

The Popes of the Thirteenth Century and Women Religious

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"I Papi del Duecento e Trecento di Fronte alla Vita Religiosa Femminile"

Il Movimento Religioso Femminile in Umbria nei secoli XIII-XIV

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A serious study of the presence and influence of women in the religious life of the late Middle Ages demands that we keep in mind a factor of great importance for the Church and society, one which has not been accorded its rightful place in history. It is a fascinating area with broad perspectives, namely, the relationship between the papacy and religious women.

The pontiffs of the time issued a series of declarations concerning the religious concerns of women in general, as well as of nuns. These often clashed with women's desires to expand the scope of their religious life, even to the world outside the confines of their convents. In fact, the pontiffs often manifested a complete indifference to their real concerns. The role of women as a vital and effective force in ecclesiastical society seems to have been ignored even at a time when they were introducing a new sensitivity and devotional practices into the Church. They were meeting her concrete needs at a critical time of her history without being given credit or public approval by the hierarchy. There is a paucity of pontifical statements to guide women, to help develop their religious life, to enrich and direct their sense of the sacred. Women, whether in a family setting or as the object of their pastoral care on the part of the clergy, were consigned, with few exceptions, to play a secondary role to men throughout the Middle Ages. It was an attitude conditioned by the fall of Eve rather than by the salvific role of Mary. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries woman was personified in the greatest evil the Church could imagine: woman in league with the devil—the witch.

It would be a mistake however to fixate one line of development or to stress only the negative side of the relationship. It had its positive features especially in the area of monastic organization.

One purpose of this study is to seek out the sources which can provide information about the papacy and women in the broader area of medieval piety, and to locate this relationship in its historical perspective as well as to assemble some themes and problems of medieval female devotion which

caught the attention of the papacy. I have tried of course, to synthesize both aspects of the problem by many hours of research, especially in the pontifical archives of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.¹

1. The biblical image most frequently found in papal documents is that of the wise virgins who "*sub habitu religionis, accensis lampadibus, per opera sanctitatis iugiter se preparant ire obviam sponso.*"² ("Clad in their religious habit, with lamps burning, they are always ready to go forth to meet the bridegroom through holy works.") The part played by the papacy in this "*iter*" ("journey") was to protect wise virgins, to provide a type of security not mentioned in the Gospel story. There the virgins are depicted as simply awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom. They are not admonished to carry a reserve supply of oil (Mt. 29, 1-13).

"*Sedes Apostolica debet praesidium impertiri, ne forte cuiuslibet temeritatis incursum, aut eas a proposito revocet, aut robur, quod, absit, sacrae religionis infringat.*"³ ("The Apostolic See must provide safeguards lest some indiscretion lead them away from their goal, or, God forbid, weaken the vigor of religious life.") In a way this represents an extension of paternal concern for individual women to a whole community. The patriarchal figure is now, significantly, not the diocesan bishop, but the Pope himself.

The image, usually found in the papal bulls of the Middle Ages, conferring the "*protectio B. Petri*" to the female community is in accord with the one used

¹The present study forms part of a broader research into female monasticism in the Middle Ages, sponsored by the University of Rome ("*La Sapienza*") and Columbia University in New York, under the direction of Raoul Manselli in Rome and Susan Wemple in New York. The object is to make an inventory of medieval Italian monasteries of women, something not yet available on a world wide basis, and with the cooperation of scholars of other nations, a list of all the monasteries of women in the Latin west in the Middle Ages. In addition it will examine the various aspects of female religiosity of the time such as visions and mystical experiences, sanctity, miracles just to mention a few. At present (1982) the project is occupied with investigating source material and is linked with the course I give at the University of Rome on all areas in which the women of the Middle Ages made their presence felt, not just that of monasticism.

At present there is no complete study of the subject of the present essay. Nor does research into the writings of individual popes provide much information about the problems of medieval women. My own research is based on the letters of the popes preserved in the Vatican archives. For further information on the subject see N. Giusti, *Inventario dei Registri Vaticani, Città del Vaticano*. 1981.

²We have in mind the series of letters beginning with *Prudentibus virginibus*. For their place in papal correspondence see the *Index initiorum* published as an appendix in P. Jaffe, G. Wattenbach—S. Löwenfeld—F. Kaltenbrunner—P. Ewald's *Regesta Pontificum Romanorum*, II, Leipzig, 1888, 805 and *Initienverzeichnis zu August Pottbast, Regesta pontificum Romanorum* (1198-1304) München, 1978, 128. Henceforth the two publications will be indicated by the abbreviations J. and P.

³J. 12517.

by Caesar of Arles: "... vos sacrae virgines et Deo deditae animae ... quae incensis lampadibus, cum segura conscientia, Domini praestolatis adventum." ("you holy virgins, souls dedicated to God ... who with lighted lamps await the coming of the Lord with a safe conscience.") The same words are found in the *Regula Virginum*.⁴

"*Protectio*" is the most frequently used term to describe the relationship between women religious and the papacy. Nevertheless, while retaining the same tutelary function, this concept underwent an evolution both in its meaning and in its role.

In Italy the origins of female religious life date back to the period of the Lombards and Carolingians, times in which political upheavals, hazardous living conditions and frequent armed incursions formed the background of the community life of nuns. Their monasteries had to be placed under papal protection. In the course of time, when political, social and military events had become somewhat stabilized, this protection took on the form of a guarantee of freedom from unwarranted interference on the part of bishops and feudal lords, and of confirming privileges, customs and acquired rights. The same literary formulas are repeated but in a different perspective. What was originally a necessary defense was little by little transformed into a guarantee of feudal patrimony and applied to both female and male institutions although the latter were unquestionably more numerous and endowed with greater wealth and power.

The "*protectio B. Petri*," found in papal correspondence of the thirteenth century now reappears in this new context.

The importance of papal documents as sources also changed. In the early Middle Ages they were often the only evidence of the existence of a particular female community, the circumstances of its foundation, the names of its abbesses and its location. With the greater documentation of the thirteenth century, papal privilege took on historical importance with a listing of properties and their extent. The papal documents also provide information about the relationship of the monastery with the town and countryside, its involvement in social and political life and its eventual moving from the suburbs to the center of the town. It must be borne in mind, however, that the records of landed properties were based on information provided by the religious community without any previous auditing on the part of the Apostolic See.

⁴See G. Morin, *S. Caesarii Arelatensis Opera varia*, Maretioli, 1942. (*S. Caesarii episcopi Arelatensis Opera omnia*, ii) 102.

