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Feminine Agency and Masculine Authority:
Women's Quest for Autonomy in Monastic Life

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
History Department

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Introduction

From the earliest days of Christianity, women were eager to devote themselves to religious vocation. The establishment of convents created communities where women could gain an education and experience self-determination while following in the footsteps of Christ and living lives dedicated to the church. Becoming a servant of God raised a number of questions for the pious women who joined the monastic life, for example, were they willing to give away all of their worldly goods and separate themselves from home and family? Were they willing to live an ascetic life of hunger and hardship devoted to prayer? Were they willing to forgo their lives as sexual creatures even to the point of denying their feminine aspect? And, most importantly, were they willing to accept that an affirmative answer to all of these questions might not be enough to satisfy the male-dominated religious hierarchy? Would women find that their devotion to Jesus and their desire to become a part of the body of Christ sustained them in the face of institutional misogyny that sought to rob them of their agency?

Throughout his brief ministry, Jesus welcomed women to hear his teaching and encouraged them to follow his path to God, the father, and eternal life. Numerous women were recorded in the New Testament among his followers, including Joanna and Susanna, who financially supported him and his apostles (Luke 8:3). The sisters, Mary and Martha, welcomed Jesus into their home. Mary eagerly sat at his feet to hear him speak; when Martha asked Jesus to chastise Mary for ignoring the duties of hospitality, Jesus instead commended Mary for her devotion to his teaching (Luke 10: 38-42). Jesus also acknowledged the faith expressed by a pagan Canaanite woman in Matthew (15:21-28), and in recognition of her belief in him, he healed her stricken daughter. Jesus' welcoming of the women who came to hear him speak surprised and disgruntled his male apostles. This is seen nowhere more obvious than the apostles' attitude

toward Mary Magdalene, the woman who followed him and sought to learn more deeply of his teaching. It is significant that Peter, the apostle Jesus would charge with founding the first Christian church, expressed disdain for the women followers. In the Coptic Christian version of the book of Timothy from the Nag Hammadi library, Peter sought to convince Jesus to send Mary Magdalene away with the following exchange: “Simon Peter said to them: “Let Mary go out from our midst, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus says: “See I will draw her so as to make her male so that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who has become male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”¹ Significantly, despite the closeness and importance of the male apostles, it was to Mary Magdalen that Jesus appeared at the most important act of his earthly life, his resurrection, charging her to share the news with his male disciples. With Jesus’ death his words could have easily been forgotten, the church he wished to found a mere footnote. The success of Christianity, in no small part, began with the women who eagerly repaid his embrace with their whole-hearted participation in growing the church.

As the church grew throughout late antiquity and into the Middle Ages, so too did the number of women who chose to devote their lives to the church. This simple wish, to forge their own destiny by following in Jesus’ footsteps, ran counter to the wishes of the male-dominated church that sought to control every aspect of women’s piety. A deep masculine mistrust of women was predicated on their belief that all women were tainted by the actions of Eve in the fall from grace at the beginning of time. This led to the development of what amounted to two different attitudinal churches, one masculine and the other feminine. The masculine church sought to marginalize women of God and mute their voices. Unlike Jesus, who eagerly taught women and

¹ The Gospel of Thomas Collection, The Gnostic Society Library
www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl_thomas.htm .

included them in his vision of the church, the men who followed and whose job it was to establish a working church, sought to vilify women and minimize their importance. A central tenet of their writings was the inferior and carnal nature of women, an obsession with sexuality, and a need for absolute control of women's minds and bodies. The obsession with women as sexual beings, from the earliest days of the church, supported the belief that those living as holy virgins required complete patriarchal control and laid the foundation for the concept of consecrated virginity and perpetual enclosure behind convent walls. Additionally, enclosure served to silence women's voices following the apostle Paul's admonition in 1 *Timothy* (2: 11-12): "A woman must listen in silence and be completely submissive. I do not permit a woman to act as a teacher or in any way to have authority over a man: She must be quiet."² This diverged from women's expectations for their own religious experience and facilitated their male peers ever-increasing control.

The feminine church was comprised of women who sought to live a life of reflection and service in community with other women, dedicating themselves to living a Christ-like life. Their perpetual virginity was a gift to God. This group included such exemplars as Hildegard, the polymath abbess of Bingen, who used her writings to counter some of the more critical views of women from church men and to call for reform of the church; Clare of Assisi, who in striving for recognition as a follower who imitated the life of Jesus, wished to found her own community of like-minded nuns who would live exterior lives in service to the poor; and Teresa of Avila, who used her fame as a mystic to negotiate her agency during the Spanish Inquisition while founding her own order of discalced nuns and claiming the central role of mysticism in that institution.

² Paul, "The First Epistle of Paul to Timothy," *The New American Bible* (Washington DC: Catholic Publishers 1971): 1321.

While this paper will utilize the individual experiences of these three women to enhance the readers understanding of the challenges religious women faced to their agency within the patriarchal church, it is important to note that these three women are not representative of all medieval religious seekers. Hildegard, Clare, and Teresa were members of the elite of the Middle Ages, as were the individuals they corresponded with. It is due to the paucity of information on women of any class, but especially the middle and lower classes, that of necessity this paper must use their experiences as representative of all women's challenges.

The expectations for women's roles in monastic life were viewed very differently by men and women of the church, with male authority vying with female agency for ultimate control of women's religious experience. This paper will argue that that in times of upheaval or reform opportunities arose that allowed women to flourish, providing them an authentic voice in the church before the vagaries of their religious lives silenced them once more.

The paper will be divided into five sections. Section one provides the historical background of the masculine view of the feminine; how a near obsession with female sexuality and its danger fostered an atmosphere of mistrust and vilification of women and narrowed their opportunities. Negative attitudes toward women became canon in the writing of the patristic theologians. The attitudes of Tertullian, Ambrose, and Jerome, each sampled here, will provide the reader with an understanding of the institutional misogyny women faced in the church. Each of these foundational fathers also wrote about the importance of consecrated virginity, although their focus was different ideationally, they sought to use virginity and the cloister to maintain masculine control of all aspects of women's lives.

Tertullian's obsession with the lifestyle of virgins in Carthage provided material for numerous treatises on dress and the necessity of veiling for virgins. His deep disdain for and

mistrust of women, whom he found dangerous to all of mankind, unfortunately found an eager audience with his fellow theologians. It is through Tertullian's writings that we are first introduced to the idea of the bride of Christ. This effort by Tertullian to control the autonomous virgins of Carthage was later appropriated for all cloistered virgins. Ambrose aggressively attempted to recruit young women to profess virginity, an act that won him the enmity of patrician Romans, who did not see this as a useful life for their daughters. Ambrose also wrote extensively on virginity, much of it containing highly eroticized imagery. At the same time, he was authoring tracts on the perpetual virginity and obedient passivity of Mary, an idea of which he was an early proponent. Jerome's writings were full of anti-female rhetoric at the same time he maintained a close relationship with the wealthy widow Paula and her virginal daughter Eustochium. Paula and Eustochium were not the average widow and virgin and their relationship with Jerome is suggestive of the power of wealth and social standing in early ascetic circles.

To allow the reader to grasp the nature of monastic life for women, the second section will look at the first monastic rule written specifically for women. Written by Bishop Caesarius of Arles for his sister Caesaria and her companions, it was meant to create a role model for co-habitation and worship by women of all social backgrounds. The section will show that the ideal and reality were often at odds within the confines of the cloister. Section three discusses the challenges for women in the twelfth-century church during a time of weakened papal authority and is anchored by Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard's life is one of the earliest examples of a woman's agency outweighing masculine authority in a time of reform. Not all women benefitted from the reforming zeal of the church as the issue of pastoral care of women (*Cura monialium*), became quite contentious at this time. Section four introduces the would-be mendicant Clare of Assisi who spoke truth to power and was all but silenced. In Clare's relationship with Francis

and his followers, the Friars Minor, we discover the real divergent nature of women's desires and church authority. Section five covers the hardening position of the masculine church toward its sisters beginning with the decretal *Periculoso* of 1298 which called for perpetual enclosure of all religious women. The efforts of Teresa of Avila to maintain the role of women's mysticism in the church and to shepherd her nuns within the new harsher objections to women's agency will help the reader to understand the challenges for women in the sixteenth century church. This period also saw the involvement of university educated theologians in the marginalization of women's piety and even its criminalization. A brief examination of the writings of Jean Gerson serves to illustrate this point.

Constant across the broad expanse of time from the third-century church fathers to the sixteenth-century spiritual discerners were the women who embraced piety, sisterhood, and sheer determination to inform their attempts to have agency over their own religious lives. The challenges women faced in this masculine world began with the church fathers.

Historical Background

The Church Fathers

The history of the early church is filled with women who died a martyrs' death for their adherence to Christian faith. Vibia Perpetua (d.203 C.E.) was one such woman. Rounded up by Roman soldiers with her companions, Perpetua, a young wife with a babe-in-arms, resisted the pleadings of her elderly father and the maternal bond with her child and refused to disavow her faith. To her father's pleading that she recants and make a pagan sacrifice to the Roman emperor

she replied, “Can I call myself nought other than I am, a Christian.”³ Perpetua understood the fate of Christians in Roman Carthage was death in the gladiatorial arena for public entertainment. On the night before her execution she had a dream, upon waking the next morning she had a revelation about her death: “I realized it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I would win the victory.”⁴

We know about Perpetua’s dream because the literate young woman wrote about her experiences from her prison cell. At roughly the same time that Perpetua was writing about the spiritual revelation concerning her impending violent death, church father and fellow convert Tertullian was busy writing treatises on Christian women filled with misogynic vitriol.

Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus (160-225), is often called the father of western Christianity. A pagan convert, Christian apologist, and rabid anti-feminist, his polemical writings concerning women, their dress, their attitude, and their moral failings unfortunately found a receptive audience in the second century and beyond. Setting the standard by which women would be judged, Tertullian wrote in *On The Apparel of Women*: “You are the devil’s gateway: You are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree, you are the first deserter of divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert-that is death-even the Son of God had to die.”⁵ In this passage Tertullian damns all women with the unforgivable “original” sin of Eve, a debt that women will be burdened with forever. In his writings, Tertullian and the other church fathers were creating an extra-biblical narrative for the new Christian religion, a mythology that

³ Perpetua, quoted in Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman*. New York: Routledge, 1997: 82.

⁴ Perpetua, *Perpetua’s Passion*, 112.

⁵ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm>.

filled in the gaps in the gospels. The culpability of women in the loss of paradise and in bringing concupiscent sex into the world is the focus of much of their writing. For Tertullian, sexuality was the tool of the devil and women were the conduit for the damnation of men.

The main subject of Tertullian's unremitting ire was un-regulated virgins, those women not answerable to either father or husband who flaunted their chastity and refused to accept the veil. Many of the virgins in Carthage were free of any masculine control and their freedom was a source of great anger for Tertullian.

In numerous treatises on dress, women were vilified for luxury-loving sinfulness and refusing to abide by the gender norm of submission to male authority. This autonomy horrified Tertullian who claimed that the independence of virgins implied the creation of a "third sex, some monstrosity with a head of its own."⁶ Tertullian fully embraced the belief that through the action of Eve sexual relations, the downfall of man, and even death entered the world. This was a sin that all women shared till the end of time. Additionally, he believed in the truth and authority of the apocryphal book of *Enoch*. This is important because the book of *Enoch* makes a direct link with virgins and the end of the world. In *Enoch*, a tale is told of angels who defied God and fell from heaven. On earth they lusted after and mated with the daughters of man. These Watcher Angels and the human women begat a race of giants and by their evil miscegenation put humankind at the precipice of death. It was fear of Watcher Angels living among the people, and the concern that they continued to lust after human women, especially virgins, that goaded Tertullian and led to his insistence on the veiling of virgins. It seems that Tertullian believed that a race of supernatural beings could be thwarted by merely having virgins

⁶ Virginia Burrus, "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no.1 (1994): 33.

go about in veiled anonymity. When his writings failed to chasten virgins into veiled and obedient submission, he formulated the idea to control women by marrying them to God, consecrated virgins would become brides of Christ, the *sponsa Christi*. By using nuptial imagery for autonomous virgins, those living a celibate life but outside in society, Tertullian was seeking to exert control over them, requiring they be veiled, and preferably sequestered in their homes under the authority of men. Tertullian advised women on how they should present themselves to their spiritual mate: “Bow your heads to your husbands-and that will be ornament enough for you. Keep your hands busy with spinning and stay at home-and you will be more pleasing than if you were adorned with gold. Dress yourselves in the silk of probity, the fine linen of holiness and the purple of chastity. Decked out in this manner, you will have God himself for your lover.”⁷ If virgins thought they were going to have authority over themselves, Tertullian had other ideas, instead marrying them to Christ and binding them to submission to male authority.

