the Hermit, the Vita S. Antonii, as one of the most important examples of hagiography, particularly because of its wide dissemination and its influence upon the vitae of other saints. One of the most significant aspects of Anthony’s sainthood was his triumph over Satan’s attacks. Anthony adopted the eremitic life in a desert in

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109 Heffernan, Sacred Biography, 5-6.
Egypt, subsisting on a meager diet of bread and water and fasting often, and there the devil tried to lure him away from his commitment by tempting him with memories of family and the comfortable life he once had, with thoughts of boredom, and with the desires of the flesh when he appeared to the hermit in the form of a seductive woman. Anthony fought off these temptations, however, with constant prayer, and he strengthened his vow of asceticism by moving into a cave, similar to a tomb. There the devil came to him with a host of demons who beat him mercilessly and left him for dead. The hermit recovered and intensified his ascetic practices by moving to complete isolation in an abandoned fort on a mountain. Satan sent his demons in the form of wild beasts to torment him, but by this time, the saint was able simply to scoff at their efforts. After twenty years in that fort, Anthony emerged to begin a ministry of teaching and healing, gathering a group of disciples who strove to follow his model of discipline. Anthony had moved to the desert, fasted, faced temptations by the devil, and emerged prepared for a public ministry, just as Jesus had, and St. Athanasius was sure to include this essential part of his spiritual journey in his vita. Elizabeth Petroff points to St. Anthony’s vita to illustrate her argument that the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers that constitute the Vitae Patrum form a literary cycle that serves as a model for a later cycle, that is the vitae of thirteenth-century female saints from the Italian regions of Umbria and Tuscany. Petroff contends that the authors of these later vitae patterned their works after those found in the Vitae Patrum, in part because the lives of the Desert Fathers were narratives familiar to their audience, and she explains that both groups of texts are characterized, by “a shared ethic, expressed in a rhetoric that utilizes particular tropes, themes, and exempla that highlight the spiritual and social values epitomized by that
One such theme is the desert experience. Petroff uses St. Anthony’s life as the foundation of her analysis, for it was cited by numerous hagiographers of the thirteenth century and served as sermon material for mendicant preachers. She has examined the lives of four Italian women, all of whom endured in-person temptations from the devil, to find that they exhibited patterns that were atypical of hagiographic texts written on medieval holy men and women, but commonplace for those written on early Church saints. St. Umiltà of Faenza (ca. 1226-1310), Blessed Umiliana de’ Cerchi of Florence (1219-1246), St. Verdiana of Castelfiorentino (ca. 1180-ca. 1242), and St. Fina of San Gimignano (1238-1253), along with many other women saints of the thirteenth century, lived lives of extreme asceticism, devoted to constant prayer and frequent fasting. They were atypical, however, in that they exhibited extraordinary supernatural powers, including the capacity to prophesy, and they served as teachers and spiritual leaders in their communities, holding unofficial positions of authority that would not have been possible in an earlier century. Also, whereas the typical medieval holy woman lived the life of an enclosed virgin, most of these women had been married and spent their devout lives as tertiaries or recluses. Borrowing a line from Umiltà of Faenza’s biographer, who was describing his subject’s transformation from privileged wife to exemplary servant of God, Petroff writes of them: “All these women could be said’ to have come not from the secular world, but from the desert.’” St. Verdiana of Castelfiorentino, a recluse from the Tuscan region, modeled her ascetic practices after those of St. Anthony with intention, to the point that

111 Elizabeth A. Petroff, “‘She Seemed to Have Come from the Desert’: Italian Women Saints and the Vitae Patrum Cycle,” in Body and Soul, 110-136; here 110.

112 Petroff, Body and Soul, 111.

113 Petroff, Body and Soul, 115, 118.
when she learned in a sermon that he had endured demonic attacks, she prayed in earnest that she would be tempted in the same way. Her prayers were answered when two serpents slithered through her cell window to take up residence there with her.114 The biographers of these Duecento women, with the *vitae* of the Desert Fathers as their model, highlighted the themes of reclusion and temptation within the desert experience to lend legitimacy to their own narratives. By the fifteenth century, characteristics that Petroff considers atypical of thirteenth-century *vitae* of Italian holy women had become rather typical, for the women in this study and others like them prophesied, worked miracles, influenced political leaders, and served as spiritual counselors, and many of them lived in their own homes or in penitent houses, having once experienced a secular life of marriage. And their *vitae* reflected the kind of desert experience portrayed in the lives of the Desert Fathers. If we carry Petroff’s interpretation one step further, we can say that, since the Desert Fathers lived in *imitatio Christi*, having secluded themselves for a time in the wilderness where they encountered their spiritual enemy Satan, the fifteenth-century biographers who seem to have patterned their *vitae* after the *Vitae Patrum* did so in an effort to portray their saints also as imitators of Christ, precisely because in the wilderness, under conditions of fasting and isolation, they came face-to-face with the grand tempter who sought to derail them from their purpose.115 This period of trial and temptation was a necessary part of each of their stories in the development of the saint, an authentic imitator of Christ.

114 Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 123. This story was taken from the *vita* written by Hieronymo Setini and translated into Latin by Bishop Attone as *Vita Sanctae Verdianae Virgine*, in *Acta Sanctorum*, February 1.

115 It is worth noting that Petroff found that the women in her study most often encountered the devil in the form of some wild beast, particularly a serpent. See Petroff, “Transforming the World: The Serpent-Dragon and the Virgin Saint,” in *Body and Soul*, 97-109. However, the women of the fifteenth century most often encountered him and his demons in their natural form, or what was perceived as their natural
As discussed in the first chapter of this study, Raymond of Capua made the themes of imitation and temptation prominent in his coverage of the life of St. Catherine of Siena. His biography, the *Legenda maior*, was completed in 1395 and became inspiration for other devout women in their rejection of the world and adoption of a program of austerities. In this widely influential text, which provided the foundation for Catherine’s canonization in 1461, Raymond elevated his subject as the ideal of female holiness for her expressions of devotion through self-mortification, fasting, and Eucharistic piety. Catherine’s *vita* inspired a large number of Italian women of the fifteenth century to join penitent groups associated with the mendicant orders, for she provided a model of “imitable sanctity” in her efforts to imitate Christ.116

**Temptation and Imitation in Devotional Literature and Art**

Italian holy women of the Quattrocento who strove to live in *imitatio Christi* took their inspiration from Scripture, sermons, vernacular devotional texts, saints’ biographies, and artwork that depicted Jesus in all his humanity.117 The *Legenda aurea*, or *Golden Legend*, written in the 1260s by the Dominican Blessed Jacopo (Giacomo) da Varazze (or Jacobus de Voragine) (ca. 1230-1298), became one of the most widely published books of the Middle Ages and was translated into Italian during the mid-fourteenth century as *Leggendario dei santi*. An encyclopedic compilation of the lives of early Church leaders and martyrs organized along the form, without disguise. When he did disguise himself, he usually appeared in the form of some human figure, such as a handsome man or even the Virgin Mary.


liturgical calendar, the Legenda aurea enjoyed widespread popularity, especially among preachers who borrowed from it for sermon material, as it included excerpts from the works of theologians such as Sts. Augustine and Bernard. It vividly depicted the tortures many martyrs endured, making suffering a part of their heroism. The Legenda provided a model for many other collections of saints’ lives published in the fourteenth century, but none of them experienced the same level of popularity. Another Dominican, Domenico Cavalca of Pisa (ca. 1270-1342) translated the Vitae Patrum into Italian as Le vite dei Santi Padri, and it quickly became a classic, with its rousing stories of saints in action, overcoming human limitations, performing heroic deeds, and working miracles. Cavalca’s edition was circulated widely in manuscript form and went through numerous printings.

Devotional texts meant to inspire meditations on Christ’s human experiences gained influence in the fourteenth century, especially as a vehicle for imitation. The Dominican Blessed Henry Suso (Heinrich Seuse) (ca. 1295-1366), a German mystic known for his own extreme austerities and ecstatic experiences, published Das Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit, or Little Book of Eternal Wisdom, in 1328, but expanded the work and translated it into Latin in 1334, releasing it as Horologium Sapientiae, or Wisdom’s Watch upon the Hours. Soon translated into French, Italian, Dutch, and English, as well as other languages, Suso’s treatise found its way into the cloisters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, where it became a favorite, and into the hands


119 Grendler, Schooling in Renaissance Italy, 283-84.
of other theologians, who included elements of his writing in their own devotional works. He wrote on the necessity of Jesus’ suffering, and the methods of conforming oneself to the Passion of Christ as a means of coming to true knowledge of God. His work had a marked influence on members of Holland’s Brethren of the Common Life. Rivaling Suso’s *Wisdom’s Watch* in circulation and popularity was the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, written between 1336 and 1364. The work was originally attributed to St. Bonaventura (1221-1274), but most modern scholars now believe that it was likely the product of a Franciscan preacher, Johannes de Caulibus of San Gimignano. The *Meditationes*, which covered in detail the span of Jesus’ life with accompanying miniatures, was composed so as to invite the reader into each scene, to dwell on the word pictures crafted to provide a sense of intimacy between the reader and Christ, as well as the Virgin Mary. The realistic portrayals in both word and art of the agony Christ endured went far toward inspiring empathetic piety in the late medieval period. Sarah McNamer has called the *Meditationes* “revolutionary” for its influence as a meditative text and argues that it should be more appropriately categorized, not as an exemplar of the Franciscan tradition, but as representative of a genre of affective meditations meant specifically for women. She has argued


that the work began as a short text, written in the Italian vernacular, by a nun—likely a Pisan
Poor Clare—to a consorella, and was later glossed and expanded into a longer version and
offered in Latin. McNamer has presented a strong case that the work was intended for a female
audience for the purpose of inspiring affective piety.122 Chapter XVII of the Meditationes,
entitled “Of the Fast and the Temptations of the Lord Jesus and the Return to His Mother,” is
accompanied by three miniatures of Satan dressed in a monk’s robe with human hands and the
ears and feet of a beast, and it encourages the reader to learn from Jesus’ example in the desert:

“Therefore consider and watch this well, which will show you examples of great
virtue. Now He goes in solitude, fasting, praying, watching, lying and sleeping on
the bare earth, and humbly conversing with the beasts. For this take pity on Him,
for while His life was always and everywhere difficult and physically painful,
here it was especially so. With this example learn from Him how to exercise
yourself in these things. Here we are concerned with four things that are good for
spiritual exercise and assist each other in a marvelous way, that is, solitude,
fasting, prayer, and corporal suffering. Through these things we may truly arrive
at purity of heart…And according to Bernard, he who is purest is closest to
God…. [T]o obtain it, fervent and continuous prayer is most valuable…. Solitude
appears to provide the fulfillment of all these things.”123

The instruction to seek solitude continues:

“You see how valuable solitude is and how physical solitude does not suffice
without mental. But in order to attain the mental, one must have very strict
corporal solitude, so that the mind may not be dispersed in exterior things and
may be joined with its Bridegroom. Therefore with all your affection and all your

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122 McNamer, Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion, 87-96, 114-15, 238n.8.
See also McNamer’s other writings on the subject of authorship: "The Origins of the Meditationes Vitae
New Directions in Manuscript Studies and Reading Practices: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall, ed.
Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, John J. Thompson, and Sarah Baechle (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre
Dame Press, 2014), 119-37; and Meditations on the Life of Christ: The Short Italian Text, Devers Series
on Dante and Medieval Italian Literature (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

123 Ragusa, Isa, trans., Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth
Century, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Ital. 115, ed. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green (Princeton:
power endeavor to follow the Lord Jesus, your Bridegroom, in solitude, prayer, fasting, and moderate bodily suffering.”

If we look at the way in which fifteenth-century holy women conducted their devotional lives, we might guess that they had some familiarity with the Meditations, and McNamer’s argument that the text was written particularly for women seems rather sound.

The fourteenth century also witnessed a proliferation of artwork depicting images of the suffering human Christ. Miniatures of the arma Christi, or the instruments of the Passion, provided a visual aid for works such as the Meditations vitae Christi. The bare figure of Jesus, in loin cloth and crown of thorns, stood surrounded by the implements of his suffering: clubs and swords, a column, ropes, scourges, whips, a hammer and nails, a ladder, a sponge and jar of vinegar, and a spear, as well as representations of those who brought him shame, such as Judas’ thirty pieces of silver, Peter’s crowing cock, Pilate and his wash basin, a mocking soldier, and three dice and a robe. While the theme of the arma Christi certainly did not originate in the fourteenth century, its presentation did experience the same kind of transformation that other media did: Christus triumphans and his weapons of victory over death in the early Middle Ages became by the twelfth century Christus patiens and the instruments employed to bring on his sacrificial suffering. These images paired neatly with the Franciscan affective devotional literature that circulated widely at the same time. Depictions of Jesus as the Man of Sorrows,

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or the *Imago pietatis*, also grew in number, with his pierced and bloodied body shown usually from the waist up (and sometimes, but not always, surrounded by the *arma Christi*), meant to inspire meditations on the painful wounds of his Passion. Caterina da Bologna provided her own interpretation of the *Man of Sorrows* in an ink drawing, which resides in a prayer book along with prayers by St. Birgitta of Sweden and a selection of lauds, some of them written by Caterina herself.\(^{126}\) The full-length body of Christ stands, knees slightly bent, with a loin cloth and rope-like crown, expressing blood from a wound in his right chest into a golden chalice. The banderole that leaves the cup to float above his head bears the words of Lamentations 1:12: “‘All those of you who walk this way, pay attention and see if there is any pain like my pain.’”\(^{127}\) Such representations of Jesus’ tormented body, along with images of the Crucifix, with Christ still hanging on the cross, and the *Pietà*, with his lifeless form deposed and draped across his mother’s lap, grew to look even more sorrowful beginning in the fourteenth century, and they played an important role in the affective practices of late medieval holy women.\(^{128}\)

Simone da Roma recorded that, along with a collection of devotional texts in the vernacular, Elena of Udine owned *I diece gradi de la humilitate*, by the Franciscan Ugo Panciera da Prato (ca. 1260-133), and a copy of *Specchio de la Croce*, by Domenico Cavalca, the

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Dominican who had produced an Italian translation of the *Vitae Patrum*. Andrea Tilatti has speculated that Elena certainly had some familiarity with Cavalca’s translated *Lives*, as well as the ever-popular *Legenda aurea*. We have the best picture of precisely what kinds of texts and images were accessible to late medieval Italian nuns and tertiaries in the case of Caterina of Bologna. Kathleen Arthur has determined from a chronicle by a sixteenth-century nun of Corpus Domini in Bologna and the work of Italian scholar Serena Spanò Martinelli that the convent library was well-equipped with some of the types of works already mentioned here, in both Latin and the vernacular, many of them likely copied from texts exchanged with other convents or borrowed from male family members and associates. The nuns possessed a martyrology, the *vita* of St. Anthony of Padua in Latin, and part of a French Bible containing pages from the Gospel of Mark. Caterina’s own writings provide clues to the other texts that might have graced the library’s tables. The *Sette armi* includes references to, if not direct quotes from, the Bible, the Roman Missal, and the Breviary, as well as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, the *Moralia of Job* by Gregory the Great, and the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux. The *Sette armi* also reflects a knowledge of the *Meditationes*, as well as the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, an early fourteenth-century illustrated text that related New Testament events to the Old Testament


passages that foreshadowed them.\textsuperscript{133} Caterina also borrowed from well-known Franciscan works, such as the \textit{Rule of Clare}, the \textit{vitae} of St. Francis by Bonaventure and Thomas of Celano, and several of St. Francis’ own writings. In other texts, Caterina also cited St. Jerome, Giles of Assisi, Bernardino da Siena, Jacopone da Todi, and Domenico Cavalca from his Italian translation of the \textit{Vitae Patrum}.\textsuperscript{134} Caterina’s familiarity with such a variety of theological texts suggests that nuns—at least the ones in Ferrara and Bologna, but likely those in other regions of Italy—were educated to some degree and had available to them works with which to strengthen their biblical and doctrinal literacy.

\textbf{Thomas à Kempis’ \textit{Imitation of Christ}}

Fifteenth-century Europe experienced a wave of new spirituality through a movement called the \textit{Devotio Moderna}, with an emphasis on strict discipline, introspection, meditative prayer, and devotional practices centered on Christ (over the Virgin and saints), and it was inspired by the devotional and mystical writings of fourteenth-century German and Dutch authors that began to circulate among the reform-minded Observant houses of the religious orders.\textsuperscript{135} The work of Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380-1471), a German-Dutch member of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine, came to provide the fullest expression of the movement’s intent. His \textit{De imitatione Christi}, or \textit{The Imitation of Christ}, quickly became the most widely

\textsuperscript{133} Arthur, \textit{Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety}, 77.

\textsuperscript{134} Arthur, \textit{Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety}, 75.

\textsuperscript{135} Gabriella Zarri, “Ecclesiastical Institutions and Religious Life in the Observant Century,” in \textit{A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond}, 23-59; here 46-50. John Van Engen provides excellent coverage of the movement, placing it in the context of fifteenth-century urban society and examining it as a late medieval phenomenon, rather than one necessarily pre-Reformation. See \textit{Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life}. 
circulated book of the fifteenth century. Written between 1420 and 1427, *De imitazione Christi* traveled throughout Europe in its original Latin, as well as in French, German, Spanish, and Italian translations, with more than 100 editions printed by 1500. Thomas à Kempis emphasized in his work the necessity of self-examination, Christ-like humility, earthly suffering, the struggle against temptation, and Eucharistic devotion—all themes common to the mission of the fifteenth-century holy woman living in *imitatio Christi*. He wrote:

> “You should be willing to endure all things for the love of God. Certainly, you should willingly endure labor and sorrows, temptations, vexations, anxieties, necessities, illnesses, injuries, contradictions, rebukes, humiliations, doubts, chastisements and contempt. These things are all aids to virtue; these test one who has begun to follow Christ; these mold a heavenly crown.”

Massimo Petrocchi, a leading scholar of medieval Italian spirituality, once addressed the question: “Was there a *Devotio Moderna* in the Italian fifteenth-century?” Recognizing the commonalities between the spirituality promoted by the Dutch movement and the kind of meditative and ascetic practices adopted among the devout on the Italian peninsula, Petrocchi sought to determine if the former had had any significant influence on the latter. He concluded that, save for a small Venetian region under the influence of the Benedictine Ludovico Barbo (1381-1443) and Augustinian St. Lorenzo Giustiniani (1381-1456), the *Devotio Moderna* had no significant impact on spiritual practices in Italy. In bringing to light the works of some Italian theologians less well-known in English scholarship, Petrocchi made the argument that the theme

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of devotio was already alive and well in Italian cities and towns. During the century when reform-minded preachers such as Bernardino da Siena, Giovanni Domenici, Giovanni da Capestrano, Antonio da Firenze, Giacomo della Marca, and Girolamo Savonarola were promoting mental prayer and interior devotion, other religious figures were also providing support for similar forms of spirituality. Paolo Maffei of Verona (1380-1453), a canon regular, wrote of the centrality of Eucharistic piety in the imitation of Christ in his _Libellus vulgaris Pauli Veronensis, Canonici Regularis, de Sacra Comunione Corporis Domini nostri Iesu Christi_. Blessed Giovanni Tavelli da Tossignano (1368-1446), Bishop of Ferrara, penned a treatise entitled _Della perfectione della religione_ (1440), in which he outlined spiritual exercises, particular to the conditions of the monastery, that would facilitate transformation and union with the Lord. Beltrame da Ferrara (1370-1440), a hermit of the Order of St. Jerome, used his _Specchio di prudenza_ to promote a Christocentric form of asceticism focused on the mental sorrows of Christ in his Passion. Antonio Bettini da Siena (1396-1487), Bishop of Foligno, in his _Del Monte Santo di Dio_, called his readers to desire a true conversion of the heart, to pray in humility, to struggle against the temptation to sin, and to seek a meditative, affective experience in an effort to attain Christian perfection. Petrocchi identified a number of other authors who wrote primarily at the end of the fifteenth century, but who also exhorted their audiences to practice a sincere form of devotion built upon humility, charity, fervent prayer, and a desire to grow closer to God through meditation and contemplation.\(^{139}\) So Italy had its own brand of devotio, similar to that which contributed to spiritual transformation in the Low Countries, but, according to Petrocchi, not directly influenced by it. Cecilia Foletti, editor of Santa Caterina’s _Le

\(^{139}\) Petrocchi, _Storia della spiritualità italiana_, 129-43.
sette armi spirituali, similarly responded to claims by modern scholars who had tried to fit Caterina’s writings into the framework of the *Devotio* movement and had asserted that enough parallels between the two existed to enable them to identify the Franciscan nun as a representative of the movement on the peninsula. Foletti countered that the originality and modernity of Caterina’s writings derived from inspirations found elsewhere, and that Ferrara, where Caterina began her career, was itself in the first half of the fifteenth century a center of spiritual reform within the Catholic Church. Foletti questioned the usefulness of a label, meaning *Devotio Moderna*, which “separated from the object for which it was coined, and glued onto a completely different reality, becomes illegible and loses its clarifying function.”

Paul Grendler would likely agree that the forms of spirituality found in late medieval German and Flemish territories and in Italy were similar yet different. He sees the Italian flavor as “a warmer, more spontaneous and emotional approach to the spiritual life,” and one focused on good works more than contemplation, with a strong connection to the Church’s liturgical life.