A more precise juridical relationship between the papacy and the monasteries of nuns resulted from a "*subiectio*" or "*submitio*" of a community to the Church of Rome. Specific records of income and lists of possessions are extant. A variety of expressions are employed: "*ad Romanam ecclesiam pertinet;*" "*ad proprietatem B. Petri noscitur pertinere;*" "*sub ditione et tutela ecclesiae Romanae consistit;*" "*apostolicae sedi subiacet.*" They reflect a complex system of infeudation and other relationships of dependency which came into being during a period of social ferment in the thirteenth century when the pontifical chancery manifested a greater interest in preserving papal letters and started filing them with the "*Liber censuum.*" Tax records are also preserved. The imposts ranged from the annual offering of a candle to the payment of substantial amounts of cash.⁵

The papal letters reveal a wide range of Vatican dealings with the nuns. They speak of the admission of a woman "*in monacham*" ("as a nun"), or "*in sororem*" ("as a sister"), "*in conversam*" ("as a lay religious") or "*in consortium ... sororum ad servitium infirmorum et pauperum*" ("to an association of sisters caring for the sick and needy"). They also treat of the location of monasteries, petitions for autonomy from ecclesiastical authorities and local nobility, permission to accept income and donations, the election of abbesses, exemption from taxation, prohibition of alienating property, permission to receive visitors, permission to enter a monastery of women, the granting of indulgences for contributing to the construction or restoration of buildings, or for visiting the monastic church on certain feasts, determining the number of lay sisters and the settlement of legal matters. According to medieval curial procedure these were questions that required a papal document, whereas in modern times they would be handled by the congregation for religious and secular institutes.

Papal letters treating of litigation form a special group: they deal with conflicts between female communities and bishops, the election of abbesses and the prohibition to possess material goods. Some date back to the early Middle Ages, but in the thirteenth century they took on a special character and gave rise to a type of documentation hitherto not used with reference to convents. It was the *audientia litterarum contradictarum* established by Pope Innocent III. Its task was to examine and evaluate the objections raised against

⁵See E. Pazstor, "*Censi e possedi della Chiesa Romana nel Duecento; due registri pontifici inediti,*" *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 15 (1977) 139-93.

the papal letters *de justitia*.⁶

Some of the examples of the activities of the *audientia* have come down to us. They reveal a broad picture of the problems that religious women faced. They also tell us of difficult cases and how the papacy reacted to them. Here are some typical examples:

There was a certain "*pauper mulier*" who wished to retire to a hermitage to "bewail her sins". ("*Sue peccata deflere.*") The pope asked her bishop to find a suitable place. His solution not only satisfied the lady but gave the bishop an opportunity to win the esteem of God and the pope. And then there were some well-educated young women ("*literatae*") who wished "to serve the Lord with the nuns, wearing the same religious habit." ("*Una cum monialibus ... sub regulari habitu Domino famulari*") The Pope intervened with some abbesses on their behalf. If they refused his request, the pope would first of all accuse them of disobedience, a sin comparable to that of idolatry ("*vitium quod idolotriæ comparatur*"), but would not compel them to accept the woman. But if a second letter produced no positive results, he would order them under pain of interdict and excommunication to admit the young woman by virtue of his authority. ("*auctoritate nostra accipi.*")

Another problem was monastic simony, which at times occasioned acts of violence. Often there was a question of dowries. In such cases the pope referred to declaration 64 of the Fourth Lateran Council, which took place in 1215. He would order the guilty parties to be expelled from the monastery without hope of return, or that they be transferred to a community of strict observance to do penance for the rest of their lives.⁷

If at times it was difficult to enter religious life, there were more numerous instances of nuns leaving it without permission, becoming thereby technically "fugitives" and incurring severe penalties. The popes came down especially hard on female religious because they were exposing themselves to greater dangers than men living alone. If the "*fugitiva*" foolishly presumed to get

⁶See P. Herde, *Audientia litterarum contradictarum. Untersuchungen über die päpstlichen Justizbriefe und die päpstliche Delegationsgerichtsbarkeit vom 13. bis zum Beginn des 16. Jahrhunderts*, I-II, Tübingen, 1970 (*Bibliothek des Deutschen Historischen Instituts in Rom*, Bd XXXI-XXXII; see also my review of this work in *Revista di storia della Chiesa in Italia* 25[1971] 592-94). The examples are also found in the section "Super monachatu" (Herde, *Audientia*, II, 328-99).

⁷See *Concilium Oecumenicum Decorate*, Bologna 1973, 264-265. For the contribution of the ecumenical councils between Lateran Council I and the second Council of Lyons to religious life see the article by A. Garcia y Garcia, M. Maccarrone, J. Gaudemet and A. Franchi in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* V (1978) 465-95 and 672-79.

married the pope would annul such a union, branding it "adulterous," and compel the woman to return to her monastery. The Apostolic See was so concerned about nuns—"propter fragilitatem sexus"—that they tried to prevent them from approaching the Curia, even on official business "*ne occasione huiusmodi detur eis materia vagandi, in salutis propriae detrimentum*" ("Lest they use such occasions as a pretext for gadding about, with great risk to their own salvation.") Many reports stress the weakness and frailty of women, and their need of ever greater protection.

This is not the place to spend much time on the activities of the *audientia litterarum* concerning religious women. From the examples given it is clear that they had to do with mental attitudes, states of mind, emotions and difficulties typical of women, especially of nuns. At the same time they show how intricate and complex the reactions of the men of the Curia were, who for the most part were jurists without any pastoral experience. They put the poor peasant and the educated aspirant in the same category without heeding the differences in their personal characters. Women who had recourse to the Curia were simply legalistic cases and their problems were dealt with by quoting canon law rather than in terms of human understanding and compassion.

The curial office that, more than any other, had a direct contact with the realities of daily life, including that of women, was the Sacred Apostolic Penitentiary. However it preserved petitions and decisions only since the fifteenth century, a time beyond the scope of this study.⁸

The original sources for the workings of the medieval Roman curia are for the most part the decisions of the Pope and his associates and tell us little about the opinions of the women themselves or the reason behind their petitions. An exception is to be found from the fourteenth century onward in the collection of cases presented to the curia which record the particular requests made to it. But their language is couched in cold legalistic terms and for the most part are stereotyped petitions for indulgences, the granting of favors, absolutions, dispensations and the like with no possibility of discerning the feelings of the petitioners.⁹

⁸See F. Tamburini, *Archivio della Sacra Penitenzieria Apostolica*, in *Guida delle fonti per la storia dell'America Latina negli archivi della Santa Sede e negli archivi ecclesiastici d'Italia*, edited by L. Pazstor, citta del Vaticano 1970, 349-53.

⁹The list of petitions, beginning in 1342, are preserved in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano. See L. Pazstor, *Archivio Segreto Vaticano*, from the *Guida* cited in the preceding note, p. 52-3.

