Sorelle Mie: The Sermons of Caterina Vigri and Franciscan Observantist Reform

A DISSERTATION

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Caterina Vigri [St. Catherine of Bologna, (1413–1463)] was a Poor Clare novice-mistress and abbess. She is most noted by scholars for her spiritual autobiography, the *Sette armi spirituali* as well as the biography *Specchio d’illuminazione*, written by disciple Illuminata Bembo shortly after her death.

This leader, recognized for her own sanctity, also composed numerous vernacular sermons to cultivate the holiness of her sisters, members of Clarissan communities at Ferrara and Bologna. Though these didactic addresses were never published during her lifetime, thirty-five are preserved in a manuscript entitled *Vita, costumi, morte e miracoli della Beata Catherina da Bologna*, compiled by apostolic protonotarius Paolo Casanova in 1606. This dissertation uses Caterina’s sermons as well as the *Ordinazione* (her commentary on the Rule of St. Clare) to examine her role in the Franciscan Observant Reform Movement of the fifteenth century.

By explicating how daily spiritual life functioned in Caterina’s houses, this project fills a lacuna in the current scholarship on Clarissan reform in Italy. Studies on this movement, where they exist, often focus on broad institutional narratives instead of such quotidian reform activities. These behaviors are crucial, however, because they demonstrate the counter-intuitive truth that women often adopted the strictures of Observance to enhance communal flexibility.
While exploring the conversational nature and educational content of Caterina’s frequent sermons, this thesis shows that, just like contemporary male Franciscans, Caterina’s preaching constituted the core of her Observant identity. The content of this preaching was varied, and drew extensively upon cultural trends outside of the cloister, as is exhibited by Caterina’s use of heated anti-Jewish rhetoric, her complex consideration of the animal kingdom, and extensive employment of layered scriptural stories. In providing a detailed analysis of one woman’s sermon corpus, this project invites further investigation of how female preaching shaped European intellectual and religious culture at the end of the premodern age.
This dissertation by Kate E. Bush fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in History approved by Katherine L. Jansen, Ph.D., as Director, and by Dr. Nelson H. Minnich, Ph.D., and Dr. Jennifer R. Davis, Ph.D. as Readers.

___________________________________________
Katherine L. Jansen, Ph.D., Director

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Jennifer R. Davis, Ph.D., Reader
For my Grandmother:
Margaret Eileen Doyle Eyerman,
who always loved school.
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ABBREVIATIONS

Places:

*CDB*  Corpus Domini Bologna

*CDF*  Corpus Domini Ferrara

Archives:

*AGA*  Archivio Generale Arcivescovile di Bologna,
Archivio della Beata Caterina

*AS*  Archivio di Stato di Bologna

Works:

*Exp.*  *Explicatio Primae Regulae S. Clarae* of John of Capistrano (1445)

*Laudi*  *Laudi, trattati e lettere* ed. Serventi

*Ord.*  *Ordinazione* of Caterina Vigri [AGA 25, 2]

*RSC*  Rule of Saint Clare (1253)

*R Urb*  Rule of Urban IV (1263)

*Ser.*  *I Sermoni*, ed. Sgarbi

*Ser. MS*  *Vita, costumi, morte e miracoli della Beata Caterina da Bologna*,
Paolo Casanova [AGA 13, 1]

*SA*  *Sette armi spirituali*, ed. Degl’Innocenti

*Specchio*  *Specchio d’illuminazione*, ed. Mostaccio
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Without the patience, love, and support of my large and growing family, this project would not have come to fruition. It is dedicated to my grandmother Eileen Eyerman, who passed away during my first year of graduate study, but has nonetheless been with me each year since. My parents Margaret and George Bush and my aunt Nancy Eyerman have also been with me each step of the way. My brother Benjamin
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INTRODUCTION

And thus all of us together, may we be—I pray you sisters—truly united. May we know, with peaceful hearts, that we are all pilgrims and outsiders who, in this miserable world, will never have...a permanent city or home, a mother’s family or a father’s. It is as if we were complete foreigners without kinship or friendship with anyone. It is only with our holy and exemplary works...that we can aspire to heaven, which is our true homeland...¹

It may be true that Caterina Vigri (St. Catherine of Bologna, 1413–1463) felt that she had no homeland but heaven. But she is still a silent resident of the monastery of Corpus Domini in Bologna, even five hundred fifty-nine years after her death. The tiny chapel in the house that she founded is not always open, but when it is, it is crowded with faithful friends. These pilgrims and natives come to pray and to look curiously upon Caterina’s brown and barefoot body, surrounded as it is by glass, red velvet, and gold.²

But the faithful do not only come to see precious objects. They come to see the nuns and to talk to them. Though they are cloistered, the Clarissan nuns of Corpus Domini Bologna answer to a modern doorbell next to a case of medieval relics. They make guests feel at home, and invite them inside for spiritual conversation.

Corpus Domini is a spot that is at once silent and filled with voices. It is a space of contradictions—of dull flesh and shining gilt—that mirrors the often contradictory life of the woman who founded it. She began life as a young lady of the worldly court, and

¹Caterina De’ Vigri, I Sermoni (Bologna: Giorgio Barghigiani Editore, 1999). Sermon XXXI, Section i, p. 238: “Et così tutte insieme, vere sorelle unite, stiamo (vi prego) col cuore pacifiche in conoscersi pellegrine e forastiere, et non avere in questo misero secolo giamai...città permanente, né casa né agnati, né cognati, né altra parentella né amicizia con alcuno, come se totalmente straniere fossimo, ma solo con le sante et esemplari opere nostre...aspirare al Cielo ch’è vera patria nostra...” All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Caterina gave this particular sermon at a Congregation of Observant women from both Ferrara and Bologna, cities which may not have been their native ones. Here the abbess perceptively created community by emphasizing similarities instead of accentuating civic or regional differences.

ended it as a veteran abbess of a holy cloister. What happened in between to ensure that she would, centuries after she spoke these words, rest in a permanent home—shoeless amidst splendor—a holy body in a space devoted to the body of Christ? Using her extant sermons (as well as other biographical and archival material) this project will make St. Catherine of Bologna’s silent body speak. It will show that she, at the end of the medieval period, constructed a community with the female voice, even using the contemporary Franciscan Observant Reform movement to amplify its volume. Caterina’s sermons provide glimpses into the purposeful personality of this Quattrocentro abbess, and echo with the many learned conversations that she shared with her nuns.

Though she claimed to have rejected them, Caterina can only be understood in the context of the worldly cities and earthly friends that shaped her. I will begin this introductory chapter, therefore, with the historical background of the houses of Corpus Domini Ferrara and Corpus Domini Bologna, tracing their connections to the civic environment of North-Central Italy. Next, I will turn to the *sermoni* themselves, considering their communal origins and explaining the ways in which redactor Paolo Casanova shaped the texts during his compilation process. I will then describe the three interconnected historiographical aims of this dissertation, explaining how this project will enrich perspectives on Caterina’s individual identity, elucidate the reform practices of Observant Clarissans in Italy, and contribute to the greater story of women as preachers and leaders at the end of the Middle Ages. Subsequently, I will summarize the four chapters contained herein. They will examine the Observant motivation for Caterina’s sermons, the conversational manner in which they were carried out, and the practical goals advanced by their scriptural and symbolic content.
The story of Caterina’s connection to the urban communities around her is one that began even before her birth. Archival records tell of a Vigri family that was firmly entrenched in Ferrara during the 1300s.\(^1\) They owned several tracts of land there, traded animals frequently, and even sponsored a family chapel in Ferrara’s Church of All Saints.\(^2\) One historian has gone so far as to say that, by the first half of the fifteenth century, they were “rich and influential” citizens of the city.\(^3\) This is in keeping with the scholarly consensus that Caterina’s father Giovanni was an educated lawyer who served as an advisor at the Court of Niccolò III, Marquis d’Este.\(^4\) Her mother Benvenuta came from a well-respected Bolognese family, the Mammelini. Caterina was born in her mother’s city in 1413, but moved to Ferrara at a young age, where she became a lady in waiting to Margherita d’Este and other notables around 1424.\(^5\)

In her youth, therefore, Caterina was exposed to the lavish atmosphere of Este rulership, receiving an education in the arts, Latin, and manners from a household that would soon become a vanguard of the Renaissance. She left around 1426, however, perhaps due to a disruption of the court in the wake of Niccolò’s infamous execution of his second wife and illegitimate son in 1425. Later that year, after refusing offers of

\(^1\)It is crucial to note at this point that the Vigri family name is spelled in a variety of ways in both historical records and modern scholarship. I have chosen “Vigri” as the most common and the simplest. Other forms include Vegri, De’Vigri, Dei Vigri, Vegri, Dei Vegri and Negri.
\(^2\)Cecilia Foletti, introduction to Le Sette armi spirituali by Caterina Vegri (Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1985), 24. Foletti’s biographical information on the family (17–40) is still the best modern source on the subject.
\(^3\)Ibid., 36.
\(^4\)Teodosio Lombardi, I Francescani a Ferrara vol. IV: I Monasteri delle Clarisse (Bologna: Provincia dei Bologna di Frati Minori Osservanti, 1975), 85. Lombardi located a charter (dated 1438) proving that Caterina’s father and his brother Alberto remained at the Este court.
marriage from several prominent men of the city, Caterina entered Corpus Domini Ferrara in order to pursue a religious life. Though cloistered, her biographies suggest that she remained close to Margherita in the 1430s. And, in 1456, when the time came for the newly named abbess to leave for her community in Bologna, Margherita’s half-brother, Duke Borso d’Este, famously lamented his city’s loss of such a holy lady. There are burial monuments that prove that Corpus Domini continued to enjoy attention from the ruling family. No less than seven individuals associated with the dynasty during the sixteenth century are interred within the cloister walls.

The move to Bologna highlighted the papal approval of Observant Franciscan initiatives, as Pope Nicholas V (who had lived there himself for two decades) supported this new foundation, also called Corpus Domini. Its success was also ensured by the actions of Cardinal Bessarion, legatine governor of the city during the 1450s. The women who would fill this new community were drawn from prominent families across the region. Giovanna Lambertini, who became Caterina’s trusted vicaress, was part of a family who had influenced Bolognese politics for five centuries. Paola Mezzavacca, Caterina’s new novice mistress, also came from a noble family with origins in both Bologna and Parma. Paola’s relatives were among the notables who greeted the nuns

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5 Specchio, VI, lix–l, 44.
7 The main attraction at Corpus Domini Ferrara remains the graves of Eleanor of Aragon, Duke Alfonso I, Duke Alfonso II, Duke Ercole, Lucrezia Borgia and the two Este daughters who became Poor Clares. They are interred under the nun’s choir. Guide Claudio Bettini provided me with an expert summary of their significance upon my visit, and I remain grateful for his help.
8 Pope Nicholas V (Tommaso Parentuccelli) in fact selected his name because of his affection for Niccolò Albergati, Archbishop of Bologna whom he had served faithfully after his studies there in the 1420s and 1430s. Eugenius IV named Tommaso archbishop of the city in the late 1440s, but political troubles prevented him from taking residence.
upon their transfer to the new foundation. Her brother, Gabriel, was certainly there, since he was the Vicar General of the Observant Province of Bologna, as well as Caterina’s confessor. Paola, who brought her twin sister Gabriella with her into religious life, went on to be named Blessed due to her sanctity.11 Illuminata Bembo, Caterina’s subsequent biographer, was herself the well-educated daughter of Lorenzo Bembo, a Venetian patrician.12 After her friend’s death seven years later, in 1463, Illuminata went on to be elected abbess. More humble widows and virgins were also in this group of twenty-eight women.13 And, in addition to the many city leaders who watched the nuns arrive in Bologna, there was a more common crowd of both clergy and lay people including “young boys and girls wearing livery and garlands of roses and flowers…and singing.”14 Their effusive welcome for Caterina shows just how much Corpus Domini Bologna was connected to networks of social status and civic power in fifteenth-century North-Central Italy.

Networks of prestige and wealth (specifically in support of the Observant movement) explain why the Corpus Domini houses flourished. They do not, however, explain the spiritual motivation of the women who lived there. Cynically, we can say that their poverty was an empty performance, given the relative material comfort of their surroundings, as well as their freedom to engage in artistic pastimes. But one has only to

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11 Ibid., 427. Casanova includes a biography of Paola in his codex as indicated in his general index (3v). Gabriel appears in several archival sources and Illuminata’s Specchio as well, see 54–55.
12 Specchio, Introduction, ix–xi.
13 Other sources count fewer, but twenty-eight is the sum total enumerated by Casanova on fol. 135 r–v of the vita/sermon manuscript, where he is careful to provide biographical detail for each nun’s family, not just the most prominent mentioned here.
14 Lombardi, I Francescani a Ferrara, 147–148 cites Wadding and a Bolognese chronicler on the nuns’ entry into the city. Casanova provides similar information to both of these sources on Ser. MS 134v, but includes this more ornate description: “Stando dipoi le Confraternità, Fraterie, Clero et una congregazione de Vergini maschili e femine, fanciulli, e fanciulle, vestiti à livree, inghirlandati di rose, e fiori, cantando...”
walk through the cityscape of Ferrara, following Caterina’s own journey from the grand moated palace of the Este dukes to the small cloistered complex on the via Pergolato, to understand that the choice of a Clarissan identity meant a drastic and deliberate contraction of life’s spatial scope. This is true in Bologna as well, since—as is evident still—the nun’s complex was not designed to be palatial, and at that time was situated not near the city center, but the city walls. What could have persuaded these women that such small settings were best for them? The assurance of institutional prestige and the lure of charismatic Franciscan tradition were crucial, but not determinant. I will show that the opportunity for holy learning, a concept central to Caterina’s interpretation of the Rule of St. Clare as well as her preaching practice, may have been what attracted so many women to each Corpus Domini foundation in the mid-fifteenth century. We must examine, therefore, just how such sermons functioned in daily communal life. To further this end, after considering the very use of the word “sermon” to describe female speech, I will turn to an analysis of the manuscript that preserves Caterina’s didactic words.

Raccolte insieme: Gathering Women, Gathering Words

Describing female speech with the term “sermon” is a choice that arouses some measure of scholarly controversy because of its association, in the premodern period, with an exclusively male prerogative—the celebration of the mass. From the early

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16 Describing women’s words and behavior as “preaching” has been a popular choice in the last two decades as medievalists’ interest in female spirituality has steadily grown. See, for example, the collection Pamela Walker and Beverly Mayne Kienzle, eds., *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), and Claire Waters *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance and Gender in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). See as well Bert Roest, “Female Preaching in the Late Medieval Franciscan Tradition,” *Franciscan Studies* 62 (2004): 119–154, as well his work “Ignorantia est mater omnium
centuries of the Church, Pauline prohibitions on female speech in religious communities had kept women from teaching in public.\textsuperscript{17} The idea of “publicness” is crucial to the most frequently quoted definition of preaching from the medieval era, that of Alain of Lille (d. 1202), who described it as “clear and public instruction regarding faith and morals.”\textsuperscript{18} It is this element of “publicness” that was of special concern to Thomas Aquinas, who noted, in his \textit{Summa Theologiae}, that though private teaching to “a few” was permitted to women, “public” address on religious matters, i.e. sermon-giving, was not allowed.\textsuperscript{19} The space of a convent or monastery was usually deemed private, however, regardless of the number of individuals addressed by a nun. Cloistered preaching by a communal leader was therefore often a normal feature of religious life in both male and female houses. As this kind of address became ever more common during the later Middle Ages—especially in the urban centers of Italy—women like Caterina took advantage of the cloister. They made it into a space that straddled the conceptual divide between public and private, thus making an impossibility: a woman giving a sermon, into a possible and even quotidian event. Though this was the case, Carlo

\textsuperscript{17} The passages attributed to Paul most often cited against the public teaching of women are Tim I, 2:12 and I Cor 14: 34–35.

\textsuperscript{18} As cited in Carlo Delcorno, “Medieval Preaching in Italy (1200–1500),” in \textit{The Sermon}, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 449. Alain’s words in the Introduction of his \textit{Artes Praedicandi} are: “Praedicatio est manifesta et publica instructio morum et fidei.” He goes on to say that it is done by “hominum deserviens, ex rationum semita et auctoritatum fonte proveniens.”

\textsuperscript{19} See Minnis, “Religious Roles,” 62.
Delcorno’s comprehensive 2000 article “Medieval Preaching in Italy (1200–1500)” does not describe a single female preacher.²⁰

This oversight is somewhat understandable given that sermons by women, including those composed by Caterina, do not conform to the stylistic patterns of a typical *sermo modernus*. Nor are they part of regular *de temporiis* or *de sanctis* cycles. Instead, it is their instructional nature that sets them apart from other types of literature.

This study will show, however, that although the form of her works varied, and her audience was enclosed, Caterina’s theological and moral concerns overlapped with those of her male Observant peers. Additionally, there is evidence that even Bernardino of Siena, in his vernacular preaching to the Sienese during the 1420s, would “substitute...traditional liturgical *thema* used for specific feast days” with scriptural passages that fit the “daily lives of the men and women” of the city, just as Caterina chose her content based on the needs of her nuns.²¹ I believe that the question as to whether these works are sermons should, then, be reframed from the point of view of content and consumption. The audience of women listening to these addresses consumed the moral teachings in them in the same way that they did didactic speech or writings traditionally labeled “sermons.”²² Thus, they are, for all practical purposes, works of the same genre. Caterina used her sermons to treat the complexities of salvation history, the wonders of the Trinity, and the manifold perils of temptation and sin, but still took care to cater to the needs of her own “public,” or as she called them: *sorelle mie*. This hortatory

²²The pattern of similar consumption is most evident in the archival materials of Corpus Domini Bologna, where works by Caterina are interspersed with sermons of prominent male authors like Bernard of Clairvaux and Bernardino of Siena.
tone seems to have caught the attention of the man who first called these thirty-five works of spiritual pedagogy sermons, redactor Paolo Casanova (1550–c.1614). His modern counterpart, Emilio Sgarbi, oversaw their publication in 1999. Since Sgarbi’s *sermoni* volume is based primarily on transcriptions of one codex, it is important to consider the complex conditions of oral delivery and written recapitulation that shaped Casanova’s manuscript. Since these processes took place over several centuries, they can be difficult to reconstruct, but Casanova’s key role in preserving Caterina’s voice, and the voices of her community, will be my next consideration.