In some ways Jerome was the spiritual heir of Tertullian, sharing many of his misogynistic concerns about women, but unlike Tertullian, who was horrified by the thought of a “third sex,” women who took on male prerogative of autonomy, Jerome seemed to embrace the “virile” woman. Historian Dyan Elliot notes: “Jerome boasts of [virile women] in his circle, whose ardent asceticism allowed them to reconstitute themselves as honorary men.”⁸ The reader is reminded that this idea harkens back to the words of Jesus to Peter in which he states he will make Mary Magdalene like a male so she may enter the kingdom of heaven. However, unlike

⁷ Dyan Elliot, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 28.

⁸ Elliot, *The Bride*, 11.

Tertullian whose negative thoughts about women were coupled with avoidance, Jerome chose to surround himself with women.

Much of what we know about Jerome and his attitudes toward women comes from his voluminous writings, including the correspondence with the circle of wealthy Christian widows that surrounded him, eager to learn the gospel and the ascetic life. What remains of this correspondence is one-sided despite the fact that the female correspondents were equally or more literate than he; it should be no surprise that the letters written by women to Jerome were not deemed worthy of saving. Many of Jerome's letters were didactic in nature as befits the mentor relationship he had fostered with the women. Several of his letters covered the same territory Tertullian, as with their shared harsh opinions of widowed women, despite the fact that many of Jerome's followers were widows. In a letter addressed to Marcella, Jerome wrote: "A widow who is freed from the marital bonds has but one duty laid upon her, and that is to continue as a widow."⁹ In another letter, this one written to Furia, he again assailed the idea of remarriage: "The dog is turned to its own vomit again and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire. Even brute beast and roving birds do not fall into the same snares or nets twice."¹⁰

Jerome was stating the imperative of chastity for widows when he advises them to devote themselves to God. Marcella was a childless widow after just seven months of marriage but Furia did have children from her marriage and an aged father whom she was caring for. It is the letter to Furia that takes on a more strident, even sinister tone about her familial obligations:

Are you afraid that the line of Camillus will cease to exist and that your father will not have a brat of yours to crawl upon his breast and soil his neck with

⁹ Jerome, "A Good Woman," *Selected Letters of St. Jerome*. Trans F. A. Wright (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 161.

¹⁰ Jerome, "To Furia on the duty of Remaining a Widow," *Selected Letters of St. Jerome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 233.

nastiness? Well, do all those who marry have children and when children are born do they always answer to their family's fame... To whom are you going to leave your great wealth? To Christ who cannot die. Whom shall you make your heir? The same who is already your Lord. Your father will look sad, but Christ will rejoice: your family will grieve, but the angels will give you their congratulations¹¹

Of the widows and virgins that Jerome kept company with none are more recognizable than Paula and her daughter Eustochium. Paula's wealth supported Jerome in many of his endeavors and it is with her assistance, and that of Eustochium, who were both knowledgeable in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, that Jerome was able to complete his translation of the Bible.¹² The three embarked upon a pilgrimage to the holy land in 384 and in Bethlehem, where Paula had mystical experiences of the life of Christ, they decided to stay. Paula financed the construction of a monastery for Jerome and a convent for herself. The structure of the monastery is described in Jerome's letter number 108 addressed to Eustochium as an encomium to her recently deceased mother:

She divided into three companies and monasteries the numerous virgins whom she had gathered out of different provinces. Some of who are of noble birth while others belonged to the middle and lower classes. But although they worked and had their meals separately from each other, these three companies met together for psalms singing and prayer.¹³

Like many of Jerome's letters, this one addressed to Eustochium was intended for a wider audience. Scholar Andrew Cain sees in *Letter 108* an effort by Jerome to secure the legacy of

¹¹ Jerome, "To Furia," 235.

¹² Albrecht Diem, "The Gender of the Religious: Wo/men and the Invention of Monasticism," in *Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 435.

¹³ Jerome, "Letter 108" www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001108.htm.

his protégée Paula, suggesting that her spiritual success was a direct result of his mentoring and personal influence.¹⁴

What are we to make of Jerome's relationship with Paula? Was she merely a friend with benefices? They came under scrutiny from their religious peers who suggested that there was more to the relationship than simple co-religionist. It has been suggested that this was the reason Jerome was forced to leave Rome after being convicted in an episcopal court of clerical misconduct based on allegations of sexual impropriety and legacy hunting.¹⁵ An interesting aside to the charge of legacy hunting is provided by Cain who suggests it was less the church that was concerned with Jerome's interaction with Paula than possibly her family who were unhappy with the relationship and its effect on Paula's fortune and Eustochium's future.¹⁶

It is not only the church that has investigated the nature of Paula and Jerome's relationship, historians too have explored their partnership. Andrew Cain believes after a deep examination of Jerome's *Letter 108*, for Eustochium, that the relationship, while filled with mutual appreciation, was foremost a business proposition for Jerome. After years of generously giving alms, Paula died penniless leaving her daughter with a heavy debt. This left Jerome in need of financial support for the monasteries. In *Letter 108* as he is eulogizing Paula and listing all of her good deeds and ascetic practices, he is laying the groundwork for her reception as a model pilgrim, penitent, and martyr, while arguably basking in reflected glory. While Cain hints at ulterior motives in praising and burying Paula, Virginia Burras finds Jerome's eulogizing full of back-

¹⁴ Andrew Cain, "Jerome's Epitaphium Paulae: Hagiography, Pilgrimage and the Cult of Saint Paula," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2010): 137.

¹⁵ Cain, "Jerome," 108.

¹⁶ Cain, "Jerome," 108, n.15.

handed compliments.¹⁷ His memories of Paula are tempered by descriptions of her excess of emotion; Paula is a woman of excesses defined by her loves, and her grief. She grieves as she leaves her children behind in Rome to journey to the holy land, she grieves the deaths of her children, she grieves the experiences of Christ's death, and she grieves, according to Jerome, with more intensity than any other human being. Jerome's Paula is all woman with the emotional weakness that comes with her sex but Burras sees something quite different in Paula's behavior and that is Paula's agency in her own experience and in the face of Jerome's would-be authority over her: "Resisting Jerome, Paula claims her ascetic practice as her own. Seeming to swap beauty for ugliness and pleasure for pain, she is making herself over as the bride of Christ. Her fasts are heroic and her illnesses frequent."¹⁸ Dyan Elliot has called Jerome and Paula a heteroascetical couple, whose chaste relationship was the center of their spiritual lives.¹⁹ But with Paula's death, Jerome was in need of a new ascetic protégée.

For this, he turned his attention to Eustochium and the vital necessity that she remained in his care and a bride of Christ. Jerome had long feared the young woman would wish to return to her luxury-filled life in Rome. Years earlier when she was just a girl Jerome had addressed a long letter to her entitled "the Virgin's Profession," reminding her of the horrors of marriage and motherhood and the privilege and sanctity of being a bride of Christ. In language filled with erotic images Jerome describes the relationship the teenaged Eustochium will have with the bridegroom (Christ): "When sleep falls on you, He will come behind the wall and put His hand through the hole in the door and will touch your flesh and you will awake and rise up and cry: I

¹⁷ Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 65.

¹⁸ Burrus, *Sex Lives*, 64.

¹⁹ Elliot, *Bride*, 150.

am sick with love.”²⁰ This type of imagery of the bridegroom and his pseudo-sexual relationship with the consecrated virgins solidified the nuptial imagery in the theologically busy fourth century. What began as a way to exert control over consecrated virgins and thus guard against the evils of sexuality and its direct connection to Satan, morphed into a spiritual marriage to Christ with its attendant challenge: a mother-in-law.

Mary, mother of the bridegroom, has a very limited story in the gospels. Her virgin conception is mentioned in Matthew but primarily she was regarded by the first and second century church as an example of obedience in contrast to Eve’s disobedience. But certain church fathers, among them Ambrose, sought to use Mary as a model for virginal decorum and to illustrate the superiority of the virginal state over the married state. By the fourth century she had been given a fictional biography in the apocrypha including the *Odes of Solomon* and *Ascension of Isaiah*, but nowhere as detailed as in *Protoevangelium of James*. David Hunter has done a thorough study of the origin of the perpetual virginity of Mary narrative that is found in rebuttals written by Jerome and Ambrose to the monks Helvidius and Jovinian who preached that Mary, after Christ’s birth, lived the life of a traditional married Jewish woman. Jerome was one of the leading advocates for Mary’s retained virginity *in partu* and *postpartum* and for his belief he would have referenced the *Protoevangelium of James*. Hunter writes:

The *Protoevangelium* is preoccupied with Mary and with her consecration to the life of perpetual virginity. Furthermore, with the focus on Mary the concern is entirely with her sexual purity. No other virtue is mentioned; not her faith at the annunciation, nor her devotion to Jesus at the crucifixion, Mary’s sole merit, according to the *Protoevangelium* is her sexual chastity.²¹

²⁰ Jerome, “The Virgin’s Profession,” *Selected letters of Saint Jerome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 109.

²¹ David G. Hunter, “Helvidius, Jovinian and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-century Rome,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 64.

The newly created ascetic biography for Mary as perpetual virgin and role model for other virgins, diminished the importance of Mary for all. Helvidias and Jovinian were arguing that married women were the equal to virgins and that Mary was both virgin and wife. Even Tertullian, who supported the virginal conception of Jesus drew the line at virginal birth and perpetual virginity. Mary, like so many women to follow, had become a cipher for a masculine agenda. Thus, the brides of Christ gained a mother-in-law and role model of perpetual virginity in Mary, and by the end of the fourth century the Fathers of the Church had created the masculine expectations that religious women had to live by.

In the next section the monastic world that developed from these earliest groups of women desiring to live in community with one another seeking a religious life is explored. The well documented monastery of St. John founded by Caesarius (ca. 470-542) the Bishop of Arles in the first half of the sixth century, will be examined. Caesarius is also credited with authoring the first rule specifically for women.²² It will provide a window into the workings of a women's monastic community in its positive and negative aspects.

The Sixth Century

Women's Monasteries and *The Rule for Nuns*

Caesarius awareness of the ever-increasing interest in the monastic life among women, including his own sister Caesaria, providing the impetus for the foundation of the monastery of St. John in Arles. Donald Hochstetler defines the "vital importance" of monastic cloister for Caesarius thus: "Without true cloister in all its meanings the life of contemplation and worship

²² Elliott, *The Bride*, 64.

that was the reason for being of a monastic community was impossible.”²³ The establishment of St. John’s also led to the creation of the first rule written specifically for women. The Rule is the spiritual ideals that Caesarius envisioned for the nuns of St. John’s and was specifically centered around the concept of consecrated virginity with strict cloister. As discussed in chapter one, in addition to just simply accepting the veil, virgins needed to be separated from the dangers and temptations of the secular world, thus communities of nuns were created within monastic cloister. This allowed the nuns to devote their time to a spiritual and contemplative life unhampered by the negative influence of the outside world. A succinct description of these Caesarian ideals for perfection of cenobitic life for women is provided by M.C. McCarthy and included strict cloister, economic self-sufficiency, a complete system of government with binding rules, and a detailed program for the celebration of Divine office.²⁴

While not as recognizable as the early church fathers, Caesarius, his sister Caesaria, and niece, Caesaria the Younger, were important foundationally to women’s monastic life in Merovingian Gaul and the larger Catholic world as some of the ideas found in the *Rule for Virgins* made their way into the later efforts to contain and control religious women. The place to begin a study of Caesarius is McCarthy’s widely referenced doctoral dissertation, published by Catholic University Press, *The Rule for Virgins of St. Caesarius of Arles*. Her study provides the complete rule in translation from the original French, with extensive analysis of the text including an explanation of the basic tenets of the rule. In her commentary, she suggests that it provided a model for all

²³ Donald Hochstetler, “The Meaning of Monastic Cloister for Women According to Caesarius of Arles,” *Religion, Culture, and Society in the early Middle Ages: studies in honor of Richard E Sullivan*, 23: 27.

²⁴ M. C. McCarthy, *The Rule for Nuns of St Caesarius of Arles* (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 1960): 49.

successive efforts to impose cloister on nuns by canon law, including in 1289 with the decretal *Periculoso* of Pope Boniface VIII which stipulated: “nuns of every community or order, in every part of the world, both collectively and individually, be henceforth perpetually cloistered in their monasteries.”²⁵

Donald Hochstetler follows up this line of thought on enclosure in his examination of its meaning as set out by Caesarius. At issue was the struggle that Caesarius fought to maintain the ascetic life of the nuns while dealing with the desires of outside religious, including bishops, priests, monks, and religious women who wished to pray and be feted at St. John. Hochstetler opines that perpetual reclusion in the final copy of the Rule which forbade *convivia*, a festive meal for important guests, long been a feature of women’s religious communities, was necessary for both economic and ascetic success.²⁶ Allowing outsiders into the convent, even those in holy orders, was seen as disturbing the ascetic principals that were fundamental to the Rule and the cost of celebratory meals placed a burden on the finances of St. John as it strove to be financially independent.