It is hard to find documents relating to consistories, those meetings of the pope with his cardinals when decisions were reached and audiences granted to persons who approached the curia with a variety of problems. We have one report of a consistory, held by Innocent III, which was preserved, not in the curial archives but by Caesar of Heisterbach. It is worth citing because it involves a juridical problem (the validity of papal absolution).¹⁰

The consistory took place in 1216, the year in which Pope Innocent died. Caesar reports an oral tradition which he heard from a number of persons. During the consistory a woman appeared, charged with incest. She came on the advice of her confessor, together with the child that resulted from her liaison, to obtain absolution. "With great importunity the woman appeared before the lord Pope Innocent and with many tears and cries confessed her offense to the amazement of all present. When the Pope observed such signs of contrition he was moved to pity and like a good physician wished to heal the patient completely and without delay. To test the genuineness of her repentance he ordered her to appear dressed in the same clothing she wore when she sinfully conceived a child." Caesar's detailed account tells of the various stages of the woman's repentance, her detestation of the evil she committed, her fear of the consequences, her dread of being handed over to Satan, (see I Cor. 5, 5.) her fear lest she died unprepared, her determination to make amends, her pilgrimage to Rome and her public confession, clad in all the trappings of a penitent. "When this most scholarly man (the Pope) witnessed such obedience, such modesty, such penitence, he could not bring himself to inflict any punishment but said to the women in the presence of all: 'Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.'"

Caesar's account might have ended here, but goes on to reveal something that had radically transformed the consistories of the thirteenth century, the right of the cardinals to question the pope's decisions. In this case one of the cardinals objected that the penance imposed by the pope was much too light for a sin as grave as incest. Innocent then submitted his decision to the "ordeal", invoking divine judgment. This was in accord with a popular religious idea rooted in a cultural climate where the devil played a very real role in daily life and had to be restrained by the intervention of God or one of his saints. According to Caesar, Innocent then decreed: "If I did not deal justly with this woman and imposed too light a penalty, let the devil have the power

¹⁰See Caesarii Heisterbacensis Monachi: Ord. Cist. *Dialogus Miraculorum* I-II, Cologne, Bonn, and Brussels: 1851. See I, 77-8.

to possess my body and cause me anguish before all the people. If, on the other hand, you are criticizing me unjustly, let the same happen to you." The conclusion was inevitable. The protesting cardinal was tormented by the devil and was delivered only through prayer.

From all we have said so far, one indisputable fact emerges. In any attempt to learn about the relationship of women with the papacy, one must conduct one's research through a network of incomplete sources. It is difficult, if not downright impossible, to construct a complete picture. The only letters we have are a few addressed to the pope by individual women or by communities. Such communications were ordinarily presented to the pope orally by bishops attached to the Roman curia (like Jacques de Vitry) or else through papal legates who could be contacted locally. Such was the case with the female community of Sesto S. Giovanni where the chaplain of cardinal legate Ottaviano degli Ubaldini settled a dispute revolving about the election of an abbess.¹¹ As we have already observed, the letters of the thirteenth century popes have been preserved only in part.¹² And the replies drawn up by the chancery do not provide much information about the day by day religious life in the monasteries of nuns. Most of the time they touch on externals, usually of minor importance, like lawsuits about property and squabbles about the election of superiors. Consequently the women do not speak to us directly about their dealings with the papacy. Their thoughts are conveyed to us only through the writing of others. Their words are edited and are often ambiguous because of traditional chancellery formulations which allow little room for any spontaneity or personal reactions. Even in those parts of the letters where some personal thought of the pope come through they refer mainly to the frailty of women and their need of protection and guidance.

Micheline de Fontette has analyzed the structure and rules of the Norbertine nuns and the Poor Clares and arrived at a conclusion not unlike my own.¹³ She observes that the woman envisioned by the compilers of rules is a stereotype. Her image is divorced from reality. She is a person whose only goal is to do penance and lead a contemplative life. Consequently the various rules offer them much the same program: enclosure, silence, and various forms of

¹¹See *Registri dei cardinali Ugolino d'Ostia e Ottaviano degli Ubaldini*, published by G. Levi, Roma 1890 (Fonti per la Storia d'Italia XX) 179.

¹²See E. Pazstor, "Per la storia dei registri pontifici nel Duecento," *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 6 (1968) 71-112.

¹³See M. De Fontette, *Les religieuses a l'age classique du droit canon*, Paris, 1967.

mortification. Fontette writes: "All religious communities tended to be identical."¹⁴

I agree only partially with her view of the model proposed for religious women. For within the context of this model the actual living of one's life could take on a personal style and make room for one's own personal feelings and behavior. It is true that the wording of the papal letters has a certain sameness. Like the rules themselves they are based on ideas which have little relation to the thinking and problems found among nuns or their rule in the social life of the times. The letters follow a set pattern and are for the most part abstract and repetitive.

Given these facts, it is obvious that the relationship between the papacy and women religious was rather restricted. Nevertheless, a study of the sources allows us to make some comprehensive judgments. It is my purpose to concentrate on certain areas of major importance.

2. The popes of the early thirteenth century encountered some grave problems with female religious communities. Since these problems were rooted, at least in my opinion, in certain events of the preceding century, I consider it necessary to recapitulate, at least in its essential lines, the history of female religious life from the year 1100 (when Fontevrault was founded) until 1198, the year that Innocent III became pope.¹⁵

In addition to the momentous problems facing the papacy in the twelfth century, such as political unrest and the proliferation of heresies, there was the question of the pope's relationship with the bishops, the formation of the college of cardinals, the new monasticism and a renewed awareness of the meaning of Christian perfection with its demands of poverty and penance. There was need to recapture, to consolidate the spiritual, cultural, and institutional stirrings which the reform movements of the eleventh century had unleashed. Women, too, were involved in the many faceted manifestations of this new spiritual vitality though on a lower key and with a much smaller role than they deserved. For a limited time and in certain places they were able to take part in some of the religious actions beyond the confines of the family circle or convent. But their share in the ministry of the itinerant preachers

¹⁴See *ibid.* 154.

¹⁵So as not to overburden this article with excessive notes, I refer the reader only to H. Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, Berlin 1935; second edition, revised and enlarged, Darmstadt 1961. Also to *Medieval Women* edited by D. Baker, Oxford 1978; and to the various articles concerning female religious communities in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, an indispensable work for a study of the twelfth century is R. Manselli, *Il secolo XII: religione popolare ed eresia*, Roma 1983.

came to an abrupt end and only served to intensify the cautious attention the hierarchy gave to woman as daughters of Eve. Their goal, to promote a return to the church of the apostolic age, envisioned as a community in which men and women, clerics and laity had a share, was not included in the general revival of religious life. It was either ignored or shunted to some form of monastic life. According to Benedictine tradition women became aware that for them, too, the road to spiritual renewal was open and that a perfect Christian life was possible in a manner different from that practiced in the early Middle Ages. In the age of chivalry women acquired a new status. They became the ideal ladies of the knight, the dream of the troubadour, the subject of romantic poetry. A new attitude on the part of the hierarchy also emerged, expressed in a different manner of regulating and comprehending the role of women within the Church and an awareness of their life style in the context of the new reform movements. Suffice to point out the Paraclete community of Eloise, which survived as an autonomous order in France until 1792 and to look at the rule drawn up for her and the community by Abelard in one of his letters to his beloved.¹⁶

We can conclude, then, that the basis for a new female spirituality was laid in the twelfth century. Women were present at the foundation of new monastic orders and found a role, though a subordinate one, in their development. Their presence as Cistercians, Carthusians, Gilbertines, and Norbertines is evidence of an awareness of their right to choose among the various monastic traditions. Still their relationship was precarious. They were confined to monasteries, and their contribution was to satisfy certain devotional obligations. They were evaluated in terms of their observance of discipline since they had no outlet for wider fields of activity.¹⁷ Any attempt to enrich the interior life of women, even when they could choose among a variety of religious institutions, was bound to clash with the views of the hierarchy, for whom women were physically and spiritually fragile, in need of protection and consequently of seclusion.