In his examination of the influence of religious texts in the vernacular, Grendler notes that Thomas à Kempis’ *De imitatione Christi* was the only devotional work by a foreign author that made its way throughout Italy before the arrival of the literature of the Spanish spirituality of the late sixteenth century. However, he also points out that its first printing there did not appear

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141 “…staccata dall'oggetto per cui era stata coniata, e incollata su una realtà affatto diversa, diventa illeggibile e perde la sua funzione chiarificatoria.” Cecilia Foletti, introduction to Santa Caterina Vegri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Foletti, 47.

142 Grendler, “Schooling in Renaissance Italy, 287.”
until 1483, in Venice, and it was not in the vernacular, but in the original Latin.\footnote{Grendler, \textit{Schooling in Renaissance Italy}, 288.} It did go through eleven printings each in Latin and Italian soon after, but the text’s influence on Italian spirituality of the mid-to-late fifteenth century is difficult to assess. Giles Constable might suggest that it had very little influence, for he has called \textit{The Imitation of Christ} “a highly derivative work,” noting that its author relied largely upon works written during the twelfth century. Besides the Bible and certain texts of the Patristic era, he leaned upon the writings of St. Anselm of Canterbury, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and his friend William of Saint-Theirry, and Hugh and Richard of St. Victor, among others.\footnote{Constable, \textit{Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought}, 239-40.} Constable cites other scholars who have arrived at the same conclusion concerning Thomas à Kempis’ perceived lack of originality. The English theologian William Ralph Inge wrote at the end of the nineteenth century: “‘We find in it hardly a trace of that independence which made Eckhart a pioneer of modern philosophy and the fourteenth-century mystics forerunners of the Reformation.’”\footnote{William Ralph Inge, \textit{Christian Mysticism} (London: Bampton Lectures, 1899), 194. Quoted in Constable, \textit{Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought}, 240.} British historian George Gordon Coulton echoed those sentiments a few decades later when he wrote: “‘There is scarcely an original sentence in it: whole pages…are practically centos from the mystical writings of St. Bernard,’” and “‘[it is] the quintessence of all that was truest and purest among the thoughts of many monastic generations of the past.’”\footnote{George Gordon Coulton, \textit{Life in the Middle Ages} (Cambridge, 1935), 95. Quoted in Constable, \textit{Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought}, 240.} One might conclude, then, that \textit{The Imitation of Christ} did not inspire spiritual renewal in Italy, but rather borrowed from the same sources which
the Italian mystics used to craft their own form of ascetic devotion. The theme of _imitatio Christi_ permeated Christian thought and religious practices even before the fifteenth century, and both the piety of Italian holy women and the text of Thomas à Kempis’ work reflect those influences.

The holy women of fifteenth-century Italy embodied the fullness of the ideal of _imitatio Christi_ as it had been developed over the centuries, and that fullness included combat with Satan, the enemy of Christ. By throwing themselves into participation in Jesus’ human suffering through self-mortification, active prayer, and extreme fasting, they created the battleground where such combat would take place. They experienced extraordinary temptations, just as Christ had during his time of fasting in the desert, and overcame face-to-face encounters with the devil to demonstrate their preparedness to serve as living saints. By striving to imitate Christ in his wilderness experience, they also imitated him in his trials, which were a necessary part of becoming like him. Suffering was an essential component of _imitatio_, and the late medieval mystic suffered through very real and physical temptations in a test of her faith. These encounters with the devil, and her ability to withstand them, caused others to view her as special—marked by God. But there would be some, especially members of the Church hierarchy, who would view such women with suspicion, and who would want to “test the spirits, to see whether they are of God.”

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147 1 John 4:1
Chapter 4

*Discretio Spirituum* and the Case Against Heresy and Witchcraft

In her work on late medieval *sante vive* on the Italian peninsula, Gabriella Zarri has suggested that: “The success of the blessed women hung by the slender thread of the ‘discernment of spirits,’ and their biographers concentrated their attention on this subject in order to reassure their readers about the supernatural source of the marvels they recounted and so prove the sanctity of the protagonists of their narratives.”¹ Indeed, in the case of Elena da Udine, Caterina da Bologna, and Colomba da Rieti, their respective biographers devoted much space to demonstrating that their subjects had encountered the devil and his agents, had recognized them as evil in nature, and had emerged victorious against them with the help of God. Zarri has also put forth that:

“In their *vitae*, the traditional theme of spiritual combat and the struggle with the demonic tempter acquired exceptional prominence, in evident connection with the growing concern with magic and the inquisitors’ commitment to define in theory and combat in practice the complex phenomenon of witchcraft…. [T]he difference between devilish illusions and mystical effects was defined theoretically, the criteria for differentiating between diabolical and divine actions were indicated, and the blessed woman was portrayed as the antithesis of the witch or the antidote to witchcraft.”²

Zarri has paralleled the prominence of spiritual combat as a theme in hagiographical texts with the Church’s growing interest in defining and identifying heretical behaviors associated with witchcraft, with biographers setting their subjects apart as blessed from above rather than cursed from below. I have demonstrated that recorded episodes of demonic encounters, present in the *vitae* of numerous saints since the early Church, also served to strengthen the case for sainthood.

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² Zarri, “A Typology of Female Sanctity,” 244.
for the holy women who overcame the devil in the flesh, for their biographers were able to portray them as imitators of Christ, who had also overcome his tempter in physical form. At the same time, I would argue, these biographers were able to reinforce the theme of *imitatio Christi* by demonstrating that their subjects possessed a Christ-like power of spiritual discernment, or *discretio spirituum*, able to recognize the source of temptation to forsake God and to determine the divine nature of their ecstatic visions. Because these *sante vive* successfully fought against evil spirits and later surrendered themselves completely to a rapturous mystical consciousness, they aligned themselves with Christ in both his human form and his divine presence, and in so doing, escaped the punishment of the Church’s inquisitorial process, for they appeared to be marked for special service unto the Lord.

Spiritual discernment took two forms: the ability on the part of the practitioner to distinguish demon from angel, or diabolical from divine; and her observer’s judgment in determining her to be a visionary, demoniac, or fraud. *Discretio spirituum* became an important subject of investigation when scholars at the end of the twentieth century gave increasing attention to the devotional practices of medieval women, and to the influence of particular women visionaries in their local communities and throughout the Christian realm in Europe. Rosalynn Voaden focused on the writings of Birgitta of Sweden and Margery Kempe to demonstrate that the doctrine of *discretio spirituum* was “a discourse, developed and elaborated by ecclesiastical authorities, a discourse which provided both a vocabulary to articulate visionary experience and a set of criteria to evaluate the vision and the visionary.”³ She contended that spiritual discernment allowed the medieval holy woman’s confessor and other authority figures

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to exercise control over her, but that it also empowered her, providing her the tools of self-fashioning and the legitimacy to serve as a vessel of divine communication—as long as she defined her experience in terms of that male-dominated discourse. Nancy Caciola followed with her examination of the effects that changes in society and religious culture between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries had on the application of the testing of spirits, and she characterized spiritual discernment as “a long-term labor of social interpretation that sometimes never reached final resolution, even after the death of the person concerned.” Her research led her to conclude that the rapid increase in women’s participation in religious life in the twelfth century gradually gave way to an association of women’s more extraordinary spiritual activity with the demonic by the end of the fifteenth century and a predictable response from ecclesiastical leaders who made discernment the focus of their efforts to ensure orthodoxy, particularly among women who claimed special divine gifts. Dyan Elliott focused her research on the inquisitorial process and the Church’s growing reliance on it after 1215 for making determinations of both heresy and sanctity, two categories for which the dividing line became increasingly blurred. She identified parallels between the scholastic method of inquiry that dominated the universities in the thirteenth century and the inquisitorial procedures that were built upon skepticism and doubt, and which led to the “gradual criminalization of female spirituality” by the end of the fifteenth century. More recently, Wendy Love Anderson has offered a different perspective on the discourse of spiritual discernment, viewing it as one marked by continuity over time—a series of

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5 Elliott, *Proving Woman* (2004), 1. Also see Elliott’s *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell* for her analysis of a similar decline in the image of women’s spirituality due to the blurring of the lines between divine rapture, associated with the mystical encounters of medieval holy women, and demonic seduction.
negotiations among a number of different authorities, including scholars of theology, preachers, confessors, and hagiographers, but more importantly, the women visionaries themselves. She has suggested that previous studies on discernment—including those by Voaden, Caciola, and Elliott—have been too preoccupied with gender, and therefore limited in their scope of analysis, for they have failed to see the active, positive role that women played in giving form to the discourse of which they were often the subject. Anderson asserts that, until the fifteenth century, “there was no absolute distinction between ‘visionary’ and ‘examiner,’” and that “[w]hat preoccupied these men and women was not gender, but authority: they sought to define, regulate, or justify their own or their companions’ religiously based claims to influence the direction of late medieval Christendom…at precisely those historical moments when the Church’s authority structures were being called into question.”  

Each of the scholars mentioned here have identified the fifteenth century as a turning point in ecclesiastical efforts to control and restrain women who reportedly possessed certain spiritual gifts that put them in touch with the divine, for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a wave of trials and judgments against such women. However, as Nancy Caciola has explained: “Surrounding each inspired woman was a series of competing and overlapping communities, from family to neighborhood to town to diocese to religious order…. [and] each of these surrounding communities would discern spirits according to a different scale of values.” Through her own case study approach, Caciola has concluded: “[T]he discernment of spirits was not a neutral decision…. [D]iscernment was an ideological act, an interpretation inflected by local mentalities, the observers’ self-interest, and

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7 Caciola, Discerning Spirits, 125.
the exigencies of power." The lives of the three fifteenth-century women in this study—Elena, Caterina, and Colomba—demonstrate that sanctity is, indeed, a social construct, negotiated among players and influenced by individual circumstances, for these women living on the Italian peninsula were revered by society at a time when the practices and behaviors of holy women in general were being heavily scrutinized. For all three women, their service to their local communities, to the reform efforts of their respective orders, and to the mission of the Church at large worked in their favor when critics tried to suggest that they were operating outside the bounds of orthodoxy. Instead, the society in which they lived and worked judged them to be holy women and imitators of Christ, not possessed by the devil, but equipped to overcome him and do the Lord’s work.

The principle of spiritual discernment as it applied to Christianity grew out of the apostle John’s command regarding false prophets to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God.” In his writings to the church at Corinth, St. Paul identified certain gifts, which included special discernment, that were bestowed upon individual believers by the Holy Spirit for the good of the wider Christian community: “To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits.” While Paul’s words implied

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8 Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 125. Caciola examines the lives of a thirteenth-century Beguine named Sibylla, Margaret of Cortona, and Elizabeth of Spalbeek.

9 1 John 4:1

10 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. Verse 10 continues with “various kinds of tongues” and “interpretation of tongues,” neither which apply to the women in this study.
that each believer would receive a single specific gift, the saintly women and men of the early Church and medieval periods seemed to embody most, if not all, of these gifts, for they were known for their wisdom, for knowledge often divinely endowed, for their unwavering faith, for their capacity to grant healing and work miracles, and for their prophetic visions. And knowing that “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light,” they also possessed the ability to perceive the sanctity of holy figures who visited them to offer encouragement and direction, and to recognize the devil and his agents for the evil beings that they were, an ability which usually carried with it the power to overcome the evil spirits and to cast them out of others, just as Jesus and the apostles had done. In the early history of the Church, efforts to define the parameters of spiritual discernment arose out of a controversy in the late second century concerning acceptable extra-biblical prophecy when a new convert to Christianity in Asia Minor named Montanus, along with two women, Prisca and Maximilla, claimed to receive ecstatic visions from God that allowed them to prophesy on His behalf. They gathered a large number of followers who made up the New Prophecy movement. The methods of the Montanists were ultimately rejected by ecclesiastical authorities, but the Church had to consider seriously its own position on prophecy and the source of revelations. As was the case concerning the concept of imitatio, Origen was the first of the early Church writers to address fully the notion of discretio, expounding upon John and Paul’s admonitions in light of those of Jesus, who warned of false prophets in Matthew

11 Wendy Love Anderson cites Joseph Lienhard’s essay, "On 'Discernment of Spirits' in the Early Church,” (Theological Studies 41 [1980]: 505-29, esp. 510-11), in which he explains that the Roman theologian Ambrosiaster, influenced by Origen, believed that all nine gifts of the Holy Spirit belonged to members of the clergy ex officio. See Anderson, The Discernment of Spirits, 25.

12 2 Corinthians 11:14.

13 Caciola, Discerning Spirits, 6-7.
7 and 24.\textsuperscript{14} Origen’s work on spiritual discernment significantly influenced Athanasius in his portrayal of St. Anthony in the \textit{Vita S. Antonii} as a great discerner, as well as John Cassian (ca. 360–435), the ascetic writer who penned \textit{Conlationes, or Conferences}, which contained his thoughts on the training and perfection of the heart, for which he believed discernment was an indispensable grace. Both works were circulated widely among monastic communities throughout the medieval period.\textsuperscript{15}

An ecclesiastical focus on the discernment of spirits in the twelfth century coincided with what Wendy Love Anderson has called “a rediscovery of prophecy,” and the beginning of what R.I. Moore has termed “the war on heresy,” for prophecy and heresy—or at least the potential for heresy—were to a large extent intertwined.\textsuperscript{16} Anderson notes that little space was devoted to the topic of \textit{discretio spirituum} among Christian theologians between the fifth and eleventh centuries, primarily because prophetic activity accredited to saints by their hagiographers went largely unchallenged, and because a small number of pseudo-prophets certain of the impending arrival of the Antichrist were easily dismissed as heretics without much debate.\textsuperscript{17} Moore points out that during those same centuries, authorities had executed not one person for the charge of heresy.\textsuperscript{18} However, the urban growth and renewal that spawned a twelfth-century renaissance

\textsuperscript{14} Wendy Love Anderson points to Origen’s \textit{On First Principles}, his homily on Exodus, and his \textit{Commentary on the Song of Songs}. See Anderson, \textit{The Discernment of Spirits}, 22-24.

\textsuperscript{15} Anderson traces the far-reaching influence of Origen’s work on discernment, particularly on Augustine’s treatment of spiritual and intellectual visions, in Anderson, \textit{The Discernment of Spirits}, 22-37.


\textsuperscript{17} Anderson, \textit{The Discernment of Spirits}, 37-38.

\textsuperscript{18} Moore, \textit{The War on Heresy}, 2.
also generated significant economic and societal changes, which caused some to react by embarking upon the *vita apostolica*, with its focus on poverty and simplicity. At the same time, the institutional Church, sometimes through the vehicle of the flourishing cathedral schools and the theologians who governed them, sought to exercise greater control over religious practices and to define more clearly—and more strictly—what constituted orthodoxy. Anderson and Moore have demonstrated that a striving for both authority and reform was at the heart of such efforts. Anderson has linked the growing discourse concerning *discretio spirituum* to the program of reform that spanned the century between the reigns of popes Gregory VII (r. 1073-1085) and Innocent III (r. 1198-1216), and she borrows the words of Richard Southern to characterize that program as one toward “total papal sovereignty in all the affairs of the Christian community.” During that century, three major prophets emerged to proclaim their own special authority: Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135-1202), and Elisabeth of Schönau (1129-1165). Their visionary activity led to a “rediscovery of prophecy,” and ecclesiastical leaders, from cleric to cardinal, were forced to refine their methods for discerning between false prophets and true mouthpieces of God. Pope Innocent III, through his letters and papal bulls, gave shape to a program of reform that addressed concerns over discernment by requiring more rigorous investigations into the legitimacy of supernatural phenomena, and through his work on the Fourth Lateran Council, he established specific

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19 Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 9-11. Also see Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*.


21 Anderson, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 44-47. Anderson notes that Joachim of Fiore did not use the term “prophet” to describe himself.
penalties for heresy, making it a crime to be punished by secular authorities. On this newfound cooperation between Church and state, Moore has argued that the “war on heresy” that was waged over the next century had less to do with the actual beliefs of those found guilty of stubbornly refusing to recant, and more to do with the struggle for power among elites within the political and ecclesiastical realms. He writes:

“The war on heresy...had effectively completed the alignment between the structures of secular and religious authority....[H]owever violently their representatives might disagree on how power should be distributed between them, they were united in the determination that it should be shared, at the highest levels, by nobody else. Recognising their mutual dependence, each affirmed the authority of the other in principle and habitually supported it in practice....The men who transformed every aspect of European government and society in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries...became adept at convincing themselves and each other that resistance to their authority, and to their noble and sincerely held ideal of Christian unity under the leadership of the church universal, was the work of the devil.”

In the centuries that followed, heresy would continue to be more a matter of the centralization of power, especially at the local level, than purely an issue of rightly-held religious beliefs.

Under the influence of the mendicant orders, the thirteenth century witnessed a new religious fervor, and as Barbara Newman has explained, the extremely devout sought the vita apostolica by embracing to the furthest extent possible the life of Christ and his apostles, including for some the more dramatic elements of healing and casting out demons, which spurred a developing interest in the demonic. Newman has suggested that because of the combined influence of the Fourth Lateran Council’s pastoral program, the popularity of mendicant preaching, and “the emergence of a charismatic female spirituality,” demons were

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assigned a much greater array of behaviors and characteristics than they had been in centuries before.24 Nancy Caciola has identified the spread of heretical dualistic teachings among the “Cathars” throughout southern France and beyond as the driving force behind three important developments concerning demonology: efforts within the universities to define the Church’s position on evil and demonic activity; the Fourth Lateran Council’s arrival at an official definition of “demon”; and the first treatise on demonology, On Evil Spirits, written by the French bishop William of Auvergne in the 1230s as part of his On the Universe collection.25 By the fourteenth century, the medieval Church had become obsessed with the demonic, an obsession that found expression in the work of Pope John XXII (r. 1316-1334), through his bull Super illius specula, to have the invocation of demons officially classified as heresy. As Alain Boureau has explained, the pope essentially transformed the Church’s definition of heretical behaviors to include not just words and thoughts, but now deeds as well.26 During his reign, scholastic inquiry among university theologians led to two important conclusions that Boureau believes ultimately gave way to the witch hunt: 1) that demons have the power to move beyond simply influencing thoughts by taking possession of the individual; and 2) that humans are

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25 Caciola, Discerning Spirits, 12-13. I have put Cathars in quotation marks, because R.I. Moore argues convincingly in The War on Heresy that there was no unifying set of beliefs, nor any collective body of people, that could be identified by a singular label such as “Cathars.”

26 Alain Boureau, Satan the Heretic: The Birth of Demonology in the Medieval West, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 3. Boureau argues that the birth of demonology in medieval Christian thought did not occur with Heinrich Kramer’s Malleus Maleficarum, but much earlier with Pope John XXII’s bull. He also points out that the pope believed that his enemies were trying to use magic to bring about his demise, which might explain, at least partially, his obsession.
“fragile and porous,” and therefore susceptible to supernatural influences. Since this growing attention to demons coincided with the tremendous increase in *mulieres religiosae*, many of whom claimed to have had encounters with the supernatural, women would disproportionately represent those whose activity received the greatest scrutiny. Two factors complicated matters for devout women. First of all, Church officials could not always differentiate between episodes of mystical consciousness and mental states resulting from medical or psychological conditions such as epilepsy or schizophrenia, or even actual demonic possession. And secondly, the saint and the witch provided mirror images of one another. Richard Kieckhefer, like Elliott and Boureau, points to the Scholastics for their contribution to—or control of—the discourse on witchcraft, for he notes that Thomas Aquinas, as well as another Dominican theologian after him, Heinrich Kramer, believed “that the demonic hierarchy was a sinister inversion of the angelic prototype, and it is possible to represent witchcraft as an exact phenomenological reversal of sainthood.” Kieckhefer enumerates the ways in which the circumstances and behaviors of the saint mirrored those of the witch: 1) both experienced a very personal relationship, usually erotic in nature, with their deity; 2) both entered into a pact, or in the case of the saint, a vow of betrothal; 3) both endured pain from a supernatural source; 4) both carried out


29 Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 85. Glucklich refers to the work of Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). Barbara Newman points out that possession shared characteristics with mental illnesses, but that not all who showed signs of psychosis were thought to be under demonic influence, nor did all those who appeared to be tormented by spirits act insane. See Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit,” 737.

acts that were extraordinary—the saint performing miracles, and the witch engaging in magic; 5) both were provided a feast by their deity—a heavenly feast for the saint, and an orgy for the witch; and 6) both found significance in the Eucharist—the saint for its sacramental and unitive properties, and the witch for its supposed powers of magic.  

Boureau adds that “divine rapture was the mirror image of diabolical possession, which itself was held in the obscurity of extracted confessions, denials, or medical loopholes.” For these reasons, spiritual discernment on the part of ecclesiastical leaders became essential in distinguishing the holy woman touched by God from the weak vessel, either possessed by or willfully entangled with the devil. Dyan Elliott, in her discussion of the mirrored images of the holy woman and the witch remarks: “But it is also important to remember that the spiritual climate that laid the groundwork for witchcraft charges was not based solely, or even primarily, on a sense of opposition or inversion, but on a fear of convergence: a basic recognition that power derived from Satan was indistinguishable from power derived from Christ.” That spiritual climate—one of despair and apocalyptic fear—had developed over a century that witnessed the cruelties of the Hundred Years’ War, the devastation of the Black Death, a crisis in Church leadership marked by the transfer of the papal seat to Avignon, the War of the Eight Saints between Pope Gregory XI and the Italian city-states, and a schism that would last well into the next century. Throughout this period of turmoil, prophets of

31 Kieckhefer, “The Holy and the Unholy,” 321. Kieckhefer has synthesized the work of Peter Dinzelbacher, Heilige oder Hexen? Schicksale auffälliger Frauen in Mittelalter und Frühneuzeit (Zurich: Artemis and Winkler, 1995). Dyan Elliott also refers to Dinzelbacher’s discussion of mirror images, as well as the work of many other scholars who have covered the subject. See Elliott, The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell, 396-97 n185.