A second important facet of convent life, in addition to constant prayer, was the humble work of the nuns’ hands. At St. John, this work took the form of wool cloth production. Maureen Tilley provides an excellent introduction to the activity that was designed not just to produce garments, but as a means of linking hearts and bodies, the *corda et corpra*, or the notion that the exterior appearance reflects the interior condition.²⁷ Tilley’s study on textiles is greatly expanded on by Maria Del Fiat Miola with in-depth examination of every aspect of textile production. Parsing

²⁵Elizabeth Makowski, “Cloister Contested: *Periculoso* As Authority in Late Medieval Consilia, *Jurist* 71 (2011): 334.

²⁶ Hochstetler, “The Meaning,” 28.

²⁷Margaret Tilley, “Caesarius’s Rule for unruly nuns: permitted and prohibited textiles in the monastery of St John.” *Early Medieval Europe* 26, no.1 (2018): 85.

the Rule for all it offers in terminology, she describes the processes mentioned by Caesarius, examines the Latin vocabulary, and makes extensive use of scholarly works on the history of textiles before coming to the conclusion that the production of textiles used a traditional female trade of wool working to inspire “industry, virtue and spousal love.”²⁸

The requirement for full enclosure outlined in McCarthy and Hochstetler included the requirement that the community be protected from intrusion by outsiders, which became a problem as word of Caesarius’s unique monastic experiment spread. Additionally, the textile handiwork of the nuns, designed as a type of meditative practice and to help them become financially independent also led to breaches in the separation from the outside. This is evidenced by Rule number 46 in which Caesarius forbids any nun from doing work for outsiders including washing, mending, or dyeing clothes. Those who did not obey were to be “beaten as if they had committed a crime.”²⁹ The harshness of the punishment indicates how seriously the nuns were to take separation from the outside world. Caesarius’s goal was the next step from simple consecrated virginity; the foundation of perpetual enclosure and monastic life for women.

Dedicated in 512, the monastery of St John, with Caesaria as its first abbess, was the first convent requiring full enclosure of women who were never to leave its walls even to their dying day.³⁰ Caesarius’ stated wish for his nuns was that they “stay continually in the cell of the monastery and implore the visitation of the Son of God with constant prayer.”³¹ In its earliest days this wish met with the reality that the convent was not self-sufficient and would, out of necessity,

²⁸ Maria Del Fiat Miola, Permitted and Prohibited Textiles in the *Regula Virginum*: Unweaving the Terminology,” *Early Medieval Europe* 26, no. 1 (2018): 102.

²⁹Coleen Maura McGrane, “The Evolution of Enclosure at the Monastery of St. Johns as viewed through the lens of the Rule of Virgins,” *Magistra* 16, no. 1 (2010): 8.

³⁰Maureen Tilley, “Caesarius’s Rule for unruly nuns: permitted and prohibited textiles in the monastery of St John,” *Early Medieval Europe* 26, no.1 (2018): 84.

³¹ McGrane, “The Evolution of Enclosure,” 5.

be subject to outside entanglement with family and friends upon whom its existence relied. Caesarius's Rule therefore allowed for visitation, or passive enclosure, as long as a senior nun was present. Any money or gifts that were given became community property and a strong prohibition was placed on letters and gifts received in secret, especially gifts of wine: "Above all, in the presence of God and his angels, I command that none of the sisters should secretly buy or receive wine sent from any source."³² This admonition was less about the consumption of wine than the potential dissention the receipt of a luxury item like wine might cause among the nuns.

The composition of the convent was a unique feature of St. John. Both elite women and those of humble origin were to share convent life equally. Earlier convents, like the one established by Paula in Bethlehem separated women into communities based on their social rank, only coming together at set periods such as chapel, where they prayed and chanted together.³³ To ensure that women were willing to persevere in the face of monastic rigor, Caesarius required they undergo a screening process designed to eliminate those who would dress the part but were lukewarm on the true vocation. Prospective nuns were required to listen to the Rule being read in the *salutatorium* several times before making their decision.³⁴ The Rule defined every aspect of cloister life, which historian McCarthy has numerically organized into 15 topics for ease of understanding, important points include foremost the mandate that the women concede to claustration and accept the rules of common life; including but not limited to, no private cells, cupboards, clothing, or food and no slaves. The nuns must be obedient to authority and live a life of chastity while keeping custody even of their eyes. To ensure harmony between women of

³² McGrane "The Evolution of Enclosure,"6.

³³ Giselle Bader "Paula and Jerome; Towards a Theology of Late Antique pilgrimage," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 18, no. 4 (2018): 350.

³⁴ Hochstetler, "The Meaning," 29.

vastly different backgrounds, Caesarius wrote a letter to the convents' noble ladies admonishing them: "If you were born noble, rejoice more in the humility of religion than in secular dignity." To those of humble birth he wrote: "If anyone was born poor before she assumed holy religion, she ought to give thanks to God, who spared her the burden of the goods of this world."³⁵

To facilitate harmony and promote an ascetic life, Caesarius exhibited an almost Tertullian-like obsession with the clothing the nuns would wear to ensure that no sister, through the quality of her habit, would be seen to be superior to another. Producing cloth for their clothing was the principal occupation of the nuns. Creating textiles served the dual purpose of saving the cost of clothing for the women, who numbered around 200 by the year 540, and to encourage humility. Each woman was assigned a daily task of spinning, weaving, or finishing and worked on their task together while one sister read aloud to them.³⁶ Their dress was to be simple and decent in color, plain and milk white with no clothing belonging to any one woman but held in common and doled out as necessary.³⁷ To forestall internal conflict in the shared dormitory of the socially mixed convent, items of bedding were to be also to be plain. This requirement meant that elite women were not allowed to bring ornate coverlets or bed hangings when they joined the community. Historian Del Fiat Miola has done extensive research on textile production in the convent of St. John, addressing the prohibition on ornamentation that was not just for clothing but also included the cloth that the nuns produced within the convent for bedding, tables, and the altar: "The sisters in the monastery of St John in Arles are not to make textiles of different colored thread using the techniques of tapestry. Embroidery is prohibited except in the

³⁵ Hochstetler, "The Meaning," 32.

³⁶ Del Fiat Miola, "Permitted and Prohibited," 92.

³⁷ Maureen Tilley, "Caesarius's Rule," 86.

case of small altar cloths. The rule also forbids bed-covers or quilts of different colours.”³⁸

There were three specific goals of these very specific rules about dress according to Del Fiat Miola: “the religious habit was an identifying mark of a sister and a sign of entrance into consecrated life, it encouraged the cultivation of interior virtue as opposed to an exterior focus, and the equality of shared clothing provided by the abbess.”³⁹ Furnishings were to provide no distraction from the central goal of enclosure, focusing each day on contemplation of God at all times through work and learning.

It is worth noting that textile production at St. John’s had to be an extremely large operation in order to produce clothing for 200 or more women, beginning with raw wool. This was not just busy work to keep the nuns from being bored but a highly organized operation as Del Fiat Miola discovered in picking apart the section of the Rule that gives the specifics of the process. An important figure in overseeing the process the *lanipendia*, or sister in charge of wool-working, decided what garments were to be made and which nuns were responsible for their production. A portion of the monastery, the *textrinum*, was set aside for the cloth production and the daily work of the nuns. This daily work provided not only much needed material goods for the nuns but was also a social equalizer that lessened dependence on outside influences and had the effect of bringing the nuns together as a community.

Much of the program for women at the convent of St. John adhered to the patriarchal control that we come to expect from the tradition of the church fathers, but Caesarius also placed great importance on a convent population that was intellectually engaged with Holy Scripture. Each nun was required to learn to read if she did not already. Girls as young as six were allowed

³⁸ Del Fiat Miola, “Permitted and Prohibited,” 99.

³⁹ Del Fiat Miola, “Permitted and Prohibited.” 90-91.

entrance into the convent but only if they were committing to monastic life and only if they were capable of learning to read. At the death of sister Caesaria, her niece, Caesaria the Younger was chosen to be the second abbess. In a prologue to *Life of Caesarius*, a biography of the saint's life, the authors paid homage to the work of Caesaria the Younger at St. John, "Her work with her companions is so outstanding that in the midst of psalms and fast, vigils and readings, the virgins of Christ beautifully copy out the holy books, with their mother [abbess] herself as teacher."⁴⁰ This appreciation of the younger Caesaria also gives a welcome glimpse inside convent walls at a community headed by a woman and women artistically engaged in their own lives.

Women's monastic life became a lifelong project for Caesarius, and unlike so many male religious, there was a very paternal aspect to it. It is interesting to note that Caesarius anticipated that the nuns of St. John would face challenges from outside actors who would wish to wrest control of their property from them or change the Rule itself. He took steps to prevent outsiders meddling in convent business and to protect his Rule against undue influence. To achieve this, he appealed to the Pope:

Sometime before 523 he secured a bull from Pope Hormisdas which guaranteed the nuns against any interference from future bishops of Arles- "None of the bishops who are your successors shall dare to claim any power in the aforesaid monastery." The founder could be as practical concerning material security as he was concerning the spiritual. In the same bull he obtained a great concession much against the practice of the times, that of papal sanction for the alienation of considerable property of the Churches of for the perpetual support of the convent.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Charlene M. Kellsey." Lectio Divina: Nuns and Reading in the Sixth and Seventh Century," (phD diss, San Jose State University, 1999): 33.

⁴¹ McCartney, *Rules for Virgins*, 11.

When Caesarius died in 542 his rule lived on under the care of Caesaria the Younger who even facilitated its export to other convents. In a very short time, however, the social experiment of equality among the classes was whole heartedly dismissed in other convents as a hierarchy of nuns by social status took hold.⁴² Equality was not a challenge elite women were willing to accept, even in holy orders, as we have seen with the separation of women by social class in Paula's convent in Bethlehem.⁴³

By the eleventh century convents often housed two separate classes of nuns, the choir nuns and the servant nuns. This phenomenon is examined by Silvia Evangelisti who describes them thus: "Choir nuns usually come from an urban elite background, and occupied the most important administrative and governing positions in the community. Servant nuns, in contrast often came from humble backgrounds and entered the convent with the specific duty of performing all the manual and heavy domestic jobs."⁴⁴ As the severity of enclosure increased the need for an in-house work force of women able to perform heavy labor also increased. Even Caesarius' insistence on literacy failed to survive his Rule, as we will see in Clare of Assisi's Rule of 1253, her community of nuns were separated into literate and illiterate sisters. Whatever the reason for Caesarius's requirement for social equality, it proved so unpopular it was abandoned for a life that more closely mimicked the world the nuns had left behind. By the sixteenth century, Teresa of Avila was faced with elite women who joined her convent with their maids in tow and expecting to have visitors as they wished.⁴⁵ Caesarius's utopian view of cloister life may have failed for several reasons. Convents were always heavily populated by elite

⁴² Tilley, Caesarius's Rule," 89.

⁴³ Cain, "Jerome," 111.

⁴⁴ Silvia Evangelisti, "To find God in Work? Female Social Stratification in Early Modern Italian Convents," *European History Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2008): 398.

⁴⁵Maureen Tilley, "Caesarius's Rule," 89.

women whose families had the luxury of providing an alternate life for their daughters.⁴⁶ Rarely were there “extra” daughters among the poor, lower classes where every set of hands was required to eke out a living. Often the only way a poor woman entered a convent was as a servant to the convent or an individual nun as Evangelisti notes: “documents in monastic archives suggest that female communities displayed a rigidly hierarchical relationship between veiled nuns and servant nuns, and that the latter formed a quite separated and disadvantaged category within the convent.”⁴⁷ Additionally, as Caesarius found in his own attempts to fully separate women from their families, there was the matter of funding. Many of the elite women who entered monastic life brought with them large dowries for their houses and with this money came a certain expectation on the part of the sisters that they would have a say in the way they lived their cloistered lives.

Does this mean that Caesarius’s Rule for nuns was a failure? Absolutely not. The rule was used by other convents, including one established by Radegund, the wife of Frankish King Clothar in Poitiers, who specifically wrote to Caesaria the younger requesting a copy of the rule. Elements of the rule were chosen for use by male monasteries, though it seems without attribution.⁴⁸ The main area where his rule could be viewed as a failure was requiring a large group of women of different social standing to live together as one, it was an issue that would continue to plague cloistered communities at large and draw the attention of the church hierarchy. The expectation of elite women that they could live a material life to which they had

⁴⁶ Jan Gerchow, et al., “Early Monasteries and Foundations (500-1200) in *Crown and Veil* eds Jeffrey Hamberger and Susan Marti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 21.