Here we have a vicious circle because women's enclosure prevented them from overcoming their weakness and frailty, cutting them off from activities

¹⁶See letters VII and VIII of Abelard. Also J. T. Muckle, *The Personal Letters between Abelard and Heloise*, in *Medieval Studies* 15 (1953) 47-94; Id. *The Letter of Heloise on Religious Life and Abelard's First Reply*, *ibid* 17 (1955) 240-81; T. P. McLaughlin, *Abelard's Rule for Religious Women*, *ibid* 18 (1956) 241-92; D. M. Montagna, *Paraclete* in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* VI (1980) 1176-178.

¹⁷See B. Bolton, "Vita matrum;" a further aspect of the Frauenfrage in *Medieval Women*, 253-73.

which would have made it possible for them to mature and exercise all the energy and cultural capabilities which might have rivaled those of men.

Nevertheless it would be a mistake, as I have pointed out, to think of the life of these nuns as frozen in total immobility where the only variations occurred, in the words of Le Bras "in the assignment of liturgical duties."¹⁸ Behind the monastic façade, then, there was considerable unrest and cultural tension. Spiritual direction was usually provided by male members of the same order, men imbued with new spiritual insight and living according to fresh models of Christian perfection. They guided their women penitents to new ways of thinking, coached them in new methods of prayer and taught them to "experience church" (*sentire ecclesiam*). They were to esteem poverty and work, solitude and penitence. They acquired a new awareness of their calling so that even when their affiliation with the male branches of their order became tenuous, they continued to exercise an important influence on the future of religious life.

Though to all outward appearances the female religious lived in a fixed mold, some of the old standards were gradually disappearing, for example, the importance attached to noble birth and concerns about family interests. The monastic life became less an occasion for promoting social, political and economic causes, less a refuge from a sinful past, and became more a deliberate and personal embrace of the ideals of spiritual renewal. The second Lateran Council (1139), for all its rigor in outlining the obligations of religious women and confirming the cloister as the only form of religious life available to women, nevertheless attributed great importance to female monasticism and endeavored to ensure and protect its purity and authenticity.¹⁹

Side by side with traditional forms of community life others began to appear which had no immediate precedents and which received papal recognition only in the thirteenth century. We might mention the Beguines of Liege, especially the community of Marie d'Oignies, approved by Honorius III. Others sprang up among heretical sects. Recent historical research has definitely rejected a purely socio-economic motivation for these latter. Rather they owed their origins to the unrest, basically religious, which had given rise to heresy in the thirteenth century. It is not our purpose here to discuss the role of women in the heretical movements although the Waldensians allowed

¹⁸See G. Le Bras, *Les institutions ecclésiastiques de la Chrétienté médiévale* I, Paris 1959 (*Histoire de l'Église* by A. Fliche and V. Martin, XII / 1), 159.

¹⁹See canon 126 in *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, 203.

women to preach and a female member of the Cathari could attain the rank of "perfect" just as the male. These were clear signs of feelings and tendencies that always seem to have escaped the notice of the popes of the time.²⁰

At the dawn of the thirteenth century female religious life confronted the papacy with a remarkable vitality while the papacy itself had undergone a renewal after the end of the schism of 1130 and especially after the pontificates of Eugene III and Alexander III. The change showed itself in the pope's attitude toward the religious movements of the time.²¹

The pontiffs of the thirteenth century still had to face a number of problems concerning religious women. They took on the monumental task of dealing with traditional female monasticism. They introduced reforms in their spiritual and economic life, reforms which, in some instances, turned out to be disastrous. Relations between some orders and their female counterparts were strained because of the impossibility or unwillingness on the part of monks and canons to provide spiritual and material assistance for their sisters.

Some women aspired to a form of religious life without a formal rule, to a spontaneous practice of poverty, penance, chastity, without any defined juridical ties. The growth of heresies provided an opportunity for a major campaign of conversion which included women. Plans were made to facilitate their return to the unity of the church while at the same time allowing them to live in their new model communities. Arrangements were needed for them to live as converts or penitents.

But instead of confronting the problem head on and making some clear cut decisions, the papacy made detours in a field becoming more and more complicated. They now had to deal with women keenly aware of their own capabilities in religious life acquired, no doubt, as a reaction to various restraints imposed on them by the hierarchy and the religious orders themselves. This new self-confidence of women forced the papacy to change, at least in part, its political intransigence and to settle for some realistic compromises.

²⁰Of particular value for a study of these problems is G. Koch, *Frauenfrage und Ketzertum*, Berlin, 1962.

²¹There are numerous studies of the history of the twelfth century popes. It will suffice to refer to the two volumes on the Middle Ages in *Handbuch de Kirchengeschichte*, by H. Jedin (III / 1-2). See also E. Pazstor, *Problemi della Chiesa medioevale*, in *Rivista di storia della Chiesa in Italia* 25 (1971) 108-38 and the work of P. Zerbi, *Papato, impero e "respublica christiana" dal 1187 al 1198*, Milano 1980. It has an excellent historical introduction. and for Italy, see G. Penco, *Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, I, Milano 1977, 278-331.

3. The clash between the two forces, the papacy and female religious, dates back to the first year of Innocent III's pontificate and it soon took on major dimensions.²²

On May 13, 1198 the Pope confirmed the decision of the Premonstratensian general chapter "*ut nullam de cetero in sororem recipere teneamini vel conversam.*" ("you shall not be obliged to accept any woman as a nun or lay sister.") The pope's reason for his approval is the same as that offered by the petitioners ("*significasti nobis*"), and it is incorporated in a typically anti-feminist context: "in accord with the apostle's warning: 'to abstain from all appearance of evil' and 'to silence those who speak evil things, who glory in detraction and spread many calumnies.'"²³ We find here an echo of the words uttered a century earlier by Marbodo of Rennes and Godfrey of Vendome against Robert d'Arbrissel.²⁴ They will be repeated with even greater emphasis by the Premonstratensians in 1213: "the evil of women surpasses all other evils in the world. There is no anger greater than that of a woman. The venom of asps and dragons is healthier and more tolerable for an man association with women."²⁵

The recurrence of an antifeminist attitude had a background in the pastoral obligation of monks and canons. Women joining new orders had found themselves confined to their convents and in need of spiritual and frequently material assistance from their brothers in religion. On their part candidates entered male orders without anticipating that they would be burdened with the care of female religious. Hence the tendency, dating back to the twelfth century, first among the Gilbertines and Cistercians, and then the Premonstratensians to shun the care of female communities, not because of antifeminism, but by reason of their other commitments. The Gilbertines faced an ironic situation since their order owed its origin to a group of women!²⁶

It was a problem that raised its head with a certain regularity during the entire thirteenth century and often with anti-feminist overtones. As we can

²²For Innocent III see H. Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen*, M. Maccarrone, *Studi su Innocenzo III*, Padova 1978 especially the chapters relating to the reforms and innovations inaugurated by this pontiff in religious life. (223-336).