When Paolo Casanova was born in Bologna around 1550, the city’s devotion to Caterina Vigri was well established. He became a chief promoter of her cult when he helped to initiate two attempts to have Caterina canonized, spanning the years between 1596–1602. It was most likely during these same years that he began the mammoth manuscript in which Caterina’s thirty-five sermons appear. The codex is entitled *Vita, costumi, morte e miracoli della Beata Catherina da Bologna*, and was ostensibly designed for inclusion in an additional canonization process. The title page of this work was originally dated 1606, with a subsequent revision to 1610, indicating Casanova, like all avid researchers, kept finding relevant work to include in his project. One would think that, after studying in Rome to become doctor of ecclesiastical and civil law, he would have found it an easy task, as one of the “overseers” of the Poor Clares of Corpus

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23 AGA, Archivio Beata Caterina, Carton 13, 1 (Hereafter *Ser. MS*). Casanova’s *Vita* manuscript is of such a size as to be the only item in this *busto*.


25 *Ser. MS*, flyleaf. The initial date in roman numerals was changed from “MDCVI” to “MDCX.”
Domini, to help their popular foundress along to sainthood. But not even his prestigious titles of Apostolic Protonotarius and Canon of St. Petronius could help him. Partially due to the new canonization complexities introduced by the Congregation of Rites (established in 1588) Caterina was not officially declared a saint until 1712.

Casanova initially meant for his compilation to be printed and published quite soon after its completion but there is no evidence that this occurred in the early modern period. The two hundred fifty-nine folios of his tome do show, however, that he spent much time and effort in collecting materials related to Caterina. The handwriting present on each page is careful, neat, and all his own. Giovanni Grasetti, another seventeenth-century biographer of Blessed Caterina, praised Casanova for paying attention to the facts as well, saying that his work possessed “extraordinary accuracy.” Casanova seems to have enjoyed his meticulous research. In addition, many capital letters in the manuscript are decorated with intriguing faces, as if it became an object personally dear to him, kept close even in moments of whimsy. There are frequent marginal notations and insertions, signifying just how important it was for him to ensure that each detail from his sources, even those he had initially forgotten, was included in the final version of the text. He even gave notations as to what iconography would be included on the flyleaf, writing “here is going to be printed a (figure of) St. Francis in the middle next to St. Clare at his

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27 Serena Spanò, “Per uno studio su Caterina da Bologna,” *Studi Medievali* 3, 12 (1970): 740 n.133. Ser. MS flyleaf states that printing was going to take place in “pocche giornate.”


right hand and Blessed Caterina to the left, she should have a crucifix in her right hand, and her composed [composto] book in the other hand.”\textsuperscript{30} He is likely referring here to the breviary that Caterina compiled and illustrated.\textsuperscript{31} His own process of compilation was therefore dominated by the figure of the Abbess that he admired and the saints who influenced her, and most especially by the force of her written legacy—a legacy that he perpetuated with his own book, composed of her words.

Casanova’s volume begins with a forty-six-chapter biography of Caterina in which the sermons themselves are embedded. It also contains a transcription of Caterina’s autobiography—\textit{Le Sette armi spirituali}, two versions of the \textit{Rosarium}—her long Latin poem, fifty-one pages of mathematical tables for the calculation of Easter, and the \textit{vita} of the aforementioned Paola Mezzavacca.\textsuperscript{32} The miraculous and visionary episodes, however, which were staples of Caterina’s own autobiography (and the biography of her disciple Illuminata Bembo—\textit{Specchio d’illuminazione}), are largely absent from these sermons. They, in spite of the word “miracoli” in Casanova’s title, reflect mostly everyday communal events. His strategy was to explore the convent archives, systematizing the written remains of Caterina’s oral communications, modernizing spelling and phrasing to meet the expectations of a seventeenth-century audience. He calls some sermons “formali parole,” indicating that they were didactic treatises fully formed by Caterina; others were based on more ephemeral notes of nuns who wrote down her “detti.” Each work is framed with a bit of explanatory paratext

\textsuperscript{30}Ser. MS, 2r: “Qui va stampato un S. Francesco in meggio a S. Chiara dalla sua mano destra: E la Beata Caterina dalla sinistra, la quale habbi nella man dritta un Crocifisso e il suo composto libro nell’altra mano.”

\textsuperscript{31}A study of Caterina’s breviary, which consists of over five-hundred pages with dozens of illustrations, was published recently as: Vera Fortunati and Claudio Leonardi, eds. \textit{Pregare con l’immagini: il breviario di Caterina Vigri} (Florence: Sismel, 2004).

\textsuperscript{32}Ser., Introduction, il.
describing its context and content. The works are not arranged chronologically due to their extraction from a varied and often undated archival base, though they are embedded in a *vita* that does follow Caterina’s life in sequence. Casanova took great care to present each sermon as part of her ritual life and that of her community.

His portrait of Caterina and her Poor Clare community captures the vitality of each to a surprising degree. As Catherine Mooney has pointed out, a typical male writer would make his female subject sound “mystical and mysterious” or even “otherworldly,” but Casanova’s Caterina is a practical intellectual, presented in a quotidian way. In fact, there are fewer mentions of visions, miracles and somatic spirituality within the sermon corpus than within Caterina’s own autobiography or Bembo’s biography. Casanova, as a man and a church official did not bear the initial anxiety of self-promotion or cult-authorization. He merely sought to bring Caterina recognition and prestige at the very highest level, something only possible because of the of local and regional fame that she had already achieved. He likely felt, therefore, that he could highlight the dimension of Caterina’s identity that encompassed her abilities as a teacher, leader, and administrator. Perhaps this emphasis, uncharacteristically gender-neutral, was partially responsible for the Church’s rejection of the canonization efforts that Casanova initiated. Though he failed in this endeavor, he succeeded in leaving us a clear portrait of an abbess whose intellectual leadership helped to foster the Clarissan Observant Reform movement.

For it is Caterina’s ability to speak clearly about doctrine and theology, a talent that rendered her “most prudent” and “knowledgeable,” that is of paramount importance

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to Casanova.\textsuperscript{34} In one passage, he describes Caterina in her cell during the night, exemplifying these virtues. At this time, he does mention her holy habit—\textit{a traditionally feminine one}—of sighing and crying copiously when she thought about the passion. This happens, however, while she engages in several other \textit{“worthy occupations”} like reading about the Passion in the New Testament, contemplating the \textit{“historical mysteries”} of the Old Testament, writing down sermons of contemporary \textit{“father preachers,”} and reading various holy books in Latin and Italian.\textsuperscript{35} Her emotions were important to him; but her virtuosic literacy remained Caterina’s ultimate achievement.

His own achievement was his apparent ability to collect her words faithfully. He often stated that words were \textit{“gathered”} or \textit{“harvested”} (\textit{raccolti}) from the sources; in fact, this vocabulary appears at least three times in chapter headings like these:

The \textit{Beata}’s great love for God alone and the greatness of His love for us are signified by her many beautiful sayings and diverse discourses, these, made and described by her at various times (are) now gathered together with the greatest brevity possible.\textsuperscript{36}

Thus he describes his methodology as a process of preservation (with perhaps some abbreviation) for the purpose of convenient display. In this way, Casanova’s practices exemplified the early modern age. It was one in which, as Marjorie Swann has pointed out, identities were created through acts of gathering objects and texts, by making

\textsuperscript{34}\textit{Ser.}, VIII, 75: “prudentissima,” XII, 95: “prudentemente,” and XXVI, 200: “scientifica.”

\textsuperscript{35}\textit{Ibid.}, XVII, 169: “Ma quando stava ritirata nella sua cella, fra l’altre sue degne occupazioni, si dilettava grandemente di scrivere gli santi misterii che di mano in mano dagli lor Padri predicatori udiva et di mandarseli a memoria, poi de leggere et notare i lbe passi del Testamento Vecchio…contemplando ancora in quello gl’historici misterii, ma molto più spesso il Nuovo Testamento, sospirando et lachrimando l’amarissima sua Passione et morte…Aggiunge di più una madre antica che la Beata pigliava più gusto di devotezione in leggere libri latini che volgari, et oltre la santa Scrittura latina sudetta, leggeva anche altri libri de vari santi latini, secondo però la commodità del tempo che se le presentava.”

\textsuperscript{36}\textit{Ser.}, flyleaf [Nb: 5r of \textit{Ser} MS]: “Dell’amor grande c’ebbe la Beata in Dio solo et delle grandezze dell’amor divino verso di noi, tutto ciò significato per molti suoi bei detti et con dotti et diversi discorsi, fatti et descritti da lei in vari tempi et hora insieme raccolti con quella maggiore brevità che s’ha potuto.”
proprietary collections thereof, often for show in museums. Thus, the value of the texts compiled by Casanova lay in their identification as “found” objects. “I found it written thus…” he clearly states of Caterina’s lengthy sermon-treatise on the Trinity. He is also careful to mention that he found her “notable” Holy Thursday “sermon” written down, but does not neglect to say that it is one that she also delivered to the sisters with “great spirit.” He considered the “Sermon on the Animals” especially interesting in that it “was found” after Caterina’s death among her “most private writings.”

In Sermon XIX, in order to remind us that he was being faithful to what he saw on the page, he included a side note that Caterina made, and then inserted his own text to say: “And behold the things that are written below, found written out thus.” He thereby indicates that the texts were worthy of attention because, in their found state, they reflected the words that Caterina actually spoke. Casanova reminds us continually with his use of phrases like “the Beata had a habit of saying,” “she said many times,” or “further, she stayed (on the same subject),” “she said thus,” or even just “she said.” And these framing statements certainly treat Caterina’s phrases as if they were artful and worthy of preservation. What really gives the sermons a sense of immediacy, however,

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38 *Ser.* XVII, 125: “Trovo così scritto…”

39 Ibid., XXXV, 329: The entire paratext for Sermon XXV, which Sgarbi entitles “Del Peccato Grave,” is as follows: “Questa madre benedetta, dopo che nell’ultima sua giobbia santa hebbe per obligo del suo officio, et con grande humiltà et devotione lavati et bacciati gli piedi in capitolo a tutte le sue figliole, gli fece poi con gran spirito (come trovo scritto) un notabile sermone, cioè in dovere loro…”

40 Ibid., XXXI, 264: “Il presente sermone, dopo la felice morte di questa Beata Catherrina, fu trovata anch’esso scritto a penna nelle sue più secrete scritture fra il numero de suoi belli sermoni.”


42 Recall that Caterina was a talented visual artist. In fact, her Madonna and Child still hangs in the chapel of Corpus Domini Bologna (also see n. 30 on her illustrated breviary). Casanova’s longest paraphrase is actually dedicated to discussion of this book and its painted miniatures *Ser.*, XX, i, 176–178.
and preserves the feeling of Caterina giving presentations “viva voce,” is Casanova’s practice of including the many lively voices of the sisters of Corpus Domini in his paratexts.

In the middle of Sermon XVII, for example, Casanova pauses to tell the reader more about the different ways in which these found documents came into being. His source is an “antica scrittora” of Corpus Domini, likely Illuminata Bembo. Sometimes, after Caterina spoke sermons out loud, she would write down copies and give them to the nuns. In turn, they would copy these materials for themselves and others. After Caterina died, her further writings (often on similar subjects) were found and read, and probably copied too. Recording the sermons was therefore a complex didactic exchange that was at once a devotional practice and a communal commemoration. Marco Bartoli has stated that the sermons are not authentically Caterina’s work, since they were the result of Casanova’s “reshuffling” of documents that he found in the Corpus Domini archive. But by 1606, this participatory process of collecting and organizing conversations is exactly what had been happening with the documents at Corpus Domini for a century and a half, beginning while Caterina was still alive. This project will use the sermons gathered by Casanova to shed light on the intellectual richness of this life, and will show

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44 Ser. XVII, iii, 128: “Addimandassimo poi (dice un’antica scrittora) alla Beata che si contentasse per charità (sicome solea fare degli altri sermoni quando gli li chiedevano) darci in iscritto le prenarrate da lei, per essere la memoria nostra agevolmente caduca, così ella fece gratiosamente com’è scritto disopra, ma in quella sua scrittura, che da noi altre copiata, gli restituiessimo, vi trovassimo di più alla morte sua queste altre bellissime annotationi infrascritte…” Illuminata herself was a great collector of Caterina’s words, saying that even if she did not write them down right away, she would still recall them as if they were written. Specchio II, xxvii, 15: “Unde diceva lei queste e altre assai parole le quale io non sono capace a poterle scivere, ma questo bene me aricordo tutavia scrivendo...”

how their content is related to that of other extant autobiographical, biographical, and archival sources.

There are many reasons why Casanova could have chosen to continue this conversation, but one of them was certainly the respect that he felt for his spiritual charges and their own holy learning. We do not have the words that he left about the nuns that were under his care as procurator of Corpus Domini but we do have the adjectives that he used to describe Caterina’s companions—“venerable and ardent,” “intelligent,” “devoted,” “worthy.”46 He could likely fashion a complementary past in this way because he knew the community in the present. In Sermon XVIII, Casanova pauses once more to tell us that Caterina used to copy many spiritual books by hand so that she could give them to the sisters.47 Thus, his copying of Caterina’s words by hand was an embodied recapitulation of her own process of generosity, especially in an age when printing was common. His gift was to the community of Corpus Domini, but also to us. We now not only have Caterina’s voice, but the echoes it made in Bologna long after she was gone.

**Beyond the *Puella Litterata*: Historiographical Goals**

Listening to this voice allows us to pursue three interconnected historiographical goals. Firstly, this project aims to revise perspectives on Caterina’s individual identity. It will therefore fit into a larger trend, as Caterina, her life, and her many works have been the subject of major attention in recent years. In addition to the publication of the

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47 *Ibid.*, XIX, 171. She also adds that she would only copy them if the sisters promised to read them: “…li copiava per utile delle sorelle, donandogli con questa condizione che li dovessero leggere.”
Sermoni (1999), the turn of the last century saw the printing of critical editions of Sette armi spirituali (2000), Specchio d’iluminazione (2001) and several of Caterina’s shorter works as compiled in Laudi, trattati e lettere (2000). They, along with a sampling of her breviary, appeared as part of the Sismel series Caterina Vigri, la santa e la città (which now numbers seven volumes). Her metric poem, the Rosarium, was also published by Sgarbi (1997). Her mystical work Dodici giardini came out as a book (1999), and even more recently (2013) was set to music. Italian scholars have realized Caterina’s local significance for decades—even centuries, but recently her singular voice has spread to a devoted international audience.

Yet further analysis of this Clarissan can shed new light on her achievements. In Anglophone scholarship, many focus primarily, as did Jeryldine Wood, on Caterina’s “personal... mystical experience” and “the rapture of her ecstasies” as reflected in her art and autobiography. Though there is no doubt that she was a visionary and an artist, discussion of these aspects of her life often obscures her identity as a powerful intellectual and reformer. In her native region, her reputation for personal sanctity is so

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53. Wood, Women, Art and Spirituality, 123.
strong that Italian scholars often focus intently on Caterina as an individual without full consideration of the religious communities and movements that shaped her. The sermons provide the key to finding the woman behind either hagiographical models or patronizing portraits of the surprising “puella litterata,” an educated girl who was a mediocre artist, but remained, at least, “charming and...amiable.”54 These works show the abbess in everyday action, seriously dedicated to the moral education of the nuns in her care.

Given the power of the sermons and the interest in the woman who gave them, it is surprising that they have not been the topic of more scholarly attention. Part of this lack of attention can be attributed to the skeptical attitude about their authenticity, as reflected by Bartoli, quoted above. Since Chiara Augusta Lainati in the 1970’s, however, many scholars have insisted on their importance without truly exploring their full significance.55 Bert Roest, prolific historian of late medieval religion, did discuss the sermons in both his 2005 “Ignorantia est mater omnium malorum: The Validation of Knowledge and the Office of Preaching in Late Medieval Female Franciscan Communities” and his 2013 monograph Order and Disorder: The Poor Clares Between Foundation and Reform.56 He is correct in stating in the latter that the sermoni “privilege


the scholarly methods of biblical exegesis,” and treat “the pursuit of theological knowledge.” He does not, however, fully tackle their content, given that his discussion is always placed in more general narratives about Clarissan history. Gabriella Zarri is one of the only other scholars to speak of Caterina’s preaching, but her 2010 work “Places and Gestures of Women’s Preaching in Quattro- and Cinquecento Italy” does not make use of Casanova’s compilation, nor does it discuss the place of sermon-giving in the regular ritual life of Corpus Domini. My project attempts to remedy the laconic and unspecific nature of much earlier scholarship, and will show that Caterina’s sermon practice was firmly integrated into the everyday life of her communities.

The sermons also embody the movement that was the life-blood of these houses: the Clarissan Observant Reform. The role of the Second Order in fifteenth-century Franciscan Observantism is quite understudied, especially in the Italian context. In fact, perhaps as a result of the movement’s “diffuse” nature, no monograph about it exists. Duncan Nimmo’s magisterial study Reform and Division in the Medieval Franciscan Order mentions women only tangentially. Traditional narratives insist that the process of Clarissan renewal was an inevitable outgrowth of male action. Moorman’s classic statement to this effect appears in his A History of the Franciscan Order, where he opines that “the quickening of spiritual life and discipline among the friars was bound to have an effect sooner or later on the Second Order.” More recent analysis, however, has suggested that, in the words of Lezlie Knox, “there is no evidence that Clarissan reform

57 Roest, Order and Disorder, 341–342.  
59 “Diffuse” is the term of Lezlie Knox in Creating Clare of Assisi: Female Franciscan Identities in Later Medieval Italy (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 128.  
60 Duncan Nimmo, Reform and Division in the Medieval Franciscan Order (1226–1538) (Rome: Capuchin Historical Institute, 1987).  
61 Moorman, History of the Franciscan Order, 549.
emerged in a systematic plan on the part of the Regular (male) Observance.”62 How did it emerge, then, and what was its character? This project is concerned with the roots, branches—and most importantly—the fruits of Second Order Reform in Italy.