32 Boureau, Satan the Heretic, 174.

33 Elliott, The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell, 264.
doom announced the end of the world, and visionaries—many of them women—called for repentance to assuage the wrath of the Lord. The Church’s response came via its theology professors at the major universities in Europe, who issued treatises with the singular purpose of addressing the twin crises of spiritual discernment and false prophecy. Dyan Elliott cleverly elucidates the situation with this: “The rise of treatises on spiritual discernment vividly testifies to the growing anxiety about deciphering divine from diabolical inspiration. Ultimately despairing of any precise science for discernment, the experts looked on helplessly as the self-styled, mystical brides of Christ, locked in erotic overdrive, veered into the diabolical ditch.”

Jean Gerson and the Need for Discernment

One of the first of these treatises to which Elliott refers, which set the course for the rest of the fifteenth century in regard to the discourse on spiritual discernment, was written in response to the case of Ermine de Reims (ca. 1347-1396), an illiterate French peasant woman. When Ermine’s husband left her a widow, she went to live in an Augustinian priory, where she

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34 While acknowledging that a number of scholars published such treatises, and that mendicant preachers sometimes made discernment as it related to heresy and witchcraft the subject of their sermons, I have chosen to focus on the published treatises of three particular scholars—Gerson, Nider, and Kramer—whose works often appeared together in literature regarding the dangers of witchcraft. See Brian Patrick McGuire, “Late Medieval Care and Control of Women: Jean Gerson and His Sisters,” Revue D’histoire Ecclésiastique 92.1 (1997): 5-37; here 35, referenced in Caciola, Discerning Spirits, 319. For coverage of other treatises and relevant mendicant sermons, see Tamar Herzig, “Female Mysticism, Heterodoxy, and Reform,” in A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond, 255-82; in the same collection, Michael Bailey, “Reformers on Sorcery and Superstition,” 230-54; and Bert Roest, “Female Preaching in the Late Medieval Franciscan Tradition,” Franciscan Studies 62 (2004): 119-54.


36 Caciola, Elliott, and Anderson call attention to the significant influence of Henry of Langenstein (De discretione spirituum, 1383) and Pierre d’Ailly (De falsis prophetis and De arte cognoscendi falsos prophetas, ca. 1380-1385) on Gerson’s work in particular and on the question of spiritual discernment in general. See Caciola, Discerning Spirits, 284-85; Elliott, Proving Woman, 246-72; and Anderson, The Discernment of Spirits, 161-78. Caciola notes that Gerson’s works have received greater attention, possibly because of his influence at the Council of Constance and his more appealing writing style (285).
experienced nightly visitations from both demons and angels over a ten-month period. The
demons tormented her in the form of seductive humans and vicious animals, and they tried to
deceive her by appearing as saints. In Ermine’s case, and in the case of many other devout
women of the following century, spiritual discernment—on her part and on the part of those who
judged her—was at the heart of how she was treated by ecclesiastical authorities: did they view
her as possessed or blessed, or simply misguided? Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski has contributed a
significant work in the study of spiritual discernment with her coverage of the life and trials of
Ermine, whose confessor Jean le Graveur recorded her encounters in *Visions* shortly after her
death.\(^37\) Jean Morel, an Augustinian canon and Jean le Graveur’s superior, wrote to Jean Gerson
(1363-1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, asking the theologian to determine whether
Ermine’s visions, as documented by her confessor, were orthodox and worthy of circulation.\(^38\)
Gerson’s response to Morel was cautious. First, he declared that he found nothing in Ermine’s
visions that contradicted Scripture—nothing heretical—and he determined that her reports of
being tempted and tormented by demons were credible, because of the similar experiences of
saints in early Christian history, whose encounters were recorded in the *Vitae Patrum*. Gerson
then commended the woman for her unwavering faith, her simplicity (or “untaught wisdom”),
and her humility, and he praised her for her ability to fight off the devil’s agents, whom he

\(^37\) Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *The Strange Case of Ermine de Reims*. Jean le Graveur’s work was published as
*Entre Dieu et Satan: Les Visions d’Ermine de Reims (†1396)*, recueillies et transcrites par Jean le

\(^38\) For comprehensive coverage of Gerson’s efforts at moral and ecclesiastical reform throughout his
career, see Brian Patrick McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* (University Park,
pictured to be “furious, roaring, and gnashing of teeth.”\textsuperscript{39} Dyan Elliott has remarked regarding Ermine’s “untaught wisdom” that this particular characteristic, in view of Gerson’s treatises on discernment, proved to be “the cornerstone to his approval: truly ignorant, but knows it! Docile, and ductile, she can do no harm.”\textsuperscript{40} However, Gerson could not recommend that her confessor’s compilation be published, for it might reach those who were unstable in their faith. Gerson then forestalled any efforts on the part of the Augustinians to promote Ermine as their own holy woman by ending his letter with a commitment to consider the matter further. Blumenfeld-Kosinski has concluded that this further consideration came in the form of Gerson’s first treatise on discernment, \textit{De distinctione verarum revelationum a falsis}, or \textit{On Distinguishing True from False Revelations} (1401-1402).\textsuperscript{41} In this work, Gerson likened the discerning of spirits to identifying counterfeit currency when he wrote: “We are like spiritual money-changers or merchants. With skill and care we examine the precious and unfamiliar coin of divine revelation, in order to find out whether demons, who strive to corrupt and counterfeit any divine and good coin, smuggle in a false and base coin instead of the true and legitimate one.”\textsuperscript{42} A highly-regarded scholar who wielded significant power and influence among ecclesiastics throughout

\textsuperscript{39} Letter to Jean Morel in Jean le Graveur, \textit{Entre Dieu et Satan}, 173, quoted in Blumenfeld-Kosinski, \textit{The Strange Case of Ermine de Reims}, 145.

\textsuperscript{40} Elliott, \textit{Proving Woman}, 280.


Europe, Gerson—like any reputable money-changer—did not want to be defrauded by a forgery, especially a woman masquerading as the handmaid of God.\footnote{Gerson reversed himself in the case of Ermine twenty years later, writing in \textit{De examinatione doctrinarum} (1423) that he had been nearly seduced by her, but that God had protected him. See Blumenfeld-Kosinski, \textit{The Strange Case of Ermine de Reims}, 144-150.}

Two hundred years after the Fourth Lateran Council, which had solidified papal power and ushered in a reform program to combat heresy, Church leaders again met in council, this time in an effort to salvage the papacy and address concerns over the spread of new forms of heresy. The Council of Constance (1414-1418) finally brought an end to the schism that had divided the Church under the leadership of three different popes, and it initiated a program of reform that would call for closer examination of religious practices that teetered on heterodoxy or superstition. Richard Kieckhefer has identified this council’s zealous reform efforts as the spark that would ignite the flames of persecution to come.\footnote{Richard Kieckhefer, \textit{Magic in the Middle Ages} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 199-200, referenced in Michael D. Bailey, \textit{Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages} (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 120.} Several years earlier, in 1391, the works and visions of the mystic Birgitta of Sweden (1303-1373) had been investigated and found to be meritorious, and Birgitta was canonized by the Roman Church. Her canonization was to be made official at the Council of Constance, and Jean Gerson presented a treatise there, \textit{De probatione spirituum}, or \textit{On the Proving of Spirits} (1415), to call into question, not necessarily Birgitta’s saintliness, but the credibility of her visions. In this treatise, he attempted to establish a set of criteria to provide structure to the Church’s stance on visions and its ability to determine their veracity.\footnote{Voaden, \textit{God’s Words, Women’s Voices}, 55-56.} He even devised a rhyming set of questions for interrogation—reflective of the
inquisitorial process, as Elliott notes— to be applied in each case: “Tu, quis, quid, quare / Cui, qualiter, unde, require;” or “Ask who, what, why / To whom, what kind, whence?”; and he further expanded each question: “Who is it to whom the revelation is made? What does the revelation itself mean, and to what does it refer? Why is it said to have taken place? To whom was it manifested for advice? What kind of life does the visionary lead? Whence does the revelation originate?”

Gerson placed great emphasis, not so much on the content of the vision, but on the character and lifestyle of the visionary, especially the integrity of her relationship with her confessor. He had serious reservations concerning the closeness of a male confessor to his female charge, worried about the possibility of frivolity, manipulation, or impropriety. Efforts to avoid bringing scandal upon the Church and its members punctuated his entire treatise. While Gerson’s *De probatione* appears to subject female visionaries in particular to harsh scrutiny, Nancy McLoughlin has made note of a political element in the French scholar’s language regarding confessors and their conduct: he was motivated at least in part by the tense relationship he had with the mendicant orders, for he had not hidden his disdain for their efforts to supplant the local priests in their duties of administering the sacraments, and now he had the opportunity to cast doubt upon their relationship with the religious women under their care.

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Dyan Elliott has pointed out that Gerson criticized the extreme austerities practiced by some women visionaries, associating them with certain medical and psychological conditions such as depression, epilepsy, and other disorders of the brain, and suggesting a causal relationship to the visions they experienced, further casting a shadow over the spiritual encounters of devout women.\footnote{Dyan Elliott, “The Physiology of Rapture and Female Spirituality,” in \textit{Medieval Theology and the Natural Body}, ed. Peter Biller and A.J. Minnis (Suffolk, UK: York Medieval Press, 1997), 141-73; here 153.}

Gerson wrote a third treatise, \textit{De examinatione doctrinarum}, or \textit{On the Examination of Doctrine} (1423), that despite the title, dealt almost entirely with the matter of judging the veracity of visions. Of this treatise, Dyan Elliott has written: “Gerson goes beyond merely discrediting female mystical experiences, working with particular zeal to disqualify women altogether as appropriate arbiters of spiritual matters.”\footnote{Elliott, \textit{Proving Woman}, 269.} Gerson was concerned with who had the authority to examine teachings for their alignment with Scripture and Church doctrine, and he provided six ranks. True to his conciliarist ways, he ranked the pope second, and councils first. Those were followed by prelates and doctors or teachers, with educated individuals and those able to discern spirits ranking last, with an acknowledgment that the discerner functioned only by the authority of the Holy Spirit.\footnote{Gerson, \textit{De examinatione doctrinarum}, in \textit{Oeuvres complètes de Jean Gerson}, ed. Palémon Glorieux (Paris: Desclée, 1960), 9:458, referenced in Anderson, \textit{The Discernment of Spirits}, 209.} Gerson had much to say about women visionaries, reminding his reader of a woman’s weaker physiology and limited role assigned in Scripture, and he wrote that “every teaching of women, especially that expressed in solemn work or writing, is to be held suspect, unless it has been diligently examined by the other six types of people which we have...
addressed above, and much more so than the teaching of men.”53 So the utterances of women who had prophetic or doctrinal visions were to be considered suspect until they had been judged for their soundness by, not one, but all six ranks of examiners. Concerning a woman’s ability to discern the spirits, he first gave credit to Augustine’s mother Monica for her skill in discernment, but then recommended that any other woman claiming to have a similar aptitude be viewed with skepticism.54 The theologian then issued a warning originally delivered by Pope Gregory XI, the French pontiff who had withdrawn the papal court from Avignon and returned it to Rome, and whose death soon after initiated the schism. The pope gave this advice from his deathbed, in Gerson’s words: “[B]eware of people, either men or women, speaking the visions of their heads under the appearance of religion; because through such people he himself had been seduced.”55 While Gerson did not name names, there were two well-known mystics who had prophesied regarding the state of the Church while it was in Avignon: Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. Apparently two women recognized as saints by the Holy Church very soon after their deaths were able to deceive the pope himself.

Toward the end of his life, in 1429, the proud Frenchman Gerson, living in exile to avoid falling into the hands of the English and Burgundians who now controlled Paris, wrote a treatise in support of the young French peasant woman, Joan of Arc, whose valiant efforts turned the tide of the Hundred Years’ War and led to her being charged with collaborating with the devil.56

54 Gerson, De examinatione, in Glorieux, 9:463, referenced in Elliott, Proving Woman, 269.
56 Daniel Hobbins speaks to Gerson’s identity as a Frenchman and the impact that France’s long war with England had on his judgments. See Daniel Hobbins, Authorship and Publicity Before Print: Jean Gerson.
Gerson defended the maiden, determining that her inspiration and successes came from God, for she had gained favor with the French king, had earned the love of the French people, had inspired them in their faith, and had struck fear in the heart of the enemy—the enemy they shared in common.57 Though he spoke of Joan in much more favorable terms than he had of other visionaries—particularly Birgitta of Sweden—Wendy Love Anderson has judged that his assessment of the young heroine fell in line with what he had written six years earlier in *De examinatione*, concluding that he focused on “the safest topics of the discernment tradition: the lifestyle of the visionary, the content of her visions, and the results they produced.”58 However, the results produced by Joan’s visions—namely, the victory of the French over the English at Orléans—certainly served Gerson’s interests, which provides support for the argument that local mentalities and circumstances have much to do with the perception of an individual’s sanctity.

Gerson’s work contributed to what Dyan Elliott has described as “the plummeting estimation of female spirituality in the scholarly world,” and she has placed the blame on his cord of three strands—the inquisitorial procedure, scholastic methodology, and a misapplication of medical diagnoses—braided together in an attempt to form a tightly-bound judicial process to address a growing swell of mystical activity, but ultimately used as a hangman’s noose.59 Elliott does concede that Gerson was not firmly anti-woman: he recognized that men could err just as

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easily as women; he credited uneducated women with the capacity to reach a higher level of contemplation than learned men; and his “ad feminam approach to discernment” was often motivated by political circumstances and concerns for the advancement of the universities’ control over matters of theology. Ultimately, however, she concludes: “Gerson’s machine was built to generate judgments…better adapted to producing condemnations than vindications.”

Regarding his legacy, she adds: “[H]is additional recourse to the misogynistic tradition had sufficiently undermined the validity of female spirituality that ‘authentic’ female spirituality could no longer exist without being subjected to this procedure. Living women, were, hence, judged by the inquisitional standard hitherto reserved for church criminals, heretics, or dead candidates for sainthood.”

**Johannes Nider: From Discernment to the Makings of a Witch Stereotype**

Wendy Love Anderson has speculated that Gerson would not have been pleased with the way his work was used toward the end of the fifteenth century to interrogate and sometimes punish women visionaries, for he had thrown his support behind at least one such woman and had judged others to be in need of proper spiritual guidance, rather than criminal prosecution. Nevertheless, his *De probatione spirituum* would be used with the German inquisitor Heinrich Kramer’s *Malleus maleficarum* (1487) to examine both women and men suspected of colluding

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61 Elliott, “Seeing Double,” 44.

with the devil. But before Kramer’s Witches’ Hammer, there was Nider’s Formicarius, or The Anthill, written between 1436 and 1438. Johannes Nider (1380-1438), a Dominican Observant from Swabia, established himself as a highly-regarded theologian, known for reforming Dominican convents throughout the German lands and serving as an active and influential participant during the early years of the Council of Basel (1431-1449). He left the council—and the Dominican convent of Basel, where he was prior—to join the theology faculty at the University of Vienna, where he held the position of dean at the time of his death. Nider greatly admired the work of Jean Gerson, and like the French chancellor, his writings reflected a deep concern for spiritual reform and the eradication of heresy, yet those same writings would be used to condemn many women for the charge of witchcraft. Of the two theologians, Dyan Elliott has written: “If both authors were considered in terms of who had recourse to the most antifeminist slurs in the totality of their writings, the assessment might well end in a draw. If this contest were reframed in terms of who managed to cram the most misogyny into a single work, however, Nider’s The Anthill would come in first, hands down.” Michael Bailey has devoted an entire monograph to the work and influence of Johannes Nider, whose extensive catalogue of writings has received little coverage historically save for his Formicarius, and he explains that the Dominican’s concern for the threat of witchcraft was informed by his broader view of the fifteenth-century Christian world as one sorely in need of moral repair, wrecked by depravity and ignorance, desperate to be rescued through repentance and a return to right living. Witchcraft

63 Anderson, The Discernment of Spirits, 223.

64 Elliott, The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell, 257.

65 Bailey, Battling Demons, 92-95.
was not his primary focus; spiritual renewal was. And so in titling his treatise *The Anthill*, he made reference to the proverb that commends the lowly ant for its inherent wisdom in being self-motivated and industrious, a model of Christian behavior: “Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise.” In this lengthy work, Nider staged a dialogue between a learned theologian—supposedly himself—and a *piger*, or sluggard, who was lazy and in need of instruction, which the theologian provided by way of moralistic stories with foundations in Scripture, patristic literature, and scholastic thought. The first of five books treats the rarity of good works performed by good people. Books two and three take a “mirror image” approach, positing good and true revelations against false visions. Books four and five do the same, with the righteous deeds of the devout contrasted with the evil ways of the witch. The thread of discernment runs throughout, and women are generally portrayed as possessing little skill in the art. Nider’s view of women as weaker and more susceptible to falling victim to temptation—especially temptations of the flesh—was fully in line with the thinking among ecclesiastics of his day. He wrote: “There are three things in nature which, if they exceed the limits of their conditions, either in diminution or in excess, attain the pinnacle of either good or evil, namely, the tongue, the cleric, and the woman. These, if they are ruled by a good spirit, are usually the best of all things, but if guided by an evil spirit they are usually the worst.” He did credit certain women with the ability to reach great spiritual heights and accomplish much good for the faith. He told of women in the Bible and throughout European history who had “sanctified men.”

66 Proverbs 6:6

67 Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 316.

in reference to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, and had led unbelievers to conversion, among them Deborah, Judith, and Esther of the Old Testament; Clotilde, wife of the Frankish king Clovis; and the Franciscan nun Colette of Corbie.\textsuperscript{69} However, when he discussed the virtues of saintly women like Colette, as well as Catherine of Siena, he praised them not for the veracity of their mystical visions, nor for their efforts at \textit{imitatio Christi}, but for their contributions to reform efforts within their respective religious communities and society at large.\textsuperscript{70} Nider also called women “silly,” casting doubt upon those who claimed to receive revelations, and he remarked, “how easily the female sex errs if not regulated by the wise masculine sex.”\textsuperscript{71} He cautioned his student, as part of his teaching on discernment, to remain skeptical of religious women who become known for their zealous devotion and extreme aesthetic practices, particularly self-mortification, for they likely were engaging in deceit.\textsuperscript{72}

Michael Bailey has determined, after reading \textit{Formicarius} as a unified whole, that Johannes Nider was not necessarily concerned with the gender of suspected witches, but with the content and source of their visions. Much of the theologian’s attention was focused on visions, particularly those of the diabolical sort, and since women were assumed, by Nider and most other medieval scholars, to be more susceptible than men to having visions, he appeared to be fixated on women visionaries.\textsuperscript{73} While he counseled his disciple to view all revelatory

\textsuperscript{69} Bailey, \textit{Battling Demons}, 52, 108. 1 Corinthians 7:14 says: “For the unbelieving husband is made holy (sanctified) through his wife.” Bailey cites Nider, \textit{Formicarius} 5.8, 390-91.

\textsuperscript{70} Tamar Herzig, “Female Mysticism, Heterodoxy, and Reform,” 273.

\textsuperscript{71} Nider, \textit{Formicarius} 2.1, 20v; 3.4, 43r; 3.8, 49v-50r, quoted in Caciola, \textit{Discerning Spirits}, 317.

\textsuperscript{72} Herzig, “Female Mysticism, Heterodoxy, and Reform,” 271.

\textsuperscript{73} Bailey, \textit{Battling Demons}, 111.
experiences with suspicion, he added: “especially those of women, unless they are tested, for I suspect that many of them are always delusive in such things.” Nider also believed that demons were the enemies of reform, and that they had targeted in particular the Observants and their efforts to bring convents in line with their more rigorous program. He recounted stories in the *Formicarius* of demons who tried to frighten or tempt novices, to prevent them from taking their vows and adding to the ranks of the reformed. To make matters worse, Nider had encountered at least one religious house for women whose members had stood firm in their resistance to his efforts to make them adhere to the tenets of strict observance. If demons sought to stymie reform efforts, and now a group of obstinate nuns had refused to embrace the Observant program, certainly Nider was confirmed in his conviction that women were both weak and dangerous in their cooperation with the enemy, whether willfully or out of ignorance. Ultimately, the Dominican’s warnings in regard to witchcraft, for which history has known him, and his instruction regarding careful discernment of spirits were motivated by his zeal to thwart the devil’s attempts to stand in the way of spiritual renewal among God’s people. And so the moralistic cautionary tales he told about demons and their evil ways were intended to inspire righteousness and faith, but instead fueled a growing fear of diabolical activity in general, and witchcraft in particular. According to Bailey, Nider was the first Church scholar to contend that women showed a much greater propensity toward witchcraft than men, and his *Formicarius*

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75 Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 107, 115-17.

contributed to the makings of the witch stereotype that would be used to prosecute women—some men as well, but mostly women—for the crime of witchcraft.