²³P. 168, ed. in O. Hageneder—A. Haidacher, *Die Register Innocenz' III*, I, Bed. Graz.—Köln 1964, 286-87, n. 198.

²⁴See J. Von Walter, *Die ersten Wanderprediger Frankreichs. Studien zur Geschichte des Mönchtums*, I-II, Leipzig 1903: I, 182-83.

²⁵See M. De Fontette, *Les religieuses*, 24, note 85.

²⁶See the two articles *Gilbertini e Gilbertine* and *Gilberto di Sempringham* both by D. Knowles in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione IV* (1977) 1178-183.

tell from papal bulls, the religious orders did not base their refusal to provide spiritual assistance to their female branches solely on lack of trained personnel in their own ranks; they also accused the women of not living according to the directions of their confessors, of stirring up trouble among their neighbors and all over the city with their complaints ("*murmurationes*"), of not giving signs of perseverance in their vocation. So it would seem that the women were at fault if the orders felt obliged to appeal to the Roman curia to have them reprimanded, and were compelled then to keep them at arms length. The women's resentment is evident from the correspondence of Jordan of Saxony with Diana d'Andalo with regard to a papal intervention.²⁷

The fact that there was inconsistency between the ideal of care and its alleged motivation witnesses to an on-going antifeminist mentality and the contradictions that marked all papal dealings with female religious. Innocent III while he accepted and confirmed the goals of the first Norbertine nuns also recognized the presence of women in some new life styles upon their return to obedience to the church.²⁸

In 1200 he granted the Humiliati the right to live "for proper and religious reasons . . . under one rule . . . together with lay men living with their wives and lay women living with their husbands. Other lay persons were also admitted to the community." His decree applied to married women as well as to single persons living in a common commitment to prayer and work with the clerics of the religious orders.²⁹ Women members of the Humiliati were also allowed to deliver pious discourses but not doctrinal sermons.

Those who were not "spiritual sisters" were organized into a so-called second order, living in a community apart from the male members, and bound by the vow of chastity and the obligations of community life.³⁰ In 1208 Durando da Huesca and his "Poor Catholics" returned to the unity of the Church and Pope Innocent III permitted them in 1212 to erect a "*domus*" (religious house) with wings for men and women, and also spelled out a list of charitable undertakings for them in which women worked side by side with

²⁷I will discuss this question later on.

²⁸See Chr. Thouzellier, *Catharisme et valdeisme en Languedoc a la fin du XII et au debut du XIII siecle*, Paris 1966 (two editions) and the broad picture of the religious and politico-social milieu preceding the foundation of the Order of the Servants of Mary in *I frati Servi di S. Maria dalle origini all'approvazione* (1220-1304) by F. A. Dal Pino Louvain 1972, 451-758.

²⁹P. 1192: *Licet multitudini*, December 1200.

³⁰In the bull *Incumbit nobis* of June 7, 1201 which contains the *propositum* of the Humiliati. See G. G. Meersseman, *Dossier de l'Ordre de al Penitence au XIII siecle*, Fribourg, 1961, 276-82.

men: providing shelter for the sick and homeless, caring for abandoned children, acting as midwives for poor women and collecting clothing for the needy.³¹ When he reconciled other groups, like the Waldensians, the Poor Preachers and Lombards, the pope expressly forbade them to allow women to preach in the churches. Though he allowed men and women to work together, he warned the men against "any suspicious association with women."³² Reading the bull one gets the impression that the pontiff was more concerned with external appearances, afraid that people might get the wrong impression when they observed this community in action, rather than with encouraging a dynamism based on a shared religious experience in which men and women cooperated in attaining the ideals of true Christian living. The Pope never seems to have adverted to this dimension.

Innocent III's insensitivity to the problems of female religious is seen even more clearly in a project undertaken in 1207 which planned the establishment of a "*universale coenobium monialium*" ("a central monastery for women") in Rome. All the nuns of the city were to live at S. Sisto regardless of their membership in a particular order or their profession of a distinctive charism.³³ The plan has been evaluated from various viewpoints. Some historians read into it a genuine concern of the pontiff for the many Roman convents which had few members or which were decadent, impoverished, or in need of reform. But his disregard for the different spiritual needs of the nuns, the exclusion of any options, and the imposition of common life and discipline in a strict enclosure leads us to believe that he had little concern for the wishes of the women themselves. The grand plan, which affected some sixty nuns, was not carried out until the pontificate of Honorius III when St. Dominic was put in charge. Instead of compulsion the saint tried persuasion. Some nuns were vehemently opposed to the scheme because they were reluctant to abandon their traditional customs and convents with their sacred vestments, relics and alleged miraculous images. One of the most famous of these was the icon of the convent of S. Maria "*in tempulo*." Once it came back to the convent from the Lateran "flying through the window just like a bird." The nuns predicted

³¹P. 4504: *Dilectus filius*, of May 26, 1212.

³²P. 4567: *De quis*, of July 26, 1212.

³³See M. Maccarrone, *Studi*, 272-78, "Il progetto di un'universale coenobium" for the nuns of Rome. See also VJ. Koudelka, *Le "monasterium tempuli" et la fondation dominicaine de San Sisto*, in *Archivum Fratrum Praedictorum* 31 (1961) 5-81. Id. *Notes pour servir a l'histoire de S. Dominique*. *ibid.* 35 (1965) 5-20.

that their icon would also leave S. Sisto and return to its convent.³⁴ The situation became more complicated when the college of cardinals, the Roman Curia and many noble families became involved. The plan was carried out, nonetheless, though not in all its details. We know this because in the pontificate of Gregory IX (1232) an archpriest of the church of Saints Cyril and John was commissioned by the pope to be the apostolic visitor of certain Roman convents whose members were not compelled to move to S. Sisto.³⁵ Again the method employed to transfer the nuns was persuasion rather than compulsion.³⁶

The new community at S. Sisto followed the so-called rule of St. Augustine with some by-laws inspired by the regulations St. Dominic drew up for the nuns of Prouilla.³⁷ These statutes, which came to be known as the constitutions of the nuns of S. Sisto, were later adopted by other communities living under the rule of St. Augustine, among them the Penitents of St. Mary Magdalene. They were approved by Gregory IX in 1232.³⁸ A bull of Nicholas IV contains the entire text, both of the rule and the constitutions.³⁹

St. Dominic's contribution to the foundation of a new type of female religious life was one of the most important events in the history of spirituality in the thirteenth century. As is well known, the first foundation of Dominicans was in fact one of women, a group of female ex-Cathari, who had been living in the south of France.⁴⁰ They were members of the lesser nobility of Fanjeaux and were converted by the saint by his own ascetical life and preaching. These ladies, impoverished by the confiscation of their lands, clung to the Cathari heresy not only for religious reasons (a solution for the presence of evil in the world), but also to secure the wherewithal to support and educate themselves. ("*Ratione paupertatis erudiendas et nutriendas*").⁴¹

The sources speak of a community dedicated to Christian monastic life. In 1218 Honorius III allowed them to follow the rule of St. Augustine.