As James Mixson has pointed out, when “the diverse ideologies of fifteenth-century Observantism took root across late medieval Europe’s religious microclimates” they “proved an explosive and unpredictable force.”63 This very unpredictability has led to various historiographical models to explain trajectories of Observantism, and has opened the field for contributions such as my own. Scholars are now exploring Observant Reform as a continentwide phenomenon, showing that, in so doing, they can challenge “lingering stereotypes” about the end of the Middle Ages as a time of unproductive decadence, particularly in religious orders.64 In spite of the promise of such an approach (one inspired by the acute analysis of religious life by scholars like Kaspar Elm) Observant studies remain, on a regional level, beset by “tangled problems of conceptualization and narrative.”65 In Italy, the most common of these narrative models is that of the Four Pillars, male Observant preachers who initiated the movement vertically, from the top down. An alternative conception of reform is the network, which describes new ideas as spreading horizontally from one female house to another.

62 Knox, Creating Clare, 128.
64 James Mixson and Bert Roest, “Introduction,” in A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond, ed. James Mixson and Bert Roest (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 2.
In the case of the Corpus Domini communities, traditional reform models of static pillars and dynamic networks both apply. These nuns relied upon the efforts of the male pillars, cultivating devotion to a newly canonized Bernardino of Siena, spreading an indulgence proffered to them by John of Capistrano, and celebrating a miracle performed by Albert of Sarteano.\textsuperscript{66} They were also part of a female-driven reform network, spreading the Observance started at their “motherhouse” of Mantua, mirroring a process that took place throughout North-Central Italy.\textsuperscript{67} Recently, Marco Bartoli, in a paper about Caterina, accurately described reform currents as originating from both “inside” or “outside” the cloister, merging, in some sense, the models of pillars and networks together in order to weave our abbess’s experience into a greater narrative about Clarissan initiatives in Italy.\textsuperscript{68}

There are problems with these traditional historiographical “shapes” of Observantism, however. Though they have some analytical use in Caterina’s case, they seem to have led historians to use rather disapproving vocabulary when describing the

\textsuperscript{66}See SA 7:67, 28–9 for Caterina’s devotion to Bernardino: “E poi inzenochise cerche cento volte e più e meno secondo che poe al nome de Jesù, invocando senpre quello. E si certissima qualuncha persona farà talle oratione con bono core che subito receberà remedio e conforto, secundo che disse e afermò la dolce memoria del santissimo fratre Bernardino, lo quale io chiamo e tengo che lui sia lo Paulo del nostro patriarcha santo Francesco.” John’s promulgation of an indulgence in articulo mortis was given to CDF and then spread to CDB. It is mentioned in a short, much abbreviated document on the very same folio where the Ordinazione finish, (AA 25, 2 184v), and a fuller copy is to be found a few folios later, in the same codex. Alberto’s miracle occurred when he was preaching at CDF. The nuns had left bread in the oven for a long time during his sermon. It was not burned when they came back to retrieve it, however, but perfectly done. See Specchio 3:4, 17–18.


movement and its legislative ambiguities. Elisabeth Lopez, who is concerned mainly with Colletan Reform in France, makes Italian reform efforts seem disorganized and confusing since they did not coalesce around one individual. She emphasizes the fact that it moved at a “slow” rate from a “multiplicity” of centers, and that the Four Pillars and other friars implementing it had no “general plan.” Roest seems to engage in the same type of pessimistic judgment when he states that, since networks of “Observant Clarissan houses sub vicariis did not all adopt the same house constitutions,” their religious life was more of an “uneven” and “piecemeal operation.” Knox also characterizes Italian “sisters’ renewal” as “varied and unsystematic.” How, then, are we to make sense of this movement, given that it is both “spontaneous” and “protracted,” localized and “vast,” “bound up with the fortunes of...First Order” Franciscans, yet not “originating as part” of their “systematic” institutional “plan”? My solution for a new “inside-out” model of Reform will confront these Quattrocento daughters of Clare through examination of Caterina’s Ordinazione, her own commentary on Clare’s Rule. Analyzing this document for evidence of everyday reform practices will allow us to encounter Clarissan communities on their own terms. In so doing, we will discover that, at either Corpus Domini, the essence of reform practice was dynamic communal learning. The Ordinazione reveal that, in Caterina’s houses,

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69 Lopez, Learning and Holiness, 383.
70 Ibid.
71 Roest, Order and Disorder, 182; 185.
72 Knox, Creating Clare, 128.
73 Sensi, “L’Osservanze francescane femminile,” 155 for “spontaneous,” as well as Fantozzi, “San Bernardino e la riforma dei monasteri di clarisse,” 361. See Knox, Creating Clare, 128 for “protracted.” Most Italian studies treat local manifestations of the movement, but for Sensi, 159 it is “vast.” See Moorman, History of the Franciscan Order, 549 for “fortunes” quote, Knox, ibid. for her statement that “there is no reason to think Clarissan reform originated in a systematic plan on the part of the Regular Observance.”
participation in daily reading, frequent text-production, and constant sermon-conversation constituted the core of their Observant Clarissan identity.

My exploration of female intellectual life and cultural production in an enclosed setting (and the impact of reform ideology thereupon) will build upon the work of many recent scholars. Most germane, perhaps, is Anne Winston-Allen’s 2004 book, *Convent Chronicles*, which treats female agency and Observant reform in German lands.74 Cloistered learning, and its connection with women’s spiritual fulfillment and churchly authority, is a topic that continues to receive attention in Anglophone scholarship, as several recent collected volumes show.75 The predominant focus of these scholarly conversations are still developments in Northern Europe, with Italian scholars focusing mainly on their own learned nuns’ reform cultures. This focus has characterized the yearly “Giornate di studio sull’Osservanza francescana al femminile,” held in a different Italian city each year from 2006–2012 and published continuously thereafter.76 My goal with this project is to join the dialogues of these two communities of modern scholars together through examination of Caterina’s premodern communal conversations. Such

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75See, for example, Virginia Blanton, Veronica O’Mara and Patricia Stoop, eds., *Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), and Virginia Blanton, Veronica O’Mara and Patricia Stoop, eds., *Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Kansas City Dialogue* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015) as well as Veerle Fraeters and Imke de Gier, eds. *Mulieres Religiosae: Shaping Female Spiritual Authority in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014). Of the forty-six essays that make up these three volumes, only three deal specifically with women in Italy.

bridge-building has long been necessary, as Daniel Bornstein, in his 1996 introduction to the volume *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, called for “closer cooperation between American and Italian” scholars and their interpretive models.77

Caterina’s sermons and rule commentary, though they reflect long-held traditions in female communities, are new sources for telling the story of women’s place in the fifteenth-century Church. In fact, the sermon culture of both Corpus Domini foundations allows us to address a third area of historiography—that of premodern religious women—in several ways. Most importantly, it will give us tools to reevaluate the vitality of women’s communal life, the patterns of their everyday spirituality, and the reality of their institutional influence.

Caterina’s sermons certainly help us to counter the idea of the Middle Ages as one of “silences” for women, or of their religious communities as spaces designed exclusively for quiet reflection.78 The sermons reveal that the vocal atmosphere of the monastery, though ritually determined, could also be shaped by the curiosity of each individual nun. In providing records of this regular but often undocumented speech practice, the sermon manuscript helps us break the silence enforced by “a lack of verifiable information... about...preaching activity” in female houses and proves that they were not such an anomalous phenomenon.79 This fact becomes even clearer when one considers the proliferation of works that preserve the words of late medieval preaching abbesses, works considered in the conclusion of this thesis. The sermons also help us to show that the

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79 Roest, *Ignorantia*, 75.
Pauline silence was not complete during the medieval period. Caterina’s preaching, as well as the relationship that she cultivated with Saint Paul and his words, show that, often, women did not internalize his message that they should not teach. In fact, for these Observants, intensive teaching through insistent speaking was co-extensive with their vocation.

Caterina’s voice also allows us to counterbalance portraits of female spirituality that focus on exceptional, ecstatic, or emotional elements of women’s lives instead of on their everyday behaviors. Between two and three decades ago, the study of medieval religious women and gender became a field in its own right within the Anglophone world, expanding with the appearance of foundational works like Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and Barbara Newman’s *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*.\(^8^0\) Then, emphasizing the uniquely dramatic and somatic nature of female spiritual experience became a way for historians and others to access a vital but overlooked segment of premodern culture. The accompanying rise of woman-centered work has been increasingly enthusiastic. Consider, for example, that a search in the Harvard Library Catalog for the words “women, religion, medieval, Europe” will yield 584 hits for the period 2000–2015. For the period 1970–1985, the same search comes up with a mere 35 works.\(^8^1\)

In spite of the volume and quality of current scholarship on female religious life in the Middle Ages, a paradigmatic problem remains, as women’s spiritual experience is

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still interpreted as emotional or embodied rather than intellectual or scholarly, an idea belied by Caterina’s sermons. Tamar Herzig, for example, has stated recently that the “pious women of late medieval Europe” because they were “barred from…teaching and preaching about religious matters…turned to prophecy, visions, and ecstatic raptures to promote the reform of Christendom.”82 But this characterization hardly seems to fit Caterina’s preaching efforts, given their scholarly and systematic nature. Gabriella Zarri, who has paid great attention to women’s sermons, often still focuses more upon the importance of the “silent preaching” of female bodies in ecstasy, or on the powerful nature of “inspired female discourse” like “visions and direct…revelations,” since they were more likely to be made truly “public” than “exhortations and lessons” that nuns composed for “a limited public of fellow sisters and disciples.”83 I hope to make a case for the importance of this “limited public” and the educational environment that they created for themselves.

To give us an inkling of how entrenched the paradigm of mystical or prophetic revelation has been in scholarship on women, consider Bornstein’s two-decade old statement that since women were “denied access to the institutions of higher education…and…human learning…” they turned into “conduits” of “divine wisdom” who could speak “without human instruction.”84 Even a brief perusal of Caterina’s work

82 Tamar Herzig, “Female Mysticism, Heterodoxy, and Reform,” in A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond, ed. James Mixson and Bert Roest (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 281.
84 Bornstein, “Introduction,” 5. Studying exceptional female mystics was particularly popular at the time Bornstein was writing, as scholars worked to establish the “Great Women” of the medieval Christian tradition. Consider, for example, the publication dates of the following works: Emilie Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard, eds. Women Mystics in Medieval Europe (New York: Paragon House, 1989); Elizabeth Petroff, Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Monica Furlong: Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics (Boston: Shambala, 1996).
can show that her preaching was very much a product of human intellectual exchange. It was only after such exchange, in fact, that she could enjoy “miraculous converse with God.” But when contemporary scholars encounter cerebral work by a woman, it is often still an occasion for surprise. Bert Roest, for example, recently noted that, in the sermons, Caterina “refuses to give in to an overly sweet and emotional spirituality” and appears therein to distrust “ecstatic experiences.”

These are statements that reveal common, almost unconscious, assumptions about how women usually encountered Christianity. They are assumptions, however, that tell us more about our own historiographical struggles than about female lives. The underlying problem lies in viewing mental and physical categories as mutually exclusive, since for people of the later Middle Ages, the binary between body/emotion and spirit/intellect did not have the same significance. My project will reveal that Caterina used her body for worship, but more often in a regular ritual than in an ecstatic episode. It will also show that she used sentiment to do intellectual work and in turn believed the mind should discipline the emotions. Analysis of her life and work will hopefully bring balance to scholarship on premodern religious women, whose otherworldly experiences should always be analyzed in the context of their more down-to-earth activities.

Finally, this project will use Caterina’s work to deepen appreciation for women’s institutional roles in the Quattrocento church. As Bornstein pointed out decades ago, study of institutional structures has long been out of fashion in Anglophone scholarship on female spirituality. When current scholars do pay attention to institutional life, it is

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86 Roest, Ignorantia, 79.
often to investigate the civic location or physical orientation of a given female house, or to measure its economic output in terms of manufactured products or art objects.\(^ {88}\) These approaches can be invaluable, but sometimes do not fully integrate aspects of material culture with the all-important spiritual concerns at the root of women’s foundations. With this project, I aim to show how materiality and spirituality worked together in Caterina’s institutional life. Thus, I will attempt to reconstruct everyday spiritual practices using traditional methods of archival analysis, as well as the innovative tools of poststructuralist social history and the discursive awareness brought by the linguistic and animal turns. I will show, in the context of Corpus Domini Bologna, just how a Clarissan house could manipulate extant normative structures in order to increase local institutional control. Caterina specifically emphasized autonomy and agency when describing her position as abbess, never seeming to defer to male ecclesiastical figures. These facts call into question the common perception that women were on the margin of the Observant movement. In fact, the “Great Man” History represented in the model of the Four Pillars of Reform is tested by the very existence of Corpus Domini’s body of reform texts.

Scholars often treat women as foreign agents or bodies in a male ecclesia. But Caterina’s communities seemed to envision the Church as a native space—one that could be

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\(^ {88}\)For a detailed treatment of female houses as rooted in the dynamics of civic space, see Sherri Franks Johnson, *Monastic Women and Religious Orders in Late Medieval Bologna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For consideration of literary culture as is linked with physical space and artistic life, see K.J.P. Lowe, *Nun’s Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For an example of an economic approach in which nuns are agents of production, see Sharon Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). For consideration of art objects as generative of communal identity, see Anabel Thomas, *Art and Piety in the Female Religious Communities of Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Note that none of these works encompasses the Quattrocento fully, making studies on the *sermoni* all the more crucial.
renewed and broadened through their own actions. My work will therefore show that, though many historians have failed to recognize it, women have long belonged at the very center of Church History.

**Commune utilità: Chapter Structure and Content**

In order to achieve these interconnected historiographical goals, this dissertation will be broken into four chapters. To begin, Chapter One will explore just what Observant Reform meant to Caterina and her sisters, and how female preaching was related to this movement. In doing so it will first turn to an unpublished fifteenth-century document produced by the community of Corpus Domini Bologna entitled the *Ordinazione*. This tract constitutes a detailed commentary on Saint Clare’s *Prima Regula* written in the voice of abbess Caterina herself. Clarissan adoption of their Order’s original Rule during this period was a purposeful—if not universal—marker of communal renewal for women. This chapter will therefore provide vital background information regarding the complex history of the Rules for Poor Clares, including the ways in which such legislation was used to negotiate gendered power throughout the Later Middle Ages. It will go on to explain how the many commentaries composed on the *Prima Regula* during the Quattrocento can provide a wealth of information on Observant adaptation of Clare’s thirteenth-century regulations, modifications usually designed to meet the specific spiritual needs of each new or renewing foundation. The *Ordinazione*’s contents can only be truly understood, therefore, in the context the Corpus Domini houses’ distinctive institutional development. Thus, following an overview of Second Order reform origins, Chapter One will go on to argue that the history of Corpus
Domini Ferrara exemplified the fluid, uncertain beginnings of female Observantism. Then it will detail how these tentative initiatives became full-fledged undertakings with the subsequent foundation of Corpus Domini Bologna. It was reform efforts like these that resulted in such a confident document of directives as the *Ordinazione*.

Chapter One will next turn to the behaviors required by Caterina’s directives, focusing on daily practices of prayer, gesture, and learning. At each point these regulations will be contrasted with statements from a better known commentary of the period, the *Explicatio* by the Vicar General of the Order, John of Capistrano, to which it is likely a response. Such a comparison will illuminate the ways in which these women, especially abbess Caterina, gained power and agency by embracing the discipline of Reform. This paradox is perfectly embodied in the practice of “exhortation in the virtuous life,” i.e. preaching, that the *Ordinazione* recommend. Overall, this Chapter aims to show just how much Caterina’s didactic words were bound up in the daily ritual praxis of her community, therefore constituting an integral part of Observant Clarissan identity.

Chapter Two will delve into the conversational nature of this Clarissan culture. It will reveal that Caterina’s *consorelle* were active consumers of knowledge, and that her sermon practice was shaped by their spiritual curiosity. First, this chapter will show that Caterina rendered her teaching more authoritative by engaging in textual conversation with an all-important Christian authority: St. Paul. Then it will turn to the relationship that Caterina, as abbess, cultivated with her nuns. In fact, the quotidian rhythm of her preaching and her deliberate efforts to mix discipline with affection created an environment in which status was leveled and hortatory words, like monastery goods,
were meant for the “common use” of all Clarissans. The sisters’ mutual concern with learning led to the conversational question-and-answer format that determined the shape of the sermons more than any other factor. After explaining the theological and personal concerns elucidated by these inquiries, and showing the part that rhetorical questions played in Caterina’s preaching, this chapter will turn to the origins of such dynamic conversational pedagogy. While it will touch briefly upon the influences of dialogical dispute, aristocratic court culture, and contemporary popular sermons, Chapter Two will demonstrate that the culture of questioning was most closely bound to the nuns’ frequent practice of non-sacramental confession. This custom required both regular self-interrogation and public exposure of personal struggles in a shared pursuit of perfection.

This chapter will go on to argue how the sermons manifest this desire for tangible knowledge expressed in practical ways. The most concrete of these was Caterina’s creation of lists of spiritual objects (her most notable set being the Sette armi) for her curious charges. When these Clarissans entered the Corpus Domini, they left behind the cityscapes of Italy at the edge of the Renaissance, and the consumer goods that filled their streets. Inside the cloister, these women—used to displaying their social status with such objects—could no longer own them. Caterina’s spiritual objects can be seen as authorized replacements for such material goods. As stated above, Caterina felt that words were meant for “commune utilitate,” just as St. Clare’s rule stated physical goods were. Creating lists of spiritual objects was the abbess’s way of embodying words as material goods, envisioned treasures to be traded in the “marketplace” of Christ’s heart. As a result of this sermon dynamic, these Observant Clarissans felt that their choice of an enclosed life was one of enrichment, not privation.
Chapters Three and Four will transition from examining the sermons’ pedagogical tactics into evaluating their rhetorical content. In tracing the particularly dominant themes of anti-Judaism and animal emulation, it will treat Caterina’s symbolic usage of the familiar “Other” in her preaching. These chapters aim, however, to move beyond discussion of these common Franciscan topoi as merely symbolic, arguing instead that they served to reinforce virtues particular to evolving Observantism within the cloister and embodied civic and cultural influences prevalent without.