Dyan Elliott has judged both Gerson and Nider’s work concerning discernment to be a response to “what they perceived as the dangerous excess that had crept into female spirituality, largely through the medium of bridal mysticism,” and she argues that “both men tended to disparage the spirituality of women in monastic institutions—undermining the efficacy of even the traditional bride of Christ.” With an increase in the number of women during the later Middle Ages who claimed to have a spiritually intimate relationship with Christ and expressed a desire to be one with him in the flesh, their passionate longings became perceived as carnal lust, historically associated with the female figure, and instead of being seen as the innocent victims of demonic temptations, they became viewed as willing participants in—even seekers of—an illicit encounter with an agent of evil. The bride of Christ had become the devil’s whore.

**Heinrich Kramer and the Hunt for Witches**

The entire fifth book of Nider’s *Formicarius* was incorporated into the witch-hunting manual that would push the prosecution of suspected witches into overdrive: the Dominican Heinrich Kramer’s *Malleus maleficarum*, written in 1486. About Kramer’s influence, Tamar Herzig has written: “Arguably, with the publication of this work in 1487, the ‘interim position,’ which had previously connected the two poles of female saintliness and witchcraft, was completely erased.” Heinrich Kramer (1430-1505), sometimes called Institoris after the Latin

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version of his surname, was a German professor of theology and, more importantly, an inquisitor. If Gerson and Nider were motivated by a deep desire for ecclesiastical and spiritual reform, Kramer was driven by an equally intense desire to see the Church reform, or strengthen, its methods of dealing with suspected witches. In 1485, having traveled to Innsbruck in modern-day Austria to seek out and try those suspected of practicing witchcraft, he brought charges against fourteen locals, including Helena Scheuberin, a burgher’s wife with a reputation for loud opinions and the use of sorcery to inflict harm. When Kramer’s line of questioning, focused on the woman’s alleged sexual exploits, made the witnesses to the interrogation very uncomfortable, the charges were soon dismissed and the inquisitor left town, humiliated but inspired to put pen to paper to defend his conceptions of witchcraft. The result, his *Malleus maleficarum*, solidified the image of the witch as a female figure, broadened the list of behaviors identified as witchcraft, and associated erotic female sexuality—a real preoccupation for Kramer—with demonic power. Hans Peter Broedel, in his examination of the *Malleus* and its impact, explains that Kramer’s failure to achieve a conviction in the case of Helena Scheuberin points to the contested

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Sprenger has often been listed as a co-author of the *Malleus*, modern scholarship gives credit to Kramer as the sole author (26 n7). Also see Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2003), 18-19.

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80 Kramer received an appointment as inquisitor in 1474 under Pope Sixtus IV, with the unusual assignment of serving, not in a singular province, but in any territory of his choosing where there was no inquisitor, or where the existing inquisitor invited him. Christopher Mackay, who has translated the *Malleus Maleficarum* into English, has called Kramer an itinerant inquisitor. He was appointed in 1478 as the inquisitor of upper Germany, a post that was renewed in 1482. In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII issued the papal bull *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, confirming Kramer’s inquisitorial authority in certain German towns where he had met resistance from local authorities. Kramer served as inquisitor most of his remaining years. See Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft*, 12-20; and Christopher S. Mackay and Heinrich Institoris. *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4, 27-28.

nature of the category of “witch” in the fifteenth century. Kramer’s colleagues certainly believed that witches existed, and that they should be interrogated and prosecuted, but they did not necessarily agree on who qualified as a witch and what behaviors constituted witchcraft. These “competing notions of what witchcraft was all about” were echoed beyond Innsbruck throughout the universities and monastic communities, but fifty years after its publication, the *Malleus* had provided the basis for a uniform definition, accepted and applied by scholars and ecclesiastical authorities. Kramer had essentially created a profile of the witch from testimonies he had heard from witnesses and defendants in his interrogations, and from his own experiences while searching for witches in the area surrounding Lake Constance on the modern-day border of Switzerland, Germany, and Austria. The hunt for witches had originated in western Switzerland during the 1430s, after the Council of Basel, where discussion of the dangers of witchcraft had not been part of official council business, but certainly permeated the conversations of theologians, including Johannes Nider, during their informal gatherings. The zeal to identify maleficent behaviors spread east during the following decades across the Alps to the German-speaking lands. Kramer, in his travels through those areas, drew his details concerning a witch stereotype from folk images of the Alpine witch—most always a woman—born of the fears and imaginings of the villagers in the region dominated by the Alps. Laura Stokes explains that, for these rural inhabitants, bad outcomes often resulted from, not natural phenomena or the will of

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God, but from the workings of magic: a child’s illness, a death in the family, a barren farm animal, hail storms, failed crops, or a host of other issues that caused trouble in the lives of the local folk. Before the fifteenth century, the Alpine witch was viewed as the representation of natural forces that caused harm—essentially a “weather witch”—and she rode on the back of a wolf, but over time, that wolf was transformed into the agent with whom he often became associated in medieval literature and folklore—the devil himself. The weather witch, working harmful magic on her own, had become the diabolic witch, sexually entangled and in league with the devil. Stokes describes the diabolic witch’s image as a “tapestry” woven from the threads of concern over heresy (particularly the Waldensian, Hussite, and Free Spirit heresies in the early fifteenth century), the activities of dogmatic inquisitors, new scholarly treatises on demonology, and, borrowing a term from Michael Bailey and Edward Peters, a “Sabbat of Demonologists” convened at the Council of Basel. Kramer helped tie the final knots.

Kramer divided his *Malleus maleficarum* into three sections: 1) the question of whether witchcraft was real or a product of the imagination; 2) the methods used by witches to work magic and recruit others, and how to combat them; and 3) the detailed steps in bringing a witch to trial and conducting the interrogation, which might include torture, and the final sentencing. Kramer’s work stood apart from earlier treatises because of his assertion that harmful magic intended to cause injury or damage—*maleficium*, which he put in a different category than

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necromancy and the black magic of learned men—was the reserve of women, and women alone. His assessment of women as weak in body and mind, prone to evil, resistant to correction, and governed by sexual passions fit the common narrative among ecclesiastics of his day, but Kramer drew a direct line between these presupposed feminine faults and the crime of witchcraft, making the practice of harmful magic the product of women’s sins. He even chose for his title the feminine plural form of maleficus, to indicate that his hammer should fall squarely upon convicted women, essentially removing men from the realm of possibility. And he wrote:

“What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours!…When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil…A wicked woman is by her nature quicker to waiver in her faith, and consequently quicker to abjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft…so through their second defect of inordinate affections and passions they search for, brood over, and inflict various vengeances, either by witchcraft, or by some other means. Wherefore it is no wonder that so great a number of witches exist in this sex.”

Kramer’s work has garnered much attention among scholars of late, particularly with the recent heightened interest in demonology, and some have offered fresh interpretations of his impact and the context within which he wrote. Edward Peters has revealed that the Malleus was not greeted with enthusiasm among scholars and elites: it was not accepted as an authoritative text upon its initial release; its publication did not generate new trials in towns that had

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86 Broedel, The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft, 175-76.

87 Stokes, “Toward the Witch Craze,” 585.

88 Kramer quoted in Stokes, “Toward the Witch Craze,” 586. Stokes takes this passage from Heinrich Institoris and Jakob Sprenger, Malleus Maleficarum (London: J. Rodker, 1928), 43, but adds in her footnote: “In the last thirty years it has been definitively established that Heinrich Kramer (alias Institoris) was the sole author of the book” (589 n25).
experienced few if any prosecutions; and many doubted some of the claims made by its author.  

Immediately after the publication of Kramer’s work in Italy, the number of witch trials there actually declined. Laura Stokes has examined the pattern of fifteenth-century witch trials in Basel, Nuremberg, and Lucerne, and has noted an increase in the frequency and intensity of punishments for all crimes, with witchcraft being counted as one among many. She has attributed these changes to the efforts of rural regions to assert their political independence in the face of the growth of nearby urban centers. Those same growing cities, forced to administer justice and maintain peace at a time when waves of migration swelled the population, made wider use of torture and execution as punishment—again, for all crimes. Stokes has also established that the number of accusations of witchcraft mirrored those of sodomy, and that sometimes charges were levied for both crimes in the same case, emphasizing the sexual component in allegations of witchcraft. She has concluded that ultimately Kramer’s influence was less significant than historians have traditionally believed, for events of the 1430s and ‘40s—particularly the Council of Basel, the gradual spread of witch trials in the Alpine region, and the increased involvement of secular judges in the criminal prosecution of such cases—spawned the transformation of the witch’s image well before Kramer came along. Stokes sums up his contribution with this: “His work can now be seen as the aftereffect of an earlier generation’s devilish work—an intermezzo,  

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91 See Stokes, Demons of Urban Reform.

as it were, between the ominous prelude of the 1430s and the terrible work of the great witch hunt itself.”

Matteo Duni has also given coverage to the growing importance of secular authorities in the witchcraft debate in the fifteenth century, shedding light on the work of Italian and German lawyers and lay jurists who argued against the belief among most demonologists that the devil could operate in the physical world by interacting with humans, especially through sexual encounters. They contended, instead, that the devil was limited in the scope of his influence to the mind and soul, not the body, working to trick and deceive through illusions and dreams. These skeptics sometimes opposed widespread witch hunts and cruel executions on the grounds that witchcraft was a mental act rooted in the heresy of devil worship, not in a witch’s actual capabilities to inflict physical harm. The German lawyer Ulrich Molitor (ca. 1442-1507), whose hometown was Constance, wrote his De lamiis et pythonicis mulieribus, or On Witches and Female Soothsayers (1489), as a rebuttal to Kramer’s claims of diabolical behaviors in the Malleus, and his text eclipsed that of the inquisitor in number of print runs before the end of the century.

Gabriella Zarri, in positioning the diabolic witch as a counterexample of the virginal holy woman, has emphasized the importance, most notably in Italy, of the Virgin Mary as a model—the New Eve—as well as female saints such as Catherine of Siena and Birgitta of Sweden, who demonstrated their influence on the peninsula. This saintly image gave devout women there “symbolic value,” but of the regions beyond Italy, Zarri has proposed:

93 Stokes, “Prelude,” 61.


95 Matteo Duni, “Doubting Witchcraft,” 219-23.
“[O]ne could make a suggestive reading of the witch-hunt terror authorized by the *Malleus maleficarum* as an expression of the fear inspired by women’s power in the Low Countries and Germany at the end of the Middle Ages. Women being more entrepreneurial and self-managing, and thus being described as more independent of if not indeed rebellious to marital authority, their power in the territories of the empire also seemed greater on the symbolic level.”

Tamar Herzig echoes Zarri’s remarks regarding the power of women, noting that recent scholarship has contextualized Kramer’s witch figure as the result of an ecclesiastical reaction to the growing prestige of female mystics in society and on the political stage. However, Herzig believes that Kramer’s entire corpus of work, viewed as a whole, has something different to show about the inquisitor with a reputation as a great misogynist. She has examined his activity after the publication of the *Malleus maleficarum* and has determined that he actually contributed to the promotion of the cults of four Italian Dominican tertiaries who were ultimately beatified: Lucia Brocadelli da Narni (1476-1544), Stefana Quinzani d’Orzinuovi (1457-1530), Osanna Andreasi da Mantova (1449-1505), and Colomba Guadagnoli da Rieti. Heinrich Kramer conducted the inquisitorial examination in 1500 of Lucia da Narni, particularly her wounds of stigmata, and he issued *Instrumentum publicum*, a notarial document certifying the presence of those wounds, visible to all witnesses present, including himself. In 1501, he held a public disputation in an effort to persuade members of the Bohemian Brethren (or the *Unitas fratrum*)

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to give up their heretical beliefs, and in his presentation, he provided examples of miracles performed by certain Dominican holy women that proved the Roman Church to be the one true faith: Lucia’s stigmata, Stefana Quinzani’s ecstatic reenactments of the Passion, and Colomba da Rieti’s miraculous ability to sustain herself for more than six years on the Eucharistic wafer alone. When the Brethren showed that they were wholly unaffected by Kramer’s demonstration, he published a preaching manual entitled *Sancte Romane ecclesie fidei defensionis clippeum adversus waldensium seu pikardorum heresim*, or *A Shield to Defend the Holy Roman Church Against the Heresy of the Pikarts or Waldensians*. In the *Clippeum*, he wrote at length about the mystical experiences of Lucia, Stefana, and Colomba, and touched briefly on those of Osanna Andreasi, lauding these Dominican holy women for their extraordinary piety. A number of heretical sects in Bohemia were led by “holy men” recognized by their miracles of healing and prophecy, and Kramer sought to differentiate them from the women he saw as exemplars of the Catholic faith—that is, women who had identified themselves with his own monastic order, and who were wholly aligned with the doctrines of the Church of Rome. When he learned that members of the Brethren were openly attacking the reputation of Lucia in sermons, claiming her virginity to be a fraud, he penned *Stigmifere virginis Lucie de Narnia aliarumque spiritualium personarum feminei sexus facta admiratione digna*, or *On the Stigmata of the Virgin Lucia of Narni and of the Deeds of Other Spiritual Persons of the Female Sex that Are Worthy of Veneration*, published in 1501. In the *Stigmifere*.

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100 Herzig, “Witches, Saints, and Heretics,” 34-35.

101 Herzig, “Witches, Saints, and Heretics,” 36-39. Herzig points out that, at the time, the Dominicans were trying to prove the authenticity of the invisible wounds of stigmata of St. Catherine of Siena, and so used the cases of Lucia, Stefana, and Osanna to strengthen their argument. They received great resistance from the Franciscans, who believed that the stigmata were a special miracle granted to St. Francis alone.
the inquisitor included a eulogy, borrowing from the praises of Duke Ercole d’Este of Ferrara that he had communicated in a letter, and honoring the four holy women for their sanctity and divine favor. Kramer closed the *Stigmifere* with an epitaph to honor the recent passing of Colomba: “Ephitaphium ad Sepulcrum positum Sororis Coloumbe tertii habitus Cherubici Dominici.”102 Both the *Clippeum* and the *Stigmifere* enjoyed wide circulation throughout Europe for years after their publication, spreading the fame of the four Dominican tertiaries far beyond the Italian peninsula. Herzig has proposed that Kramer’s condemnation of women in the *Malleus maleficarum* and his later praise for these *sante vive* can be viewed as “two sides of the same coin.” In the *Malleus*, he argued that women were more impressionable than men, but that “’when they [women] use this quality [of their greater impressionability] well they are very good, but when they use it ill they are very evil.’”103 His coverage of the deeds of Lucia, Stefana, Osanna, and Colomba in the *Clippeum* and the *Stigmifere* indicates that he considered them women who had used their impressionability well, making them ideally suited to be vessels of God. Herzig adds:

> “Kramer apparently assumes that only members of the female sex, deprived as they are of the capability to critically evaluate the images that influence their minds, can reach such a perfect degree of *Imitatio Christi*…[T]he very qualities that render women more susceptible to the devil’s machinations also turn them into the privileged conduits for divine revelations that confirm the tenets of Christianity.”104


But she also reminds us that Kramer endorsed only particular holy women—those under the spiritual guidance of his trusted Dominican brothers, who perceived themselves as the standard-bearers of the Catholic faith.

Herzig’s revelations regarding Kramer’s support of these Dominican tertiaries perfectly illustrates the point I want to make regarding the three *sante vive* in this study: these holy women served a purpose. They helped advance someone else’s cause. For Kramer, their lives of piety and their mystical experiences gave him material to use in his efforts to combat the heresies spreading throughout the Holy Roman Empire—evidence of saintly individuals submitting to the authority of the Catholic Church and performing authentic supernatural acts in its service. These saintly women, and others like them, were lauded, rather than condemned, because of their service to: 1) the Church at large in its efforts to bolster its reputation; 2) their respective orders, who sought both to implement a program of reform and to expand in number and influence; and 3) the communities in which they lived and the leaders who governed them, struggling under the weight of societal changes, political conflict, and apocalyptic fear. They were needed for the essential support they provided, and their encounters with the demonic only strengthened their case for being considered living saints, because they demonstrated that these women—like Christ himself—were a threat to the enemy, dangerous enough that he had to persist in dissuading them from their devotion and their mission of service.

**Service to the Roman Church at Large**

In his reconsideration of the alleged “unresponsiveness” of the late medieval Church toward its members, Lawrence Duggan has recommended two items to consider that apply directly to the current study. First, he suggests that there really was no such thing as a singular “medieval church”—no one unified, homogeneous, and harmonious body—and he explains:
“The structure of the church embraced a hierarchy descending from the pope down to the ordinary parish priest and beyond to the large semi-clerical world of scholars and students in minor orders. This hierarchy broadly mirrored the social hierarchy, and in many other respects ‘church’ and ‘society’ were so intertwined as to make the two inseparable.”

Second, Duggan asserts that mysticism was not “a refuge of the discontented,” and while he refers here to the mysticism of the fourteenth century, there are applications to be made to the century after. He argues that historians have tended to associate mysticism with a reaction against the Church hierarchy—against corruption and control, and against the overreach of power. He makes the point that mysticism represents the height of the religious endeavor, the pinnacle of the contemplative experience. Therefore, mysticism exists as part of, not outside of, Christian spirituality and orthodoxy. He writes:

“Indeed, one can and must argue that mysticism grew not apart from, but rather out of the rich soil of medieval Christianity, so many forms of which stressed the primacy of contemplation. If mysticism thrived in the fourteenth century, it could do so only because the medieval church had labored so well to Christianize Europe. A flowering of mysticism, therefore, is more logically construed as a tribute to the success of the church than as a commentary on its lamentable condition.”

The mystics of the fifteenth century found their place in the wider Church hierarchy, and they operated within its structures, adhering to its doctrines. Duggan uses the examples of Pierre d’Ailly, Jean Gerson, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe among others, but the same applies to Elena da Udine, Caterina da Bologna, and Colomba da Rieti: they were an integral part of the Church, representing it and advocating for it. Just as Heinrich Kramer wrote of the

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106 Lawrence Duggan, “The Unresponsiveness of the Late Medieval Church,” 7.
Dominican tertiaries he supported, these women promoted the Roman Church as the beacon of the one true faith. And because the Church leadership, particularly the office of the pope, had suffered in reputation after Avignon and the schism, the Church actually needed these charismatic women to keep the people in their local communities in the fold and to inspire them to seek a deeper devotion—to the faith, yes, but especially to the Church itself. The visions these women had—of not just Christ and the Holy Virgin, but of saints both old and new—served to confirm the legitimacy of the cult of the saints, an important means through which the laity stayed connected to a Church that sometimes felt out of reach and out of touch. The *sante vive* gave local Christians someone to emulate and someone to intercede for them, all in the name of the Church universal. The Church gave these holy women an established system through which to operate, and they in turn generated enthusiasm for devotion to that same system.

To Duggan’s first point, the medieval Church, because its leadership often lacked both unity and stability throughout its ranks, became an expression of its representatives at the more local level—bishops, priests, mendicant preachers, and even holy women—and sometimes those representatives had differing interpretations of how orthodoxy and heterodoxy were defined. Because of the inseparable nature of church and society, the application of those definitions was often influenced by regional cultural and societal norms, as well as personal and political biases. Therefore, locale played an important part in determining the outcomes for many individual religious figures. Their worthiness was judged by local ecclesiastical and secular leaders, as well as the laity to whom they ministered. Their success or failure hung upon how they were perceived by the audiences that actually saw them perform.
Service to the Observant Reform Movement

These holy women chose to work within the system of the institutional Church in one significant way: they associated themselves with one of the major orders—Elena with the Augustinians, Caterina with the Franciscans, and Colomba with the Dominicans. Heretics, and by extension witches, often went rogue, or they identified themselves with some sect that had been deemed heretical, or at least teetered on the brink of heterodoxy. Marguerite Porete, burned as a heretic, was a Beguine. Joan of Arc, burned as a cross-dresser, received visions as she worked the family farm. She had no affiliation with any order or sect. By contrast, the holy women in this study subjected themselves to the authority of their respective religious orders, and therefore, the Church. They operated under the protection of the male authorities over them, who, presumably, would ensure the legitimacy of the women’s spiritual activity, and would provide correction when needed. By means of their obedience and their sanctity, they advanced the work of their orders, expanding their influence and growing their ranks in number.

Elena Valentini da Udine holds the distinction of being the first Udinese woman to become an Augustinian tertiary, having taken the mantle in 1452. Her widowed sister Profeta and several other women soon joined her in her commitment to the order.\textsuperscript{107} Right away Elena contributed to the work of the Augustinians by leading others to join this new community. One of her biographers, the Augustinian canon of the cathedral at Aquileia, Giacomo da Udine (ca. 1415-1482), writing soon after Elena’s death, commented that the tertiaries of his order in Udine were numerous, and that they devoted themselves to Augustine and the woman they called their

\textsuperscript{107} Andrea Tilatti discusses the names and social stations of some of the women who joined Elena in Tilatti, “La regola delle terziarie agostiniane di Udine (sec. XV).” \textit{Analecta Augustiniana} 54 (1991): 65-79; here 65-69.
leader and mother. The women were associated with the Hermits of the convent of Santa Lucia, but they lived in private homes, since the Augustinians of Udine would not have a house for tertiaries until the completion of the convent of Sant’Agostino in 1464, after Elena had died. That building project, begun in 1448 before Elena had even committed herself to the order, was made possible by a donation of land from the two widowed Valentini sisters.