⁴⁷ Evangelisti, “To Find God,” 406.

⁴⁸ Albrecht Diem, “The Gender of the Religious: Wo/men and the Invention of Monasticism” in *Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*,” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 440.

become accustomed would be source of consternation for the more ascetically minded of the nuns, as in Florence where “convent superiors repeatedly observed that nuns were breaking the rules and enjoying too much familiarity with material and luxury goods, living a lifestyle that was a far cry from the one they had subscribed to.”⁴⁹ This difference of opinion in the way women were to serve God was a challenge each nun faced and fodder for masculine regulatory zeal.

Before leaving Caesarius and the *Rule for Virgins* it is worth noting that in this religious family both Caesaria and Caesaria the Younger were recognized by their contemporaries as highly-literate and important players in the foundation and success of St. John’s. Of the two we know more about Caesaria the Younger from her writing, including the letter to Queen Radegund that she included with the requested copy of Caesarius’s rule. In it she provided advice to Radegund on what she deemed important in convent life as practiced at St John: “Let there be no woman from among those entering who does not study letters. Let them be bound to know all the Psalms by memory. And as I have already said, be zealous to fulfill in all things what you read in the Evangelists.”⁵⁰ Also, her words come to us from her *Dicta Caesaria*, a collection of three meditations upon the writings of Caesarius. The first two are close commentary on sermons of Caesarius, but the third contains more of Caesaria’s own voice as she quotes direct passages from the Bible and shared her meditation on a heart seeking Christ. The question arises how closely involved were the two Caesarias in the writing of the *Rule for Virgins*. With their high level of literacy, paired with the changes the Rule underwent over a period of years, and the fact that the rule impacted them personally, it seems difficult to dismiss

⁴⁹ Evangelisti,” To Find God,” 403.

⁵⁰ Caesaria, quoted in “Early Convent Life: Three Women of Merovingian Gaul” in: *The Writings of Medieval Women* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 47.

the idea that women were not just the subject of the rule but also co-authors. It is unfortunate that, as with Paula and Eustochium's involvement with Jerome as he created the Vulgate Bible, the true extent of contribution and authorship is impossible to discern in the texts that we know women were involved with writing. It is worth noting that the historian Albrecht Diem questions the authorship of the *Rule for Virgins*, which he refers to as the "mother" of all monastic rules for nuns. Suggesting that the Rule is an example of women's authorship being silenced, Diem asks: "Was it really Bishop Caesarius of Arles (d.542) who wrote and constantly revised this text, or was it a product of collaboration first with his sister and later with his niece, the first two abbesses of his monastic foundation?"⁵¹

The *Rule for Virgins* for the Monastery of St. John, had many forward-thinking ideals that were examples of the best women's communities had to offer. Despite the harsh reality of perpetual enclosure, for the women of St. John's the emphasis on social equality and shared work coupled with the ideals of a highly literate community in which women were not only expected to know scripture but also to engage with it, provided the foundation for a successful monastic life. Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, the social equality of Caesarius's community was not to outlive him as different ideals of what the church and monastic life stood for came to the fore in the centuries of monastic growth for women that followed.

The Twelfth Century

Hildegard of Bingen: Authority Given and Taken

By the twelfth century the church had passed its first millennium and it was ripe for reform. This reform would have its effect on women as we shall see in this section. In discussing reform

⁵¹ Diem, "The Gender of the Religious," 434.

Fiona J. Griffiths notes: “Reform as a complex phenomenon that resisted neat definitions; there was no single, universally recognized program for reform and the so-called reformers disagreed among themselves, concerning their objectives and methods.”⁵² The fever for change, from the top down, found its voice in would-be papal reformer Arnold of Brescia, (c 1090-1155), who decried the wealth of the clergy and the temporal power of bishops. In an effort to bring about disendowment for the clergy and church he was joined by like-minded Romans who, in a bold move, chased Pope Eugenius III from Rome. Unfortunately for Arnold, his concerns about the purity of the church were not shared by the most powerful and he was later removed himself at the behest of the newly elected pope Adrian IV.⁵³ He was captured by the forces of Emperor Fredrick I (Barbarossa), on behalf of the pope and placed on trial. For his efforts to reform the church to purer more ascetic times, Arnold was hanged, his body burned, and his ashes thrown into the Tiber.⁵⁴ It was in this papal-political milieu that the abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), far removed from Rome in the Germanic states, was thriving.

Numerous superlatives have been used to describe Hildegard; prophet, seer, holistic healer, poet, and composer. She was primarily the abbess of her own successful convent. Born in 1089, the tenth, or tithe, child of a wealthy family and as tradition demanded she was tithed to the church from birth. Given over to the anchoress Jutta of Sponheim at age eight, she was educated and trained in the monastery of St. Disibod where she professed virginity and took the veil. In

⁵²Fiona J. Griffiths, “The Cross and the *Cura monialium*: Robert of Arbrissel, John the Evangelist, and the Pastoral care of Women in the Age of Reform,” *Speculum* 83 (2008): 309.

⁵³ Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 40.

⁵⁴ Elphege Vacandard. “Arnold of Brescia,” In *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907) www.newadvent.org/cathen/01747b.htm.

the year 1136 she was chosen by the nuns as their new abbess, replacing the recently deceased Jutta.

From early childhood Hildegard had visions of divine light and as she grew older, she became more aware of her visions and began to write them down. Both her visions and her writing were examined and approved by church authorities and she was allowed to continue her writing and even to travel and preach. The nature of her writing and the papal approval that supported it generated fame for the abbess who also benefited from an aristocratic background. These factors led to her corresponding with some of the most important church and political figures of the day. Hildegard was a traditionalist who believed in the superiority of men and the frailty of women but only in as much as they were made that way by the Creator. In her writings, it is obvious that she was supportive of women's strength of religious conviction and power. She developed her own sophisticated theology of the feminine, viewing the personified church as "Ecclesia" and equating consecrated virgins with it.

It was her very strong belief in the traditional values of the church that led her to be an ardent supporter of church reform. In long prophetic treatises she accused the clergy of fornication, adultery, simony, pluralism, soft living, greed, negligence, and insubordination.⁵⁵ The behavior of the clergy in a prophetic dream led to the rape and downfall of Ecclesia, the church personified. It was a schismatic time in the history of the church with numerous weak popes vying with anti-popes for papal authority. It was in this milieu that Hildegard released her ire for Frederick I, whom she had met with in person and who she held responsible for damaging Ecclesia. Frederick, who we have previously seen as the military arm of Pope Adrian IV against Arnold of Brescia, actively interfered in papal elections and in 1164 named Paschal III, his

⁵⁵ Newman, *Sister*, 242.

appointee, the successor to Pope Victor IV. Then, upon Pascal's death, he used his secular and military strength to appoint another antipope, Calixtus III. Hildegard addressed Fredrick with fiery words inspired in her by God: "He Who Is says: I destroy contumacy and by myself crush the resistance of those who despise me. Woe, woe to the malice of wicked men who defy me. Hear this king if you wish to live; otherwise my sword shall smite you."⁵⁶

Preaching and teaching, chastising male clergy, and calling down the wrath of God upon a powerful ruler doesn't seem like the behavior of a twelfth-century nun, but Hildegard was not an average nun. We are left to wonder how she was able to claim authority for herself. When questioned about her right to do just that, speak authoritatively, she always demurred, insisting that it was God's choice to speak through the weakest vessel. By insisting that her authoritative voice was given to her and not taken by her, she swayed those who were concerned by her sex. It is also possible that some of her authority came from what she called the "effeminate age" of the church. Hildegard coined this term for the male members of the church who exhibited all of the behavior women were vilified for. As she prophesied to Pope Conrad III c.1150: "the present effeminate age would cede to an era still worse"⁵⁷ The focus of much of Hildegard's ire harkens back to the concerns of Arnold of Brescia, even though she followed the view of the papal hierarchy and agreed Arnold was a heretic. Historian Barbara Newman, in her study of Hildegard, confirms the similarity of their concern with the state of the clergy: "In her vehement denunciations of the effeminate age, Hildegard condemned a Church whose vain, pleasure-loving prelates had lost all manly fortitude and zeal for the Word of God."⁵⁸ Hildegard lived in

⁵⁶ Newman, *Sister*, 13.

⁵⁷ Newman, *Sister*, 238.

⁵⁸Newman, *Sister*, 239-240.

a rare time in which her aristocratic background and the fame of her visionary ability enabled her to fulfill her personal agency and also to exert authority of her own.

This power of a female voice benefited from unusual circumstance of papal authority. In her lifetime twelve popes ruled from the holy see and an additional seven anti-popes, puppets of powerful secular leaders, contributed to the weakness of central authority. It was also true that during much of her lifetime the church was crusading in the east in an attempt to free the holy land from Muslims, so its concerns were less on the domestic front.

Hildegard's nascent authority did not last her lifetime. Her male antagonists had her pleading with them at the end of her life to lift an interdict placed on her convent for purely political reasons. In 1178, at the age of eighty, Hildegard approved the burial of a once excommunicated but later reconciled nobleman in the graveyard of her community. Canons at her local cathedral demanded that his bones be exhumed and Hildegard refused. What followed was a lengthy drama between the two sides that dragged on for a year before Hildegard was vindicated.⁵⁹ Much of this interaction between Hildegard and church authorities has the appearance of putting Hildegard and her nuns in their place. That she had the temerity to go against, or even question the wishes of her superiors, was the source of this harsh treatment. The brief window of opportunity for female authority enjoyed by Hildegard had firmly closed.

Despite ups and downs in her career, some personal and others political, Hildegard was an extremely successful nun, allowed to go beyond the standard role for a woman in her position. Even with all of the roles she played in monastic life, one thing she could not do was dispense the sacraments; for this a priest was necessary. An essential part of every convent was the monks or priests that provided pastoral care for the nuns. The requirement to meet the

⁵⁹Newman, *Sister*, 14.

sacramental needs of the nuns was often met with a deep sense of God-given obligation but just as often with ambivalence, grudgingly accepted as part of religious life for a man. With the duty to care for nuns came the inevitable male peer who stridently condemned the practice. This was the experience of Robert Arbrissel, founder of the mixed community at Fontevraud and champion of women in religious life. Followed by rumor and innuendo concerning his interaction with religious women, he faced withering criticism from Bishop Marbode of Rennes: “the beginning of sin was caused by a woman and through her we all die, so if we want to avoid sin, we must cut the cause of sin away from us.”⁶⁰ Robert persevered in the face of this criticism and continued, along with his monks, to minister to the women of Fontevraud, even unto of his death-bed where he extracted a promise from his monks that they would continue to care for their monastic sisters, to “obey the command of Christ’s handmaids for the salvation of your souls.”⁶¹

Robert’s dying directive to his monks has a fascinating caveat. In commending the care of the nuns to the men, in much the same way Jesus commended his mother to John the apostle, he assured them that this obligatory care would save their souls. Here is but one example of the usefulness of women religious framed as a benefit to men. Another individual to adopt this benefit of women’s care was erstwhile philosopher and teacher turned monk Peter Abelard, who became the spiritual director of the displaced nuns of Argenteuil when they were invited to become part of the Paraclete community. It is worth noting the conditions under which the nuns of Argenteuil were displaced. Abbot Suger, dedicated himself to reforming the monastery of Saint-Denis, and then laid dubious claim to the priory of Notre-Dame, the home of the nuns at

⁶⁰ Fiona J. Griffiths, “The Cross and the *Cura monialium*: Robert of Arbrissel, John the Evangelist, and the Pastoral Care of Women in the Age of Reform,” *Speculum* 83 (2008), 306.

⁶¹ Griffiths, “The Cross,” 304.

Argenteuil. Using what modern scholars believe to be forged documents and the old trope of nuns behaving scandalously, and with the support of Pope Innocent II, Suger saw the nuns evicted and replaced by monks. The fact that the priory was wealthy under the leadership of the nuns cannot but help to have made it more attractive for reform. Discussing the reformation at Argenteuil, Thomas G. Waldman notes: “It is arguable that reformation is no more than a euphemism for acquisition yet all the language suggest that the quality of life among these religious women did not coincide with the stricter view of the monastic life so widely held in the early twelfth century.”⁶² Again the will of masculine authority is seen to take away all that the nuns had worked hard for and made successful at Argenteuil, while at the same time smearing their reputations as consecrated virgins.