The goal of Chapter Three will be to investigate the links between the anti-Judaism often associated with the Observant Franciscan movement and the prejudicial tropes about Jews present in Caterina’s sermon corpus. The origin and intensity of male Observant rhetoric and actions against Jews has been and is a subject of considerable historiographical debate, especially in the Italian context. This discussion, however, has never included Clarissan perspectives on the Jews, presumably because of the lack of source material on this topic. As a result of this general lack of evidence, it is surprising to read dozens of anti-Jewish remarks within Caterina’s preaching, and easy to attribute them to Casanova, her redactor. (Given the remarks on Jewish transgression that appear later on his *Vita* codex, this attribution seems plausible.) This chapter will argue, however, that associating these remarks with Caterina is the correct choice. It will reveal the presence of anti-Jewish vocabulary in the archival materials of Corpus Domini and associate Caterina’s statements with those of contemporary Observants. It will go on to characterize the sisters’ disdain for the Jews as an oppositional response to the courtly tolerance of Jewish commercial activity prevalent in the Este court during the first half of the Quattrocento. This moral outrage regarding Jewish lending practices was an attitude
largely shared by the civic authorities that would, under Franciscan influence, establish the Monte di Pietà in Bologna, and others throughout Italy, in the last half of the same century.

The content of Caterina’s work was therefore determined by civic developments outside of her cloister, but it was also deliberately chosen to shape lives within it. Specifically, she exploited certain anti-Jewish tropes for pedagogical purposes in an attempt to establish communal obedience and adherence to the virtues of repentance and poverty. In describing the Jews as God’s chosen people who had “obstinately” refused to accept his directives and his Son, she created an implicit parallel between them and those sisters (also set apart through God’s favor) who “obstinately” refused to follow their Rule in order to honor Christ. Caterina also used images of Jews victimizing a vulnerable Jesus in order to increase the emotional intensity of the Christocentric piety at the core of the sisters’ vocation. Additionally, by equating Clare’s Rule with Christ’s New Testament law of love, Caterina was able make the Old Testament Law of the Jews seem dangerously superstitious and antithetical to her vocation. Anti-Judaism was therefore built into Clarissan identity in a fundamental way. This chapter challenges common assumptions about rhetorical violence in the works of medieval women, for it did not always take the form of self-abnegation. Sometimes it was aimed outward and at a particularly vulnerable target: The Jews of Northern Italian cities.

Caterina’s social perspectives also come into surprisingly sharp focus within her discussions of animals. Chapter Four will therefore treat her longest sermon, numbered XXXIV by Sgarbi and entitled by Casanova: On The Virtues and Vices of Various Animals. Though Caterina does discuss “vicious” animals in this work, her more
compelling anecdotes reflect her belief that humans should emulate creatures, that, like
the dog, are full of “good and noble properties and customs.”\textsuperscript{89} Sermon XXXIV reveals
that this habit of reading and interpreting animal action is related to broader patterns of
literacy and reading in the lives of the women of both Corpus Domini communities, a
theme introduced in Chapter Two. The sheer variety of material present in Sermon
XXXIV is useful in that it allows us to evaluate which texts these nuns were reading most
and link this practice to their Clarissan identity. Examination of this work is difficult in
that its structure is irregular and its source material often obscure. It does not, for
example, make systematic use of bestiary materials, employ motifs from Anthony of
Padua’s Animal Sermons, or even mention the ultimate animal enthusiast, Francis of
Assisi.

Its ultimate inspiration, however, is stated in the final chapter by Caterina herself.
There she says that she was inspired by the biblical paradigm of animal parables, of
beasts that “teach” as is found in the Book of Job.\textsuperscript{90} What these nuns were reading most
regularly and closely therefore, was scripture. Chapter Four will next investigate the
ways in which these women of the Quattrocento encountered biblical texts on a daily
basis, showing just how much this reading practice had expanded since the early days of
their order. Then it will turn to the content of the scriptural quotes present in Sermon
XXXIV, showing that the most prominent theme was central to the Clarissan mission:

\textsuperscript{89}Ser. XXXIV, xiii, 274–275. In one passage on the dog, Caterina states that it is her goal: “immittare et
continuamente effettoare in me queste buone et nobili proprietà et costumi d’un così fedele animale.”
\textsuperscript{90}Ibid., XXXIV, lxv, 323–324. The end of the long passage in which Caterina finally states her inspiration
for the sermon reads: “Così se tutte le attioni sue divine sono nostri ammaestramenti, non è donque stato in
tutto fuori di proposito un tale appoggiamento fattovi, poiché me l’hanno imparato (per gratia divina)
l’udire le prediche de nostri dotti Padri et leggere alcuni santi libri, oltre che me n’ha avertito Giobe a 12
con dire: \textit{Interroga jumenta et docebunt te et volatilia coeli et indicabunt tibi; loquere terrae et
respondebit tibi, et narrabunt pisces maris.”}
poverty. The ways in which these passages address voluntary poverty is diverse and multi-layered, showing how references to scripture could be tailored to different segments of the audience—from novice to expert.

Chapter Four will also unpack these layers, thereby revealing communal learning in action, built around the dynamics of reading and poverty. In contrast to the luxury books likely used by the nuns before they entered enclosure, the spiritual texts of Corpus Domini Bologna were composed of simple materials and bear only humble decorations. Their practice of reading in the cloister was therefore centered on the renunciation of worldly status. This project was only aided by their process of “reading” and learning from humble animal teachers, and listening, as Caterina recommends, to what these creatures voiced through their behavior. This chapter will thus conclude with an examination of the concept of animal imitation, first showing this to be a tacit rejection of the domination and ownership of animals practiced by those of high status in Quattrocento society. More importantly, abnegating human identity in this way allowed for the ultimate expression of living poorly and simply as a follower of Francis should, without worldly distraction. For, as Caterina states in another sermon (referencing the book of Job) humans are born only to “struggle” whereas birds are born simply to “fly.”

In highlighting how powerful the speech of humble animals could be, one cannot help but think that Caterina was showing that the speech of women like herself, so often subjugated or ignored, could have real power as well.

A brief conclusion to this study will expand upon a crucial detail merely suggested earlier on: the connection of Caterina’s preaching to the practices of other

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91 Ser. XX, i, 176: “Tanto meno (et pur ne avertisse il Spirito Santo per bocca di Giobe) che se gli uccelli nascono al volato et l’huomo nasce alla fatica.”
abbesses of the period. Comparing the content of her work with figures like Caterina Bugni, Domenica da Paradiso, and Juana de la Cruz reveals multiple similarities, specifically regarding dialogic structure and didactic strategy. Such frequent sermons came to constitute communal identity, memory, and history for female houses, and became part of the narratives of personal sanctity ascribed to their leaders. This short excursus will explore just how Caterina was part of an institutional trend involving female leaders who taught at the edge of the Renaissance. Fueled by vernacular learning and aided by reform initiatives, these active cloistered women created new audiences for spiritual consumption just on the border of the private/public divide. It was perhaps because she was such an innovative leader across spaces and between eras that Caterina, as an intellectual, felt like a “pilgrim,” a “foreigner” in her own age. Let us now explore her “exemplary works”—the sermons—to see if they, at least, can find a permanent “home” among the scholars of our own time.
CHAPTER 1

Observantia de la professione: Caterina Vigri’s Reform Praxis

In a sermon composed to honor St. Francis on his Feast Day, Caterina speaks of
the “holy love” their “Father” bore for Christ. She goes on to explain the intricate
meaning behind each letter of the word love, “AMORE.” The letter “O,” she says, stands for:

The Odor of Obedience [and] of Observance and of meritorious Works (Opere).
For when we voluntarily made the profession and promised to God to observe the Rule, he, at that point kindly accepted our promises, and right away—with the golden belt and tie that is his infinite love—bound our hearts to his, dwelling in the round and circular sphere of his holy kingdom. He also put on our hearts his round ring, and married us in faith, by which we are assured that if we are faithful to him in the observance of virginity, continence and chastity—and in other virtues—that he will be most faithful to us. Then, in order to confirm this spiritual bridal sacrament that we made with him he gives us a most holy kiss.

[Our names], as his most beloved brides, are thus written in the book of the elect and are living in Paradise. But I have to warn you that just as an earthly husband would have a hard time if his wife—by not obeying him and living as she pleased—threw away her wedding ring right in front of him, a heavenly husband would be even more justly indignant. If he sees us break the bridal promise and faith we gave to him (through non-observance and violation of our obligations), he would have great reason to refute us and divorce us forever as ungrateful, unfaithful, and unworthy wives, and to abandon us in our feeling of wickedness.1

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1Ser. XXXIII, x, 260–261: “La terza lettera è la O, cioè ODORE di OBEDIENZA, di OSSERVANZA et di OPERE meritorie, il che è quando noi volontariamente faciamo la professione et promette a Dio osservare la Regola: ch’egli in quel punto benignamente accetta la promessa nostra, et subito col cinto et legamo d’oro rotonda circolare sfera del suo santo regno, et anch’egli ne porge il suo rotondo anello, et sposa noi in fede, per cui siamo certe che se saremo fidele a esso nella osservanza della virginità, continenza et castità et dell’altre virtù egli sarà fidelissimo a noi. Poi ci dona il suo sacratissimo bascio per confirmatione di questo sacro spirituale sposalicio nostro fatto con esso, et d’haverci descritte in Paradiso nel libro dell’elette et viventi sue spose. Bisogna mo avvertire che se il sposo terreno havrebbe moto per male quando la sua sposa getasse via in sua presenza l’anello col quale l’havesse sposata per non l’obedire et vivere di suo capriccio, tanto più il celeste sposo sarebbe giustamente sdegnato quando vedesse che sprezzassimo lui, il suo sposalicio et la fede datale con la inosservanza et la contraventione dell’obligo, ilché havria grandissima ragione di rifiutarci et farne il perpetuo divorzio, come spose ingrate, infidele et indegne et di lasciarci nel reprobo senso nostro.” Emphases mine.
Within this passage, the all-encompassing “O” of “osservanza” becomes the physical and metaphysical tie that binds a nun to God. When she forsakes this observance she pays the ultimate penalty, and gives up her identity as Christ’s bride. The bridal imagery herein is laden with late medieval expectations regarding female behavior and social status. It is language that Caterina’s companions would have understood, since they had deliberately exchanged worldly marriages with wealthy men for relationships with Christ. But what would they have understood about the central word “Observance?” What was their everyday relationship to the Franciscan Observant movement of the Quattrocento? And, crucially, what was the place of the preaching abbess within this new Observantism? When Caterina used the word “osservare” in her sermons, it was, as in the passage above, to stress adherence to a rule. This chapter will therefore explore how Caterina’s communities observed their rule: the Prima Regula of St. Clare, and transformed it to fit their evolving life of learning.

This chapter will begin, then, by examining the Ordinazione, guidelines that exist as an unpublished, unedited vernacular document from Corpus Domini Bologna. Composed in the voice of Abbess Caterina herself, these “Ordinances” constitute a lengthy commentary on the Rule of Saint Clare. Thus, they provide valuable information on fifteenth-century Observance-in-action. After delving into the details surrounding the creation of this work, I will expand my analysis to show how its production fits into the larger narrative of the Clarissans’ centuries-long struggle for a rule that matched their spiritual ambitions. The meanings of this customized commentary can only be understood, however, in the context of the communities that generated it. Therefore, I
will turn next to the foundation and expansion Caterina’s Clarissan houses in both Ferrara and Bologna, showing that they were part of the Observant vanguard in Italy.

Traditional institutional narratives, however, can only provide so much insight into the intimate daily workings of each community. This chapter will therefore conclude with a more detailed examination of the practices that the *Ordinazione* recommend. Detailing these behaviors allows for a richer understanding of Clarissan reform as it was constituted through patterns of daily prayer, communal ritual, and the perpetuation of texts both sacred and mundane. The significance of these quotidian habits emerges only when they are compared to the recommendations contained in a more well-known contemporary commentary: the *Explicatio* of Clare’s Rule composed by Vicar General John of Capistrano. In contrast to the Corpus Domini document, John’s work stresses the overall importance of obedience and enclosure for Clarissans, not learning. Ultimately, my analysis of these two works will show that, for Caterina and her sisters, ritual and literacy were not incidental byproducts of rigorous Observantism. Just as the desire for poverty defined Clare’s vocation, for the nuns of Corpus Domini, learning was at the heart of their reform identity and at the foundation of their sermon practice.¹

The paradox of their lifestyle, then, was that in embracing strict institutional regulations, these women gained a measure of intellectual autonomy and agency within the Church’s hierarchy. The differences between John’s and Caterina’s perspectives on

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Clare’s Rule show that that composing commentaries like the *Ordinazione* was a way for Clarissan abbesses to have conversations not only about praxis, but about power as well.

*Fructi e seipe: Caterina’s *Ordinazione* Text*

The *Ordinazione* text utilized for this study is bound in a small, (roughly 6”x4”), and well-worn codex of miscellaneous devotional works in the Archivio Beata Caterina at Bologna’s Archivio Generale Arcivescovile. The commentary within is written in a late gothic hand in local vernacular and occupies most of ten folio pages. Some of the folios are parchment, some paper, and though chapter titles are in red, they are not ornamented, indicating their practical and every-day nature. They are, however, sandwiched between copies of two ecclesiastical privileges for the houses of Corpus Domini, indicating their link to communal status and identity. The codex as a whole dates from the fifteenth century, with this particular portion written down in the 1460s or just after, in the last years of Caterina’s life, or immediately following her death. In fact there are sections of this same small volume that are said to be in the saint’s own hand, even if the *Ordinazione* are not.

This document is certainly associated with Caterina and her community, but her singular authorship has not gone uncontested. Cecilia Folleti, working in the 1970’s, stated that they were the work of an anonymous author. Later, Silvia Serventi described

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2 AGA 25, 2, fols. 175v–84v. This work has been discussed most recently by Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 324–325. It was known, however, to Zarri as discussed in her “Écrits inédits,” 223 and Lainati, *Temi spirituali*, 194.

3 Zarri, Ibid. dates the work to the 1460’s. Silvia Serventi dates the volume as a whole as Quattrocento, which is logical as it contains autographs. For her full description of the manuscript see *Laudi*, LVI. Bartoli seems to be mistaken when he dates the AGA copy to the end of the sixteenth century. See Marco Bartoli, “Le ‘Ordinazioni,’” 72.

4 Serventi, *Laudi*, LVI.
them but did not edit them for her 2000 volume of the Saint’s works: *Laudi, trattati e lettere*. The *AGA* manuscript does not mention an author, and Caterina’s name does not appear within the text. Yet, a somewhat later copy analyzed by Marco Bartoli states that they were indeed the recommendations of “Mother Catterina,” ordinances that she “observed while living [at Corpus Domini Bologna] and which were observed there for some time afterwards.”5 Thus, Bartoli and also Bert Roest are comfortable crediting Caterina with this commentary.6 This attribution is logical given the dating of the *AGA* copy, and the strong and purposeful role for the abbess built into this document, as will be discussed further below. In addition, as Bartoli points out, the writer of the *Ordinazione* uses the first person at least once, when she states “I exhort you” to the sisters, recommending strongly that they listen to spiritual reading during mealtimes. As he says, it is “difficult to imagine another person” besides Caterina who would make such a definitive statement at Corpus Domini in the 1460s.7 In the end it is likely that this commentary was built on the words of the founding abbess, and I will henceforth refer to her as its author. It is crucial, however, that we view it as “the fruit of communal life” as suggested by Bartoli, and a product of women’s “team work” in the manner of Clare’s *Prima Regula* (and indeed the *sermoni* themselves).8

Though my examination of this work can advance Observant studies, it is necessarily preliminary. This is currently the case because I have yet to consult the copy that Bartoli examined, as it is held in the small and more private archive still maintained

6For his acceptance, see Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 324.
7Ibid.
8Ibid., 76.
by the Poor Clares of Corpus Domini Bologna. This iteration, entitled the *Ordinazioni* or the *Avvertimenti* commands special attention as it is attached to a vernacular copy of Clare’s Rule. I have also yet to see a third copy, apparently dating from the eighteenth century, and now held at the Bologna’s Biblioteca comunale dell’Archiginnasio. Examination of all copies remains important, for Bartoli’s study reveals that the *CDB* version differs in content from the *AGA* version. This can be surmised from his discussion on the role ascribed to the Cardinal Archbishop in the *CDB Avvertimenti*, a figure who does not play a large role in the *AGA* text. Additionally, there are differing prescriptions therein regarding just how often the Rule and the Ordinances are to be read at table. My future research plans include examining these texts to compare such variations.

The reason, says Caterina, for composing such a document, is that “religious women [who live] without the observance of the holy *Ordinazione* are like pieces of land without fences, whose fruits can be stolen from all sides, leading to confusion everywhere.” The possibility of such chaos made it necessary to create a normative document to complement the Rule of her revered foundress, the “blessed Clare, our mother and disciple of the blessed Francis, handmaiden and spouse of our savior Jesus Christ.” The author’s preoccupation with orderliness, with doing only what is permitted by the *RSC*, does not, however extend to commenting on the Rule of Clare in an exact fashion, or even leaving all of its tenets intact. Notable omissions include the

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9MS Bologna, Biblioteca comunale dell’Archiginnasio, cod. Ital. 269.
10As the manuscript is unpublished, all transcriptions and translations of *AGA* 25, 2 are my own. Slashes indicate a line break in the MS. *Ord. Introduction*, 175r: “pero che le persone/ religiose senza la observantia de la sante/ordinatione sono como la possessione senza/ siepe le fructi de la quale se possano facilmente robare da ogni parte e cussi de/vignire in ogni confusione.”
11*Ord. Introduction*, 175v: “de la beata/Clara madre nostra discipula del beato Francesco e/ancilla e sposa de nostri salvatore yhesu christo…”
requirement for perpetual fasting. Cited for this change is no less than Pope Eugenius IV, who provided a dispensation for five months of the year in 1437. Caterina also omits Clare’s hardline language on poverty. Though it is clear that she does not wish her sisters to traffic in worldly goods, her chapter titles do not show Clare’s preoccupation with the subject, revealed in headings like: “On the Lack of Possessions” and “How the Sisters Should Not Acquire anything of their Own…”\(^{12}\)

More crucial than what is missing, however, is what Caterina chose to add. Firstly, her document has chapter divisions where Clare’s original copy of the Rule had none.\(^ {13}\) When the RSC was divided into sections, they numbered twelve, meaning that the fourteen chapters of this commentary treat more topics than the Rule which inspired it. Therein, Caterina spent much more space describing how sisters should behave at table, in chapter meetings, and during the Divine Office. And when she omitted Clare’s recommendation that “sisters who are not literate should not care to become so,” she

\(^{12}\)See RSC Chapters VI and VIII for Clare’s words on poverty. Full chapter headings follow for comparative purposes. Recall, however that Clare’s were added at a date after their initial composition. Their most common modern forms are as follows: Chapters I and II constitute an introduction and guidelines for accepting postulants. III. Divine Office, Fasting, Confession and Communion, IV. Election and Office of Abbess, Chapter, Officials and Discreets, V. Silence and Speaking at the Grate, VI. Lack of Possessions, VII. Concerning Work, VIII. That the Sisters shall Obtain Nothing for Themselves, About Procuring Alms, and About Sick Sisters, IX. Concerning Penance and Sisters who Serve Outside the Monastery, X. The Admonition and Correction of Sisters, XI. The Keeping of Enclosure, XII. The Visitor, Chaplain, and Cardinal Protector. AGA Ordinazione: Introduction. I. That the abbess should be vigilant and have the Rule, Ordinazione read frequently, II. The way that ladies should be received into the order, and about novices, and concerning possessions, III. Divine Office and mass, IV. Concerning coming to the refectory, fasting and abstinence and the discipline, V. Confession and communion, VI. Chapter, and the publicizing of guilt and defects, VII. Holy silence and the form of speaking, VIII. The Offices, and how the sisters should work and be active, IX. How to provide for and serve sick sisters, X. How sisters should sleep, XI. How the sisters who go outside ought to behave, XII. How to behave when someone enters the monastery, XIII. Holy prayer and intercession for the living and the dead, XIV. The authority of the abbess and of the confessor.