The Observant movement among the Augustinians had begun in Italy and proved strong there, spreading its influence across the Alps by the 1420s, and taking over the positions of leadership of the entire order by the middle of the fifteenth century. So the Observant influence among the Augustinian Hermits in the Friulian region, which included Simone da Roma, likely ran deep. In fact, one of Elena’s biographers, the high-ranking and highly-regarded Hermit Paolo Olmi who had composed a Latin vita—now lost—was a member of the Observant

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108 “Omnium earum, quarum magnus et numerus, quae nunc Augustino et sanctae Monachae deserviunt, Helenam procreatricem atque principem esse et saecula saeculorum ducem et matrem hic vocabunt,” in Giacomo da Udine, “Ad Paulum II pontificem maximum vita beatae Helenae utinensis feliciter incipit per Iacobum utinensem,” (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, lat. 1223), f. 29r, quoted by Tilatti in Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 130-31 n9. Giacomo da Udine based his vita—the only saint’s life he ever attempted, as he was better known for his orations and military treatises—on the work of Simone da Roma, writing most likely between 1464 and 1471, and he dedicated his work to Pope Paul II, producing more of a literary experiment in the humanist style than anything of use in the promotion of its subject as a saint. See Frazier, Possible Lives, 239, 265; and Tilatti in Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 22-24. Frazier, who devotes her entire chapter on Elena to Giacomo’s vita, calls it “flagrantly literary.”

109 Andrea Tilatti has edited “La regola delle terziarie agostiniane di Udine (sec. XV),” which he explains is an adapted form of the Rule of St. Augustine, with accommodations for women living outside of a community in their own homes, without necessarily taking a vow of poverty. See Tilatti, “La regola,” 67.

110 Tilatti in Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 130-31 n9; and Tilatti, “La regola,” 68.

congregation in Lombardy. Simone da Roma, Elena’s primary biographer, as well as another Hermit, Giacomo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo, praised the holy woman for her strict observance of the tenets of their order, and they used her life of piety and devotion to exalt their Ordo Eremitarum Sancti Augustini (O.E.S.A.). Giacomo Filippo Foresti included an entry on Helena beata utinenti in his collection entitled De plurimis claris selectisque mulieribus, which he dedicated in 1497 to Beatrice of Aragon (Naples), queen of Hungary and Bohemia. Patterned after Boccaccio’s De claris mulieribus (1362), which initiated the literary genre of galleries of renowned women, Foresti’s compilation included biblical heroines such as Sarah, Judith, and Esther; historical figures such as the poet Sappho, Cleopatra, and of course, Augustine’s mother Monica; as well as a number of virgins and martyrs. So Elena’s inclusion in such a collection seems peculiar, unless the Hermit meant to celebrate a saintly woman of his own order whose virtue was worthy of imitation. The Hermits looked to Elena as a model of sanctity whose promotion would serve to elevate their order, and so they sought to protect her body and her relics, and they recorded her miracles, even noting in their ledgers the expense for the paper to do so. Those ledgers also indicated expenses for a chapel, an altar, and a painting of

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112 Frazier discusses Paolo Olmi’s reputation and accomplishments in Possible Lives, 241.

113 Tilatti in Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 77. Divisions between the Conventual and Observant branches of the Augustinian Hermits likely were not as sharp as those between their respective counterparts in the Franciscan Order. They were indeed quite sharp between the Augustinian Canons and Augustinian Hermits. See Frazier, Possible Lives, 235-36 and 242-43.

114 Jacopo Filippo Foresti, “De beata Helena utinenti,” in De plurimis claris selectisque mulieribus opus prope divinum novissime congestum, fols. 146-148 (Ferrara: Laurentinus de Rubeis, 1497).

the Hermits’ would-be saint. The Franciscans had a strong presence in Udine, having arrived there after the Augustinians, but establishing the convent of Santa Croce early on for the Franciscan nuns. They also had the support of the influential Savorgnani, a noble Udinese family that backed Venetian control of the city and consequently was rival to the family of Elena’s husband, the Cavalcanti, who opposed the Venetians and had sided with the Patriarch of Aquileia. If a rivalry between the orders existed in Friuli, then it likely tied into the political rivalry between families, and possibly gave the Augustinians even greater motivation to promote Elena as one of their own saints and garner greater influence among potential candidates in the region.

Four ranking Augustinians—Simone da Roma, Giacomo da Udine, Paolo Olmi, and Giacomo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo—recorded Elena’s struggles with the devil, her austere devotion, her miracles, and her supernatural visions. They risked their own reputations on a woman who they believed showed convincing evidence of divine favor, and who had properly exercised spiritual discernment in her encounters with the supernatural. Simone da Roma, whose

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117 Udine was part of a region in the Italian northeast that had been ruled for centuries as a patriarchate, with a bishop or cardinal of the Catholic Church sitting as patriarch. When the Venetians seized the lands of the reigning patriarch in 1445, they declared that only a Venetian would from that point on hold the title. This contributed to diplomatic tensions between Rome and Venice. For political divisions in the Friulian region, see Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta and Factions in Friuli during the Renaissance* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

account served as the basis for all the others, wrote that Satan had appeared to Elena disguised as a good angel and tried to convince her to boast of her good works. The tertiary, having been blessed with the gift of discernment, quickly saw through the disguise and quoted the words of Jesus to instruct the devil to flee. Simone also related Elena’s many visions of holy figures, given to her by God as a consolation for her trials with the enemy. She saw Jesus in his heavenly splendor, the Virgin Mary, St. Augustine, his mother Monica, and the newly-canonized Augustinian St. Nicholas of Tolentino. For experts on the discernment of spirits such as Gerson and Birgitta of Sweden’s confessor, the Spanish bishop Alfonso Pecha, the emotional response to a supernatural vision often served as a gauge of its authenticity, with joy being the most desired outcome. Simone da Roma reported that Elena’s sister often found her in her cell overwhelmed with joy when she had experienced a divine visitation. Elena’s biographers believed that she had encountered God’s saints and had enjoyed the blessings of their presence. These men had no interest in promoting a fraud or a false prophet, and considering that the Franciscans and Dominicans seemed to have cornered the market on saints and blesseds in the medieval Catholic Church, the Augustinians would not have been served by trying to advance the cause of someone unworthy of veneration. They chose Elena to represent their order, because they believed she was, indeed, a santa viva, marked by God for a divine purpose.

119 This episode is related in Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 156. See Chapter 2 of this study for expanded coverage.

120 These visions are related in Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 163-67. See Chapter 2 of this study for expanded coverage.

The Franciscan nun Caterina Vigri da Bologna serves as a special case in the discussion of spiritual discernment, because the devil was initially successful in deceiving her, but through her strict obedience, she ultimately turned the tables on her enemy and caused his defeat. In the process, she was able to support the cause of the Observants in securing a growing convent of devoted women.

Caterina’s troubles began when Verde Pio da Carpi became patron of Corpus Christi sometime around 1429, in what Mary Martin McLaughlin has called a “high-handed capture of [the] community.” Verde Pio sought to have the lay community converted to a cloistered house associated with the Franciscans. The transition from lay community to a House of Poor Clares did not occur smoothly for the women of Corpus Christi. The founder Bernardina Sedazzari, before her death, had committed her successor, Lucia Mascheroni, to maintaining the house’s lay status at all cost. Lucia was the sister who had welcomed Caterina into the house when she first arrived and to whom the young girl felt a strong allegiance. However, Caterina also wanted the women to be associated with an order, as Verde Pio did, and to keep a strict observance. In 1431, the new abbess Taddea, sister of Verde Pio, expressed a desire to have the now-enclosed sisters remain under the more relaxed Rule of Urban (1262), which her sister had requested of the pope upon their foundation as a Clarissan house. But Caterina and others preferred the stricter Rule of Clare approved by Innocent IV (1253), believing it would allow

122 McLaughlin, “Creating and Re-creating Communities of Women,” 306. McLaughlin covers in detail the origins of the convent and its transformation from lay community to house of Poor Clares. She also discusses the socio-political motivations of Verde Pio in her control of the convent, and the trouble that her efforts caused for Caterina.

123 Santa Caterina Vegri, Le sette armi spirituali, ed. Foletti, 156-57 (X.1-2).
them better to fulfill the spiritual ideals of humility and obedience. The ensuing dispute over the matter reflected the tensions outside the convent walls within the wider Franciscan community between the Conventuals and the Observants, and it created serious tensions among the sisters of Corpus Christi. In a decree issued 6 October 1434, the bishop of Ferrara, Giovanni da Tossignano, along with other ecclesiastical authorities, absolved fourteen sisters of Corpus Christi—including “sororem Catelinam de Ferraria”—of any charges of apostasy, and any burden associated with possible excommunication or suspension of any kind resulting from grievances brought against them by the Abbot of Gavello, the man to whom the pope had given authority to establish the convent as a Clarissan house and oversee its elections. While this notarized document gave no indication as to why charges had been brought against these nuns, Cecilia Foletti has theorized that this group of fourteen, possibly led by Caterina herself from her new position as mistress of novices, likely ran into trouble through their efforts to implement a more rigorous form of life and to promote the associated practices of asceticism. Ultimately, if these women did encounter strong opposition in such a quest, they were later vindicated, not just by the edict of absolution, but also by the fact that Verde Pio sent a petition to Pope Eugenius IV in 1435, asking that the house be placed under the Prima Regola of Clare, for which he gave his

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124 Kathleen Arthur explains that the sisters were inspired to adopt the stricter rule after Giacomo da Capistrano offered in 1447 a clarification of its application in a “modern” setting. See Arthur, *Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety*, 18.

125 McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550)*, 295, 594 n. 24. In the introduction to her critical edition of *Le sette armi spirituali*, Cecilia Foletti explains that Pope Eugenius IV did not specify which rule the convent should follow when he first approved its conversion to a House of Poor Clares, and she speculates that he did so to avoid the appearance of giving a nod to either the Conventuals or the Observants in the foundation of Corpus Christi. See Santa Caterina Vegri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Foletti, 59-66, particularly 65.

approval in 1446.\textsuperscript{127} Although Caterina had to defend herself against charges, she was able to see her convent become part of the strict observance. However, during those years of strife within the convent walls, the devil had disguised himself three times in an effort to cast doubt in Caterina’s mind. He appeared to her as the Virgin Mary, as Christ crucified, and as the Madonna with Christ child in arms. Each time, he took advantage of young Caterina’s conflicted emotions between submission to superiors and support of a stricter rule, and he tried to convince her to abandon her desires in the name of obedience. The devil accused her, in the guise of the Holy Virgin, of being selfish and disloyal to Lucia, and so she committed herself to obedience, but instead of the joy that should have come from honoring Mary, she experienced resentment—and so she threw herself into prayer. Dissatisfied with this outcome, the devil came to her as the crucified Christ and called her a thief for rescinding her obedience, insisting that she possess the same will as that of her superior. When she did not give into the misery caused by renewed submission, but battled her own disobedient thoughts with prayer, he came to her as the Holy Mother carrying the Christ child, again accusing her of selfishness, and yet she committed herself to trying to please God. Even though Caterina did not recognize the figures appearing to her as diabolical in nature, her response was to obey and pray, instead of giving in to despair. Her righteousness foiled the attempts of her enemy to drive her to abandon her principles. Her reward was a visit from the true Madonna and Child, when she was able to hold the baby in her own arms, and all bitterness was replaced with joy—even jubilation.\textsuperscript{128} Caterina would later admonish her novices in her little book that would come to be known as \textit{Le sette armi spirituali}.

\textsuperscript{127} Arthur, \textit{Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety}, 54.

\textsuperscript{128} Caterina discusses these three visitations in the seventh chapter of \textit{Le sette armi}. See Chapter 2 of this study for expanded coverage.
to “take good care that you are not deceived by the appearance of good, for the devil sometimes comes forth in the appearance of Christ or of the Virgin Mary or really in any figure of an angel or saint. And so in every apparition that might occur, take up the weapon of Scripture.”

Cecilia Foletti has called Caterina’s *Le sette armi* “an important doctrinal document to be inscribed in the vast movement of religious reform of the first half of the fifteenth century.”

Although it was first printed in 1475, twelve years after the nun’s death, the devotional guide was copied and circulated among monasteries in northern Italy and beyond. Caterina had entrusted the original to her confessor, with the request that it be corrected and copied, with the duplicate sent to the convent at Ferrara that was once her home. Other copies were made, likely at the hands of the nuns in Bologna as well as Ferrara, and shared among convents, with one copy even making its way to the influential duchess of Ferrara, Eleonora of Aragon, wife of Ercole d’Este. But even before her manual was published, Caterina da Bologna was beneficial to the Observant movement among the Franciscans of Italy. The convent of Corpus Christi at Ferrara provided the city an alternative to the more established but lax Conventual convent of San Guglielmo, which had a reputation as a retreat for wealthy widows and a home for nuns with

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131 Kathleen Arthur notes that the original manuscript is held at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence as Ms. Pal. E.6.4.97, under the title “Incomenza uno libretto composto da una beata religiosa del corpo di christo sore Caterina da Bologna,” published by Azzoguidi, 1475. See Arthur, *Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety*, 190 n12.

little interest in prayer and devotion. The population of Corpus Christi grew ten-fold in twenty years, largely because of Caterina’s reputation as a divinely-inspired teacher, mystic, and worker of miracles. Under her influence, the convent developed into a center of Observant reform and an example to other Clarissan houses. Caterina was instrumental in promoting the cult of the Observant preacher Bernardino da Siena, who died in 1444, a year after visiting Ferrara for the final time, and was canonized in 1450. In *Le sette armi*, she referred to him as the apostle of St. Francis, just as Paul was an apostle of Christ; she called him “the Paul of Francis.” She also recorded a vision she had had of “the one who preached with a great voice,” standing in the midst of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the holy apostles, and a great multitude, preparing for the final judgment. On the occasion of Fra Bernardino’s death, she composed a laud, celebrating as a site of pilgrimage the city of Aquila, where he had spent his final days. When the Franciscan Observants decided to expand their influence in the city of Bologna, they chose Caterina to go there in 1456 and open a new house of Poor Clares, Corpus Domini, because of her success in


137 “…e in mezo de lorro era uno che predicava con grande voce.” Santa Caterina Vegri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Foletti, 157 (X.3-5). Caterina recorded here that she asked for confirmation—and received it—that this vision was of divine origin, to be sure that the devil had not tricked her.

This convent also became an important spiritual center, especially for the young women of the noble families in the region.

While Sister Illuminata Bembo’s *vita* of Caterina, *Specchio di illuminazione*, held influence as source material for the biographies that followed, her work did not circulate widely until its first print run in 1787. Instead, the *Vita de la beata Catherina da Bologna de l’ordine di Santa Clara del Corpo de Cristo*, written in 1502 by Observant Friar Dionisio Paleotti, a confessor at Corpus Domini, became the standard biography during the sixteenth century, likely because he supplemented his narrative with four chapters of Caterina’s miracles. Recently, historian Marco Bartoli has drawn attention to the work of Franciscan friar Mariano da Firenze (1477-1523), who devoted a full section to the life of Caterina Vigri in his *Libro delle degnità et excellentie del Ordine della seraphica madre delle povere donne sancta Chiara da Asisi*, written in 1519 and unique in his identification of the holy woman as a “santa dell’Osservanza.” Even in death, Caterina served her order and the Observant movement by providing them, through her life and her writings, an exemplar of holiness, advancing the Franciscans as keepers and promoters of the faith.

139 Illuminata Bembo, *Specchio di illuminazione*, 53 (VII.7).


Colomba Guadagnoli da Rieti was, in the words of Tamar Herzig, “the most famous living saint active in the Italian peninsula” as the fifteenth century drew to a close.\textsuperscript{143} Even during the early years of her ministry, the young woman proved to be a veritable rock star, at least according to her biographer, particularly after she exorcised a demon from a girl in Viterbo. Town officials there tried to keep her from leaving, but she snuck away with her companions and continued on to Narni, where the citizens, having already heard about the miracle with the demoniac, crowded in great numbers to welcome the living saint, some of them standing on walls to get a better look. Reminiscent of the throngs that once gathered to witness Jesus himself, the scene in Narni lacked only a tax collector, short in stature, perched in a tree to get a glimpse of the awaited visitor. Here, too, the townspeople plotted to keep Colomba as their own local living saint, but she found a way to escape.\textsuperscript{144} Everywhere she went, she represented the Dominican Order, for she wore the habit of black and white. In Perugia, Colomba advanced the cause of the Dominican Order by actively promoting one of its most beloved saints, Catherine of Siena. She began the town’s tradition of holding a procession annually in honor of St. Catherine, and when she founded an open monastery for tertiaries there, she named it Santa Caterina da Siena.\textsuperscript{145} The Observant Franciscans held significant sway in Perugia, as evidenced by their monopolization of the town’s new cults, with the veneration of Italians such as Bernardino da Siena, Bernardino da Feltre, Giovanni da Capistrano, and Giacomo della Marca, but Colomba

\textsuperscript{143} Herzig, \textit{Savonarola’s Women}, 51.

\textsuperscript{144} These events are discussed in Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 92-97 (XXI), and covered in Chapter 2 of this study.

\textsuperscript{145} Herzig, \textit{Savonarola’s Women}, 40.
brought attention to her order’s saints, and she, too, would be venerated by the townspeople upon her death.  

Under Colomba’s influence, the ranks of the Dominican Third Order swelled. Her confessor and biographer, Sebastiano degli Angeli, wrote of his charge: “I think then that, by the gift of God, this blessed virgin Colomba is the foundation and beginning of the reformation of the communal life of the sisters of the Penitence of St. Dominic,” for she had modeled how to maintain a commitment to the three solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience without the peace and quiet of clausuration, and how to surrender her mind to contemplation and to work acts of mercy with her hands. She also wrote the constitutions that governed the pinzochere at Santa Caterina, the first modus vivendi for a penitential community. Gabriella Zarri has credited Colomba with initiating a new form of religious life for tertiaries, based on the vita apostolica, and has attributed to her a leadership role in the women’s religious movement of her time. Colomba’s community, founded on the principles of strict poverty and detachment from the world, which were endorsed by the reformists, inspired the foundation of similar tertiary

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147 “Penso adonqua che, per dono de Dio, essa beata vergine Colomba è exordio e principio de la reformatione de la vita collegiata de le suore de la Penitentia de Sancto Domenico…” Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 247 (LII, c. 66v).

148 Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, Worldly Saints: Social Interaction of Dominican Penitent Women in Italy, 1200-1500 (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1999), 150-52. Although Colomba’s was an open monastery, she recommended that the women living there remain isolated from the outside world, except for attending services and performing acts of charity.

houses in Milan, Ferrara, and Soncino, further spreading the Observant Dominican influence across northern Italy.150

When Richard Kieckhefer examined the circumstances of two nuns living in the fifteenth century, Eustochio da Padua and Magdalena de la Cruz, he determined that some holy women ran into trouble because they were considered a threat to other women. He wrote:

“Eustochio and Magdalena were…women whose aspirations to sanctity evoked a mixture of adulation and distrust. They were caught in a trap particularly dangerous for a holy nun: their life of apparent sanctity in the convent was at least an implicit reproach to those who took their vows and their devotions far less seriously. Essentially the same phenomenon might at times be observed outside the cloister as well…where bystanders might well consider themselves reproached for lack of spiritual fervor.”151

Such was the fate of Colomba da Rieti, for despite her personal popularity and that of her tertiary community, she did have her detractors. As if sent by the devil himself, two strangers—older women who had been staying at the convent as guests in need of hospitality—used the opportunity of a dispute to slander Colomba, bringing false accusations in an attempt to discredit her, mocking the rigors of her penitential life and trying to turn the other sisters against her. They even called into question the motives behind her good works when she had cared for the infirmed during the plague.152 Her biographer quoted St. Ambrose in reference to these diabolical attacks:

“"It is a more serious temptation that trickery which not only makes up the falsehood and

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152 Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 139-40 (XXXI, c. 32rv). The women hinted at impropriety, because Colomba had moved her confessor to an isolated room to care for him when he succumbed to the plague.
pretends, but also discolors and taints the pious works done.\textsuperscript{153} He then identified \textit{uno altro modo de tentatione}: Colomba had become the subject of an examination by an inquisitor from France, who had just returned to Rome from an investigation into a French convent that had seemingly been overtaken by evil spirits, and she had to defend herself once again. Because rumors die a slow death, word of the earlier allegations made against the young virgin had spread, and the inquisitor arrived in Perugia to observe her behavior to discern whether she was truly led by the Spirit or possessed by the devil. In the end, he determined that she was so full of virtue and humility that surely she was a servant of God, and he even requested some relic—a handkerchief sewn by her own hand—to take back with him.\textsuperscript{154} But the inquisitor’s verdict was not enough to bring Colomba lasting peace. Despite a positive outcome from her audience with Pope Alexander VI in 1495, when his son Cesare Borgia and the Cardinal of Siena (future Pope Pius III) spoke very highly of the woman rapt in ecstasy on the ground before them and the pontiff ultimately offered his blessing over her and her way of life, a parade of ecclesiastical authorities and representatives, both men and women, continued to visited Perugia to authenticate her sanctity, especially her rapturous ecstasies and her ability to survive on the Eucharistic wafer as her primary source of sustenance.\textsuperscript{155} In most every case, they were

\textsuperscript{153} “È più grave tentatione quilla calu(m)pnia che non solamente co(m)pone la falsità e finge, ma etiamdio le pie opere facte decolora e tinge,” from Ambrogio, \textit{Expositio in psalmum David CXVIII}, 24, in Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 140 (XXXI, c. 32v). Sebastiano then compared Colomba to Joseph, the son of Jacob who had been falsely accused and imprisoned for improprieties (Genesis 39), and Susanna, the righteous woman trapped by two elders who desired her but could not have her (Daniel 13, which appears in neither the Jewish Tanakh nor in the Protestant Bible).