³⁴See H.H. Vicaire, *Histoire d Saint Dominique*, I-II, Paris 1957; II, pp. 278-91.

³⁵See V.J. Koudelka, *Notes*, 18.

³⁶See note 34 above.

³⁷See H.H. Vicaire, *Histoire* 386-96: "La regle de Saint—Sixte."

³⁸p. 9025.

³⁹p. 23512.

⁴⁰See Chr. Thouzeller, *Catharisme et valdeisme*, 255-56. Also see the article by L.A. Redigonda, *Dominicane monache*, in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* (1976) 780-793. For Prouille, col. 781.

⁴¹See Chr. Thouzeller, *ibid.*

St. Dominic was also instrumental in establishing another community of women in Toulouse,⁴² this time not for converts but for reformed prostitutes. He founded a third group in Madrid.⁴³ However, the first genuinely Dominican community of nuns was established in Italy at the convent of St. Agnes of Bologna through the initiative of Diana d'Andalò.⁴⁴

We can discern the goals and dominant characteristics of the new female spirituality from the letters sent by the second master general of the Order of Preachers, Jordan of Saxony, the direct successor of St. Dominic, to Diana and her sisters.⁴⁵ Although they lived their lives in strict enclosure, we can detect a radical transformation of monastic ideals. The "longing for God" becomes in effect a longing for union with God which, accruing to Jordan does not entail traditional contemplation but is realized in activity. The master general is not exhorting the Sisters to contemplate but to act, to participate in the dynamic life of the Friar Preachers, not in externals, not in their itinerant preaching, but interiorly, in prayer. But there is a vast difference between prayer as understood by the monks, as a passive repose of the soul in God, a kind of spiritual death, and that of the Dominican nuns which is an apostolate of prayer for the spread of the order. There is no longer a question of dying to the world and for the world but prayer for all the needs of the world. In fact Jordan, through his letters, brings his sisters back to face the world and its realities. Meanwhile the monasticism of the Dominican nuns remained identical in its external structure with that of other female religious, a cloistered life filled with prayer, work, meditation and penance. What did change was the significance attached to this way of life. Here we notice the profound difference between the Dominican and Franciscan ideals. The Friars Minor and Poor Clares clung to the example of Francis and saw in poverty a special actualization of the life of the poor, suffering and crucified Savior. However, this is not the place to dwell on this topic. The international Society of Franciscan Studies dedicated a congress and later a published volume to the Franciscan heritage bequeathed to religious women.⁴⁶ Here it will suffice to

⁴²See L.A. Redigonda, *Dominicane monache*, 781.

⁴³*Ibid.* 781-82.

⁴⁴See the article by A. Walz in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* IV (1964) 593-95.

⁴⁵See *Beati Jordani de Saxonia Epistulae*, ed. A. Walz, Roma 1951. (*Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum praedicatorum Historica*, XXIII.) His correspondence was the subject of a seminar which R. Manselli and I conducted for a group of students in the academic year of 1981-1982.

⁴⁶See *Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII*, Assisi 1980 (*Società internazionale di Studi francescani*, VII).

point out that the new religious experience of the mendicant orders occasioned serious problems for the papacy, as we can see from the life of Clare. Innocent IV spoke about Clare's commitment to follow the Benedictine rule "to give authenticity" to the religious life of one who already had it through authentic Franciscanism.⁴⁷ St. Agnes's community faced the threat of suppression in the pontificate of Gregory IX even though Jordan of Saxony tried to depict it as a precautionary measure aimed at preventing the cohabitation of "meretrices" with "virgines."⁴⁸

This lack of understanding on the part of the papacy was certainly felt in many female communities who were living without a fixed rule, as penitents, as women trying to realize in some way the Christocentric poverty of St. Francis, or following the rule of St. Augustine which placed them directly under the jurisdiction of the local ordinary. The papacy did not oppose the life style of penitents, but whenever possible assigned Dominicans or Franciscans as spiritual directors, in this way fostering the development of third orders.

The pluriformity of life styles, however, tended to create a climate hostile to these "devout women" (as the sources call them) who were not really nuns but seculars. In the thirteenth century, when clothing still distinguished the various classes of society, it is not surprising to hear of "a certain religious woman who still wore secular attire", and departmentalized her religious and social roles.⁴⁹ One day when the Beguine Uda asked to receive holy communion the priest refused saying that "it was not proper for lay women to receive communion whenever they want."⁵⁰

Fanatical women were sometimes thought to be possessed by the devil.⁵¹ We read the story of a deceased woman who had lived the eremetical life appearing in a dream to a certain lady and advising her to enter a religious community.⁵² Another theme reoccurs, though not frequently mentioned in the biographies— that of women who died in the odor of sanctity after living as solitary penitent because they were unable to realize their desire to enter a convent.⁵³

⁴⁷ See P. Omaechevarria, *Clarisse*, in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* II (1975) 1116-131.

⁴⁸ See *Beati Jordani de Saxonia epistulae*, ed. cit. 54-5.

⁴⁹ See Caesarii Heisterbacensis... *Dialogus Miraculorum* II, 189, 201.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 191.

⁵¹ See Agostino da Montefalco, *Vita, miracoli et Revelationi della B. Chiara de Montefalco del ordine di S. Augustino, examine da XII Cardinali* better known as *Sommario*, Venezia 1515, vv. 27, 36.

⁵² *Ibid.* f. 38.