\(^{13}\)Margaret Carney, *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life* (Quincy, IL.: Franciscan Press, 1993), 82–3. Here Carney emphasizes the fact that there were no chapter divisisions in Clare’s original document.
expanded the possibilities for dialogue, learning, and sermon practice. In order to understand how such an evolution occurred, it is necessary to delve into the history of the rules followed by the Franciscan Second Order. For the Poor Clares of the Quattrocento were women who craved simplicity, but inherited a complex past.

A Rule of One’s Own: Poor Clare Legislation—Origins and Evolution

Beginning with Clare’s initial commitment to Francis’ mission in 1212, monastic women could become affiliated with the burgeoning Franciscan movement in a dizzying variety of ways. Indeed, in the medieval period, “a unified order of Poor Clares with a coherent rule...did not exist.” In addition, the development of Second Order normative legislation and the conflicts arising from it are notoriously difficult territory for historians to explore. Pascal Robinson noted this fact over a century ago, when he stated that “the whole question of early Clarissan legislation...(is)...very controversial” and that untangling the institutional history of it was a task at which “only the most patient” of students is likely to persevere. Nonetheless, I will attempt an outline here of the most important features of the legislation that shaped Clarissan life in the 1200s and 1300s. In the process, I hope to show how the normative documents of the Poor Clares reflected greater trends concerning women’s place in the Church, and how they set the stage for

14 RSC X, VIII: “et nescientes litteras non curent litteras discere.” Chapter X of the Later Rule of the Friars contains a similar admonition. Early Franciscan anxiety about the propriety of learning is well documented. Clare was not anti-intellectual, but Caterina was more zealous about building educational processes into her daily life, perhaps due to the fifteenth-century growth of vernacular spiritual literature. On Clare and learning see Lezlie Knox, “What Francis Intended: Gender and the Transmission of Knowledge in the Franciscan Order,” in Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe, 1200–1550, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004).


fifteenth-century reform movements. For during the Quattrocento, Observants like Caterina, building on Clare’s legacy, used seemingly rigid rules to enhance communal flexibility.

Clare’s vocation after her conversion to the simple life of Francis was bound to elicit some regulatory controversy, given that it was built on an impossibility: enclosed mendicancy. Women wishing to imitate the friars early on were steered away from a lifestyle necessitating wandering preaching or begging and led towards one focused on cloistered contemplation. Clare’s routine during her early years at the house of San Damiano in Assisi resembled the lifestyle of thousands of other *religiosae mulieres* in thirteenth century Italy, as many women wished to live a poor life of penitence and service without adhering to a set rule. From about 1212 to 1215, Clare therefore based the practices of her small community around the recommendations that Francis had given her, a document known as the *Forma vivendi*.\(^\text{17}\) She dedicated herself above all to absolute material poverty. The fluidity of her institutional identity at this stage was unsurprising, given the fact that the Franciscan brothers also were in a state of flux regarding their communal obligations.

In the wake of the Fourth Lateran council in 1215, Pope Innocent III made it clear that religious without set rules could undermine the Church’s hierarchy. He also discouraged the formation of new rules for innovative forms of religious life. Thus, Clare’s community at San Damiano (and other houses nearby who followed their example) were required to take on the Benedictine Rule. At the same time as this new

regularizing movement was gripping all Orders, the ranks of the *fratres* and *sorores minores* were growing apace. In fact, no less than bishop Jacques de Vitry noticed this trend on his 1216 visit to Italy.\(^\text{18}\) The popularity of a Franciscan lifestyle was such that the new female houses springing up were often affiliated with it in only nebulous ways. They often depended more upon traditional regulations, papal privileges, or episcopal decrees to shape their communal identity than upon fixed rules. Though many in these new houses did not prioritize poverty, Clare herself remained steadfastly dedicated to it, and even petitioned Pope Innocent III to recognize her desire for complete freedom from possessions in 1216.\(^\text{19}\) She refused grants of all revenue-generating properties, preferring to rely upon alms begged by the friars, who also provided spiritual support. The essential nature of the level of *cura monialium* owed to enclosed women by their male counterparts would be an additional source of contention as the order grew.

Another layer of complexity was added around 1218, when Cardinal Hugolino, then bishop of Ostia, issued a *Forma vitae* for many of the communities that would become “Poor Clares.” He called women in his group of houses “Poor Ladies” and later “Poor Ladies of the Order of San Damiano.” These houses fell under direct papal control, and Hugolino reissued these statutes during his own pontificate as Gregory IX (1227–1241). Clare herself agreed to take on some of these Hugolinian constitutions, still underpinned by a Benedictine observance, so long as she could maintain her cherished poverty. The abbess’s stubbornness troubled the Cardinal even after he granted her, with the 1228 bull *Sicut manifestum*, a measure of protection for her simple lifestyle.\(^\text{20}\) Clare

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\(^\text{18}\)Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 23.
was not the only nun of her order dissatisfied with the normative status quo. Her friend and ally in religion, Agnes of Bohemia, petitioned Gregory for a real Franciscan rule for women. He refused.\textsuperscript{21} Numerous female houses outside of the influence of San Damiano were happy, however, to use papal favor to their advantage, and they often joined the order during these years not to “follow the poor Christ” but to enjoy the particular “juridical protections” that it afforded.\textsuperscript{22} It is important to recall that at this “precocious” stage, the order of the Poor Ladies was not an exclusively “Clare-centered” movement, as it was made to seem in later centuries.\textsuperscript{23} Instead of having one leader, many female communities negotiated for the life they wanted on a hyper-local level.

Seeking to unify the many different practices that these protections afforded, Pope Innocent IV, Gregory’s successor, issued yet another Rule for the Poor Ladies in 1247. This solidified their Franciscan identity by basing their way of life on the so called “Later Rule” of the Friar’s Minor as opposed to the Benedictine Rule. But as the friars’ own stance on poverty softened—allowing them to take on traditional clerical and academic roles—they resisted their duty to care for enclosed female communities, who were often more dedicated to primitive poverty than they were.\textsuperscript{24} Clare, herself, continued to strive for simplicity and a strong alliance with male Franciscans. Issued in a time of political conflict with the Empire, Innocent’s legislation was implemented unevenly both within and without Italy. Such continued indecision and normative variety actually allowed for the “practical and astute” Clare to compose her own legislation.\textsuperscript{25} This Form of Life was

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{23}Knox, Creating Clare, 8.
\textsuperscript{24}Mueller, Privilege of Poverty, 107–108.
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., IX.
one that Innocent would, against all odds, approve just before Clare’s death in 1253. It was the first religious rule composed by a woman to gain papal approval during the medieval period. This dramatic fact is coupled with the equally dramatic story that Clare fought and gained approval of the simple statues for her “Poor Sisters” while on her deathbed, cherishing this Rule as dearly as she did her 1228 Privilege of Poverty. These guidelines, perhaps given their rigor in terms of absolute lack of possessions and perpetual fasting, did not immediately find favor, and a variety of observances remained.

Therefore, by 1263, when Pope Urban IV composed yet another rule for the Order, he noted that they had many kinds of vows and observances, as well as “a variety” of titles. They could be known as “sisters,” “ladies,” or “nuns,” and described as the “poor” and “enclosed women” of the “Order of San Damiano,” among other “diverse names.” Though, he said, they could keep the privileges and indulgences gained under these several rules and titles (those of Gregory IX are specifically mentioned) they would henceforth be known as members of the “Order of St. Clare.” Subsequently, Urban’s twenty-six chapter rule was indeed adopted by the majority of female houses that had responded to the inspirational message of the early Franciscans.

What’s in a Rule?: Persistent Diversity and Gendered Expression

There is evidence, however, that diversity of practice persisted into the 1300s, in spite of Urban’s attempt at normative uniformity. This was often a result of the communal initiatives of powerful women wishing to live by the rules they preferred. A

26 *R Urb*, Introduction: “In hoc autem Ordine vos, et alias ipsum profitentes, sub nominationum varietate interdum Sorores, quandoque Dominas, plerumque Moniales, nonnumquam Pauperes inclusas Ordinis Sancti Damiani…”
27 Ibid.: “…decrevimus ordinem Sanctae Clarae uniformiter nominandum…”
few houses kept Clare’s Rule, including—at least initially—the Saint’s own community in Assisi. Other houses to do so were the few influenced by Agnes of Bohemia (like those in Bratislava and Prague) and some in southern Europe overseen by Sancia, Queen of Naples. As early as the 1240’s Isabelle of Longchamp had, with the help of the male Franciscan elite, composed her own Rule for Sorores Minores. Over a dozen houses, in France and elsewhere, followed her guidelines with continued papal permission.

In addition, women, sometimes with the help of male allies, took to composing unique sets of constitutions, statutes applicable to their particular monastery. Though very few of these documents survive from the fourteenth century, their existence (as well as that of innumerable papal privileges and exemptions from this era) reveals that women were frequently able to customize their lifestyle while remaining under the aegis of the Clarissan Order. As late as 1337, Urban’s Rule had to be reissued to some houses in German lands, showing that legislation for Poor Clares was an issue necessitating negotiation throughout the medieval period. This kind of fluidity contributed to Caterina’s ability, later on, to compose her own rule commentary. Before examining it, however, it is important to consider the essential discursive differences between rules composed by women and those by their male counterparts in the later Middle Ages. It is necessary to focus on details of vocabulary and tone, since the general behaviors recommended in these documents tended to be nearly identical, always including poverty, chastity, and obedience in an atmosphere of prayerful enclosure. This analysis

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30 Roest, Order and Disorder, 72.
will help to answer the question as to why Franciscan women of the Middle Ages continued to invest time and energy in making their own rules and statutes.

Due to the brevity of this discussion, I will mostly contrast Clare’s own Rule and the 1263 Rule of Urban IV, showing that, therein, Clare recommends practices to her familiar community by means of open exhortation, whereas Urban dictates behaviors to a new Order using words of enclosure and legislation. Clare’s Rule shows that she viewed her way of life as one of “divine inspiration,” devoted to the behaviors of Christ in his “holy gospel,” specifically poverty and humility. In keeping with this dynamic, she quotes scripture frequently, and writes in a style rooted in Old Testament “prophetic preaching.” At its practical core, her rule sets forth what each nun actively “promised” when she accepted religious life. The abbess’s affection for those she addresses is evident; she calls them “my sisters,” who are also “most dear” and “most beloved” members of community, in need of charitable care and perpetual service. In at least two instances, Clare’s affection leads to an emotional address of her audience. At the end of Chapter Two, for example she says “I admonish, beg, and exhort my sisters to wear humble garments always” as Christ did in the manger. In Chapter Ten, she says “I admonish and exhort the sisters in the Name of the Lord Jesus to avoid all pride, vainglory (and) envy,” saying that they should replace the appetite for such things with

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31 RSC, II discusses how those who come to the order through “divina inspiratione” ought to be accepted, and how all sisters should give their goods away to the poor “quicquid Dominus inspiraverit.” Clare mentions the Gospel at the outset of her Rule, where she states that the Rule, as instituted by Francis, required one to observe “Domini nostri Jesu Christi sanctum Evangelium.” She closes the Rule with a similar proviso in Chapter XII.

32 Carney, First Franciscan Woman, 93.

33 Clare uses “promissit” in Chapter I to explain that all sisters of her order are to devote themselves in full obedience to the current and future heads of the Church and of the Franciscan Order.

34 RSC, II: “sorores meas,” VIII: “carissimas sorores meas” and “dilectissimae sorores.”

35 Ibid. “Et amore sanctissimi et dilectissimi Pueri pauperculis panniculi involuti, in praesepio reclinati, et sanctissimae Matris eius moneo, deprecor et exhortor sorores meas, ut vestimentis semper vilibus induantur.”
“mutual affection” which itself is the “bond of perfection.”

Such emphasis on communal participation and affection actually mirrors the way that this *forma vivendi* was composed, not just with the input of neighboring monasteries and Church hierarchy, but with the cooperative input of all sisters during their regular chapter meetings. Thus, Clare’s Rule seems to incorporate a variety of voices in a single prescriptive document.

From the outset, Urban’s Rule puts forth a different vision for female religious life. Instead of a moving inspiration for an active and emotional gospel experience, his Christ is described as a steady foundational “rock” upon which to build the “structure” of a religious “order.” The many details necessary to delineate this structure, make his rule or “formula” roughly twice as long as Clare’s, framed with more ornate and authoritative language. His words are focused on creating a legislative unity, not an emotional one.

Thus, Urban only refers to the sisters as “beloved in Christ” once, at the outset, and is rarely concerned with making direct appeals to them in the body of his rule. What does concern him is complete enclosure. He first emphasizes this requirement in Chapter II, in which he says that sisters must stay behind the “surrounding walls” of their monastery until death, except in the case of war, fire, or flood.

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36 *Ibid*, XX. The full passage, for comparison with Urban’s below, is: “Moneo vero et exhortor in Domino Jesu Christo, ut caveant sorores ab omni superbia, vanagloria, invidia, avaritia cura et sollicitudine huius saeculi, detractione et murmuratione, dissensione et divisione; sint vero solliciate se ipsum invicem servare mutuae dilectionis unitatem, quae est vinculum perfectionis.”

37 *Carney, First Franciscan Woman*, 96; 80.

38 *Rurb*, Introduction: “…hanc petram Christus lapidem esse voluit in vestri Ordinis structuram primarium.”

39 *Ibid*, XXVI: “Ut autem vos in hac Regula, sive formula tamquam in speculo possitis inspicere ne per oblivionem aliquid negligatis…”


41 *Ibid*, I: “Omni namque tempore vitae suae hanc vitam profitentes clausae manere firmiter teneantur infra murorum ambitum, et intrinsecam clausuram Monasterii deputatum; nisi forsan, (quod abisit) superveniaret inevitabilis et periculosae necessitas sicut exussionis, ignis, vel incursus hostilis, seu alicujus hujusmodi…” Such strictures were only tightened by the papal decree *Periculosus* in 1298.
describes the portress (the nun who was to monitor those who enter and exit the monastery) stating that she must be a woman of exceptional character and vigilance. Even his words concerning clothing in Chapter IV show a great preoccupation with enclosure, this time with the confining of women’s own bodies.

The ethos of supervision and control inherent in Urban’s Rule is expressed clearly in Chapter Twenty-Two. Here, he does “admonish” the sisters directly, using Clare’s words from Chapter Ten about avoiding pride, etc. He follows this statement, however, with a warning about ridding oneself of all vice that could be displeasing “in the eyes of the true Spouse,” Christ. He does mention maintaining the bond of communal unity, but serving God with their “exterior and interior purity” like “prudent virgins” seems to take precedence over Clare’s appeal for emotional mutuality. Urban’s prescriptive document was fairly successful in creating the structured Order that he envisioned. But until the end of the Middle Ages, women continued to hearken back to the example of Clare as a foundress who enabled an inspired communal life based upon their specific spiritual needs.

In looking at the contrasts between these two rules (and the institutional history set forth above) we can see that the rule-giving genre, due to its multi-layered nature, became a way for male and female Franciscans to have textual conversations with their predecessors, contemporaries, and even successors. This dynamic of conversational exchange is evident from the beginning of the tradition, as Hugolino was only inspired to

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42 Ibid., XXVI: “Monemus sorores omnes et hortamur in Domino Jesu Christo ut caveant omni superbia, vanagloria, invidia, avaritia, cura, et sollicitudine hujus saeculi, detractione et murmuratione, dissensione et divisione, ac omni vitio pro quo possit dislicere in oculis veri Sponsi, sed magis sollicite coram Deo servare exteriorem et interiorem in omnibus puritatem, ac semper invicem habere mutuae dilectionis unitatem, quae est vinculum perfectionis; ut in ea radicatae et fundatae possint ad Agni Domini nostri Jesu Christi nuptias cum prudentibus virginibus introire.”
write his constitutions by a group of sisters in Pamplona, who wrote him a letter asking for normative guidance. The preservation of multiple voices is evident in Clare’s Rule, where she uses the material of Benedict, Francis, Hugolino and Innocent. Urban’s guidelines, in spite of their seemingly unified nature, could encompass all of these as well.\textsuperscript{43} Clare’s is different, however, in that it hints at conversation \textit{within} female communities regarding their own everyday practice and experiences. As we will see, the exhortative nature of Clare’s \textit{Forma vitae} influenced Caterina’s commentary upon it and in turn, the latter’s practice of preaching to her sisters. To understand, however, just what changed for these abbesses between the 1250s and the 1450s, we must now turn to the development of the Franciscan Observance in Italy.

\textit{Facinoribus plena: Investigating Second Order Reform in Italy}

Observant Reform for Franciscan women in Italy is difficult to synthesize because it was, in the words of Lezlie Knox, both “geographically diffuse” and “temporally protracted.”\textsuperscript{44} Complexity also arises from the fact that its impetus came simultaneously from male voices outside the cloister and female ones within it. This section will detail the general trajectory of the Regular Observance in order to better explain the historical evolution of Caterina’s Corpus Domini communities. Along the way it will show that male and female reformers used both the traditional language of preaching and the timeworn genre of the rule to express new and creative Observant identities.