\textsuperscript{154} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 143-45 (XXXII, c. 33v-34r).

\textsuperscript{155} Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 153-58 (XXXIV). The pope and his cardinals fled to Perugia in May, 1495, to escape the approaching king of France, Charles VIII, who was passing through Rome on his way back from capturing Naples. The pope called for Colomba, so that he could witness her character for himself. Sebastiano hinted that the pontiff had become a bit annoyed when Colomba repeatedly fell
impressed with her *pietà, carità, humilità, simplicità*, and *mansuetudine*, or gentleness, and most everyone of them requested—or stole—some relic of hers to take with them.\textsuperscript{156} When more cynical doctors of philosophy and science examined Colomba and tried to explain her behaviors as medical phenomena or melancholy, her confessor at the time, Fra Sebastiano, defended her fiercely, comparing her divine capabilities to those of Sts. Dominic and Catherine, and suggesting that her critics were themselves spiritually impaired and lacking in discernment.\textsuperscript{157} However, trouble brewed within her convent walls again, for certain women, driven by their resentment of reproof for their laxity, began to murmur and complain about their prioress and her confessor, and their accusations against the two reached all the way to Rome. They seemed determined to discredit Fra Sebastiano by alleging that he had used his knowledge of the sciences, particularly astrology, to make predictions, which he then supposedly fed to Colomba.\textsuperscript{158} The priest sent a letter to Rome, and then visited in person, to defend himself and the prioress, and their names were eventually cleared, even if they still had asterisks next to them.\textsuperscript{159} The virgin remained under the watchful eye of those within the Roman Curia who

\textsuperscript{156} Sebastiano recorded these visits in chapters XXXIV and XXXV of the *Legenda volgare* (153-62).

\textsuperscript{157} Sebastiano recorded these examinations in chapters XXXVI through XXXVIII of the *Legenda volgare* (162-82).

\textsuperscript{158} Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 219, 225 (XLVII, c. 57r; XLVIII, c. 59v). Sebastiano mentioned that Savonarola, the reform preacher from the same order, was “simelmente contumace,” or similarly in default with the pope, for making predictions that seemed the result of astrology. So Sebastiano appeared guilty by association, for the confessor was a known supporter of the controversial preacher.

doubted her sanctity, and they dispatched a small group of religious women—“scribes and Pharisees,” as her biographer called them, linking them with the religious leaders who tried to find fault with Jesus—and those women filed a less-than-glowing report regarding the prioress’ behavior and her ability to govern her charges. Perhaps as a result of that report, likely combined with Colomba’s support of the controversial preacher Savonarola and her declination of Lucretia Borgia’s invitation to serve as her court prophetess, she received the news that would send her into despair: she was to be put under ecclesiastical censure, removed from her post as prioress, and forbidden to speak with any of the brothers in her Order, except the new confessor assigned to her.\footnote{Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 230-33 (XLIX, c. 61r-62r). Giovanna Casagrande dates the assignment of Colomba’s new confessor in December, 1498. Giovanna Casagrande, “Introduzione,” in Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 1-31: 9. Tamar Herzig discusses Colomba’s troubles related to Savonarola and Lucretia Borgia in \textit{Savonarola’s Women}, 51-52.} Just two days prior to being served notice, Colomba had asked her confessor to explain the words of Jesus—“‘Dio mio, Dio mio, perché abandonato me hai?’”—uttered as he hung on the cross, as if she knew of the impending judgment that would leave her feeling \textit{totalmente abandonata}, just as Jesus felt in his darkest hour.\footnote{Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 233-34 (XLIX, c. 62r). Scripture reference is from Matthew 27:46.} When Richard Kieckhefer offered his assessment of the final outcome for Eustochio and Magdalena, he suggested that even a “coalition” of disgruntled accusers could get nowhere “without a legitimating appeal to theological principle which could plausibly be made to fit the circumstances.”\footnote{Kieckhefer, “The Holy and the Unholy,” 318-19.} In Colomba’s case, she ultimately received a good report from the reformist cardinal sent to examine her after
her year-and-a-half “in the desert,” and because of her great sanctity and virtue—and implied here was her commitment to the doctrines of the Church—her censure was lifted.163

The Dominican Leandro Alberti (1479-ca. 1552) used Sebastiano Bontempi’s *vita* as the basis for his own work on the life of Colomba, which he published in 1521, in hopes that his edition would better represent her before the ecclesiastical authorities responsible for determining sainthood, for he had “sanitized” his version. He eliminated mention of Pope Alexander VI’s seeming unwillingness to give Colomba his blessing during an early encounter, when he did not yet know of her divine capabilities, and he erased any reference to her contempt for the pope’s imperiousness. Alberti, a Savonarolan sympathizer himself, also removed any evidence of a connection between Colomba and the disgraced preacher, including acknowledgment of the charges of Savonarolism that had been levied against her and her confessor Sebastiano.164 And both biographers were careful to leave out Colomba’s ecstatic vision, on the day of Savonarola’s execution, of three Dominican martyrs—Fra Girolamo and the two friars hanged and burned with him—being crucified, but then ascending into heaven. However, this vision was recorded by Savonarola’s biographers, in an effort to bolster his saintly credentials by associating him with the woman considered by so many to be a saint herself.

**Service to the Community**

In his work on the making of sainthood, Aviad Kleinberg has explained: “The saints and their communities needed each other. The men and women who played the demanding role of saints needed the attention, the reassurance, and the support of their audiences. For the saints’

163 Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 251-52 (LIII, c. 68r). The cardinal was the Frenchman Raimondo Perauld. See Tilatti’s notes on Cap. 53, c. 68r (332-33).

164 Herzig, *Savonarola’s Women*, 47, 64.
followers, the saints provided a measure of confidence in an uncertain world.”165 In fact, the community made the saint, so she needed its members as much as they needed her.

Elena da Udine, even before she officially took the habit as an Augustinian tertiary, had dedicated herself to caring for her neighbor: the hungry beggar, the naked child, the sick and lonely widow, and anyone else who needed material or spiritual comfort. She also gained the love and respect of her fellow citizens for her efforts to promote peace among them, for since Venice’s takeover of Udine in 1420, and the Republic’s defeat in 1445 of the Patriarch of Aquileia, for whom Udine served as the capital, tensions ran high between supporters of the patriarchate and those of Venetian rule. She encouraged her fellow citizens to pray, to confess, and, most importantly, to forgive. When Elena died, the factions within the city came together and set aside their differences long enough to mourn the loss of their holy woman with a proper festival of the dead.166 While two of her biographers, the Hermits Simone da Roma and Giacomo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo, devoted most of their space to Elena’s piety and asceticism after she had officially taken the habit, a third biographer, the cathedral canon Giacomo da Udine, emphasized her ministry among her compatriots in the years before her formal vows—between 1441 and 1452, when political hostility was at its worst. Andrea Tilatti has proposed that Giacomo da Udine focused on her love of neighbor, portraying her as a peacemaker with a message of forgiveness, because he saw an opportunity to win favor with the Venetian rulers who now dominated the region. He presented her as a new Udinese saint, representative of the new regime, and even better so because she had been the wife of an ardent supporter of the old

165 Kleinberg, Prophets in Their Own Country, 163.

166 Tilatti in Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 75.
regime, the patriarchate. Giacomo quite possibly hoped that her cult would replace that of the martyred patriarch, the Blessed Bertrando, former ruler of Udine and a reminder of what once was. By portraying Elena as a peacemaker and a saint of the new order, he could placate the Venetian overlords who now held influence over his own position and stipend.167

Caterina da Bologna played an important part in the growth of Ferrara as an influential cultural center on the Italian peninsula, a program begun by Niccolò III d’Este and carried on by his sons, among them Borso d’Este. The d’Este family, patrons of the arts, supported the convent of Corpus Christi, which embodied in its architectural design and the art of its altar pieces the theme of adoration of the body of Christ. They also held Caterina in high regard, for she had been a part of their household in her youth and an intercessor for their family when in need of prayer. Margherita d’Este credited the nun’s prayers with saving her from an undesirable second marriage after her first husband died in 1432 and she chose to live a devout life.168 Caterina, an artist herself, was instrumental in developing a culture of reverence and devotion within the convent walls of Corpus Christi, through prayer, the written word, and visual representation, and people from the secular world became attracted to this woman and her life of piety.169 When her time came to leave the city, the convent was able to continue its expansion, thanks to her reputation, and it enjoyed the patronage of prestigious noble women such as Eleonora d’Aragona, Isabella d’Este, and Lucretia Borgia. Kathleen Arthur writes of the holy woman’s influence:


“Unlike the ‘living saints’ who were cultivated by d’Este and Gonzaga rulers as court adornments, consulted for prophecies, prayer and protection, Sister Caterina and her closest companions occupied a different civic and religious space. By drawing novices into the convent from cities across northern Italy, they increased the civic piety and actively spread the model of Observant Reform to a broad range of society.”170

Caterina had gained notice among the officials of Bologna, her hometown, when she prayed for the city as it was under threat of attack from the forces of the duke of Milan in 1443, and she predicted victory for Bologna’s own beloved Hannibal Bentivoglio over the enemy.171 When they requested her as the abbess of their new Observant convent, Corpus Domini, Borso d’Este, now duke of Ferrara, was certain that with his political influence he could keep his local dona santa and prevent her from leaving for Bologna.172 His efforts failed, and she departed in 1456, taking her deep sense of obedience and her popularity as a living saint with her.

Colomba da Rieti made her greatest impact in Perugia. She found herself in a city that had been plagued by political instability, with its sovereignty frequently challenged by the pope in the name of the Papal States and its leadership contested by powerful families. One scholar has recently characterized the political situation in Perugia as “infernal,” and Colomba as “a poor clay pot among monstrous containers of violence.”173 In 1479 Rodolfo and Guido Baglioni had inherited control and ruled together as tyrants. They would solidify their power just one month

170 Arthur, Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety, 153.


172 Arthur, Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety, 17. Arthur mentions in her footnote (157 n1) that the duke’s use of the term dona santa in his letter to Bishop of Ferrara, Francesco dal Legname, in which he assured the bishop that he could secure the nun’s stay, conveys Caterina’s public reputation.

after Colomba’s arrival by ousting from the city a rival family, the Oddi, in October, 1488. Perugia endured a number of local wars over the next decade against neighboring towns that had provided refuge to the Oddi. The Baglioni brothers also had to contend with jealous and vengeful members of their own family who sought to usurp their power. So Colomba appeared at an opportune time: her immediate popularity with the citizenry, who craved social and spiritual security in troubled times, served the two rulers, who became patrons of the holy woman, by lending legitimacy to their claim to authority. The citizens of Perugia viewed Colomba as an angel from God, and when the Dominicans of Rieti endeavored to get their hometown holy woman back, even sending a friar who tried to remove her forcibly from the church altar while in a state of rapture, the Baglioni family stepped in and promised that Perugia would support her with public money and build a monastery, her Santa Caterina da Siena, where she could service the needs of young children. When the plague threatened to decimate the population of Perugia in 1494, the magistrates and the citizens looked to Colomba to intercede for them, for her prayers and guidance had rescued them on a number of occasions before. She had performed numerous miraculous healings, with a strong record of saving infants and children, and she had prayed for the safety of the city in 1491—and would again in 1495—when the banished Oddi

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175 Tamar Herzig, Savonarola’s Women: Visions and Reform in Renaissance Italy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 39. Ugolino Nicolini characterizes the relationship as one of “la strumentalizzazione,” or exploitation, and he asserts that Sebastiano’s work demonstrates “una mal celata simpatia,” or “poorly concealed sympathy” for the patrons of his subject. See Nicolini, “Il Baglioni e la beata Colomba,” 79, 86.

176 Sebastiano Angeli, Legenda volgare, 124-6 (XXVIII, c. 27v-28r).
tried to re-enter by force and failed. In the face of the plague, Colomba ordered everyone within the city to pray to God and to petition their patron saints Dominic and Catherine, and to make a banner in their honor to carry in a three-day precession to the church, with the healthy and the infirmed walking side-by-side. By following her counsel, the town was spared from the horrible pestilence, and when Colomba’s confessor at the time, and then the beata herself, fell ill, they both were healed. Sebastiano degli Angeli recorded another occasion, uno vehemente terrore, when a great multitude took refuge with Colomba in the monastery’s oratory, where the citizens implored her to pray on their behalf. She delivered a great sermon to them, admonishing them to purify their lives, so negligent in spirit, to placate the wrath of God.

According to Sebastiano, Colomba experienced a mental vision in which God showed her that judgment would fall upon those men whose hearts were so full of ambition. She approached the head of state, Guido Baglioni, and shared with him her vision, of a body cut into pieces, and she exhorted him to fear God. Guido, however, chose not to heed her warning, because he saw no eminent danger. When Guido’s son Astorre sent his chaplain to Colomba to ask for her prayers, he found her in the chapel with her confessor. She looked to the heavens and saw a vision of three tabernacles, each with a cross hanging inside, completely engulfed in flames, and she heard a voice, saying: “‘Quisto per mesere Asturi.’”

Soon after, in July of 1500, the family

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177 Sebastiano devoted a chapter to Colomba’s miracles of healing, and one to the two major efforts on the part of the Oddi to overtake the city. See Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 182-86 (XXXIX), and 211-15 (XLV).


179 Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 247-48 (LII, c. 66v). Giovanna Casagrande comments in the notes (332, Cap. 52, c. 66v), that Sebastiano did not make clear which terror he meant. He might have been referring to the plague of 1494, the political strife of 1495, or the plague of 1499.

180 Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare*, 215-16 (XLVI, c. 56r).
gathered for Astorre’s wedding, an event now referred to as *le nozze rosse*, or “the red wedding,” when bastard members of the Baglioni family, with the help of some of the Oddi, attacked the ruling family after the ceremony had taken place, killing the groom, his brother, and his father Guido in their sleep. Tamar Herzig has commented on the holy woman’s relationship with the ruling family: “Despite her profound impact on public life in Perugia, Guadagnoli probably did not succeed in significantly changing the Baglionis’ ways of practicing local politics.”

I began this discussion of spiritual discernment with the words of Gabriella Zarri, and I conclude in like fashion. From her study of Italian *sante vive* and the lives composed about them, she has deduced:

“The authors of these *vitae* were treading on dangerous ground when they set about narrating the wondrous deeds of female mystics endowed with supernatural gifts, since their culture accepted the possibility that similar effects could be produced by opposing powers—by God or by the devil….Faced with the problem of discernment of spirits, the authors all addressed it in the same way, resolving the question by proposing practical criteria. Sanctity could be recognized by its fruits: the saints’ virtues, especially humility, were proof of divine action; and their fidelity to the church, expressed in their proselytism and obedience to their confessors, was the surest way of recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit.”

I would add that their lives of *imitatio Christi* identified them as living saints, for the fruits of such imitation included discernment of spirits and victory in combat with the devil. Those who encountered these holy women believed that they had received a divine touch, because the events in their lives and their words and deeds mirrored those of Christ and the saints before them.

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181 See Black, “The Baglioni as Tyrants of Perugia, 1488-1540,” 263; and Pierotti, *Colomba da Rieti a Perugia*, 161-77. Many other family members were killed that night.


183 Zarri, “A Typology of Female Sanctity,” 244-5.
Heinrich Kramer once wrote that, “[just as it is hard to suspect an upstanding and decent person of heresy,] so on the contrary a person of bad reputation and shameful habits of faith is easily defamed as a heretic.” Elena, Caterina, and Colomba proved that they were virtuous and faithful, upstanding and decent, and they became very popular with the citizens and officials in their communities. Their lives demonstrate that, at least in part, accusations of heresy and witchcraft were less a matter of belief and practice, and more a matter of personality and politics. These holy women earned the respect and adoration of those who encountered them, particularly those who benefited from their presence, and their *fama* in life led to their veneration in death.

Chapter 5

Postmortem Veneration and the Making of a Saint

In 1199, when Pope Innocent III issued a bull of canonization for Sant’Omobono da Cremona, he identified two essential components of authentic sanctity when he wrote:

“‘Although…the grace of final perseverance alone is required for sanctity in the Church triumphant…in the Church militant two things are necessary: the power of moral behavior [virtus morum] and the power of signs [virtus signorum], that is, works of piety during life and miracles after death.’”¹ Virtus, which translates as virtue in one sense and as power in another, in the case of the saint was comprised of pious actions and moral excellence, as well as spiritual power of the supernatural kind and the ability to work miracles, both in life and in death.² While Innocent III and the popes after him sought to quantify such virtue and power and assess it objectively, the laity employed these same categories more subjectively in ascribing sainthood to the holy women and men who lived among them.³ Official sainthood ultimately required the endorsement of the Church hierarchy, but the process began at the local level, where lay Christians perceived an individual to be worthy of veneration, because they had benefited from the proximity of the one who had modeled piety, who had ministered to their sick, and who had interceded for their town in times of crisis. The virtuous one was deemed a vital member of society, even if from behind a convent wall, and so sanctity was socially constructed.⁴

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² Kleinberg, Prophets in Their Own Country, 8; and Thomas Head, in Medieval Hagiography, xiv.

³ Kleinberg, Prophets in Their Own Country, 8.

⁴ Head, “Introduction,” in Medieval Hagiography, xv.
**Virtus and the Vox populi**

Thomas Head has explained the importance of these saintly figures to both the institutional Church and its lay members:

“The veneration of those people deemed to be saints lay at the core of the practice of medieval Christianity. For saints were...key members of the Christian community. Saints demonstrated their holiness through their actions, whether it be in the willingness to accept martyrdom, in the rigors of extreme asceticism, in the wise exercise of episcopal office, or in the heroic defense of their virginity. With God’s assistance they could turn that holiness into miraculous actions, such as curing the sick, defeating their enemies without the use of force, or exorcising demons.”

The vitae of the three women presented in this study suggest that they “demonstrated their holiness” by yet another means: through their perseverance against the torments of Satan. For the fifteenth-century holy woman, the wilderness experience—her struggles against the devil’s temptations, and her ultimate victory over them—provided a demonstration of both aspects of virtus. Her virtue, or her pious actions, made her a target of demonic efforts to derail her in her ministry, but also gave her the tools to endure those trials, for they drew her closer to Christ and kept her focused on his purpose for her. That endurance proved that she had Christ-like strength—an almost supernatural ability to bear physical trauma, mental anguish, and spiritual despair, and to overcome very real temptation, with her virtue intact. That endurance also imbued her with power and provided evidence that surely she was touched by God, who was the source of her miraculous capabilities. Virtus in the sense of moral excellence, particularly by means of imitatio Christi, prepared the ground for virtus in the sense of supernatural power, which provided even greater opportunities for the imitation of Christ through the working of miracles. Victory over the violent temptations of the devil, for the holy woman, was the bridge

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between the two facets of *virtus*. Her perseverance and triumph during her time in the spiritual desert confirmed that she possessed both virtue and power, and it contributed to her perception as a living saint.

Pope Innocent III, as part of his program of reform, attempted to claim for the papacy complete control over the processes of canonization, making the assessment of a venerated individual’s life and miracles a judicial process for which only members of the Roman Curia were qualified. The pope’s reforms received official ratification at the Fourth Lateran Council. However, the dossier of a candidate for sainthood did not reach the pontiff’s desk without first being compiled by local ecclesiastical authorities, who would have only promoted someone who had gained favor with the local population. The *vox populi* first declared an individual worthy of veneration, sometimes even before the pope knew of that person’s fame. Without popular support at the local level, there could be no sainthood, especially because local citizens bore witness to miracles and spread word of them, but they were there to see the wondrous works primarily because they were part of an audience of citizens who recognized the holiness of the miracle worker. André Vauchez has explained that Innocent III valued the virtuous life of the would-be saint, and saw it as equal in importance to the ability to work miracles, which garnered greater attention from the laity. However, the cult followings of Elena da Udine, Caterina da

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6 Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 37. Vauchez relates the story of Peter of Castelnau, who was hailed as a martyr but was not canonized by Innocent III, because the local inhabitants did not view him as a saint, and therefore did not attest to any miracles at his tomb. Peter was, however, beatified.

7 Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 36-37. Mary Harvey Doyno, whose work is discussed later in this chapter, discusses the pope’s emphasis on acts of devotion as a reaction to the number of lay saints who claimed to have charismatic, or miracle-working, powers. See Part One of Mary Harvey Doyno, *The Lay Saint: Charity and Charismatic Authority in Medieval Italy, 1150-1350* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).
Bologna, Colomba da Rieti, and other Quattrocento holy women like them suggest that by the mid-fifteenth century, at least in Italy, the laity had grown increasingly concerned with both moral excellence and supernatural powers, for they sought out those women whose virtue was nearly unquestionable. Particularly under the influence of the mendicant orders, with their morality preaching and their efforts at spiritual reform, lay Christians in Italy knew what a saint should look like, and they demanded that anyone receiving their reverence be authentic, even extraordinarily so.