⁵³ See the biographies of Rose of Viterbo, Margherita Colonna and Umiliana de' Cerchi, to give

Other sources, however, take a different view and stress the values of life in solitude. The idea most frequently presented is the possibility of a woman uniting herself directly to Christ, her spouse, without the mediation of some holy founder. God allowed Margaret of Cortona to see Saint Francis surrounded by a great multitude of saints and asked her why she did not join them. Margaret is supposed to have replied: "Lord, I love all the saints. I wish to be united with all of them. But it is You alone that my soul longs for with many tears because my soul is directed to You alone, my eternal and never failing good."⁵⁴

Sometimes the problem was viewed from another perspective, that of combining an eremetical life in the world with the support of a religious community. There is the story of Marguerita Colonna who saw herself in a vision descending from paradise where she had been living with the Madonna and the holy virgins—symbolic of her hermitage on Monte Presentino where she was living happily in the company of a few other ladies. She seemed to descend "on a new rope to the earth where her brother, a senator, dressed as a poor pilgrim awaited her. She did not feel that she was separated from the Madonna. Even in her descent from heaven she felt that Our Lady was very close to her just as she was in the world above..." Recalling this vision she said to her companions: "Arise, let us go forth. It is the will of God that we leave this place."⁵⁵

The tendency of the papacy to promote the enclosure of nuns is more evident in the second half of the thirteenth century. It was the by-product of the great movement toward clericalization which took place especially among the Franciscans. While clericalization made it possible for the friars to teach in the universities, to become members of the hierarchy and to come to the defense of the Church, the enclosure of the nuns precluded any such outlets and led to a certain amount of dissatisfaction and malaise. A bull of Honorius IV on the other hand, tells of a group of ladies who at the beginning lived in their own homes and dedicated themselves to God by observing an "appropriate seclusion" but later on felt the need of entering a religious order and received the authorization of the pope without any difficulty.⁵⁶

just a few examples.

⁵⁴See *la vita di Margherita da Cortona* by fra Giunta Bevegnati, in AA. SS, February III n. 69.

⁵⁵See L. Oligier, *S. Margherita Colonna. Le due vite (...)* Roma 1935. (Lateranum N.S. 2), 148-49.

⁵⁶P. —, Reg. Vat. 43, f. 12.

The pontiffs paid little attention to the tertiaries who wished to organize themselves into religious communities. A recent study lists only ten bulls and even these "make statements and give directions more or less explicit, more or less clear, concerning their requests."⁵⁷ While there is some consistency in the decisions of the pope with respect to other problems in the Church, his dealing with religious women lack any fixed policy. There seems to be a reluctance to get involved, a willingness to let things take their natural course according to particular circumstances.

It was in this religious climate that Boniface VIII issued his famous decretal "*Periculoso as detestabili*" (in 1298) which imposed a strict enclosure on female religious.⁵⁸ The significance of this bull for the values of the cloister is a matter for historians to debate. Without attempting to decide the merits of the questions, we might note that the decretal, by its own admission, concedes that there was a growing problem for women religious which demanded a realistic solution from the papacy. But instead of getting to the root of the problem the pope responded with a series of questions. Among other things it is not clear whether the departure of nuns from their monasteries—stigmatized as "dangerous and detestable behavior"—was not linked to a frankly religious ideal, like the desire to follow the example of the poor Christ by earning ones livelihood by begging. Various hagiographical sources attest to the fact that such a desire was keen and active among women. Thus we read of Clare of Montefalco, a contemporary of Boniface VIII, who enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to go begging.⁵⁹

In the fourteenth century with the enormous problems created by the transfer of the papacy to Avigno, there was little time for the popes to get involved with the problems of female religious. Although correspondence with religious orders was better organized, it had to do mainly with male communities. For the most part papal letters dealt with dispensations from

⁵⁷ See G. Odgardi, *La vita comunitaria tra i penitenti francescani nelle bolle papali del secolo XIII*, in *Prime manifestazioni di vita comunitaria maschile e femminile nel movimento francescano della Penitenza (1215-1447)* by R. Pazzelli—L. Temperini, Roma 1982, 21-38. The quotation is from p. 36.

⁵⁸ See *Liber sextus decretalium*, lib. III, tit. XIV, in A. Friedberg, *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, II 1053-054. also J. Leclercq, *Clausura*, in *DIP II* (1975) 1170-171.

⁵⁹ See E. Pazstor, *S. Chiara da Montefalco nella religiosità femminile del suo tempo*, in *Santa Chiara da Montefalco e il suo tempo*, Atti del IV Convegno di Studi Storico-ecclesiastici (Spoleto 1981). L. Pazstor found, in the secret archives of the Vatican, the process of the canonization of Chiara da Montefalco, long thought to be lost. They can now be found in the *Processus* of the archives of the Congregation of Rites.

various impediments to ordination and the admission of men born out of wedlock to monastic life. During the entire fourteenth century a reform, or more precisely a reconstruction of religious life, especially that of the mendicants, was undertaken only by Benedict XII.⁶⁰ The same pontiff issued a series of "ordinationes" against apostates and religious who left their communities (like the letter "*Pastor Bonus*" of 1335). These included women as well as men. In fact his successors issued numerous dispensations for nuns who "misled by the evil spirit left their communities and went gadding about the world dressed in secular garb."

The decrees of John XXII had special relevance for women. He issued prohibitions against the practice of magic and witchcraft, branding them as heretical.⁶¹ His "*Super illius*" of 1326 traces its origins to Alexander IV. It took effect as an authentic declaration only after further study by the second Avignonese pope. In accord with the mentality of the times women were assumed to be the ones who made wax figurines, love philters and practiced witchcraft. The papal decree served to intensify the anti-feminism rampant at the time. One might object that magic rites had nothing to do with the practice of piety. But simple folk who had recourse to a woman reputed to be a witch were convinced that she was endowed with supernatural powers. And even if such powers came, not from God, but from the evil one the ceremonies involved had all the appearance of religious rites.

4. In a study made some years ago, and still highly regarded, Fr. Friedrich Kempf addressed the fact that when, at the Council of Lyons, Innocent IV ordered the disposition of Frederick II from the imperial throne he was able to do so only because he had built the power of the papacy to such a height that it ended up by losing contact with the ordinary faithful.⁶² This phenomenon was essentially political but it had repercussions on the religious life of women. When the popes did intervene to apply canonical norms to the life of

⁶⁰See C. Schmitt, *Un Pape réformateur et un défenseur de l'unité de l'Église. Benoît XII et l'Ordre des Frères Mineurs (1334-1342)*, Quaracchi (Firenze) 1949. L. Boehm, *Papst Benedikt XII (1334-1342) als Förderer der Ordensstudien. Restaurator—Reformator—oder Deformator regulärer Lebensform?* in *Secundum regulam vivere. Festschrift für B. N. Backmund*, Windberg 1978, 281-310. And see the article by C. Schmitt in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione VI* (1980) 1139-140.

⁶¹See R. Manselli, *La premessa medioevale della caccia alle streghe*, in *la Stregoneria in Europa*, by M. Romanello, Bologna 1975, 39-62. Id., *Enrico del Carretto e la consultazione sulla magia di Giovanni XXII*, in *Miscellanea in onore di Mons. M. Giusti, Perfetto dell'Archivio Segreto Vaticano*, II, Città del Vaticano 1978, 97-129.

⁶²See F. Kempf, *La deposizione di Federico II alla luce della dottrina canonistica*, in *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria* 21 (1968) 1-16.

women in the Church they did not take into account their legitimate aspirations. They skirted the real issues and aroused considerable dissatisfaction among the people.

Beginning in the thirteenth century, but culminating in the fourteenth, a significant gap appeared between the official hierarchy, and another, spiritual one. The latter tended to replace institutional structures with the values of a deeply felt interior life. This gap was to widen as time progressed, and female religious would be deeply involved.