Fifteenth-century Franciscans yearned for a return to their founders’ core values of poverty and simplicity, believing many of their houses to be corrupted by the very

\textsuperscript{43}Carney, \textit{First Franciscan Woman}, 79.
\textsuperscript{44}Knox, \textit{Creating Clare}, 128.
worldly concerns that they were built to escape. Relaxation of several regulations (including those concerning entry into the Order) had occurred in the second half of the fourteenth century when, in the wake of plague and warfare, the populations of numerous houses dwindled, along with the monetary donations required to maintain them. The tumult of the Great Schism (1378–1417) engendered a longing for discipline and stability throughout the Church. Popular commitment to conciliar solutions to the crisis caused the rhetoric of renewal “in capito and et membris” to expand as never before. The Franciscans’ long-term preoccupation with rules intensified as all orders entered a period of “normative regularization” impacting religious of both genders. Urged on by this rhetoric and already dissatisfied with the state of internal discipline, the most zealous male Franciscan leaders took administrative action. In fact, by the end of the Council of Constance in 1418, the First Order Regular Observants existed as a body separate from Conventual friars. In 1420, they would bring the first female house into their fold.

Members of the Regular Observance in Italy were poised for success in that, though they maintained the importance of Franciscan simplicity, they were willing to engage in public

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45 Roest, Order and Disorder, 165.
46 Ibid. See also Nimmo, Reform and Division, 517, as well as Sensi, “L’Osservanze Francescane Femminile,” 139. Sensi traces the word “observantia” back to conciliar roots as well, citing Lateran IV’s proclamation that monastic orders should, in their chapter meetings, “attend to matters regarding the reform of their orders and the observance of their rule.” See also Clare Lappin, “The Mirror of the Observance: Image, Ideal, and Identity in Observant Franciscan Literature, c. 1415–1528” (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2000), 21.
48 Lappin, Mirror of the Observance, 11–12; Nimmo, Reform and Division, 574–5.
ministry on a grand scale using widespread preaching. Often inspired by Franciscan hillside hermits, or zoccoli, who had initiated the Spiritual reforms of the late 1300s, Regular Franciscans found it impossible to live lives of rural isolation. Their charisma and tenacity helped the Quattrocento Observants to gain the approval of both civic and ecclesiastical authorities. The most fiery and talented of the Observant pioneers was Bernardino of Siena. He was the first of the so-called Four Pillars of Reform to build up his reputation in the cities of North-Central Italy. Two of the other three, John of Capistrano and Albert of Sarteano, were also involved in Clarissan reform. Indeed, in their capacities as Vicars General in the 1440s and ‘50s they continued the Second Order initiatives that Bernardino started in the two decades previous. The indefatigable Sienese friar made it clear that reform was necessary because of the decadence that existed within female communities that were not properly enclosed. While speaking in Perugia in 1425, for example, he called such houses “places for sows” that were “full of outrages”—more like brothels than nunneries. He claimed to have reformed two hundred female houses with the help of similar inflammatory words, a figure that cannot be substantiated. That religious women listening to his preaching habitually adopted a stricter lifestyle in its wake is a fact that can be proven. These nuns were rarely “outrageous” as Bernardino would have it, but rather formed a conservative and educated

49Lappin, Mirror of the Observance, 20–21. The name Regular Observance, significant for its connotation of Rules, differentiates the movement under Bernardino from the “Spiritual Observance” of hermits like Paoluccio.  
50James of the Marches, though a great defender of the male Observant cause, seems to have been less active in reforming the Second Order.  
51Moorman, History of the Franciscan Order, 590 contains a list of Ministers/Vicars General. Alberto of Sarteano served as Vicar General in 1442–3. John was appointed Cismontane Vicar General (head of the Observants in Italy) by Eugenius IV in 1431. He was replaced by Bernardino of Siena six years later, but also held the post from just before Bernardino’s death in 1443 until 1446, and then again from 1449–52.  
52Sensi, “L’Osservanz e francescane femaili,” 155, Roest, Order and Disorder, 179: “loca porca et facinoribus plena.”  
social elite, already committed to internal reform within their houses. Often, they were equally inspired by earlier, fourteenth-century Italian communities of the Spiritual Observance, comprised of lower-status tertiaries and *bizzochi*. And just as often, a sign of their reform was switching the practice of Urban IV’s 1263 Rule (or another observance altogether) for the more rigorous *Prima Regula* of Clare. Another sign, one that came frequently when they embraced greater poverty, was an enrichment of their own rhetorical and literary efforts in support of Observant community.

The first documented incidence of a house adopting the stricter Rule of Clare occurred in Milan in 1418, where the sisters of Saint Orsula became Observant after one of Bernardino’s tours. Milanese Reform was headed by abbesses Caterina Calmi and Felicia Meda, both influential women from notable families. Corpus Christi in Mantua was reformed soon after with the aid of Milanese sisters. This community, founded by the marchesa Paola Malatesta Gonzaga, would become a hub of the Observance, sending reform parties to houses in seven different Italian cities over the course of the Quattrocento. The Italian movement’s momentum also increased with promulgation of the bull *Ad statum singulorum*, Eugenius IV’s 1431 call for the reform of Clarissan houses.54 It was in that same year that Caterina’s own community, Corpus Domini Ferrara, was also officially made, by order of papal bull, “ordinis sanctae Clarae.”55 A few years later, in 1435, its foundress, Verde Pio di Carpi (who had ties to the ruling Este) requested and received another bull clarifying that the sisters there were to “conform” in every way to the Regular Observance as it was in Mantua, thus acknowledging the role that sisters from this “motherhouse” had played in their

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54 Knox, *Creating Clare*, 124.
55 Lombardi, *Francescani a Ferrara*, 82.
transformation. In fact, Verde’s own sister by birth, Taddea, was a Mantuan Clarisse. It was she who most likely served as the first Clarissan Abbess of Corpus Domini Ferrara.

Digni de mazore gloria: Ferrara, Bologna, and Clarissan Institutional Identity

Caterina’s first house and its multiple shifts in religious identity were emblematic of the uncertain trajectory of the Second Order Observance in its formative stages. The life of Corpus Domini Ferrara also exhibits the variety of choices determined women of the Quattrocento had when constituting their communities. For the foundation that Caterina would enter around 1426 began its life as a religious space in 1406, but one that “had no links whatsoever with the Clarissans and their Rules.” Bernardina Sedazzari, widow and one-time affiliate of the Benedictine monastery of San Silvestro in Ferrara, paid for the land and building with her own money, with the original intention of making it a cloister of Augustinian nuns. Instead, for the first twenty or so years, the house of “Corpus Christi and the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary” was filled by women living essentially as bizzoche, enjoying a spiritual life unaffiliated to a particular order. This situation persisted in spite of the interventions of both Pope Martin V and the bishop of Bologna attempting to regulate their enclosure. Upon Bernardina’s death in 1425, she passed on her legacy (and her wish that the community remain unaffiliated) to her

56Ibid., 90.
57Lombardi, Francescani a Ferrara, 65. Note that, though I will refer to the communities by their current names, fifteenth century documents often refer to the both the Ferrara and Bologna houses as “Corpus Christi,” not “Domini.”
58Mary Martin McLaughlin, “Creating and Recreating Comunities of Women: The Case of Corpus Domini Ferrara,” Signs 14, 2 (Winter, 1989): 296. This section is much indebted to McLaughlin’s research on CDF, (as well as the work of Foletti and Lombardi).
communal heir, Lucia Mascheroni. She was soon opposed by a rival, Ailisia de Baldo, who, because she wished to impose a definitive Augustinian rule, essentially split the community in two. After a period of conflict, Ailisia and her party actually left Corpus Domini in 1426, and, in the next few years, they founded a new house named Sant’Agostino, where they could profess the Augustinian life they had desired.

Remaining in Corpus Domini, Lucia soon faced another rival of sorts, Verde Pio di Carpi, a wealthy patron who strongly favored making the house into one of enclosed Clarisse, an initiative which caused further upheaval for the sisters already present, including Caterina. Verde’s campaign was successful, and, as mentioned above, she received official papal approval to align the community to the Order of Saint Clare in 1431.

Confusion over institutional identity did not end at this point, however. Firstly, Eugenius IV had, for reasons unknown, assigned the oversight of Corpus Domini’s transition not to an Observant, or even to a Franciscan, but to the abbot of the Benedictine foundation of Gavello in Ferrara, who bore the thankless task of choosing an abbess from among the Mantuan newcomers. In addition, though it is clear that by the early 1440s the sisters were certainly under the supervision of the Observant Friars, at first a “secular priest” was to be assigned the duties of chaplain and confessor. Another perplexing detail arises from Verde’s request to the pope that Corpus Domini should follow the modified 1263 Rule of Urban, not the more rigorous Prima Regula of Clare. Eugenius’

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59Ibid., 298–300.  
60Lombardi, Francescani a Ferrara, 77.  
62Lombardi, Francescani a Ferrara, 82; Foletti, Sette Armi, 52–3.  
63Ibid., 83.
response, the initial authorizing bull *Sedis Apostolica copiosa benignitas*, does not specify, however, which rule the community should follow. What is inconsistent here is that the Mantuan sisters reforming Corpus Domini in 1431 were noted for their adherence to the stricter Observance. Bert Roest has suggested recently, however, that Corpus Christi Mantua could have formally adopted Clare’s Rule at any point between 1420 and 1445, the year when the sisters requested instruction from John of Capistrano on how to follow it correctly. Therefore, there is no guarantee that the Mantuan sisters were adhering to the *Prima Regula* in the early 1430s. It is possible that the motivation for Verde’s renewed (and approved) request to follow their “observance” in 1435 could have been a recognition that Clare’s rule was now officially in practice. In the background of these events was yet another, older source of contention: Lucia Mascheroni’s claim on the physical house of Corpus Domini. Lucia stayed in the community until sometime between 1446 and 1452, still stubborn in the promise that she had made to Bernardina to take no vows. This concerned the professed sisters, who eventually called upon the bishop of Ferrara and then the pope to help them. Eventually these figures absolved Lucia of her “oath” and turned the house over fully to the resident Poor Clares. It was only in the early 1450s then, that Corpus Domini could be called fully Observant, at least in a statutory sense. These multiple legislative ambiguities show just how fluid the Reform movement was for the Second Order in Italy, especially in its early stages.

The house’s early culture of conflict could not help but shape the personality of the novice mistress, the nun in charge of teaching the monastery’s ways. This person was Caterina Vigri. Illuminata Bembo, in her biography, makes it clear that choosing to

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64Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 183.
observe the Rule of Clare in all of its strictness was part of Caterina’s life-long project of holy obedience. Her choice, however, did not come without a struggle. The tumult of her early years at Corpus Domini Ferrara, and her choice to adopt a Franciscan identity, is expressed within the visionary narrative of her autobiography, the *Sette armi spirituali*. Therein, she states that God allowed her to go through “great storms” of confusion in order that she might thereby “prove herself worthy of greater glory.”

When Caterina entered Corpus Domini at the age of thirteen she became close to then-leader Lucia, who had no desire to adopt a Clarissan lifestyle. Caterina, had, however (as a matter of personal choice, not communal policy) adopted a Franciscan confessor early on, perhaps indicating her preference for such spirituality. She did not form an alliance with Verde Pio di Carpi, though, the person primarily responsible for making Corpus Domini a Poor Clare house. Whether this was out of loyalty to Lucia or distaste for Verde’s worldliness, it is difficult to say. More than one scholar has suggested that the manipulative Verde is the human figure behind the diabolical visions that plagued Caterina in the early 1430s.

During this time, Caterina experienced visions in which Satan came to her disguised as Christ and the Virgin Mary, highlighting her feeling of spiritual uncertainty as regarded surface appearances: Lucia appeared to be a devout woman, but her unaffiliated way of life was not a holy choice; Verde appeared to be a worldly woman, but the Clarissan life that she promoted was an ideal one of poverty and discipline.

\[66^*\text{Specchio}, 26.\]
\[67^*\text{SA}, 7:34, 21: “\text{Al laude del Segnore Dio, lo quale non abandona chi spera in esso, avegna che li permeta de molte e grande tenpestate per volerli in ci\`o provare e farli digni de mazore gloria.”}\]
\[68^*\text{McLaughlin, “Creating and Recreating,” 314–15.}\]
\[69^*\text{Ibid.}\]
\[70^*\text{Ibid., Foletti, *Sette armi*, 72ff.}\]
It may be hard for us to imagine the struggle of institutionalization in these visionary terms. It is easier, perhaps, to think of how distressed Caterina must have felt in 1431, when, after she and her consorelle left the monastery for a brief time during some construction work, they returned to find that the Mantuan reform party had already set up shop in Corpus Domini. Regardless of her feelings about their lifestyle, their sudden arrival must have been jarring for the young nun. After these Observant Clarissans were present, her troubling visions still persisted for years. This suggests that, for her, adoption of a Clarissan identity (and the peace of mind that came with it) was a gradual transformation, not a sudden event. Thus, her individual experience mirrored the trajectory of the movement in general. Caterina forges the connection between following the Prima Regula and the “greater glory” for which she suffered years of doubt in her “Sermon in Honor of Saint Clare.” There, she states that Clare has inspired her to speak of how much greater heavenly kingdoms are than earthly ones. The Saint did this, she says, in order to “enliven us to observe the Rule as we are obliged, [the Rule] by which Saint Clare certainly desires to give us, her company, an eternal and happy prize.” True belief in such a prize, however, was the product of much discernment. Caterina’s pedagogical works, because they treat the period from the 1430s to the 1460s, thus help us to understand Observantism both in youthful formation and in maturity. It was her time as a confused student that made her one of the Franciscan Reform’s best teachers.

72 Ser. XXXII, 248: “Figliole et sorelle mie charissime in Christo, per innanimire maggiormente della Regola, per la quale S. Chiara ce ne vuol far dare al sicuro in Cielo in sua compagnia un eterno e felice premio, ella ha inspirata hora una sua infima et indignissima serva a dirvi in proposito che gli è tanto differenza fra il felicissimo riposo et la gloria dell’anima nostra in esso celest’empirio rispetto a quell del corpo, et fra le dote dell’uno et dell’altra (che pur le doti del corpo, et la sua gloria sarano al suo tempo negli eletti anch’elle grandissime) quanto è di maggior nobiltà et essentia quella da questo.”
The Observants’ foundation of Corpus Domini Bologna in 1456 was certainly a smoother process than the creation of its motherhouse. From the outset, it enjoyed a reputation for prestige, lending security to this phase of the Observant movement and leading to adulation for Caterina, its first abbess. The necessity for a new house arose partly because Corpus Domini Ferrara had proved popular, one document stating that the small enclosure held one hundred five sisters. With such growth, they could easily spare fourteen professed sisters for the new Clarissan community, even if one of them was their novice mistress Caterina. The new abbess had even experienced a heaven-sent vision which, in addition to the vote of her peers, authorized her new leadership position.

The founding of Corpus Domini Bologna was authorized at high levels, both ecclesiastical and civic. It received papal approbation from Nicholas V, who responded positively to the initial 1454 request of the members of the Franciscan Third Order (along with the Observant Franciscan Friars of San Paolo al Monte and the city’s bishop) to create a new Clarissan community within a recently acquired hospital building. Papal support continued under Calixtus III, who indicated such via the bull Ad ea quae in omnipotentis laudem et gloriam in 1455. At this time Bologna’s civic government was headed by Cardinal-Legate John Bessarion, who found a more suitable location in the

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73 AGA 1, 1. Dated 16 October 1455, this is the mandate of the procurator, Vicar General, nuns of CDF and other officials regarding establishment of CDB. When discussing the two-thirds majority of the nuns reached in this matter, the writer states that it is: “ex centum quinque sororibus monialibus in eo monasterio.” The document is perhaps a copy of an original, for though a notarial authentication is present, the hand appears to be a sixteenth-century one, perhaps Casanova’s.

74 Lombardi, Francescani a Ferrara, 147 cites the total number of the party that transferred on July 22, 1456 as eighteen, including a novice and two converse, as well as Caterina’s own mother. The Ferraresi were sad to see Caterina go—even Borso d’Este himself commented on his city’s loss—and according to Casanova (Ser MS. 133v) they had to leave in the middle of the night in order to avoid “popular tumult.”

75 Specchio, 7:1–8, 52–54 in which God authorizes her choice of leadership in Bologna (her birthplace) as opposed to Cremona, home of another new foundation.

76 Lombardi, Francescani a Ferrara, 144–5. For Casanova’s take on the foundation, see Ser. MS folios 130–132. He says that even the Bolognese senate was involved.

77 Ibid. and AS 1126/1, 4 for the copy of this bull originally held by CDB.
church of S. Cristoforo delle Muratelle, then occupied by the Brothers of St. Jerome. Bessarion’s prestige and authority would only grow; he went on to become Cardinal Protector of the Franciscans in 1458. And the initiative for a new female foundation was so strong that once these brothers were relocated, adjacent buildings (and plots of land) were purchased on the sisters’ behalf, and the complex was readied for their arrival. Such high-level support meant that Bessarion’s government not only assured that the sisters of the new community paid no taxes on goods and alms donated to them, but that each sister received a yearly measure of salt. Caterina’s new community, therefore, was well poised for success, and under the care of San Paolo’s Observant friars, before she even set foot in it. The spiritual routine of Corpus Domini Bologna, unlike its Ferrarese predecessor, was therefore well established from the beginning. This fact ensured that it quickly became a hub of civic life. According to Casanova, the city so anticipated the nuns’ entry that a veritable parade of notables—from guild leaders to senators to Bessarion himself—came out to meet them, all eager to share in the prestige that an Observant Franciscan identity now signified in the Papal States and beyond.