**Who Was a Saint?**

Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell devoted a chapter in their collaborative work to the question of “Who Was a Saint?” and delineated the characteristics common among those who were venerated within their local communities. They identified five expressions of holiness that defined sanctity for the faithful of medieval Christendom: 1) the all-important supernatural power, followed by 2) penitential asceticism, 3) works of charity, 4) worldly power (possession of it, or persecution at the hands of those who held it), and 5) evangelism. I submit that the wilderness experience made each of these components of sainthood possible—was even essential to their development—in the life of the holy ascetic. First, while miracles and prophecy provided outward evidence of supernatural gifts, there were more private expressions of communion with the divine, initiated by penance and contemplative prayer, and for the living saint, culminating in mystical union with Christ. Weinstein and Bell suggested that “the most impressive contemplatives were those who had achieved a powerful mastery over self.”

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8 Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, 141-165; here 159.

9 Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, 150-51.
experience provided an intermediate phase between penance and the development of the kind of mastery over self that allowed for mystical union. Such mastery was cultivated in the desert. The devout woman committed herself to purging her mind, body, and spirit of sin, engaging in such deep contemplation and penitential austerities that she left herself vulnerable to assaults from the devil, yet she became stronger, her soul fortified by the experience. She had perfectly demonstrated mastery over self, which testified to her supernatural power. Second, through her acts of penitential asceticism, the holy woman suffered not only for her own salvation, but on behalf of others, just as Christ had. Through her strict discipline and total submission, she interceded for those living in her community, serving as their spiritual counselor. As Weinstein and Bell have explained: “Every community…had its special protector, its holy ascetic who had once walked its streets, sweated at the same toil, or experienced the same catastrophe. ‘Their’ saint had shared their condition yet had transcended it by making human suffering into a holy profession.” Sharing in their condition included suffering the temptations of the devil, but the holy woman was able to transcend them. Third, she performed works of charity that often involved miraculous transformations: she multiplied food, healed illnesses, resuscitated babies, and even exorcised demons—a feat possible only because she had defeated the devil and his agents in her own life. Fourth, worldly power, exercised by those who sought to stand in the way of the beata and her ministry, often created circumstances that allowed the woman to showcase her heroic virtue. The humble servant of the Lord shone bright against the wickedness of her detractors, and her willingness to suffer their persecution contributed to her holy aura. In the

10 Weinstein and Bell, Saints and Society, 154.

11 Weinstein and Bell, Saints and Society, 158-59.
mind of the believer, no one wielded more worldly power than the devil himself, and his efforts lay behind every attempt to prevent the saint from accomplishing God’s work, but her ability to endure his afflictions served to confirm for the faithful that the power of good was greater than the power of evil. Finally, the living saint was uniquely qualified to engage in evangelical activity, which involved admonishing the citizenry to repent and turn from their sins, for she had demonstrated her own power over the enemy and served as a model of perfection. Such perfection could not have been achieved had she not been tested in an extraordinary way during her wilderness experience.

The Living Saint: Transgressor or Talisman?

Elizabeth Petroff has argued convincingly that medieval women saints were transgressors—”rule-breakers and flouters of boundaries”—on two different levels. First, they were saints, and sainthood almost requires that holy women or men push the limits of convention—that they live outside of the mundane and make excess their norm. Second, they were women, and by devoting themselves to sanctity, they breached the confines meant for medieval women by making themselves visible. The life of the living saint was a public one. She was perceived to be holy, because the public had witnessed her holiness. But women were supposed to restrict themselves to the private sphere. The medieval holy woman challenged, or rather transgressed, such limits. Petroff has explained: “…although there appear to be two different kinds of transgressions for female saints…in actuality there is only one real transgression for a woman: to go public, to be a visible, speaking, informed moral leader. In that context, the two most dangerous activities for a woman are literacy and public teaching—to

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12 Petroff has devoted a chapter to “The Rhetoric of Transgression in the Lives of Italian Women Saints,” in Body and Soul, 161-81.
possess the word and to move in public space.”

She has examined the *vitae* of Santa Bona da Pisa (1156-1208), Sant’Umiltà da Faenza (1226-1310), and the Beata Villana dei Botti da Firenze (1332-1360) to uncover the transgressive nature of their virtue and power. Santa Bona, an Augustinian canoness, inserted herself into a dispute among men, helping some local monks come to an agreement and, in the process, revealing to them her miraculous ability to fly. Sant’Umiltà, an illiterate nun, preached—in Latin, on the subject of doctrine—to the sisters of her convent, having been taught to read by the Holy Spirit, a transgressive miracle in itself. The Beata Villana, a literate visionary, prophesied in the town square for all to hear, but the guilt of her transgressive public display caused her serious physical pain. Petroff has determined that in each case, the woman’s biographer crafted a narrative that attributed these public miracles to divine will, portraying the transgressor as merely a vessel. In her words:

“The authors have created a rhetoric that masks but does not deny transgression. The female protagonists are not the subjects of their own lives, for they are captured by the rhetoric that inscribes them in a patriarchal mentality. They are not the subjects because they are never responsible; even at their most active, they are portrayed as the bearers of another’s message, the means by which God works miracles. They are not even allowed their transgressions, for that would make them truly public figures, and the notion of female sanctity excludes going public.”

Petroff rightly considers these devout women to be transgressors in the context of the religious culture of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. André Vauchez has recently penned *Caterina da Siena: una mystica trasgressiva*, in which he argues that the Sienese holy

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15 Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 177.
woman transgressed the bounds of the private sphere by inserting herself into the politics of the Church, and in doing so, initiated a “spiritual matriarchate” and paved the way for a new “feminine Catholicism.”¹⁶ In consideration of Petroff’s analysis, along with Vauchez’s assessment of Catherine of Siena as both transgressor and innovator, I would argue that Catherine of Siena stood as an essential transitional figure, for the Quattrocento women in this study and others like them who were active during the years after the Council of Constance, were no longer transgressors, at least not in Italy. They were important, even sought-after, religious figures who had become an integral part of Italian society. By the mid-fifteenth century, Christians living on the Italian peninsula had grown accustomed to local women saints who practiced extreme asceticism, and townsfolk liked their holy women “out there” in the public eye. They needed them out there, in their midst, prophesying and healing and leading the people to repentance. Catherine of Siena, who was canonized in 1461, set the stage for a succession of Italian women who ministered in their local communities and were later honored by the Catholic Church as blessed or saints. Her performance and accomplishments as a santa viva, and her swift admission by Church authorities to the corps of canonized saints, made “holy woman as public figure” an accepted phenomenon among the city-states of Italy. In the northern region of the peninsula, the Lombard city of Como had its Beata Magdalena Albrici (c. 1415-1465); Mantua had the two Beate Paola Montaldi (1443-1514) and Osanna Andreasi (1449-1505); the Piedmontese town of Trino had the Beata Magdalena Panattieri (1443-1503); Genoa had its own Santa Caterina (1447-1510); and Soncino had the Beata Stefana Quinzani (1457-1530). The Tuscan town of Pisa benefited from the friendship of the Beate Maria Mancini (1355-1431) and

Chiara Gambacorta (1362-1419). Just as Milan had sacrificed its own Beata Felicia Meda (1378-1444) to Pesaro, Florence gave up its Beata Antonia (1401-1472) for both Foligno and L’Aquila, where she established convents with her friend Beata Paola da Foligno (d. 1470) under the tutelage of the well-known Franciscan foundress Beata Angelina da Montegiove (1357-1435).\footnote{Angelina da Montegiove’s contribution to the spread of Franciscan houses is discussed in Chapter 1 of this study.}

In other parts of central Italy, Cascia had its Santa Rita (1381-1457), Rome had its Santa Francesca (1384-1440), Camerino had its Santa Camilla Battista (1453-1524), Spoleto had its Beata Agostina Camozzi (1435-1458), and of course Narni had its own Beata Lucia (1476-1544). These holy women devoted themselves to lives of asceticism, they ministered to the material and spiritual needs of their communities, they had visions and prophesied, and many of them accomplished all of this after having first overcome temptations of the devil.\footnote{The women mentioned here who had encounters with Satan are discussed in the Introduction of this study.} They were valued by their cities and towns for the connection they provided to the divine, and for the intercessory role they played on behalf of their fellow citizens. They were not mere vessels; they were chosen instruments, actively participating in—often serving as leaders in—the religious life of their communities. They were public figures, and they were welcomed as such.

Vauchez has pointed out that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, under the clergy’s influence, “the faithful acquired a taste for the cult of the saints and made it, in a sense, their own. They preferred the saints close to them in space and time….\[T\]he smallest town, soon even the tiniest village, wanted a patron saint of its own.”\footnote{Vauchez, \textit{Sainthood}, 139.}

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in Italy, where what he has identified as “local particularism and urban patriotism” generated a special kind of civic pride. For fifteenth-century Italian believers, the saint closest in space and time was the living saint, *la santa viva*. There was no need to wait for an official postmortem declaration from the Church of a holy person’s sanctity; they could have their saint right there with them, living and breathing, praying and teaching, healing and interceding, in their very midst. The role of the local saint became even more imperative for a population that had witnessed natural disasters, social and political upheavals, and some of the worst episodes of ecclesiastical mismanagement in the history of the Church. The laity needed the spiritual security and guidance that the living saint afforded them. These women’s private devotional activities and public forms of engagement with the laity were no longer transgressive or objectionable; they were expected, even extolled. Italy’s living women saints became celebrities within their own towns and beyond. And for this reason, their biographers did not need to mask their behaviors once deemed inappropriate or deny their public persona. Instead, they put them on display. They highlighted the women’s austerities, providing great detail of their physical suffering; they lauded them for their victories over temptation; they emphasized their frequent communion and ability to abstain from earthly foods; they celebrated their ecstasies and revelations as rewards for their devotion; and they intentionally drew attention to their public ministries of teaching, counseling, prophesying, and working miracles. Their hagiographers illustrated the many ways in which their subjects lived in *imitatio Christi*, and the consequent exhibitions of both excellent virtue and supernatural power.

These holy women gave their biographers a great deal of material with which to work. They first put their own lives on display by choosing to leave the private sphere and become public figures. Elena da Udine began her religious life in the public even before she officially
took the habit. She worked in her community, caring for her neighbors, and she ministered to other widows who would eventually join her as tertiaries. Caterina da Bologna sought out the cloistered life, but even from the confines of her convent walls, she exercised significant influence, for her reputation helped the cities of Ferrara and Bologna to become centers of learning, attracting great numbers of women to the religious life. Colomba da Rieti made the public an integral part of her religious life, for she needed an audience—witnesses to her performance as imitator of Christ *extraordinaire*. Each of these women, before beginning a public ministry of healing and prophesying, endured a private struggle against the enemy, from which they emerged the victor. Each of them, in both private and public, made the imitation of Christ the foundation of their devotion, and that imitation gave their hagiographers a framework upon which to structure their life stories to demonstrate their worthiness of sainthood.

**Who Made the Saint?**

When Vauchez wrote his seminal work on sainthood, which covered an expansive time frame from 1198 to 1431, he distinguished between *official* saints, or those who were vetted through a process of canonization and found by the Roman Church to be worthy of veneration, and *local* saints, or those for whom a cult of devotion developed within communities where, as Vauchez explained, “religious conceptions of the faithful and the requirements of the clergy intersected.” From his examination of the early work of Weinstein and Bell, he determined that for the Italian laity, the perception of sainthood rested less upon the holy person’s power

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20 Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 157. Vauchez had identified a third category, *popular* saints, but since they most often had no *vita*, I have not included them in this discussion.
relationships and more upon explicitly religious considerations.\footnote{Vauchez, \textit{Sainthood}, 184-85. Vauchez examines Weinstein and Bell’s “Saints and society: Italian saints of the late Middle Age and Renaissance,” \textit{Memorie Domenicane}, n.s., 4 (1973): 180-94.} Whereas in other parts of Christendom, saints often came from wealthy and powerful families, Italian saints came from more modest backgrounds and gained popularity among the local laity for their devotional practices and spirituality. Weinstein and Bell called them “communal protectors” and “heroic models who had less to do with practical power than with the struggle toward individual spiritual perfection…dedicated to expiating not only their own sins but also those of the community.”\footnote{Weinstein and Bell, \textit{Saints and Society}, 177.} In most cases in Italian cities and towns, at least in the fifteenth century, the clergy supported and promoted the laity’s choice of holy woman or man, largely because they chose those individuals who demonstrated sincere devotion, evident by their strict austerity and their efforts to imitate Christ.\footnote{Vauchez, \textit{Sainthood}, 217.} Increasingly, the chosen ones came from the growing number of tertiaries associated with the reform-minded mendicant orders. On the peninsula, prestige meant very little, if anything at all; piety meant everything.

More recently, Mary Harvey Doyno and Janine Larmon Peterson have examined the proliferation of saints among northern and central Italian communes in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries to determine the influence of lay devotion and ecclesiastical authority in the identification of holy figures worthy of veneration. Doyno explores the rise of lay sanctity in the years from 1150 to 1350 and how it “illuminates a complex debate that was taking place between the laity, the church, and civic authorities over the source of religious power and charisma.”\footnote{Doyno, \textit{The Lay Saint}, 2.}
She looks at civic lay saints, such as midwives, artisans, merchants, and domestic servants around whom cults developed because of their extraordinary piety, acts of charity, and ability to perform miracles while living. These individuals operated within the confines of Church orthodoxy by living according to the *vita apostolica*, independent of the mendicant orders, as the ideal Christian way of life, but they also sometimes threatened the authority of the institutional Church, because their charisma, or ability to work miracles, made them popular and difficult to control. None of these lay saints achieved beatification or canonization, except for Sant’Omobono da Cremona mentioned earlier, but they did contribute to the establishment of a civic identity among the *popolo* who sought a greater stake in the workings of communal politics. Their outward focus and emphasis on service to others through works of charity stood in contrast to the more introspective focus of the growing mendicant orders, who represented the authority of the Church. Yet the papacy and those orders sometimes promoted these lay figures, as a means of shaping the moral and spiritual life of the laity. Doyno explains that the phenomenon of the civic lay saint died out with the growth of the third orders, which increasingly oversaw the devotional practices of pious women and men who chose to live the apostolic life.

Janine Larmon Peterson takes a micro-historical approach to examining the lives of Italian women and men who were cult figures and whose sanctity was disputed by ecclesiastical authorities, but embraced by local officials and members of the laity. Peterson focuses on late medieval Italy from 1250 to 1400, and she contends that “by trying to increase its spiritual authority through bureaucratic centralization and regulation of what constituted sanctity, the church absented itself from the development of cults on the ground and inadvertently encouraged
the proliferation of local disputed saints.”

As Peterson points out, disputed saints were local saints, and they often provided a shared civic identity for the people who venerated them, and those same people were willing to risk punishment and accusations of heresy to promote the cults of those whom the papacy opposed. In many cases, instead of challenging the authority of the pope, who was often viewed as a distant political player in the game of peninsular politics, the laity simply carried on with their everyday business of devotion to their contested saints. Peterson finds that the disputed saint disappeared by the end of the fourteenth century as Italian republics began to solidify their autonomy, and the papacy became distracted by the crisis of the Western Schism.

Both Doyno and Peterson find cooperation between the laity and local leaders, both public and ecclesiastical, in creating and promoting cults of religious figures within their communities. Doyno demonstrates the use of lay saints from working-class society, embraced by the local citizenry, as political tools among communal officials in garnering public support and establishing civic autonomy. Peterson explains the collaborative efforts between the clergy and the laity in challenging higher ecclesiastical authorities, particularly inquisitors, who sought to suppress the promotion of those cults not sanctioned by the Church. In both cases, saints were made at the local level, often by those who cared little for what the pope had to say about the propriety of their cult veneration. Public officials, local representatives of the Church, and its lay members came together to determine the worthiness of holy figures to be regarded as saints. Peterson bases her work on the premise that sanctity and heresy were not distinct and separate categories in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, by the beginning of the

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Quattrocento, sanctity and heresy became increasingly separated, in part because of the influence of the mendicant orders and their efforts to combat heresy through the instrument of spiritual reform. In fifteenth-century Italy, as Doyno and Peterson point out, saints no longer came from the laity of the working class and were less likely to be disputed. However, those who would be regarded as saints still met the spiritual and civic needs of the townspeople and their local civil and ecclesiastical leaders, and their cult veneration was promoted accordingly by these same groups. The case of Elena da Udine illustrates the point perfectly.

Having lived her religious life in imitation of Christ, Elena died in the same manner, for on the night of 23 April 1458, she uttered the words, “In le man tue, Signore, recomando l’anima mia,” and then she raised her head above her pillow in the direction of the Crucifix and took her last breath. Miraculously, even in death her head remained elevated toward the cross. Her sisters stripped her dead body to bathe and clothe it, and they saw that she was covered in sores and scabs, the wounds of her self-mortification. To announce her death, the Augustinian brothers set about ringing all the bells in the town, but the “bell of justice,” used to signal the death of a criminal, refused to ring, and its hammer fell to the ground—another great miracle—as if to confirm that the one who had died had no cause to be judged. At the sound of the bells, all of the women and men of the town came to Elena’s home to honor her in death, and the brothers carried her body to Santa Lucia, where they placed her in the sacristy of the church. There a man named Zuanne, a furrier who had lost his right arm, came and knelt in front of Elena’s body,

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26 Doyno does note that nuns and tertiaries were considered members of the laity (they could not be ordained), but had taken vows as part a religious order. Doyno, The Lay Saint, 7.
asking that she intercede for him before God that he might be healed. The man kissed her hand as a sign of devotion, and immediately he was delivered from his malady as if nothing had ever happened. The next night, two brothers came to the sacristy to take Elena’s body to be interred near the great altar of the church, as they had been instructed, but the blessed woman spoke to them and asked them to bury her in the ground under her prayer chapel. These miracles were recorded by Elena’s biographer, the Augustinian theologian Simone da Roma, and he concluded his vita with these words: “This is the life and miracles which were presented to the reverend provincial master Andrea da Ferrara, in the year of our Lord 1458. This life and miracles were approved in the presence of witnesses and written by the hand of the notary, called Candido of Udine. FINIS.” The documentation of Elena’s postmortem miracles, as well as those that occurred at her hand while she was alive, was submitted by a well-regarded member of the Augustinian order to be approved by another high-ranking member of the order and notarized by a local public official, with lay witnesses present. As Aviad Kleinberg has noted: “All hagiographers expect to be believed on some level. At least formally they all write history. The hagiographer’s obvious interest in edification should not make us forget his claims to historical truth. The saints’ biographies were to be read as the written record of virtue practiced in the

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27 “…andato uno chiamato maistro Zuanne pellizaro, el qual haveva perso el brazo dritto, per si fatto modo che non se ne posseva aiutare niente…” The text clearly states that the man had lost his arm. Nothing in the text suggests that Zuanne simply lost the use of his arm. Instead, he asks to be delivered “de quella infirmitade, de portare uno brazo de cera”—“from that infirmity, from wearing an arm of wax.” Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 179-80.

28 Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 177-80.

29 “Questa è la vita e miracoli li quali foreno presentati a lo reverendo maestro Andrea da Ferara provinciale in el anno Domini 1458. La qual vita e miracoli fo aprovati in presentia de testimonii e scripta per mano de notaro, chiamato misèr Candido de Udene. FINIS.” Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 180.
actual world.” And so Simone da Roma, who did not know Elena personally and could not be accused of being an infatuated confessor who had fallen in love with his saintly subject, offered the woman’s life as historical truth, and his provincial master accepted it as such. Simone also presented his work to the local notary, to have it ratified as an official legal document. The notary’s signature guaranteed legal authenticity that the events recorded actually took place. Candido da Udine—who enjoyed a long career, for his signature appears on documents dating from 1418 to 1470—put his name on a document that declared miracles to be fact.

In the 1980s, Andrea Tilatti combed through l’Archivio di Stato di Udine and discovered a daily record book in which three miracles that occurred in the months following Elena’s death had been registered in Latin at the hand of the notary Gregorio q. Adamo, each accompanied by a list of witnesses. A young woman, Subetta, had suffered a grave illness that affected her entire body, but when her family asked the blessed Elena to intercede, Subetta was healed. Another woman, Venuta, was freed from a terrible fever when Elena was called upon to intervene. A small child, just a year old, was so sick that she could not open her eyes, but when her father showed devotion to Elena in hopes of a miracle, her eyes opened immediately and she was healed. When Tilatti edited and published these miracles, he noted the “normalcy” associated with the notary’s inclusion of these supernatural events among his other official recordings,

30 Kleinberg, Prophets in Their Own Country, 52.

31 Andrea Tilatti discusses the notarial evidence of Candido da Udine’s career in Simone da Roma, Legenda della beata Helena, 180 n. 4.

32 Tilatti has edited these three miracles in Andrea Tilatti, “Per man di notaro: La beata Elena da Udine tra documenti notarili e leggende agiografiche,” Christianesimo nella storia 8, no. 3 (1987): 501-520; here 519-20.
evidence of the quotidian nature of the miraculous in fifteenth-century Italian society.\footnote{Tilatti, “Per man di notaro,” 517.} These notarial documents, along with Simone da Roma’s notarized \textit{vita}, also bring together three groups responsible for determining sainthood on the local level: regional ecclesiastical leaders within the mendicant orders, local public officials with legal authority, and the laity who benefited from and gave witness to the miracles performed. If postmortem miracles were required as a sign of sanctity, then each of these groups had a hand in the making of the saint, for they bore witness and attested to the veracity of the holy woman’s miraculous capabilities beyond the grave.