Significant, too, is the fact that, with the exception of Clare of Assisi, none of the women whose lives were molded by the new religious ferment which found expression in mystical experiences, visions and miracles, even if they enjoyed popular cult, were raised to the honors of the altar unless they belonged to the privileged ranks of sovereigns or the higher nobility. The canonized women of the thirteenth century, in addition to Clare, included the empress Cunigunda (by Innocent III in 1200), Elizabeth, daughter of the king of Hungary and widow of the landgrave of Thuringia (by Gregory IX in 1235), Margaret, queen of Scotland (by Innocent IV in 1250), Hedwig, duchess of Silesia (by Clement IV in 1267), Bridget of Vadstena who died in 1373 was canonized in the fifteenth century and therefore lies beyond the scope of this study.⁶³ At any rate, with Bridget of Sweden we enter upon a female spirituality quite different from that of the women of the thirteenth century.

There was no lack, however, of requests, or more technically, processes, which were never carried to a conclusion, of other women whose sanctity was celebrated locally. Here is another example of the clash between institutionalism and charism.

As opposed to the women of the papal documents, frail, in need of protection, confined in a strict enclosure these local cults offer us strong-willed women who grappled with all kinds of problems both of a political and religious nature. They took upon themselves voluntary poverty and endured destitution brought on by lack of funds or bad harvests. They practiced the most severe penance and asceticism; they suffered bodily illnesses and painful bouts of spiritual aridity. Some bore in their bodies the marks of Christ's passion and in their hearts those of his sorrowful Mother. Women who were shut out of the world of letters were nourished and supported by divine revelations which enabled them to grasp perhaps more profoundly than many theologians of the time the basic truths of the Christian faith. The topics

⁶³See A. Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge*. Roma 1981.

which the nuns heard in sermons, the scenes they saw depicted in the frescos of the churches, became for them intuited knowledge which they shared with other women in simple words, suffused with feminine sensitivity and compassion.⁶⁴

One woman, for example, explained the Blessed Trinity as three children, all looking alike, equal and co-eternal, and of surpassing beauty. The three seemed at time to merge into one, and then to separate into three, "but retaining such a similarity and equality that each one of the three, even when separated from the other two, remained equal in grandeur and in every other way." A certain abbess portrayed the Trinity as a flame of fire which rose straight up to heaven and when it approached the celestial gates broke out into three streams of fire. Clare of Montefalco said that the Lord revealed to her that when the priest spoke the words of consecration over the bread and wine, they were instantly transformed into the body and blood of Christ, and all the hosts in the entire world could at once become the body and blood of Christ without any confusion. The problem of enclosure, too, viewed as a safeguard of virginity, was discussed by women. They either committed their virtue to the care of the Madonna or else imagined it as elevated and placed on a very high tree so that the women were isolated from all earthly things and could rest secure.

The papacy did not seem to be aware that the original forms of worship, without official sanction, could give rise to a flowering of some new religious practices and to a revitalization of old ones. The cross was the object of special veneration among women. It was a sign of membership in the ranks of the elect. To be a daughter of God meant to die on the cross. Margarita Colonna who received a cross from a "preacher of the word" who resembled St. Francis felt that it pierced her flesh and made her aware of Franciscanism as a following of Christ in preaching the gospel and accepting a share in his cross.

Another popular devotion had as its object the *Mater Dolorosa* (the Mother of Sorrows) who suffered not only on Calvary but, as Benvenuta Boiani writes, in the loss of Jesus in the temple. We also encounter the role of Mary as co-redemptrix. Margarita tells the story of a vision she had childish, perhaps, but still touching of the child Jesus lying in a bed much too big for him. His

⁶⁴I discussed the typology of female visions in the period between the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries at the twenty-third congress at the center for the study of medieval spirituality at Todi in 1982. For a study of the wide gamut of visions, male and female in the Middle Ages see P. Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionlitteratur im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart 1981 (Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters, Bd. 23).

mother was standing at the foot of the bed and when she asked the Bambino to move over and make room for her and he refused, Margarita rebuked him; "You won't move over because you don't want to. Remember that she bore you in her womb for the sake of us all." As soon as the Bambino heard these words, he moved and made room for his mother to lie down beside him.

The frequency of such mystical contacts with God may have been another powerful symptom of the lack of rapport between the official hierarchy and women. The latter felt a keen need for closer association both because they needed support for their personal spirituality and because they felt isolated in the midst of happenings bigger than themselves.

We can discern typical feminine sensitivity in a "*vita*" (biography) written between 1241 and 1271 by the fellow religious of Helen of Hungary. They describe her as covered with wounds from each of which sprouted a beautiful lily. "From the wound in her right hand, impressed on the feast of St. Francis, there emerged a golden filament which grew into a long stem bearing a golden lily. A white lily grew from the wound in her side. It was a tender sign of the purity and innocence of the young princess, now a nun. There was an obvious difference between her experience and that of St. Francis who was chosen to relive the sufferings of Christ. The stigmata represented the supreme moment of his union with the Crucified. The young girl dared not aspire to such heights and took care to conceal the lilies. But the nuns furtively collected them and preserved them.

There existed, then, a world of devotion, of sentiment, of imagination anchored in the social and cultural ambience of the time but which was ignored by the papacy. It nourished a whole complex of hopes, ideals and aspirations of the "*ecclesia spiritualis*" and was one of the most characteristic features of late medieval religiosity. In the fourteenth century, first with the Avignonese period, and then with the great Western Schism the distance between the papacy and women religious grew even wider just at a time when their need for spiritual support became more pressing.

When Giovanni Columbini was exiled from Siena he found refuge in Città del Castello. The bishop, Buccio Bonori, was a man who provided "security" for those in need of assistance. The bishop had a cousin by the name of Catherine. She embodied and developed the ideals of the religious women of the thirteenth century in their most important aspects: love of poverty, joined with a life of prayer and austerity, not in a convent, but in her own home. The beginnings of the future Jesuates took root there. These religious lived on alms though they were for the most part women of noble birth. They spread rapidly and were found in Città di Castello. But when they appealed for papal

approval, they were rebuffed by Eugene IV.⁶⁵

The history of the religious life of women, despite their ever increasing documentation, still has numerous hiatus. But it fills an indispensable chapter in the history of the middle ages. Fresh research and evaluations will be carried on, but we can conclude, even now, that women, whether religious or secular, played a notable role in the Church and in Christian society, even though we are not yet in a position to appreciate its depth and richness. A growing sensitivity to the topic on the part of historians augurs better hope for the future.

⁶⁵See R. Guarnieri's article on the Gesuate in *Dizionario Degli Istituti Di Perfezione IV* (1977) 1112-1116. For Colombini and Buccio Bonori see E. Pasztor, "S. Bernardino da Siena e l'episcopato italiano del suo temp," *Atti di simposio internazionale Cateriniano-Bernadiniano*, Siena 1982, 715-39, esp. pp. 731-732.