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78Lombardi, *Francescani a Ferrara*, 145–6 points out Calixtus’ statement that the original location was too small and next to a brothel! For Bessarion’s decree see AS 1126/1, 5.
80AS 1126/1, 6 for documents that detail the purchase (on the nuns’ behalf) of buildings and land adjacent to the St. Christopher complex on 6 August and 11 October 1455.
81AS 1126/1, 7 is dated 31 August 1456, just after the nuns’ arrival in July. There is actually an additional copy in the archive produced shortly after, indicating its status as an important legal document.
82Lombardi 148–9. Ser. MS folios 133–135 describe their entry into the city in great detail, even giving the names of each senator and guild leader. Casanova also lists each sister to enter the foundation on fols. 134–136. Notably, there are legal documents in the house’s archive that pre-date its foundation and do not have to do with the nuns’ activities. This likely means that the surrounding community saw the house as a trusted neighborhood location that could safeguard their important paperwork.
Although they did not always simultaneously follow the same rules in the same way, one trait that united Observants in Italy was their obsession with commenting upon their communal legislation. One could even say that creating and refining normative discourse was a hallmark of Observant identity, for doing so demonstrated the moral authority that differentiated them from Conventuals. In fact, male Observant authors produced “eleven expositions” on their own “Later Rule” between the years 1430 and 1528. Hashing out the proper observance of Clare’s original legislation was also a preoccupation of prominent members of the First Order, including Bernardino of Siena (whose commentary is now lost), John of Capistrano (whose Explicatio will be treated below), Nicolas of Osimo, and William of Casale. During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, in addition to Caterina’s legislation written at Bologna, female houses in Perugia, Camerino, Ferrara, Pesaro, and Sarzana composed house constitutions based on Clare’s Prima Regula, either generating them on their own or urging a male spiritual guide to do so on their behalf. The Statutes of Monteluce in Perugia proved to be some of the most popular. They spread along with the parties of sisters sent to reform other houses, a process that occurred at least six times. This list of commentaries and statutes

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83 Lappin, Mirror of the Observance, 12.
84 Roest, Order and Disorder, 321.
86 Roest, Order and Disorder, 181.
does not even include the widely influential constitutions of French Clarissan reformer Colette of Corbie, confirmed by a bull of Paul II in 1458.87

As has been suggested above, the goals of fifteenth-century Clarissans were substantially different from those of Clare herself. Why, then, would they turn back to her Rule, and invest so much time in commenting upon it? This likely occurred because, in using their foundress as touchstone of purity, austerity, and penitence, they lent credibility to their female-led reform efforts, which may have otherwise been perceived as tainted with novelty. In addition, claiming Clare and her Rule as their starting point clarified the incredibly complex story of their origins. Most crucially, however, rules were used by these female Franciscans as tools of negotiation and conversation with the Order and curia, just as they had been from their very origins. As we will see below, the key to Caterina’s preaching practice can actually be found in her Ordinazione. Therein, she took the dynamics of internal exchange and communal “exhortation” present in Clare’s Rule to their fifteenth-century fruition. Caterina’s experience of expanded vernacular piety, and of environments of secular and sacred “conversatio” inspired her belief that learning was not optional, but obligatory. An examination of her guidelines will reveal that she considered herself just as capable of instructing her community as “Pillar” of Observant Reform, John of Capistrano.

In 1445, a nun named Elizabeth of Mantua asked Cismontane Vicar General John of Capistrano to clarify how she and her community should best fulfill the requirements of Clare’s Rule, since it was legislation actually new to most Clarissans. He obliged.

87Colette of Corbie, “Sentiments & Constitutiones,” in La Règle de l’Ordre de Sainte Claire, avec les Statuts de la Réforme de Sainte Colette, quelques lettres de cette Glorieuse Réformatrice, ses Sentiments sur la Sainte Règle, etc. (Bruges: Soc. de Saint-Augustin, 1892).
The title of the resulting “systematic and pragmatic” commentary was the *Explicatio Primae Regulae S. Clarae*. The rigors of his document—he set down one-hundred eighteen precepts, the breaking of which was a mortal sin—were softened over time, but his declarations on the “legal obligations” of these women, as well as his focus on their enclosure and obedience provides a clear view of his priorities for female Franciscans.

Interestingly, there is no copy of the *Explicatio* in the AGA materials, although there is a copy of the 1446 commentary of Nicolas of Osimo, who tempered John’s legislation and shortened it considerably. Bert Roest and Marco Bartoli have shown that Caterina’s *Ordinazione* are indeed a reaction to John’s *Explicatio*, given that she points out somewhat slyly in the prologue that *none* of her ordinances carry the weight of mortal sin. What remains to be investigated, however, is her greater purpose in composing them. Recall her statement on their utility is that “religious women [who live] without the observance of the holy *Ordinazione* are like “pieces of land without fences.” A close examination of her guidelines, especially in comparison with the *Explicatio*, shows that Caterina’s “fences” were not just a means of control, but further functioned to promote practical prayer, ritual gesture and communal literacy—the fruits of her Reform. For Caterina, composing the *Ordinazione* was not only a way of maintaining autonomy in the face of John’s attempt at uniformity, but of keeping her all-important Observant promise to Christ.

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90 AGA, 25, 1, 25v–29v.
91 Caterina’s *Ordinazione* also have significant similarities to the statutes of Monteluce, San Gugliemo and the Colletan Constitutions, perhaps indicating that they were composed after these documents, or that all communal composers were inspired by the guidelines that worked for other communities.
Prayer is, of course, the central activity in any nun’s daily routine. But you would get little sense of its rhythms by simply reading John’s *Explicatio*. He mentions the mechanics of prayer only in the context of the Divine Office, where he briefly prescribes the number of Our Fathers illiterate sisters were to say at each canonical hour, and how sisters were obliged to say the Office of the Dead upon the passing of one of their own. Caterina certainly uses the *Ordinazione* to enumerate such obligatory prayers, but also to forge connections to the outside community and to expand opportunities for private devotion. From the nine canonical hours of the daily Divine Office, to the Monday and Wednesday sessions of the Discipline, from the many obligatory celebrations of mass, to the twelve yearly occasions for both confession and communion, the rhythms of prayer life within Corpus Domini were purposeful and complex.

One of the purposes of prayer was to extend the community’s influence on the outside world and cement relationships with secular supporters. For example, at chapter meetings, the abbess or her vicaress would “recommend that the sisters pray for the whole world, especially Christian people, and for the government of the Church and the State, and pray specially for the benefactors of the monastery—living and dead, then say the customary psalms for their souls.”

Caterina dedicates Chapter Thirteen to such material, entitling it “Concerning Holy Prayer and Intercession for the Living and the Dead.” Here she details how the seven “penitential psalms as well as the litany and the

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92 *Ord.* Cap. VI, 178v: “raccomandi a le oratione de le sorelle lo u–/ niverso mundo. e maximamente lo popolo christiano/e quanto a lo stato ecclesiastico e mondano e spe/cialmente li benefactori del monasterio vivi e mor–/ti. poi dicto li psalmi consueti per le anime loro.’

93 *Ord.* Cap. XIII, 182v: “de la santa oratione e di/suffragii di vivi e di morti”
prayers for living benefactors” are to be said every other week.\textsuperscript{94} From Easter to the Feast of the Holy Cross (September 14) this was to take place after nones, during the rest of the liturgical year, after matins. On the same days that these devotions occurred, or rather in the evenings, they were to say the Office of the Dead for the deceased benefactors. Perhaps the most intriguing of these intercessory devotions was the insistence that, on the Saturday before the first Sunday of Advent, the nuns were to observe the customary prayers and offices of the dead for the souls of their parents.\textsuperscript{95} There can be no better example of the strong connection between the external world of status to the internal world of the cloister. For this practice most likely indicates that the families of the highborn nuns of Corpus Domini were also the monastery’s benefactors; that is, they provided financial support to their daughters. Similar prayerful intercessions were of course, habitual for all enclosed communities of the premodern age, but rarely do contemporary documents describe them in such a detailed way. John certainly knew that such prayer patterns were in place, but did not feel the need to comment much upon them in the Explicatio. Caterina’s document thus provides a more intimate look at the practical activities that formed the foundation of Clarissan spirituality.

Opportunities for personal prayer and reflection were also built into the daily and yearly devotional cycles at Corpus Domini. Each time she went to confession, for example, a sister was required to spend at least an “eighth of an hour” contemplating the sins that she had committed since her last confession.\textsuperscript{96} This may seem scant time, but

\textsuperscript{94}Ibid.: “si dica li psalmi pentitentiali cum le/letanie e soe oratione per li benefactori vivi.”
\textsuperscript{95}Ord. Cap. XIII, 182r: “Simalmente l’ultimo sabbato inanzi/la dominica de lo advento per le anime di padri e madrede/ de tutte le sorelle faciano celebrara una miss/a dicano lo vespro di morti e l’offito de ix lec–/zioni cum le laude.”
\textsuperscript{96}Ord. Cap. V, 178r: “ciaschuna sorella inanzi che vada a la confessione soa/pigli tempo vel glie possibile al ma ancho de una octa–/va de hora nel quale piensi li soi pecati che a com–/ressa de la precedentente confessione fino a quella pre–/sente”
since their confessions were quite frequent, it may have even felt lengthy. On other occasions, the time given for such devotion was certainly more substantial, provided that the community was not engaged in reading the penitential psalms, as mentioned above. From the Feast of the Holy Cross until Easter, the sisters were allotted an hour of individual prayer in church after matins in the morning and another after compline in the evening. The sacristana bore the duty of patrolling the church for those who wasted this time slumbering, or looked as if they were about to drift off.\(^97\) In the summer, during their hour of rest after nones, sisters were also allowed to “wander in prayer” while resting alone in their cells, presumably with no one on patrol.\(^98\) Thus, prayer was integrated into every facet of Observant life, with no waking moment allowed to go to waste.

Caterina’s ambitious program of devotional prayer was inextricably bound to performance of ritual gesture, both practices that John does not emphasize in his *Explicatio*. One of his only treatments of bodily motion occurs when he describes how a novice is to make her profession of entry into the order, “on bent knees with her hands joined in the those of the abbess.”\(^99\) This description does not appear in the *Ordinazione*, which are much more concerned with the manifold quotidian gestures that take place subsequent to this single ceremony. It is, in fact, rare to find the mundane motions of enclosed women portrayed with such clarity. Descriptions of late medieval women performing bodily gestures most likely conjure up images of individual mystical ecstasy.

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\(^{97}\) *Ord.* Cap. XIII, 182v: “E la sacristana visiti doe o tre volte/ciaschuna sorella ne la hora de le oratione se/forse alcuna dormesse o non, posse sompnolenta.”

\(^{98}\) *Ord.* Cap. X, 181v: “Ma quelle che non vorano o non posano dormire se occupino e vachino in oratione, o lectione o altri exercitii piantosi e quieta senza strepito.” One important architectural aspect made clear by the *Ordinazione* (and discussed by Bartoli) is the existence of one common sleeping dormitory but of individual cells for prayer.

The *Ordinazione* show, however, that regularized communal rituals involved gesture just as much, if not more than spontaneous visionary experiences. At Corpus Domini, they played a vital role in the processes of community formation and reintegration. Consider the careful synchronization described in the following description of the Divine Office.

When they enter the church, the sisters are to kneel in their places, and then:

> When the final signal (bell) for the Office sounds, everyone should stand up straight in their *cancelli*, their faces away from altar. When the *hebdominaria* makes a sign that the Office is beginning, everyone in the choir should turn at the same time to the altar and bow down deeply, saying the “Our Father.” When the signal is made to get up, they should right themselves and turn away from the altar. And then the *hebdominaria* says [Psalm 69] “deus in adutorium meum intende” and everyone responds “domine ad adjuvandum me festina” and turns together from the choir to the altar and bows saying “Glory to the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Then they should rise up straight and proceed according to the ordinary with due gravity and ceremony.100

They are to do this “all together” until the Office is “completely finished.”101 Considered kinesthetically, this passage makes it clear that performing the same physical gestures simultaneously unified the sisters, rendering them one body. (This is at least true of the literate sisters, a fact that will be considered during my discussion below.) Just as a gesture could create community proactively, it could also signify humble penitence for any actions that had damaged group cohesion. If, for example, you came to a meal late, you had to enter the refectory on your knees and remain so until the abbess gave you further penance or gestured a sign for you to come to the table.102 If you failed to attend the Divine Office, or committed other transgressions, the penance issued was to eat the

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100*Ord. Cap. III, 176v: “..sonando l offitio chiaschuno se lievij dri/ta ne li loro cancelli cum la faza in verso lo altare. fino che l ebdominaria fara signo de princiapare lo/offitio e allora tutte voltandose l uno coro al altaro/e inclinadose profondamente dicano lo pater noster./e fato signo de levarse drizando se voltino in ver–/so l altare. e l alora l ebmodinaria dica. deus in ad–/uitarium meum intende. e resposte da tutte domine ad ad–/juvandum me festina. voltandosi l uno coro al altare/se inclinandose e dito Gloria patri e filio et spiritui sancto/se levino dritte e perseguitino cum debita gravita/e ceremonie segundo l’ordinario...”

101Ibid.: “tutte insieme perseverino infino a la/fine”

102*Ord. Cap. IV, 177r.
next meal not at the table but kneeling “on the ground,” presumably in view of the rest of the sisters seated comfortably on chairs or benches.103 Communal exclusion based on insufficiency of bodies or deeds is present throughout the Ordinazione. Early on, in Chapter Two, Caterina states that women must be “healthy of body” as well as being “faithful and Catholic,” “not suspected of any error,” and free from any “stain of public infamy.”104 And this is even prior to their entry into religious life. Observance fostered an attitude, as is oft repeated in the sermons, that she “who is not with us is against us;” and just as the reward for proper behavior was great, the punishments were severe.105

Gestural punishments were not only exclusionary, however. They were also tangible ways of re-integrating individuals back into the all-important communal body. The equality of each member of this body was physically expressed at every chapter meeting. There, the abbess, should, after she is finished addressing her flock, “kneel down and humbly tell of her faults [and] publish her offenses and negligences. Then she sits back down. The sister closest to her follows, and then one after another each nun admits her faults individually and receives penance.”106 When they have finished, they kneel down and say the Confiteor Deo in unison. When the call and response of the prayer is finished, they all “bow their heads down and say at the same time Benedicte nos mater. And then the mother, or if not her, the vicaress, should give them her blessing.”107

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103Ord. Cap. III, 177r: “...e ne le prima refectione manzi in terra.” This punishment is found in the statutes of both Monteluce and San Gugliemo in Ferrara, indicating that it was fairly common.
104Ord. Cap. II, 175v: “sane del corpo,” “Especialmente che siano/catholice e de nesuno errore suspsecte...e de nesuna infamia/publico maculate.”
105This phrase, from Luke 11:23, appears at least five times in the sermoni. See n. 601 on 257.
106Ord. Cap. VI, 178v/179r: “lei in zenochiandose se renda in culpa humelmente dele soe offense e negligentie publiche/poi sedendo lei sequiti a lei la sorella propinqu. e cussi/tutte l una doppo l altra se rendano in copa cussi/brevita de parole e recevano la penitentia.”
107Ibid.: poi/recevuto e fato la penententia tutte inclinandoli/loro capi a uno tempo dicano Benedicte nos mater/e la madre o non vicaria li dia la benedictione.”
This performance of equality amidst hierarchy was surely not an unusual scene in a late medieval cloister. What is special is that Caterina’s words allow us to view its embodied mechanics up close. John’s commentary is concerned with reform of the head and members of the ecclesiastical body. Caterina knew that this process began with the bodies of Corpus Domini.

*Maximamente le litterate: Learning and Literacy in Observant Community*

To focus merely on gestural prayer in the *Ordinazione* is to examine something that was present in all medieval religious communities. It also is to omit the foundational skill that, for Caterina, both made these devotions possible and perpetuated their performance: literacy. John had his own instructions regarding Latin literacy for postulants:

> I counsel that no one should be received as a “clerica” [a postulant knowledgeable in Latin] after the age of twenty-five, unless she should be literate enough as to be able to learn the Divine Office easily. Nor should any woman, whatsoever her age, be professed as a “clerica” unless she knows how to say the Divine Office by herself at least as well as everyone in the community. But if she professes as a “laica” [a postulant unfamiliar with Latin] then she should remain a novice until she knows the Office.¹⁰⁸

What is crucial within these rather stark recommendations is that John only cares about the competency of each individual nun in isolation, and does not explain how she is supposed to acquire information from those around her. He was certainly one who valued the product of learning over the process of becoming learned. For him, this

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process is somehow external to the requirements of Clarissan life. In contrast, the everyday practices of literacy and reading described in the *Ordinazione* show that the process of holy learning defined the very character of life at Corpus Domini. The product of this process was their Observant Reform.\(^{109}\)

The value of letters was not universally embraced by Franciscans, especially the early ones that Observants attempted to imitate. In Chapter Ten of her Rule, the section concerning “The Admonition and Correction of the Sisters,” Clare states: “those who do not know letters, let them not care to do so.”\(^{110}\) John of Capistrano’s commentary reveals that learning was still a matter of some concern, even in the mid-Quattrocento. As Lezlie Knox has pointed out, John uses Clare’s Chapter Ten passage to criticize the danger of undue curiosity.\(^{111}\) Embedded in his discussion is anxiety about obedience. Latin literacy and ambitious learning are not prohibited outright, but one was to consult superiors about such efforts and obey their recommendations.\(^{112}\) He seems to suggest that since learning is a “gift of the Holy Spirit,” it should not be a capricious endeavor. He is also worried, however, about the abbess’s learning, and says in his final exhortation that “her zeal should be for the study of holy prayer and for the consolation of devotional reading rather

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\(^{109}\)Roest has pointed out previously just how important knowledge was for Caterina. See “*Ignorantia est mater omnium malorum*,” 65–83.

\(^{110}\)RSC, X, 8–9: “Et nescientes litteras non curent litteras discere. Sed attendant quod super omnia desiderare debent habere spiritum domini et sanctam eius operationem...” Similar wording exists in the *Later Rule* of the Friars.

\(^{111}\)Knox, *Creating Clare*, 141, n. 75, citing Exp., Cap 10, 517: “praecptum includitur sub illis verbis quae videntur monitoria; sunt tamen prohibitoria pro quanto appetetur litteratura supra dispositionem Dei et iustae obedientiae debitum rationale. Cum enim scientia sit donum Spiritus sancti, ultra divinam voluntatem apprehendi non potest. Et ideo beatus Franciscus monendo fratres pariter et sorens curiositatem presumptionem prohibuit et appetitum supra divinam et naturalem dispositionem litteras discere dicens: *Et nescientes litteras non curent litteras discere.* Hoc autem remanere debet in dispositione sui superioris cui subditae se committunt fideliter tamquam Deo...” His commentary goes on for quite a while in a similar fashion.

\(^{112}\)See Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 349.
that for the use of curious books or the proud eloquence of splendid melodies.”