According to the notarial records of the convent of Santa Lucia, Elena died in the odor of sanctity.\footnote{Frazier, \textit{Possible Lives}, 230.} Giacomo da Udine remarked that her face shone white with lips of red that seemed to smile, and her lifeless body appeared to be alive and sleeping peacefully. This saintly defiance of the natural processes of death and decay were necessary to the development of the holy woman’s \textit{fama sanctitatis}, which had its origins in the \textit{vox populi} and provided tangible evidence of her incorruptibility.\footnote{Tilatti in Simone da Roma, \textit{Legenda della beata Helena}, 73.} Elena’s cult enjoyed broad popularity in the Friulian region, and in a Roman Missal printed in Venice in 1487, Elena’s feast day was introduced on 27 April.\footnote{It is now recognized on the anniversary of her death, 23 April.} However, by the end of the century, her fame began to fade as Rita da Cascia, who died just one year before Elena, became the rising star within the Augustinian order.\footnote{Tilatti, “Per man di notaro,” 518; and Tilatti in Simone da Roma, \textit{Legenda della beata Helena}, 91. Rita was beatified in 1626 and canonized in 1900.} For the most part, devotion to Elena...
remained localized around the church at Santa Lucia, where she had always been viewed as a beata. The Udinese tried periodically to rekindle interest in devotion to Elena, publishing an Italian translation of Giacomo Filippo Foresti’s Latin vita in 1599, and another biography in 1677. Between 1764 and 1768, the Augustinians presented Elena’s cause for beatification, but they had to abandon their efforts because of political turmoil in the Venetian region. Elena’s body lay at Santa Lucia until 1806, when Napoleon decreed the suppression of religious houses, and her caretakers were forced to move her to a house of Poor Clares. In 1845, when anti-Catholic forces of the Risorgimento to unify Italy began to threaten monasteries and convents again, her remains were taken to the Cathedral of Udine, where there can be viewed today. To commemorate the occasion of her permanent transfer, the Augustinians once again submitted Elena’s case for beatification, and she was recognized on 27 September 1848 by Pope Pius IX.  

When Caterina da Bologna died on 9 March 1463, the sisters of Corpus Domini buried her body in the graveyard of the convent, and many of them visited her there and received miraculous healing of their own bodily pains. They also could smell a sweet, but unfamiliar, odor coming from the site, so eighteen days after Caterina’s body had been interred, it was exhumed and found to be incorrupt, still warm and youthful in appearance. The sisters moved her body to a chapel in the church, so that she could be venerated, and there she continued to emit a

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40 Illuminata Bembo devoted a chapter to events after Caterina’s death entitled “Como che la beata Katerina fu cavata della sepultura in capa de giorni XVIII,” in *Specchio di illuminazione*, 74-80 (IX).
fragrant odor, her body supple and her face full of color. Anything that touched her corpse absorbed the sweet fragrance. Even three months after her death, her nose still gave forth blood, enough to fill a small bowl. Many miracles took place for those who visited the body of the beloved saint.

In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the humanist Sabadino degli Arienti (1445-1510) published his well-known *Gynevera de le clare donne*, in which he included an entry for Caterina. Similar to Giacomo Filippo Foresti’s celebration of Elena Valentini among biblical and historical heroines in the volume he wrote for Beatrice of Aragon, *De plurimis claris selectisque mulieribus*, Sabadino’s biography of Caterina sits among those of fifteenth-century women known for their virtue, as well as strength of mind and character, from the powerful families of Italy, including the woman who inspired the work, Ginevra (Sforza) Bentivoglio, wife of the lord of Bologna. In 1524, Caterina was beatified by Pope Clement VII, who visited her church in 1530 with Emperor Charles V to view her body that still lay incorrupt. For a time, the Franciscans of Bologna seemed content with maintaining a local *cultus* for their blessed

41 Illuminata Bembo, *Specchio di illuminazione*, 78-80 (IX.18-26.).

42 Illuminata Bembo, *Specchio di illuminazione*, 80 (IX.27). Sister Illuminata ended her vita with a statement that she had not written down the many miracles that occurred: “Et dico iterum non havere scripto nulla de li suoi tanti miracoli facti.”

43 Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, *Gynevera de le clare donne*, 1483, ed. Corrado Ricci and A. Bacchi della Lega (Bologna: Romagnoli-Dall’Acqua, 1888). According to Serena Spanò Martinelli, Sabadino’s original text has a date of 1472 at the foot of the page in Caterina’s biography, but a publication date of 1483 for the entire volume. See Martinelli’s introduction to *Il processo di canonizzazione di Caterina Vigri* (1586-1712), ed. Serena Spanò Martinelli (Firenze: SISMEL, 2003), xvi n.7. Because of Sabadino degli Arienti’s reliance on Illuminata Bembo’s vita and the timing of his biography’s publication so close to the holy woman’s death, his work has been used along with Sister Illuminata’s throughout this study for source material on her life.

44 Sabadino used Ginevra’s name as the basis of his title, but blended the Greek word *gyne* (woman) with the Latin *vera* (truth) to produce a variation of her name.
Caterina. Around 1605, the canon Paolo Casanova compiled a vita under the title *Vita, costumi, morte e miracoli della Beata Catherina da Bologna*, and though his work remained unpublished and largely ignored by later biographers, it proved important for its transcription of thirty-five of Caterina’s sermons, which demonstrated the nun’s command of Scripture and skill in biblical exegesis. In 1623, Casanova’s work was submitted along with a new vita of Caterina, published by the Jesuit Giacomo Grassetti in 1620, by the Cardinal Marc’Antonio Gozzadini of Bologna to initiate the canonization process for the beata. A prior attempt had been made in 1586 by the sisters of Corpus Domini and the local bishop, but their presentation was unpolished, and they had omitted important details that were common knowledge to the Bolognese, but not to the papal Curia. This time, with a cult that had since grown in popularity and the unanimous support of local authorities, Caterina’s cause seemed to be on solid footing. An investigation into her life’s work led to the compilation of her miracles, which numbered one hundred sixty. However, because of changes made to the canonization process by Pope Urban VIII in the mid-seventeenth century, and other bureaucratic issues within the Curia, Caterina would not be officially canonized until 22 May 1712 by Pope Clement XI. Her body remains on display at

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45 André Vauchez, “Santa Caterina Vigri (1413-1463) e il suo processo di canonizzazione (1586-1712),” in *Pregare con le immagini: il breviario di Caterina Vigri*, 5.

46 Bert Roest, “Female Preaching in the Late Medieval Franciscan Tradition,” in *Franciscan Studies* 62 (2004): 119-54; here 148. Roest suggests that Casanova’s vita received little attention because Caterina’s sermons “did not agree with the Post-Tridentine depiction of female sainthood.” The sermons were edited and published by Gilberto Sgarbi in 1999, with a dedication to Paolo Casanova.

Corpus Domini in Bologna to this day, dressed in her habit and sitting upright on a golden throne.

Upon the death of Colomba da Rieti on 20 May 1501, the young woman’s frail body, which still bore the chains of her penitence and the disfigurement they had caused, was washed and dressed by her prioress and mother and put on display at the church for three days, where she lay in the odor of sanctity. All of Perugia, as well as large crowds from other towns, came to touch and kiss her body and to remove some kind of relic from the holy woman’s vestments and flowers. She received a public funeral at the expense of the magistrates of the city, and everyone mourned the loss of their beloved saint. But many continued to feel her presence long after as she appeared to them to offer counsel, consolation, and miraculous healing.\(^{48}\) Sebastiano degli Angeli concluded his \textit{vita} of the beloved \textit{beata} with two chapters on the postmortem signs of her sanctity. In the second of those chapters, he listed many of her miracles, with the names of those blessed by her powers beyond the grave. The nobleman Ludovico de Orlandino de Monte Ubiano suffered for weeks with a fever and headache, but when he showed devotion to the memory of Colomba, he returned to health. Bernardino de Cola, a Perugian citizen, had suffered with stomach pains for four years until he visited the remains of the virgin, at which time he was healed. Innocentia de Angelo was so “fractured” that she could not walk, nor use her hands, but as Sebastiano so succinctly explained: “facto el voto, fo libera.”\(^{49}\) These are just some of the dozens of miracle that the friar recorded to demonstrate his subject’s healing power.

\(^{48}\) Sebastiano devoted chapters LX and LXI to Colomba’s funeral, and chapters LXII and LXIII to signs and wonders following her death.

\(^{49}\) Sebastiano Angeli, \textit{Legenda volgare}, 297 (LXIII).
Dominican tertiaries who had been associated with Colomba, including Lucia Brocadelli, Osanna Andreasi, Colomba Trucazzani (d. 1517), and Caterina Mattei (1486-1547), worked with success to establish the virgin’s cult throughout northern Italy, particularly in Mantua, Ferrara, and Milan. The Dominican friars of San Domenico in Bologna were able to acquire a relic of Colomba’s, which they used to exorcise demons from the possessed among Bologna’s population. Colomba, who was regarded as a “second Catherine,” was the second, after the Sienese saint, in a “chain of succession” of Dominican tertiaries—a chain of holy women who had been a part of the reform efforts of Savonarola, and who were still associated with those efforts, even after the preacher’s death. Although Colomba died soon after he did, her memory was held dear by those who came after her and were part of the Savonarolan circle, particularly Colomba Trucazzani, who tried without great success to fashion herself as a “second Colomba,” and Caterina Mattei, who identified herself as “the third Colomba.”

In 1566, Pope Pius V granted a concession to allow the sisters of Colomba’s convent in Perugia to commemorate her. However, despite her biographer’s efforts to portray her as a holy visionary with postmortem virtus, a canonization procedure for her did not open until 1626. Serafino Razzi (1531-1611), a highly regarded Dominican author and musician who also served as prior of a number of monasteries in Florence, composed vita of both Savonarola and Colomba to promote their respective canonizations. He included the account of Colomba’s miraculous vision of the preacher’s death in his vita, to associate the condemned friar with the

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50 Herzig, Savonarola’s Women, 63. Herzig points out that the brothers were devotees of Savonarola and sought Colomba’s relic, because they could not obtain one of the preacher’s.

51 Herzig, Savonarola’s Women, 60-61.

holy woman, but he omitted it from her account, so as not to taint her saintly image.\textsuperscript{53} Colomba was not officially beatified until 1713 under Pope Clement XI.

In the case of each of the three \textit{sante vive} whose lives make up this study, their cause was promoted locally and regionally by members from the various sectors of society. The townspeople sought their prayers and blessings while they lived, and venerated them when they died. Local citizens established their \textit{cultus}, which was often embraced by others throughout the region. Their respective orders upheld them as models of virtue and were eager to claim them as representative saints. Their hagiographers recorded their ascetic devotion and miracle-working power in \textit{vitae} written in the local dialect, intended first for the edification of those who knew and loved the holy woman, or for those who might come to know her through their work. Papal approval seemed almost a secondary thought. Local officials affirmed the veracity of the beata’s deeds in documentation that carried legal weight. Each of these parties played a role in the making of the saint. But what about the women themselves? What role did they play in making themselves saints?

\textbf{The Living Saint: Self-Fashioning Through Imitation}

In her concluding thoughts regarding the late fifteenth-century female mystics of the Dominican Third Order, Tamar Herzig wrote: “The somatic spirituality of pious women in late medieval Europe enabled them to fashion themselves as divinely inspired messengers, who

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} Herzig, \textit{Savonarola’s Women}, 49-50, 64. Serafino Razzi included Colomba’s \textit{vita} in a collection of lives of holy women and men. See Serafino Razzi, “Vita della Beata Colomba da Rieti,” in \textit{Vite dei santi e beati del sacro ordine d’Frati Predicatori, cosi huomini come donne}, seconda parte (Firenze: Bartolomeo Sermartelli, 1577), 83-94. The most recent biography of Colomba, was compiled by Maria Luisa Cianini Pierotti, \textit{Colomba da Rieti a Perugia: “Ecco la Santa. Ecco la Santa che viene”} (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2001). While Pierotti concentrates her work on Colomba’s time in Perugia, she does include an extensive bibliography of other works on the beata, all written in Italian or Latin.
\end{itemize}}
transmitted God’s instructions to others. Barred from filling sacerdotal roles and from teaching or preaching about religious matters, they resorted to prophecy, visions, and ecstatic raptures to promote the reform of Christendom.”

They fashioned themselves, but with the design and purpose of imitating Christ. They actively pursued a program of austerity that followed the pattern of the life of Christ, in *imitatio Christi*, willing to sacrifice everything, including their own bodies. Their model was the Savior portrayed in Scripture. He received baptism; they received the habit. He fasted for forty days; they fasted through Lent. He was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by the devil; they experienced the wilderness, alone in the darkness of their cells, tempted by their enemy. Angels ministered to him in his weakness; saints visited them to comfort them. Jesus emerged from the wilderness and preached repentance; they called others to join them in their commitment to Christ, and when trouble rocked their cities, they called the citizens to turn from their wicked ways. Jesus performed miracles; they, too, multiplied food and healed the sick. He prayed to the point of drawing blood; they prayed until they collapsed from exhaustion. And just as Jesus suffered at the hands of sinners, they suffered at their own hands, sinners themselves, but ultimately made righteous and able to suffer for the sake of others. In every possible way, the lives of these devout women mirrored the life of Christ, and their time in the wilderness was an essential element in completing the image.

We cannot easily discern the motivation behind the heroic ascetics to which these women subjected themselves, whether it be self-promotion, escapism, or sincere piety, or some combination of the three. We have the vantage point of the writers who took on the task of

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54 Herzig, “Female Mysticism, Heterodoxy, and Reform,” 281.
promoting their sanctity and who clearly believed in the genuineness of their devotion. While we cannot judge motive, we do know the outcome. If they sought fame or influence, they achieved it. If they desired to escape a life others had chosen for them, they accomplished that. If they longed to be a bride of Christ, then according to their biographers they attained it. They fashioned themselves into a Christ-like figure, going to incredible lengths to live as Christ, sacrificing sleep, nourishment, and comfort, and inflicting horrific punishments upon themselves that required heroic fortitude. They endured terrifying torments from the devil, and even if they brought them upon themselves, through starvation and abuse of the flesh, they still endured them, suffered through them, and overcame them. And they acknowledged Christ as the source of their perseverance and power. In the process, they promoted the cause of the Church, they advanced the reform efforts of the religious orders, and they provided solace to the laity who sought them for their Christ-like wisdom, comfort, and grace. These women held significant social, religious, and even political influence, and Italian Quattrocento society provided the means for that to happen.

Elena Valentini found herself widowed, and she took stock of her life and realized that she had spent it chasing after vanities. She spent the rest of her life making up for lost time, appearing to be selfless in her commitment to serving others. When she took her vows as a tertiary, she sacrificed all comforts to pay penance for her former life, and she caused her own body great pain. Some have suggested she was depressed or suicidal. We cannot know for sure, but no matter her mental state, she kept her mind and her body focused on devotion to Christ through imitation. Caterina Vigri chose the religious life early in her youth, perhaps because she thought herself unworthy of marriage, or perhaps because she truly desired to live apart from the world. She was tormented by doubts, and seemed to be driven to despair by the questions she
had about the sincerity of her own faith. Some would say she suffered from depression. But she
overcame her mental condition and found joy—in Christ—and became a leading force in the
spiritual life of her community inside and outside the convent. Colomba Guadagnoli chose the
religious path even earlier, seemingly at birth, but at least as a young child. Did she craft for
herself the persona of a budding holy woman out of a desire to avoid a life of marriage? Most
likely. But she certainly knew enough about the life of Christ that she could imitate him with
precision. She was well-studied, and she subdued her flesh with such intensity and such
dedication, that if she did it all to avoid an earthly marriage, then she undoubtedly earned the
right to spend her life as a bride of Christ.

The biographers who wrote the lives of these *sante vive* portrayed them as models of
humility. In most cases, their dead bodies bore the visible marks of their humble devotion. Their
ability to live out their faith through physical torment and emotional anguish could not have
come from any desire for fame or merely from a need to escape the traditional life of a medieval
woman. They had to have been motivated by something much deeper. If, as Herzig has said, they
were prohibited from teaching and preaching by the patriarchal hierarchy of the institutional
Church, then they taught and preached through their acts of devotion, modeling piety and the
forsaking of self, and their bodies served as their pulpit. If preachers promoted moral and
spiritual reform, so did these women saints, but with their bodies. In the end, we can find no firm
line of division between self-fashioning and sincere piety in the lives of the *sante vive*. Either the
line is blurred, or there is no line at all.
Conclusion

The fifteenth century has proven to be fertile ground for the discovery of innovations in spiritual expression among the Christian women of western Europe. My hope is that with this study, I have contributed to the understanding of the religious experience of women on the Italian peninsula during that century, a time when they had a meaningful role to play in helping to shape lay devotion. I have chosen what I believe to be a representative sample of the holy women who populated the religious landscape of the Quattrocento in Italy, drawing their stories out of the confines of the hagiographic texts written in dialects from regions scattered across the peninsula. Elena, Caterina, and Colomba came from different towns and different socio-economic backgrounds, and they each arrived at their positions as local holy woman through very different circumstances. They associated themselves with different orders, and two of them had a vita written for them by someone other than their confessor. Elena da Udine, a widow with children, lived in the far corner of the Italian peninsula, farther north than Venice, and took the Augustinian habit of a tertiary only after spending more than a decade taking care of the sick and the poor in her community. Immediately after she died, her order chose a leading theologian to write her biography, presumably because he could promote her sanctity with greater effectiveness than her personal confessor. Caterina da Bologna, an educated young woman from a family with political connections, lived a bit farther south, and she ultimately chose an enclosed life with the Poor Clares. She penned her own semi-autobiographical spiritual treatise, and her consorella—a woman—recorded her full vita. Colomba da Rieti, a spiritual child prodigy, lived in the heart of the peninsula, the daughter of a merchant family who drove her parents to distraction with her desire to live as a bride of Christ. After she took the habit of the Dominican Third Order, she had several different confessors, but only one of them would come
to write the story of her spiritual journey. Three women from very different backgrounds had something very much in common: they had active ministries as visionaries, living lives in imitation of Christ and becoming spiritual leaders in their communities, after first enduring and overcoming frightening temptations from the devil.

I could have chosen at least six other Italian women with similar stories. But the three whose lives appear here provide enough detail to construct the profile of the Quattrocento santa viva. At some point in her life, whether after a crisis point or when she felt a calling, she consecrated herself to God, vowing obedience and chastity, and usually poverty as well. She embraced a life of imitatio Christi, making his physical suffering her own, in very real and palpable ways. She fasted and prayed, just as Christ had done in preparation for his earthly ministry. She replaced food with prayer, often sustaining herself on the Eucharistic wafer alone. And she encountered Satan, coming face-to-face with him, fending off his advances, and resisting his temptations to sin or to deny God. She was in the wilderness, alone and hungry, exhausted from prayer, using the only weapon she had at her disposal—Scripture—to force her enemy to withdraw his efforts against her. And she succeeded. She emerged from the wilderness spiritually stronger, more confident in her devotion, and prepared to minister to others, just as Christ was when he overcame the devil in the desert. Having demonstrated her faithfulness, she was rewarded with a mystical marriage, becoming a bride of Christ and enjoying rapturous union with him in ecstasy. She was blessed with the gifts of prophecy and healing, which she shared with those around her. Townspeople and civic leaders alike sought her spiritual counsel; they asked for her healing touch when loved ones were sick, or even possessed by demonic spirits; and they besought her to intercede for them with prayer when trouble loomed. She was a public figure, even if from a private setting, and essential to the life of the community.
These women were extraordinary in their piety, but the idea of the Italian holy woman was not so extraordinary in Quattrocento Italy. Across the northern and central regions of the peninsula, cities and towns venerated similar cult figures, during their lifetimes and after their deaths, because such women served a vital function in society. They met a need. They modeled orthodoxy—and perhaps more important, commitment to the Church—on behalf of an ecclesiastical hierarchy that desperately needed to revamp its reputation. They worked within the religious orders, promoting the Observant program of moral and spiritual reform. And they provided a connection to the divine for the laity, who needed to know that God had not abandoned them to war and plague.

All that changed in the sixteenth century. The suspicions surrounding women’s spirituality that arose under the influence of Gerson, Nider, and Kramer only intensified after the Reformation rocked the Christian world. As Gabriella Zarri has so eloquently explained: “…the revolt which sought to abolish the hierarchical order of the Church ended up denying female sanctity; just at the time when, toward the end of the fifteenth century, female saints had reached the apogee of their power and were recognized on both the historical and symbolic levels.”¹ The patriarchal strictures of the Protestant reform movement left little room for the expression of austere female piety, and the Roman Church now had to defend its position regarding more ritualistic elements of its worship, such as the cult of the saints. In the Church’s efforts to stop the hemorrhaging caused by an exodus of its members, it tightened its reign and religious women suffered the most. Gradually convents and penitent houses were encouraged, and then forced, to

¹ Gabriella Zarri, “From Prophecy to Discipline, 1450-1650,” in Women and Faith, 84.
become strictly enclosed. In such an environment, the prophetic living saint could not operate. The holy woman of the sixteenth century was forced to turn inward, living a fully introspective life, deeply contemplative but confined within her cell walls, with no outlet for any spiritual gifts with which she might have been endowed. The Italian living saint of the Quattrocento who had overcome the devil’s torments so that she could conduct a public ministry was no more. But for at least a century, religious women in Italy were able to enjoy a vibrant kind of spirituality that allowed them to experience God fully, to engage with the community around them, and to have a meaningful influence on the religious culture of their time.

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2 Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner. *Worldly Saints*, 156.
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Vita

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