The actions of abbot Suger in Argenteuil were not an isolated occurrence, other nuns found their reputations and those of their houses besmirched with reforming zeal: “Church officers often justified reforms by asserting that a women’s house was degenerate, corrupt, and financially mismanaged.”⁶³ This harkens back six centuries to the concerns expressed by Caesarius on the security of women at St. John’s and explains the lengths he went to in assuring their security from the interference of outsiders. With the group of newly displaced nuns was their abbess, Abelard’s former wife, Heloise. Abelard’s initial hesitance in caring for the women was based on criticism leveled against him that he was a luxury-loving lothario. Having been castrated at the behest of Heloise’s unhappy uncle, he felt unfairly saddled with his previous mistakes but still preferred to give distance to women.

⁶² Thomas G. Waldman, “Abbot Suger and the nuns of Argenteuil,” *Traditio* 41(1985): 248.

⁶³ Fiona J. Griffiths, “Women and Reform in the Central Middle Ages.” In: *Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender In medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 457.

Despite initial reticence, Abelard came to appreciate the importance of caring for nuns and by doing so reap the benefits of association with brides and their privileged access to Christ. He opined that men could earn “spiritual rewards” through their service.⁶⁴ In his correspondence with Heloise he tells her that he addresses her as his superior, despite his gendered superiority, because she out-ranks him by virtue of being the bride of Christ. Abelard’s understanding of the value of the status of the nuns of the Paraclete is voiced in his seventh letter to Heloise entitled: *Concerning the Authority and Dignity of the Order of Nuns*, in which he relates the importance of women throughout Jesus’s life and ministry and again in his eighth letter in which he writes to the male members of the community: “preside over the nuns too in such a way that he regards those who are the brides of the Lord whose servant he is as his own mistresses, and so be glad to serve rather than rule them.”⁶⁵ Abelard’s directive here, that the male members of the Paraclete must remember that they are to serve and not rule over the women of the community is suggestive of the firmly entrenched secondary nature of the women of the Paraclete. These nuns, though near contemporaries of Hildegard, were not enjoying her level of religious agency.

If we stopped at just one letter, we might have a portrait of Peter Abelard as arch-feminist, sadly that is not the case. While it is true that he was supportive of the male role in pastoral care of nuns and believed in the superiority of the role of bride of Christ, he nonetheless aped the words of St. Paul in his adamantness that women were inferior to men and required the authority of men within the convent. Abelard writes in *Historia calamitatum*: “And so I am much surprised that the custom should have been long established in convents of putting abbesses in charge of

⁶⁴ Fiona J. Griffiths, “Men’s duty to provide for women’s needs: Abelard, Heloise, and their negotiation of the cura minialium,” *Journal of Medieval History* 30, no. 1 (2004): 10.

⁶⁵ Griffiths, “The Cross,” 315.

women just as abbots are set over men”⁶⁶ Abelard’s delusion concerning his necessity came up short in the face of the reality of Heloise’s specific requirements for a spiritual advisor for herself and her exacting nuns, and her success as the administrator of the Paraclete.

If at one time Abelard expected the women of the Paraclete to be dependent upon him, that was not the case. The records of Heloise’s activities for the Paraclete show that she was not just an able manager but increased the property and prestige of the convent, and gained the respect of monastic leaders, among them Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux.⁶⁷ The inclusion of Bernard as one of Heloise’s correspondents and later visitor to her convent is interesting in as much as he was outspoken in his condemnation of male interaction with female religious.

The twelfth century seems like a turning point for women in monastic life. Abbesses like Hildegard and Heloise proved women capable of running and growing their own monastic communities, yet their authority had to be couched in terms acceptable to men, many who were ambivalent about women in religious life. As Barbara Newman relates, time and again Hildegard explicitly pointed to her feminine frailty and shock that God would use her as a tool for prophecy. She defers to higher authority and even when she took on the mantle of “masculine” teaching, it was a means to encourage men to step-up in their roles and replace her so she could return to anonymity. She never tried to take on authority that did not belong to her sex, as Newman points out she only attacked the abuse and not the form and source of hierarchal power.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Griffiths, “Men’s duty,” 14.

⁶⁷Griffiths, “Men’s duty,” 19.

⁶⁸Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 254.

The same could be said of Heloise, though not out in society the way Hildegard was, she was still performing authoritatively for her convent. Many of Abelard's letters on matters of theology were written at her behest. Her expectations for herself and her women were very different than Abelard's. The Rule he wrote for the nuns, which was never implemented because Heloise refused it, required that the convent be under the authority of a male abbot and not a female abbess.⁶⁹ A requirement of the Rule that Heloise proved completely unnecessary.

In two different studies cited in this paper, Fiona J. Griffiths uses Abelard and Heloise and their correspondence concerning the Paraclete to examine the *Cura monialium* or pastoral care of women. For women in a cloistered life it was essential to have an ordained priest to administer the sacraments, but from Heloise's letters it is obvious that not just any priest would do. The women of the convent had high expectations of their preacher and teacher. Some monks like Robert of Arbrissel, and in his own self-centered way, Abelard, believed that care of women was part of their calling that they did willingly even when others reproached them for fraternizing with the enemy. But as we shall see, as the twelfth century closed the care of women was increasingly seen as onerous by the men called to do it.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the twelfth century church was in a period of flux with calls for clerical reform. One of these reforms was an end to what remained of clerical marriage. Women married to priests were branded concubines or worse, whore. This reform affected not only clerical wives as Dyan Elliot suggests: "a campaign which aimed at nothing less than completely purging a male clergy of their female companions."⁷⁰ The rhetoric of the danger of women was amplified by the

⁶⁹ Griffiths, "Men's duty," 19.

⁷⁰ Dyan Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993), 102.

reformers by “premiering their arguments on the moral and physical repugnance of all women.”⁷¹ This renewed vilification of women came at the same time as the population of women entering convents continued to grow with an attendant need for monks to tend their spiritual needs. The negative response to this influx of women is seen in the Cistercian order, one to which women were drawn in large numbers. As early as 1212 Cistercian abbots were filing petitions with their General Chapter against female monasteries. In 1222 the General Chapter sent a letter to the pope requesting that the Cistercians be exempt from duty to women and in an addendum to the statutes of their order ratified in 1237 the Cistercians added language that excluded women from their order.⁷² In 1251 Pope Innocent IV notified the Cistercians that they would no longer receive requests for the foundation of female orders.⁷³ It is hard to imagine that this is what Hildegard had in mind when she called for reform while lamenting the effeminate church.

The twelfth century gave us two remarkable women in Hildegard and Heloise. Each flourished in a different way. Hildegard was able to turn her prolific gifts to her advantage and use them in interplay with the leading clergy of her day to push an agenda of reform that would return the church to what she viewed as masculine excellence. For a brief time, a woman had the ear of her male superiors and they listened. We are left to wonder if Hildegard’s period of authority had a positive or negative effect on the women who followed her.

While Heloise cannot be said to have the same level of influence as Hildegard, she certainly came through difficult circumstances with her agency intact. That abbot Suger was able to reclaim the priory at Argenteuil is often laid at Heloise’s feet. Heloise was abbess when Suger cast

⁷¹Griffiths “The Cross,” 310.

⁷² Klaus Schreiner, “Pastoral Care in Female Monasteries,” in *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*. Eds. Jeffery F. Hamburger and Susan Marti,(New York: Columbia University Press 2008), 231.

⁷³Schreiner, “Pastoral Care,” 237.

his covetous eyes on the property and claimed the nuns were living dissolute lives. The fact that some of the nuns of the order chose not to follow Heloise to the Paraclete was seen as confirmation of an irregular situation at the nunnery.⁷⁴ Despite being the victim of male authority Heloise flourished at the Paraclete, standing her ground against Abelard's efforts to take control of the lives of the nuns under her care. Both women had specific ideas about their religious lives and goals and faced challenges with the masculine church but came out of it with their ideas mostly intact. Next, we find that Clare of Assisi did not have exactly the same success with male authority.

The Thirteenth Century

Clare of Assisi: A Story Re-written

The thirteenth century saw no diminution in the number of women who were interested in religious vocation nor did it lessen the calls for reform of the church. One reform movement that blossomed at this time was an outgrowth of the spiritual life of Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), and was dedicated to a life in imitation of Christ (*Imitatio Christi*). Francis chose a life of poverty, subsisting on alms, and itinerate preaching to the masses. Rebuilding the church wherever he found it wanting was a figurative and literal mission, as in San Damiano where the spiritual aspect met the physical when he rebuilt the church there. Francis founded his order, the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans) in 1209. His teaching attracted a large following, including his spiritual sister, Clare.

Clare (1194-1253), also from the Italian town of Assisi, was one of Francis's ardent followers. She embraced his life of poverty and rejection of worldly goods and would spend her

⁷⁴ Waldman, "Abbot Suger," 246.

lifetime attempting to follow this path which she called the “Privilege of Poverty.” Though her male commentators would insist she was following in Francis’ footsteps in imitation of him, Francis was merely a guide to the one she really wished to follow, Jesus Christ. The clearest picture we have of Clare, in which she defines her own life, comes from her letters to Agnes of Prague (1211-1282). In her first of four letters to Agnes she refers to following in Jesus’ “footprints,” a path she set for herself and thus applauded Agnes for also taking this path of poverty: “to the footprints of Him to whom you have merited to be joined as a spouse.” Then, in a subsequent letter, Clare congratulates Agnes and her nuns for their imitation of the footprints of the “poor and humble Jesus Christ.”⁷⁵ This relationship, or imitation of the ministry of Christ, is repeatedly claimed by Clare. An in-depth examination of the writings of Clare by Catherine Mooney finds that unlike Francis, who mentions the concept of *imatatio* only once in his writings, it is mentioned by Clare eight times. Each time she directly claimed an imitation of Christ. As Mooney clearly shows: “In no case does she mention imitation of Mary, female saints or any other women.”⁷⁶ It is not to be construed Clare was rejecting the importance of Mary who was included in her Rule as a model of poverty for her order would follow. In Chapter 2 of the Rule: “Those who wish to accept this life and how they are to be received,” item 18 states: “And for the love of the most holy and beloved Child Who was wrapped in the poorest of swaddling clothes and laid in a manger (cf. Lk 2:7-12) and of His most holy Mother, I admonish, entreat and exhort my sisters that they always wear the poorest of garments.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Catherine M. Mooney, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 60.

⁷⁶ Mooney, “Imitatio,”: 63.

⁷⁷ Clare, “Rule of Saint Clare,” in *Lives and Voices: Sources in European Women’s History*, eds. Lisa DiCaprio and Merry E. Wiesner (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2001): 124.

Mary was a role model, just not Clare's role model. Clare's own choice for how she wished to live, and the path she wanted her sisters to take, was a life like Christ, which she would refer to as the Privilege of Poverty, and which she would devote her whole life trying to attain. Her choice for a stringently austere life was challenged by papal authority even as they tried to contain her and re-write her life as an imitation of Mary (*Imitatio Mariae*), the more gender appropriate member of the holy pair. Clare tenaciously maintained her own agency, and never veered from her path in Christ's "footprints." She never backed down.

Like the women previously examined in this paper, Clare had the benefit of a wealthy upbringing with its attendant education, but unlike the others who followed a more traditional religious devotion, Clare took her role to the extreme, to the consternation of the male clergy. Her wish to live the mendicant life, traveling and begging for food and lodging, was roundly dismissed by the church hierarchy who were adamant that women must be enclosed in a cloister.⁷⁸ This requirement of women's religious life had not changed from the time of Caesarius' insistence that perpetual enclosure was a necessary part of women's monastic life. Unable to successfully challenge the requirement for enclosure she none the less repeatedly petitioned for the Privilege of Poverty which meant that she and her followers lived cloistered but had no financial support or material endowment from Rome, depending instead on alms given to them by the community and pastoral ministry only by their fellow Franciscans. Clare's life of extremes included food deprivation, fasting three days a week, taking no food or drink, and following a regime so strict that both Francis and the Bishop of Assisi insisted she moderate her fast to include an ounce and a half of bread a day.⁷⁹ Clare's devotional behavior is an

⁷⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1987), 15.

⁷⁹ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 100.

example of food asceticism, the consumption of food being one of the few things which women had complete control over. But even this self-denial, appropriate for a man but not a woman, was met with suspicion by church authorities who developed open hostility to women's ascetic practices.⁸⁰

Clare's form of life, so antithetical to the church's assigned role for women, did not come without a struggle. It is difficult to know if her tenacity in the face of authority came from her aristocratic youth, the clarity of her vision, or a bit of both but she would not back down from what she felt was as the bare minimum requirement for her order to follow. To this end, Clare began working on a Rule for her order, unlike Hildegard and Heloise, who both followed a Benedictine rule that had been revised to accommodate women, Clare's was to be the first Rule for women written by a woman. Borrowing some elements from other orders, including the Benedictines, it still kept a focus on extreme poverty. The last years of her life were spent attempting to get papal approval for her Rule. Clare, the women who followed her, and even others not under the aegis of San Damiano where Clare had established her convent, were part of a vanguard women's penitential movement that swept northern and central Italy.⁸¹ This movement came to the attention of Cardinal Hugolino de' Segni, later Pope Gregory IX. The loose and unorthodox organization of women in convents and informal communities risked scandal and heresy, so with the approval of Pope Honorius III, he set out to organize women into regularized communities in 1218. Hugolino then turned his attention to Clare's monastery, expecting it to join with the others in compliance with his newly constituted Order of San Damiano. Clare capitulated to some of the requirements sought by Hugolino but obtained from

⁸⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 84-85.

⁸¹ Lezlie Knox, "The Form of Life of the Poor Ladies" in *The Writings of Clare of Assisi* (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publication 2011): 85.

him, now as Pope Gregory IX, the 1228 guarantee of the Privilege of Poverty.⁸² In 1230 Gregory issued the bull *Quo elongati* that forbid brothers within female communities, which threatened to end the relationship of Clare and the Franciscan brothers who had always been a part of her community. This was part of an effort to end double communities like Heloise's Paraclete. In response Clare took to her bed in a hunger strike.⁸³ The Pope reversed his ruling for her monastery only, but his relationship with Clare was now contentious.

Clare had many supporters for her Rule, among them several friars that had been close associates of Francis and who became affiliated with Clare upon his death. She also drew the attention of other women who wished to model themselves after her. One such woman was her frequent correspondent, the afore mentioned Agnes of Prague. Before becoming Agnes of Prague (or often Agnes of Bohemia) she was simply known as Princess Agnes. Agnes wrote to Clare expressing her desire to follow the Privilege of Poverty and Clare responded warmly with encouragement for her endeavors in the realm of extreme poverty, declaring to her she would be rewarded by heavenly riches and a close relationship with Christ: "so just as the glorious Virgin of virgins carried him physically so, you can too, following in her footsteps especially those of humility and poverty, can without any doubt, always carry him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body."⁸⁴ Clare solidified her support for Agnes by sending her trusted adviser Elias as a mentor, in a following letter to Agnes she advised her to "value Elias's counsel and disregard anyone who would try to direct the community against their vocation of evangelical poverty."⁸⁵ When, with additional counsel from Clare, Agnes sought permission to adopt the *forma vivendi*

⁸² Knox, "Form of Life," 88.

⁸³ Knox, "Form of Life," 88

⁸⁴ Clare Monagle, "Poor Maternity: Clare of Assisi's Letters to Agnes of Prague," *Women's History Review* 24, no.4 (2015): 495.

⁸⁵ Knox, "Form of Life," 90.

given to Clare by Francis, the pope denied it with the issuance of the bull *Angelis Gaudium*. This called for Agnes to recognize the superiority of his own monastic constitution for women and also to recognize his authority as Pope. Agnes demurred on the superiority and authority demands, suggesting instead that her brother King Wenceslaus, who supported her goal of holy penury, might be of assistance in the hostilities between Gregory and Emperor Frederick II.⁸⁶ Agnes got her wish and the pope got his army.

This interesting bit of power play may have been inspired by Clare's encouragement, albeit in a tacit way, that Agnes ignore papal rules and follow what she thought best. Specifically, in her third letter she addresses the new requirement, by Gregory, of the norm of strict Cistercian fasts for the monasteries of San Damiano: "I beg you, dearly beloved, to refrain wisely and prudently from an in indiscreet and impossible austerity in the fasting that I know you have undertaken." Broken down, in this quote Clare is encouraging Agnes to be wise and prudent, and to ignore the indiscreet and impossible requirement set by the Pope. This is a wonderful example, in writing of the encouragement of one woman to another to use her agency against authority.

In response to the efforts to claim personal and professional agency by Clare and then by Agnes, the Pope re-doubled his efforts to control the "malcontent" nuns. The first to be reprimanded by the pope was Elias, Clare's long-time and trusted advisor who was removed from his position of Minister General of Clare's order. When Elias continued to his efforts on behalf of the women and their way of life Gregory excommunicated him.⁸⁷

This would prove to be a difficult time for Clare, not only was the pope running out of patience with women who sought to defy his orders, but the removal of Elias from her service

⁸⁶ Knox "Form of Life," 91.

⁸⁷ Knox, "Form of Life," 92.

proceeded a sea change in the Order of Lesser Brothers. With Elias's ouster in 1239, many if not all of Clare's supporters were gone from San Damiano. Those who remained, under the leadership of new friars, dramatically curtailed their pastoral responsibilities for the nuns. In her emotionally fraught last days, Clare's eye turned to protecting her Rule for San Damiano, a priority now that her Franciscan brethren were distancing themselves from her. Why were they moving away from their obligation to the women? It seems that there are several answers to that question: one being the renewed concern that association with women was polluting, another, that time spent on the women took the friars away from their own works. Most likely it had to do with the effort to enshrine their founder Francis in a holy light that would lead to sainthood and his interactions with the women was seen as detrimental to this effort. A case in point is presented by Mooney who in examining the writings of Thomas Celano, Francis' first biographer, finds startling differences in the first copy, the *Vita prima* and the second, *Vita secunda*.

In Celano's *Vita prima* of Francis, Clare and the women of San Damiano were accorded a central role addressing how the women moved into the refurbished church of San Damiano "that blessed and holy place, that glorious and most excellent order of poor Ladies and holy virgins."⁸⁸ In direct appreciation of Clare and her relationship with Francis he claims she is "strongest and most precious stone" in the foundation.⁸⁹ Just twenty years later with the publication of the *Vita secunda* a dramatically different narrative is presented. Clare is no longer mentioned by name and the convent is mentioned only in passing and that mention is devastating in the length it goes to distance Francis from the women: "Though their father (Francis) gradually withdrew his

⁸⁸ Mooney, "Imitatio Christi," 72.

⁸⁹ Mooney, "Imitatio Christi," 72.

bodily presence form them, he nevertheless gave them his affection in the Holy Spirit by caring for them.”⁹⁰ Not content just to distance Francis from the women, Celano goes on to relate a warning to the friars said to be from Francis himself about women: “a honeyed poison...which led astray even holy men,” and “avoiding contagion from association with [women]..was as easy as walking in a fire without having the soles on one’s feet burned.”⁹¹

For Clare and her ladies, the tide had turned and the male Franciscans wanted nothing more to do with them. After a brief respite in the vilification of women, we find that even for those living the most stringently penitent and holy of lives, it was back in full force. It comes as a surprise then that on August 9, 1253, with the issuance of the bull *Solet annuere*, Pope Innocent IV, the successor of Gregory IX, approved Clare’s Rule just before her death with the Privilege of Poverty intact. The deathbed scene of Clare’s reception of the papal document is recounted by Sister Filippa, her close companion: “Although she was near death, she reverently took the letters and pressed the papal seal to her mouth to kiss it. The following day, lady Clare, truly transparent without stain, without the darkness of sin, passed from this life to the Lord in the brilliance of eternal light.”⁹² The approval of Clare’s Rule was the culmination of the debate on what it meant to be a Franciscan. The most central element of Francis’s teaching was that a life of poverty was the surest way to God and with her Rule, Clare wished to assure that for her order.

This document and many others by and about Clare are examined in Lezlie Knox’s essay in the volume *The Writings of Clare of Assisi*.⁹³ Knox begins with an extensive exploration of the

⁹⁰Mooney, “Imitatio Christi,” 73.

⁹¹ Mooney, “Imitatio Christi,” 74.

⁹² Monangle, “Poor Maternity,”: 497.

⁹³ Knox, “Form of Life,”61-107.

provenance of Clare's writing related to her continuing quest for perpetual poverty and later for the approval of her Rule. She then delves into what the paper trail says about Clare's interaction of more than 30 years with papal authorities, especially in challenging their authority to make changes to the way she and the nuns of San Damiano lived. With all the efforts to maintain her convent she still had time to mentor to Agnes. Much in Knox's essay shows the creeping increase of papal authority over women's religious orders. The stated goal of Gregory IX was to regularize women's religious houses and take control of women on the perimeter of orthodox communities such as the penitent women of the Minoresses, followers of Francis who lived in the world beyond the cloister with the support of sympathetic friars. These communities met with strong disapproval from Gregory who issued a bull 1241 against their claims of association with his order of San Damiano. This mission to suppress the lay religious women was taken up by his successor Innocent IV who issued bulls condemning them in 1246, 1250, 1251, and 1257.⁹⁴

Was Clare, a well-known and charismatic ascetic, unbeknownst to her, playing a role in the effort to control other religious women? Knox thinks that both Gregory and Innocent felt strongly the way to regularize female religious life was through increased clerical authority. Possibly recognizing Clare's authority to write a Rule was a way to make her part of the machinery that ordered women's lives.⁹⁵ The reason that Innocent IV approved Clare's Rule has never been satisfactorily determined. It is widely accepted that she was highly respected as a holy woman and a good (if prickly) role model for other women. The idea that Clare would prove useful to the church, even in death, to frame women's religious devotion is a strong

⁹⁴ Knox, "Form of Life," 93

⁹⁵ Knox, "Form of Life," 95.

contender for the reasoning behind Innocent's approval. If evidence was needed of Clare's appeal to other women, we needed to look no farther than her letters and relationship with Agnes of Prague.

That relationship shows us, beyond the one-dimensional champion of poverty, a woman deeply invested in sharing the route to female agency with another woman. Clare Monagle's exploration presents a side of Clare not often commented on, her maternal side. In her letters to Agnes of Prague she shows a nurturing, maternal side, embracing Agnes as mother and welcoming her as a sister bride. As Monagle makes clear, Clare the older and more experienced woman, was embracing Agnes as a daughter: "do not for a moment wonder or in any way believe that the fire of my love for you burns any less sweetly in the deepest heart of your mother."⁹⁶ At the same time, she is welcoming her to the world of the bride who is willing to live the life of poverty: "Spurning all these things with your whole heart and mind you have chosen instead holiest poverty and physical want, accepting a nobler spouse the Lord Jesus Christ, who will keep your virginity always immaculate and inviolate."⁹⁷ The genuine emotion expressed in these letters is not to be doubted, but as Monagle is quick to point out, letters at this time were rarely personal and would have been read or heard by many people. As we have seen above, Clare used her letters to aid Agnes in navigating the intricacies of papal relationships. She truly is a mother teaching her daughter the ways of their world and even, if read carefully, how to keep her voice in the androcentric world.

Of the explorations into Clare's lifelong effort to live in imitation of Christ, the most disheartening is by Catherine Mooney, not for lack of exceptional scholarship, which it is, but for

⁹⁶Monagle, "Poor maternity," 494.

⁹⁷ Monagle, "Poor maternity," 493

the description of the wholesale theft of Clare's agency and legacy by the male hierarchy of the Church. In the chapter *Imitatio Christi or Imitatio Mariae* in her book *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, Mooney goes deep into the writings of Clare and explores her language of personal piety and desire and the gendered and dismissive way she was represented by male biographers.⁹⁸ Again and again in her writings, Clare speaks of following Christ, choosing poverty like Christ, trying to be like Christ: "gaze upon, consider, and contemplate Christ, while desiring to imitate him."⁹⁹ Mooney examines how Clare's personal image was changed, much of the reasoning related to the expansion in Marian devotion and the identification of Mary as the appropriate role-model for women. Sadly, much of the change was brought about by the previously mentioned effort to free Francis from the encumbrance of his female followers and make his, a singular relationship with Christ. This is evident even in the art commissioned for monasteries. That Clare had become anathema to the Franciscan brothers and written out of their history and iconographic representations is affirmed by Mooney who notes that in thirteenth and fourteenth century, depictions of Clare were nearly absent from men's houses: "The friar's Church's, in contrast, are virtually bereft of images of Clare. Clare does not appear once in any of the scenes in the ten historiated panels dedicated to Saint Francis."¹⁰⁰ It is only through the efforts of Clare's own followers that she appears associated with Francis. In one example, the Santa Chiara Dossal of 1283, Clare and Francis are depicted together as Clare performs a miracle of multiplying bread in a Christ-like manner. In another work also

⁹⁸ Catherine Mooney, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1999), 52-77.

⁹⁹ Mooney, "Imitatio Christi," 63.

¹⁰⁰ Mooney, "Imitatio Christi," 75.

commissioned by women for their convent, Clare's death is depicted and likened to those of Christ, Mary and Francis.

This effort by Clare's followers to maintain the life of *Imitatio Christi* for themselves and for her memory was to be a losing battle as Mooney relates: "This evolving portrayal of Clare and the correlative depictions of her female followers as imitators of Mary and Francis served to distance them from the centrally important Christian motif of imitation of Christ and consequently reinforced their secondary position vis-à-vis Francis and his male followers."¹⁰¹

Despite the Franciscans desire to ignore Clare, her importance to the Church is not to be underestimated and is supported by the fact that just two years after her death she was canonized. It is possible that the individual canonized would be unrecognizable to Clare herself with the emphasis placed on her devotion to and imitation not of Christ but of Mary. This rebranding of women's piety by the male dominated Church, is the beginning of redoubled efforts to corral and control nuns and their religious experiences. Like Hildegard before her, Clare spent much of her life negotiating with masculine authorities. For Hildegard her reputation and fame as a mystic and prophet gave her the opportunity to use her gifts to influence both temporal and ecclesial rulers. Clare however only had her primitive yet powerful devotion to offer. Her efforts at *imitatio Christi* and the life of poverty were her superpowers, yet in the years she attempted to claim her authority, her story was being rewritten in two ways. Firstly, by the Franciscans who insisted that she was imitating Francis himself, a Christ-like individual to her also-ran status. Interestingly, recent scholarship by Franciscan scholars place a different take on Clare's efforts. They suggest that Francis was never a role model for Clare but rather his idea of poverty as closeness with Christ was what she was drawn to: "The role Francis played in her vocation? He

¹⁰¹Mooney, "Imitatio Christi," 76.

was the channel whence it came from God; indeed, he is only the herald, the ambassador of the King who is King of poverty.”¹⁰² Clare’s use of Francis’s name was a savvy effort to legitimize her goals by attaching them to a man.

Secondly, Clare was a handy representative for the continued effort to define Mary as the role model for all women. Even though more than 700 years had passed since Ambrose and other early church fathers had started the idea of Mary and her purity being important to women’s lives, men were still trying, unrelentingly, to apply gender specificity to piety. If Mary, in her passivity and obedience, could not encourage the same behavior in women, the Church would need to take more concrete steps. The next section will examine those steps taken by papal authorities to reassert masculine prerogative over the feminine church with the implementation of strict enclosure orders on all religious women and a new antagonist to women’s religious practices: the male discerner of spirits.

The Thirteenth through Sixteenth Century Enclosure and Discerning Women

In the year 1298, Pope Boniface VIII, the father of the Church, had lost all patience with his wayward daughters. In issuing his decretal *Periculoso* he stated: “in virtue of holy obedience, under threat of divine judgement and the prospect of eternal damnation;” that “nuns of every community or order, in every part of the world. both collectively and individually, be henceforth perpetually cloistered in their monasteries.”¹⁰³ The daughters were being sent to their rooms, and

¹⁰²Jacques Dalarun, “Francis and Clare of Assisi: Differing Perspectives on Gender and Power,” *Franciscan studies* 63 (2005): 18.

¹⁰³ Elizabeth Makowski, “Cloister Contested: *Periculoso* As Authority in Late Medieval Consilia,” *Jurist* (2011): 334.

not surprisingly, Mary was again called upon to model acceptable behavior. Ambrose, one of her most ardent supporters, provided the narrative: “Consider how Mary was never found anywhere else except in her bedroom when she was sought (Luke 1.28).”¹⁰⁴ First Mary, and now all women professing religion were to be shining examples of commendable anonymity, sequestered indoors.

Boniface’s order was just the beginning of hard times for nuns who wished to be outside convent walls taking care of their convent’s business, as even abbesses were not exempt from perpetual enclosure. Boniface’s vitriolic screed explains his ruling: “the dangerous and abominable situation of certain nuns, who, casting off the reins of respectability and impudently abandoning nunnish modesty and the natural bashfulness of their sex not only went rove about, but also knowingly admitted secular persons into their monasteries.”¹⁰⁵ As we saw with Abbot Sugar in chapter three, defaming women’s character, usually with the suggestion of sexual impropriety was the first step the masculine church took to subjugate the feminine. Nuns had been living in cloister with permeable walls for centuries without their activities being seen as transgressive but in the thirteenth century the same spirit of ecclesial reform challenged women’s rights to govern themselves. Examining Cistercian women and the cloister, Erin L. Jordan lists two reasons for strict imposition of enclosure: first, as always, is the fear of women and their power to pollute spiritually and threaten men’s salvation. Merely coming into contact with women left men at risk.¹⁰⁶ But it is the second reason identified by Jordan that is an extremely interesting landmark for the time period. Her second reason is the proliferation of women’s

¹⁰⁴ Elliot, *Bride*, 43.

¹⁰⁵ Erin L. Jordan, “Roving Nuns and Cistercian Realities: The Cloistering of Religious Women in the Thirteenth Century.” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 43, no. 3 (2012): 598.

¹⁰⁶Jordan, “Roving Nuns,” 606.

religious groups in the low countries and France. Religious fervor was not limited to women willing or able to enter monastic life; other women were drawn to lay religious communities that lived a Christ-like life without professing holy orders. One group, the problematic Beguines, were subjected to pointed criticism, even harassment. It was the flowering of this movement that may have led the Cistercians General Chapter to act in a definitive way to emphasize the contemplative and cloistered character of its female members so they would not be confused with the Beguines. Once nuns were no longer able to act outside of the convent, previous sources of income dried up. The Cistercians were concerned that money that should have been tithed to the convent might instead be given to the Beguines. The confusion over the difference in a Beguine and a Cistercian nun didn't just end with money but also reputation as Jordan discovers: "as the thirteenth century progressed, beguines were increasingly the focus of ecclesiastical scrutiny, and concerns about orthodoxy were always an issue."¹⁰⁷ Cistercian concerns about permeable convent walls and the proliferation of lay religious groups are often cited as reasons that Boniface felt the need to take action to manage women in holy orders and lay religious women, thus the decretal *Periculoso* was enacted.

Enclosure had always been a feature of women's monastic lives. When Caesarius wrote his Rule in the sixth century, he required his nuns submit to perpetual enclosure. As discussed by Donald Hochstetler earlier, Caesarius felt that it was essential to a life lived in contemplation. It is also true that it provided a measure of safety for the nuns in unsettled times. The meaning behind *Periculoso* was very different then the encouragement of contemplation or concern for safety. It was an organized effort to take women's agency from them. Boniface had become agitated by the large numbers of women claiming religious authority who were living out in the

¹⁰⁷ Jordan, "Roving Nuns," 609.

world, therefore, women's penitential groups such as the Beguines who were taking authority to teach and live free had to be stopped. Since women in these groups lived all over Europe and many enjoyed the support of their communities, this was easier said than done. The easiest women to apply the strict new rules to were the ones already under the Church's control, those already in convents.

A long shadow was cast over women's lives by *Periculoso*, from questions of its legality to the changes it made in their lives as they faced a lifetime of total seclusion. One response to the life changing order was the increase in women's mysticism, an outgrowth of the new strict enclosure. And, because no agency on the part of women goes unchallenged, the work of John Gerson on spiritual discernment will be relevant to the discussion of women's spiritual authority. Finally, this section will introduce Teresa of Avila, one of the most important mystics of the sixteenth century who worked hard to maintain the dignity and legality of women's mysticism.

Boniface recognized that his order *Periculoso* would most likely be challenged since it was to be a dramatic change in obligation for women, therefore he submitted the document to law scholars at the major universities for study. These canon lawyers undoubtedly would be called upon to interpret the law. Elizabeth Makowski has examined documents related to the genre of legal opinion (*consillia*), finding that Boniface's canonists differed in their opinions as to the enforceability of *Periculoso*. One major concern of the lawyers was whether nuns who had professed under a less strict rule could be forced to accept the new harsher requirements of *Periculoso*, which also called for excommunication for nuns who chose to leave the convent. Despite overwhelming support for the decretal, the concern remained that holding nuns to a higher standard than the one they professed under would not hold up in court. Canonist Oldradus de Ponte (d.1343) opined that since women entering monastic orders were given a one year

probationary period in which they might freely leave, it seemed that a nun, before being required to live a harsher form of monastic life, should at least be given a second probationary period.¹⁰⁸

As the presence of lawyers suggest, women did contest the changes and went to court to challenge it. Dissatisfaction with the changes papal authorities made in their lives did lead some women to leave their convents but most stayed and devised new ways to live and worship *in claustra*.

For women in religious orders the years since the imposition of *Periculoso* represented a change in their devotional practices. With strict enclosure came a more focused emphasis on the contemplative life, as a result the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed an increase in women's mystical experiences, the one remaining expression or outlet for their devotion. In the early monastic orders the playing field was much more level, with women and men worshipping and learning in much the same way but with the founding of the University of Bologna in 1088 and the University of Paris in 1150 men gained access to the newest translations of Greek source material, debated the minutia of the gospels, and fine-tune the male-centric Christian faith. This separation pushed even the most intellectually gifted women to the margins. The only outlet left to women was the control of their bodies and minds. Women's mystical experiences were summarized by Caroline Walker Bynum:

Mysticism was more central in female religiosity and in female claims to sanctity than men's and paramystical phenomena (trances, levitation, stigmata, miraculous inedia, etc.) were far more common in women's mysticism. Women's reputations for holiness were more often based on supernatural, charismatic authority, especially visions and supernatural signs."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Makowski, "Cloister Contested," 340.

¹⁰⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, in Kathleen Ashley "Cultures of Devotion" *Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013): 520.

Mystical experiences were not just a mid-millennia phenomenon, having been part of women's religious lives from the start. Women were defined by their permeability to outside influence, both positive and negative. Referring again to Catherine Mooney and her discussion of the idea of Marian devotion, which was foisted upon Clare of Assisi: "The theological formulation of Mary as mediatrix is echoed strongly in both learned and popular accounts of the saints' lives in which women, much more than men are viewed as mediators, channels, or bridges connecting this world with the supernatural world."¹¹⁰ Mysticism and supernatural experiences in the thirteenth century were an acceptable part of women's devotional practice.

While a full examination of these practices is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief description of some of the most prominent behaviors is: extreme fasting, such as subsisting only on Eucharistic wafers, rapture or out of body experiences, visions of drinking from the wounds of Christ, or nursing at his breast, and detailed visions of carnal marriage with Christ. This phenomenon, nuptial imagery of the bride of Christ in a mystical consummation with the groom was not a new idea. As early as the writing of St. Jerome the bride of Christ relationship had been eroticized, but now it had become an embarrassment to male church leaders and provided another way to question the very sanity of the bride. This "marriage," in which consecrated virgins were given away in a rite established centuries before by the church fathers, was the only one available with the virgins of the Church and it had played a central role in their identity. Now consummation was to be taken away from them.

Extreme asceticism, mystical pronouncements, control of the physical and mental self, this was cloistered women's agency. This was also the behaviors that drew the jaundiced eye of

¹¹⁰ Mooney, "Imitatio Christi," 69.

French theologian John (Jean) Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris. Gerson (1363-1429), devoted much of his intellectual and professional life to studying mysticism, the *via mystica*, with an eye toward false revelation. This “discernment” of spirits, almost exclusively applied to female mystics, although he did also label others who sought to speak for God as delusional and to be found : “among servants, uneducated youths, slow-witted old people, the uneducated crowd, [and] broken-down old women.”¹¹¹ Gerson sought to enhance the University of Paris’s reputation as the center of spiritual discernment with its members identifying the diabolical influences controlling mystics, again mostly women.

The outcome of successful discernment relied on enhanced clerical control and the development of a procedural/judicial response to female prophecy.¹¹² In other words, John Gerson set out to rob women of the only agency left to them by the church. Gerson’s goal was to equate female mysticism with diabolical delusion under the guise of helpful study. To that end, he produced three treatises on the subject: *About distinguishing true from false revelations*, *About testing spirits*, and *About investigating teachings*. In each document he discusses the importance of adherence to the gospel and rendering authority to church hierarchy. The three ways to test the authenticity of spirits are defined as: learning in the Scriptures, by spiritual experience, and by special gift of the Holy Spirit.¹¹³ Gerson planned to unleash a cadre of university educated discerners on women who dared to suggest they spoke from God. Reaching back to the beginning of Biblical time and the culpability of Eve’s inadequate ability at

¹¹¹ Dyan Elliot, “Seeing Double John Gerson, the Discernment of Spirits, and Joan of Arc.” *American Historical Review* 107, no.1 (2002): 27.

¹¹² Elliott, “Seeing Double,” 35.

¹¹³ B.J. Craiger, “Doctrine and Discipline in the Church of Jean Gerson,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 41, no. 3 (1990): 396.

discernment, Gerson tared women in the fourteenth century with the brush of misogyny: woman became the arbiter of negative exemplarity.

It is worth noting that Gerson's indictment of female mystics was a double-edged sword. In his *On the Proving of Spirits*, he suggests that women are led astray by their religious fervor and that those who claim mystical prerogative: "develop inappropriate relationships with their confessors under the pretext of frequent confessions."¹¹⁴ Even a religious scholar would realize that inappropriate relationship require the involvement of two people. Then again, that is most likely the reason for Gerson's concern about female mystics and their obsessive need for their confessors; male confessors needed to be protected from the women to whom they ministered. We shall see later in the chapter that Teresa of Avila was also concerned about confessors, in her case though it was about the lack of pastoral ability when dealing with women's mystical experiences.

If, as Dyan Elliot suggests, Gerson sought to wrest mysticism from women who he worried "outstripped the learned cleric in contemplative gifts,"¹¹⁵ in order to enhance the university and the scholastic prerogative, the machine he created far outstripped these simple goals. His ideas about the discernment of spirits and the authenticity of women's voices would in time lead in a direct line from doubt to death for many women:

Gerson's approach [was] a methodological triumph, but his 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 inquisitorial standard hitherto reserved for church criminal, heretics, or dead candidates for sainthood.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Elliot, "Seeing Double," 29.

¹¹⁵ Elliot, "Seeing Double," 33.

¹¹⁶ Elliot, "Seeing Double," 51.

Gerson was the spiritual and intellectual godfather of the Inquisition. His agenda; anti-woman, bigoted against female spiritual agency, and dismissive of their lack of education, is thoughtfully covered by both B. J. Caiger in *Doctrine and Discipline in the Church of Jean Gerson* and Dyan Elliot in *Seeing Double: John Gerson, the Discernment of Spirits, and Joan of Arc*. Both historians present the nature of Gerson's ideas on discernment and the necessity to train clerics to investigate potential diabolical sources. Caiger discusses the political implications that concerned Gerson especially as related to maintaining hierarchical authority. Toward this question of authority Gerson identified three types of judgement that came from the church: authoritative, judicial, and doctrinal or, the power to declare, the power to discipline, and the power to teach thus made the church the last word on all aspects of discernment.¹¹⁷ Elliot covers much the same territory but also includes an aspect not covered by Caiger which is the desire by Gerson to have the university be the authority on the intellectual questioning of mysticism: "His defensiveness on behalf of the scholastic prerogative was additionally colored by his desire to reform the university by promoting mysticism."¹¹⁸ Gerson's principles for determining if women's religious experiences were legitimate or false is summed up by Elliott:

But ultimately, Gerson's machine was built to generate judgements. Moreover, fueled as it was by objections, careful considerations and doubt. It was better adapted to producing condemnations than vindications, even as it was more successful at identifying heretic than identifying saints.¹¹⁹

Gerson wasn't exactly covering new territory, men had always found a way to undermine women's religious agency; in the case of Hildegard, we had an example of agency granted then taken away, and with Clare agency allowed but rewritten in a way suitable to masculine

¹¹⁷ Caiger, "Doctrine and Discipline," 399.

¹¹⁸ Elliot, "Seeing Double," 34.

¹¹⁹ Elliot, "Seeing Double," 44.

authority. The difference with Gerson's plan was that agency would be consistently and permanently denied to women.

If Gerson's ultimate goal was to end women's mystical lives and leave them without voice his wish was nearly granted with the publication in 1487 of Heinrich Kramer's (1430-1505) *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches), the notorious witch-hunting treatise and instruction manual for inquisitors. A direct product of male anxiety over the authority accorded to female mystics and Pope Innocent VIII's personal fear of witches, the *Malleus* now strongly equated women's mystical experiences with witchcraft. In a diatribe against women, one whole chapter (*Liber 1 Quaestio 6*) is devoted to explaining why women are more likely to be witches than men. In an article devoted to examining the later years of Kramer's life, Tamar Herzig gives this overview: "In this chapter, he contends that women's nature is weaker than men's not only physically, but also psychologically, intellectually, and morally. Kramer argues that women's lascivious nature and moral and intellectual inferiority are the reason for their greater proclivity to witchcraft."¹²⁰ The closing years of the fifteenth century were not easy ones for cloistered nuns, lay religious women, or women in general who were subjected to the witch hysteria of the Dominicans and the Inquisitorial leanings of other clerical males who believed women had overstepped their prerogative.

It would be understandable if nuns kept to themselves, not overtly expressing religious devotion or mystical experiences in fear for their lives, doubtless many did, but not Teresa of Avila (1515-1582). Teresa perfectly fit the Inquisition's idea of a demonic heretic with her Jewish blood, (her grandfather was a converso) and her claims to mystical experiences. Indeed,

¹²⁰ Tamar Herzig, "Witches, Saints, and Heretics: Heinrich Kramer's Ties with Italian Women Mystics," *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press), 28.

Teresa was referred to an Inquisitorial tribunal on at least five occasions when questions were raised concerning her orthodoxy and religious behavior.¹²¹ Between 1575 and 1576 she wrote five defenses of herself and though cleared by the Inquisition, she still had her firm detractors who held her writings to be heretical. Teresa's success was credited by Mary E. Giles in this way: "Teresa negotiated acceptance for her visionary authority because she was uncommonly intelligent, rhetorically skillful, cognizant of the larger religious scene, and theologically adept."¹²²

Teresa, like Hildegard before her, was careful never to claim authority for herself, instead insisting God spoke through her. She rarely used bridal imagery or called herself a bride of Christ instead saying that God called her daughter.¹²³ In her most recognized work *The Interior Castle*, Teresa outlines a spiritual journey of the soul to unite with Christ, in its preface she asks that God help her to explain the state of rapture she experiences. Teresa's writing was non-confrontational, instead of the erotic bridal imagery that had become such a part of the vilified experience of women, she instead framed a relationship with Christ in terms of friendship. This friendship was not one of normal companionship often based on social class but rather was a spiritual companionship, in which an individual could have a friendship with Christ in much the same manner as the saints.¹²⁴ Teresa maintained that the friendship with God was maintained

¹²¹ Gillian T.W. Ahlgren, "Negotiating Sanctity: Holy Women in Sixteenth-Century Spain," *Church History* 64, no.3 (1995): 380.

¹²² Mary E. Giles, "Introduction," *Women and the Inquisition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999), 10.

¹²³ Elizabeth Rhodes, "Yo Dije, Si señor" in *Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999): 147-148.

¹²⁴ Tara K. Soughers, "Holiness as friendship with Christ: Teresa of Avila," *HTS Theologese Studies/theological Studies* 42, no.4 (2016): 3.

with mental prayer, unfortunately mental prayer had come under increasing suspicion from the Church and the Inquisition.

The danger of interior prayer and contemplation as exemplified by its female practitioners is defined by Ahlgren as a clash of religious epistemologies or the struggle between learned men and spiritually experienced women.¹²⁵ As with the teaching of Gerson a century before university-trained theologians took strong exception to women who dared to preach or teach. In addition to the educated versus inspired dichotomy, Ahlgren finds that the age-old charge that women were morally weaker and deluded by the devil, completes the tarnishing of women's religiosity. Women such as Teresa were deemed by incapable of following a personal spiritual path in the words of the Inquisition whether because they were ignorant, deceived or truly malicious.¹²⁶

If potential heresy in her writing or her religious practices kept Teresa before the Inquisitorial court, other aspects of her life made her an exemplary nun. Dissatisfied with the laxity in the Carmelite order to which she belonged; she organized her own reformed order of discalced Carmelites. As with Clare before her, Teresa was concerned with the materialism of women entering holy orders and prescribed a more ascetic convent life. Teresa's strictly enforced rules of enclosure and contemplation won her approval of church authorities and the enmity of the order that she left, as she attempted to spread her message of ascetic austerity. Teresa took seriously the challenge of the strict religious life her nuns would face and the very real danger a disordered population could pose to the whole convent. This is exemplified with her examination of melancholia in the nunnery. Writing in *The Interior Castle*, she offers advice for

¹²⁵ Ahlgren, "Negotiating Sanctity," 376.

¹²⁶ Ahlgren, *Negotiating Sanctity*, 377.

other prioresses on the identification of the melancholiac nun versus the nun who is just dangerously willful or even demonically possessed. Teresa must have been well aware that a convent in which nuns were exhibiting questionable behavior would have brought the whole institution very negative attention. Teresa's concern is addressed by Philosophy professor Jennifer Radden: "Of note is the extreme seriousness with which she [Teresa] took this condition and its potentially crippling effects in a closed, religious community. In Teresa's writing, melancholia was a growing menace."¹²⁷ A menace that Teresa hoped to help other nuns to identify and manage without outside interference.

Historian Alison Weber, in studying Teresa's effort to maintain her convent reform and approval to use mental prayer finds that taking on the devil is one way Teresa wrested agency from the Church. Named over two hundred times in her various works, the devil and his minions were tangible entities in the lives not just of contemplatives but of everyone in the fifteenth century. Teresa insisted, in defense of mental prayer, that though the devil is strong the influence of God within this mental exercise is stronger. She defined the devil not in the alluring sexual terms so often used to entice women but with dismissive laughter, more nuisance than seducer.¹²⁸

It was not only the Inquisitors that questioned Teresa's spiritual acumen, her confessors also doubted her ability to avoid demonic temptation in mental prayer and insisted she only pray orally using church sanctioned prayers. Needless to say, this was not a popular idea with Teresa: "Thus obedience to confessors and submission before their unwarranted suspicions is recast as a kind of penance. Confessors, rather than their spiritual daughters, become the locus of demonic

¹²⁷ Jennifer Radden, "Melancholia in the Writing of a Sixteenth-Century Spanish Nun." *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 12, no. 3 (2004): 293-297.

¹²⁸ Alison Weber, "Saint Teresa, Demonologist". In *Culture and Control in Counter Reformation Spain* eds. Anne J Cruz and Mary Elizabeth Perry (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1992): 176.

deception.”¹²⁹ In her own disalced convents Teresa insisted that her nuns have access to more than a single confessor, so that neither would have sole authority over the nun and her expression of piety. Antithetical to the teaching of Gerson cited above, confessors, with their lack of skill were more of a problem to women than women a danger to the confessor.

Teresa was a mystic, abbess, author, and according to Alison Weber, a Demonologist. Each of these elements made her a successful nun and one who, despite being repeatedly questioned by the Inquisition, and her confessors, would eventually rise not only to sainthood but also be named a Doctor of the Church. This honor put her in the illustrious company of those diminishers of women, Saints Jerome and Ambrose, The devil was a real evil presence to Teresa but he appeared in many guises such as the Dominicans and the Calced Carmelites who were her “enemies,” as Weber outlines in her study of Teresa’s writing in *Saint Teresa Demonologist*:¹³⁰ “Teresa attributes interpersonal conflict-especially the internecine struggle with the calced to diabolical intervention.”¹³¹ Weber also shows that by taking authority over any interaction with the devil Teresa is the master of the situation. Less easy to master was the dissention between the two orders, calced and disalced Carmelites which was one of the reasons Teresa was on the docket of inquiry in the year 1576, and remanded to her convent from 1576-1577.¹³² This human problem is one of several that Teresa faced and is discussed in the book *Women in the Inquisition* edited by Mary E. Giles.¹³³

¹²⁹Weber, “Saint Teresa,” 177.

¹³⁰Weber, “Saint Teresa,” 184.

¹³¹Weber, “Saint Teresa,” 184

¹³²Ahlgren, “Francesca de los Apostoles: A Visionary Voice for Reform in sixteenth century Toledo.” in *Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World* ed. Mary Giles (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999): 124.

¹³³ Mary Giles, *Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999).

Teresa is a rare exception in the Spanish Inquisitional age, a woman called before the judgement of men who was able to convince them of the legitimacy of her spiritual life. Teresa continued her mystical journey, shepherding her nuns in that path by referencing the words of Jesus presented in the introduction of this paper when he offers to make Mary Magdalene like a male. In her *Camino de perfeccion* she tells her nuns: “I would not want you, my daughters, to be womanly in any way nor to seem so, but [to be] strong men; for you do what is in you the Lord will make you so manly that men will be shocked.”¹³⁴ Maybe Teresa hit on the way for women to retain agency in religious life: relying on Jesus to make them male.

Conclusion

The history of women lives within the church is a checkered one. Beginning in the third century when women like Perpetua won approval for being martyred for their faith to the sixteenth century when women died despite their faith, martyred on the twin altars of heresy and witchcraft, the control exerted by their male superiors worked to diminish the women’s role in the church, robbing them of their agency and autonomy.

Yet, despite the effort to contain and silence them, women continued to join monastic communities, and working together faced the challenges to their agency over their own religious lives. Sisterly instruction, motherly care, posthumous art, and unceasing devotion to their calling, were all ways nuns attempted to claim autonomy in their lives and make their voices heard, if only to each other. This paper has presented the reader with glimpse of the challenges faced by women who sought a life of religious vocation. Occasionally, they were allowed to make a

¹³⁴ Ahlgren, “Negotiating Sanctity,” 381.

contribution to the betterment of the Church. Retrospectively the reader will see that the Church was better for it.

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