Anxiety about learning is not a notable feature of the *Ordinazione*, and Caterina omits Clare’s phrase about letters altogether. The sisters’ clothing was not to have any curiosities, but there seems to have been no prohibition on their minds having at least a few.

Caterina’s first nod to knowledge acquisition in this document is her statement that “so that ignorance should not be an occasion for anyone to sin, the abbess should have the whole Rule read at table every six weeks on Saturday, and the *Ordinazione*...should be read every two months.”

Being abbess at a new papally sanctioned community gave her the power to put her own statutes nearly on par with those of her foundress, a strategic move that may have been as much about didactic utility as with authority, for the *Ordinazione* themselves functioned as a teaching document. Hearing them so often, the sisters would presumably have come close to memorizing their contents. Some of these contents did include instructions on how to say the Divine Office, for example; the beginning of the Sequence of the Holy Spirit, with its call and response is included in the text.

Thus, those who did not know Latin would have not only heard the Divine Office several times a day, but would have encountered pieces of it within the *Ordinazione*. In addition, precise discussion of gestural prayer, as quoted above, was certainly meant to teach these same gestures. This practice of educational reading meant that any nun who was *layca* might not remain so for long.

113 Exp. 523–24: “Sanctae orationis studium sibi societ et pro refrigero lectione devotorum potius quam curiosorum voluminum vel faustuosi eloquii pompticae melodiae semper utatur.”
114 See Ord. Cap. II, 176r, on the nuns’ required clothing.
115 Ord. Cap. I, 175v: “E acio/che la ignorantia non sia ad alcuna casione de peccare/la abbadessa fatio ogni sesta feria e sabato lezere/amensa tuta la regola. e ogni due meisi una volta/le infrascripte ordinatione.”
Part of the process of encouraging Latin literacy at Corpus Domini was the built-in advantages for those who had achieved it. If you were “competently literate,” for example, you could join the community two years earlier, at age sixteen instead of age eighteen. The justification for such a differentiation is not given.\footnote{Ord. Cap. II, 175v: “Ancora non sia recevuta alcuna dentro/dai monasterio cum (con) l abito o senza l habito se non a/compiuta xvi anni. e/competentemente letterata. e/per non letterata o vero layca se non a xviii anni.”} We can speculate, however, that Caterina believed the process of literacy acquisition rendered a novice more mature and thus better able to comprehend the full implications of enclosed life. This would be in harmony with her statement that at the end of her probationary year, a novice: “if she is literate, should know the Divine Office competently,” but all \textit{converse} “whether they are literate or not, must, before professing, know the commandments of the laws, and the principles [of them], and the most common commandments of the Rule, and understand them competently.”\footnote{Ord. Cap.II, 176r: “E si e litterata sapia compe–/tentemente lo divino offitio. E cussi le converse/non litterate como litterate inanzi la professione/sapiano li commandamenti de la leze e li principali/e li più communi commandamenti de le regole e compenten–/mente gli intendano.”} Another indication in this document that literacy enhanced communal status is the statement that literate sisters had to come to church before all of the others, since their skills were necessary for liturgical practice. Caterina states that “the literate sisters should be accustomed, as soon as the signal for the mass or Divine Office is sounded, to come to the church to prepare to lift their hearts to the Lord. In this way, they should be congregated in the choir before \textit{(in anzi)} the Office begins.”\footnote{Ord. Cap. III, 176v: “Le sorelle litterate siano sollicite sonato la messa e lo/ymmo segno de l offitio divino a vegnire a la chie–/sa a preparare li loro cuori al seigniore. Si in tal modo che/siano in anzi lo principio de l offitio in coro congregate.” Note that phrases similar to “prepare their hearts for the Lord” are found in the Divine Office chapters of both the Monteluce Statutes and Colette’s \textit{Constitutiones}. These documents do not, however, make specific indications that the literate sisters should convene in the church before anyone else.} Their reading and vocal performance were essential to worship and thus were to be “celebrated…religiously, devotedly and with a competently loud and intelligible
voice.” In addition, all sisters are warned that they were never to miss any of the daily offices without a legitimate excuse, but this tenet applied “especially” (maximamente) to the literate sisters.

It may seem as if those who knew how to read and perform Latin prayer had greater communal obligations, and that illiterate sisters would be happy to stick to “their office” of Our Fathers. It is also possible, however, given the superior prestige that came with more responsibility, that the layce were eager to join the ranks of the literate. It is also not difficult to imagine that a new sister would perhaps find it monotonous to say the sixty-nine prescribed Our Fathers each day. If this did not encourage them to learn the office, perhaps the one hundred extra Our Fathers and Hail Mary’s (required on the four yearly occasions when the community offered comprehensive prayers for the dead) would.

This drive for holy prestige helps to explain why patterns of learning persisted daily in Caterina’s monastery. There was to be “continuous reading at table,” for example, at both daily meals. The procedure seems to have involved everyone; and no indication is given that anyone was excluded because they were unable to read. Given the mixture of Latin and Italian within the extant devotional texts from Corpus Domini, a

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120Ibid.: “E cussi religiose–mente e devotemente e cum competentemente alta e in–telligibile vose legano e celebrino lo divino of–fitio e laude.”
121Ord. Cap III, 177r: “Ne alcuna etiamdio permetta alcuna hora/del divino offitio ne la quale non convegno al coro/ cussi di nocte como de di e maximamente le litte–rate se per le predicte casione non sera excusata.”
122RSC, III:4 prescribes twenty-four Pater Nosters for Matins, five for Lauds, seven each for Prime, Terce, Sext and Nones, twelve for Vespers and seven for Compline. Thus, sixty-nine seems to be the minimal figure for the day for the illiteratae.
123Ord. Cap XIII, 182v: “Ma le sorelle illitterate nelli/predicti quatro tempi de l anno dicano per chiaschuna/volta cento pater nostri e cento ave marie per/quelle tale anime.” These occasions do not even include the more frequent prayers for monastery benefactors (or those required upon a death of a community member) which would up the tally considerably.
mixture also evinced in an early modern catalog of their library, there is no reason to think that the lezione did not incorporate both languages. Thus, mealtimes provided an opportunity for the acquisition of bilingual literacy skills, for, Caterina, echoing Benedict, exhorted her nuns that they “should stay attentive during the lezione, so that not only is the body fed bodily, but the mind is fed and consoled spiritually too.” The reading cycle went like this: “When the person reading at the table has read about five verses, the mother [or one taking her place] makes a sign, hitting the table with her knife, the sisters should change places and start to eat. This should be done honorably and silently.”

Like the lezione, several more communal practices at Corpus Domini assumed literacy. One was actually an organizational tool, the tavola upon which the sacristana, one of the monastery’s officials, wrote down the weekly duties and who was to perform them, a list drawn up by the vicaress. Although only a functional vernacular literacy was necessary in order for the tavola to work, it is just one of the everyday rituals that show the nuns reading in contexts both sacred and casual. Books make an appearance at the Divine Office, of course, where they must be properly arranged in preparation for

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126Ord. Cap IV, 177v: “ve exorto che stiati attente a/la lectione acio che non solamente lo corpo sia refec–/tionata e consolata corporalemente, ma etiamdio la mente sia re–/fectionata e consolata spiritualmente.”  
127Ibid.: “E quando che leze a/mense havera lecta circha v versi la madre e/non essendo essa la vicaria o non una altra deputa–/ta quando loro non sono presente, fatia signo percotendo/cum lo cortello a la mensa e allora le sorelle scorfino/le soe poste e commenzino a manzare. E stando hon/ste e cum silentio.” Contrast this practice with Chapter 38 of the Rule of Benedict, which appoints one reader for the entire week.  
128Ord. Cap. VI, 178v: “sedendo l altre la sacristana se lievi dritta/e lega la tavola de le offitarie ordinate per la se–/pitma futura. la quella tabula fatia la vica–/ria.” Note the switch between Italian and Latin usage within a single sentence, supporting the point above. These duties included who was to read segments of the Divine Office for the week. Monteluce Cap 1:10, 94 also mentions use of such a “tavola.”
service. John also mentions reading material in the context of the Divine Office, his only mention of it outside of the above quote about inappropriate “curious books.” He states simply that literate sisters should have breviaries because of their obligation to chant the Office. When reading Caterina’s guidelines, one gets the impression that books were not just in church, but in multiple locations in the monastery. Chapter Eight, treats the way sisters should behave while working, stating that they “should not talk of worldly or idle things.” An alternative given for such discussion is “talking about God, or of virtue;” failing that, “someone” could “read something spiritual” to her fellow laborers. Similarly, singing was also permitted during work, a pastime most likely not beloved of John, given that he stuck to the initial Franciscan custom requiring the Divine Office to be chanted just like that of the friars, not sung. Recall, as well, his disdain for “splendid melodies” expressed in the quote above. In addition to incidental communal reading, the Ordinazione recommend private reading. For, from Easter until mid-September, during her after-nones nap, a sister who could not or did not want to sleep, or was not engaging in prayer, was free to read quietly.

It is of interest certainly, to find a document that shows premodern women creating what some would call a textual community. In the case of Corpus Domini, however, we can go a step further and examine the results of these activities—for such

\[129\text{Ord. Cap. 3, 176v: “E quelle acui aspecta apparecchino/li libro e l offitio e le altre cosse necessarie”} \]

\[130\text{Exp. Cap. 3., 349: “praeeptum est quot sorores litteratae faciant divinum officium secundum consuetudinem fratrum Minorum sine cantu ex quo habere poterunt breviaria.” His language is almost identical to Clare’s here which is also similar to the Later Rule of the Friars in this matter.} \]

\[131\text{Ord. Cap. 8, 180r: “E lavorando se guardino de non parlare cos-/se mondane ne otiose. e de fare ridere dissoluta/mente.”} \]

\[132\text{Ibid.: “ma piu tosto dicono offitio de gratia o non./parlino di dio, o de le virtude, o non sia una che leza/alcune cosse spirituale, o non alcune che cantino..”} \]

\[133\text{Ibid.: Cap. 10, 81v. “Ma quelle che/non vorano o non porano dormire se occupino/a chino in oratione o lezione o altri exer-/citi…senza strepito.”} \]

\[134\text{See Roest, “A Textual Community,” 180. He uses Stock’s term to describe Colletan Reform.} \]
are Caterina’s *sermoni*. If one were to ask what she said during weekly chapter meetings, these didactic treatises would be the answer. They are the proof that the abbess was indeed “exhorting and leading [the sisters] with holy words and examples of the observance of the profession and of a virtuous life,” as required by the *Ordinazione*.¹³⁵ No other contemporary rule commentary, including John’s, makes a similar allowance for the ritual teaching of the abbess. Urban’s Rule describes this meeting as a site of correction only, during which the abbess could admonish, regulate and reform her charges’ negative behavior.¹³⁶ Clare herself urged that the chapter meeting discussion was to concern the practical “utility and integrity” of the monastery, making no mention in this context of leading through “holy word.”¹³⁷ The *Ordinazione* show that Caterina merged the practical with the holy, saying, in Chapter Eight, that no hour of the day should be without “spiritual utility.”¹³⁸ For Clare, the chapter meeting was a place where everyone had a voice, for she said, during such communal conversation, “God sometimes reveals what is best to the least.”¹³⁹ Caterina found a way to expand the practical promise of the chapter meeting context: shared literacy. Such holy discussion made every student into a charismatic teacher and a kind of preacher. According to Chapter Two, elevated powers of expression were a pre-condition of entering the community, as each

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¹³⁵*Ord.* 178v, Cap. 6: “Exhortandole ancora e in ducendole/ cum sante parole et exempli a la observantia de la professione e vivere virtuoso.”

¹³⁶*RUrb.*, XXII: “Semel in hebdomada ad minus abbatissa sorones suas pro ipsarum monitione, ordinacione, et reformatione teneatur ad Capitulum convocare…”

¹³⁷*RSC*, IV: “Semel in hebdomana ad minus abbatissa sorones suas teneatur ad capitulum convocare; ubi tam ipsa quam sorones de communibus et publicis offenis et neglegentiis humiliiter debeant confiteri. Et quae tractanda sunt pro utitate et honestate monasterii…”

¹³⁸*Ord.*, 180v, Cap. VIII: “E lei (the abbess) sia prudente in ordina–te e dispensare el tempo a ciascuna che non trapas–si hora senza spirituala utilitade.”

¹³⁹*RSC*, Cap 4: After the line quoted in 57 above Clare states that the abbess “Ibidem conferant cum omnibus sororibus suis; Saepe enim Dominus quod melius est minori relevat.” Scholars have pointed out that “minori” can also mean younger in this context, as it is translated when the same statement is made Chap. III of the *Rule of Benedict.*
postulant was to be “naturally competent of speech” before she even professed.\textsuperscript{140}

Subsequently this natural ability was honed, so that any sister who spoke to a person outside of Corpus Domini made sure that her “conversation had integrity” and that every individual she ran into was “well edified” by her words.\textsuperscript{141} Her educated speech was the hallmark of her identity. Thus, the ritual setting that fostered it, a chapter meeting that prized bilingual conversation and encouraged inquiry-based teaching, should be at the core of any study of Observant women in Italy. Caterina’s dynamic communal conversation, and the “holy words and examples” that filled it will be the subject of the next chapter.

**Coda: Voluntà d’esse Madre**

This investigation has shown that in spite of John of Capistrano’s powerful position as a preacher and Pillar of Reform, his *Explicatio* may have had little impact on the way that the nuns of Corpus Domini Bologna learned about the “regular observance.”\textsuperscript{142} Though he, and others, may have tried to make the Second Order conform to the wishes of First, nowhere in the *Ordinazione* does Caterina indicate that anything should be done in the manner of “the friars.” And though she mentions collaborating with male leaders like “confessors,” “spiritual fathers,” “visitators,” and the “vicar general of the province” it is the abbess who emerges as the real authority.\textsuperscript{143} It

\textsuperscript{140}Ord. 175v, Cap. II: “de sermo naturale competente…”

\textsuperscript{141}Ord. 182r, Cap. XI: After saying that they should avoid suspicious people and houses, Caterina says “ma queste sono/foura in tal modo se habiano che de la honesta/sua conversatione quelli che vederano e cum/loro parlarano possano essere bene hedificati.” Compare Chapter III of the *Later Rule* of the Friars.

\textsuperscript{142}Ord. 176r, Cap. II: One of the required steps of the novitiate is that the abbess, as the Rule of Clare requires, appoint a “maestra discreta.” In the case of of Corpus Domini, this person was responsible for teaching “nele regolare observantie. e l’ordinatione e/santa conversatione…”

\textsuperscript{143}The “confessore” appears in at least five different contexts (175r, 178r, 180v, 182v, 184v) the “padre vicario,” as he is most often called, is mentioned in about six (175r, 176r, 180v, 181v, 182v, and 184v). The
is she who, barring a few extreme acts, has the power to diminish or increase the strictures of the ordinances. The Explicatio says that any visitator is to be obeyed above the abbess.\textsuperscript{144} The Ordinazione mention the visitator’s ability to correct, but also hold that when a competent abbess is present, no one should “take” her “commission,” or contradict her “will.”\textsuperscript{145} Caterina’s clear claims of communal autonomy should thus lead us to reconsider how we study female agency within the Italian Reform movement. For in adopting an Observant Franciscan identity, Caterina gained institutional power and created pedagogical opportunities with few, if any, parallels in Quattrocento society. Thus, in the future, instead of conceiving of an Observant sermon as delivered only by a friar at the point of “foundation,” we should also think of it as given by a sister in a cycle of daily devotion.

\textsuperscript{144}Exp. 344, Cap. I: “potius obedire visitatori quam abbatisae, cum visitatator ex forma regulae auctoritatem habeat tam in capita quam in membris...” He also includes twenty detailed precepts on “The Election and Office of the Abbess,” presumably in an attempt to regulate female leadership such as that exhibited by Caterina.

\textsuperscript{145}Ord. 184v, Cap. XIV: “o non/ che prenda de commissione o volunta d’esse madre.” In Chapter Nine, Caterina does state that the abbess’s choices should be questioned by the “padre vicario” if she, or the “infermiera,” show a “lack of charity” and are found to be “notably negligent” in the care of the sick. Since she suffered illness throughout her life, it is likely that this issue was close to her heart.
CHAPTER 2

Quanto satisfare vi posso: The Sermoni as Clarissan Conversation

Caterina Vigri’s practice of “exhorting and leading” her sisters, particularly in the setting of their weekly chapter meeting, was, I have argued, a vital element of her Clarissan Observant identity.¹ This chapter will use the structure of the sermoni to further explore the educational mechanics that defined Clarissan community at the end of the Middle Ages. Caterina herself describes this all-encompassing process of spiritual learning at the end of Sermon II. Here, she, as teacher, addresses her ultimate instructor—Christ:

I have—so as to gain your greatest favor and mercy—learned all of the things that I have said above, as well as those that will be related in writing below, out of most holy love for you. I learned them partly from reading your holy books, and partly from listening to our preacher fathers. I also learned them from reading an even greater compendium of your holy mysteries in the book of your most loving person on the cross, and in the wound of your open side, the true entry into your wisdom…²

These words evoke the imbricated practices of preaching and writing, listening and reading, feeling and thinking that were required of the virtuous sisters of the Corpus Domini monasteries. Here, I will explore the foundation of such practices, investigating precisely how Caterina constructed the authority to preach and examining the communal setting in which she did so. I will then expose the conversational nature of her teaching

¹ Ord. 178v, Cap. 6: “Exhortandole ancora e in ducendole/cum sante parole et exempli a la observantia de la professione e vivere virtuoso.”
² Ser. II, xxxi, 33: “Permodochè havendo io, per tuo sommo favore et pietà imparate dal tuo santissimo amore tutte le sopradette, et anche tutte le infrascritte si narrarano, parte lette sui libri santi, et parte uditele dai padri nostri predicatori, leggendole poi anche tuttavia in maggior compendio de tuoi santi misterii su il libro della tua amorississima persona in croce et nella piaga del tuo aperto costato, vero ingresso alla sapienza tuo...”
style and probe its origins, finally evaluating, to the extent possible, the effects of this regular preaching on the communal life of Clarissan Observants.

Chapter One revealed just how careful Caterina was to build the teaching of virtue into her normative *Ordinazione*. But, as Catherine Mooney has pointed out, “hortatory” speech by medieval religious women always needed special authorization.¹ The *sermoni* show that Caterina bolstered her pedagogical authority through citation of the first “father preacher” of them all: the apostle Paul. This chapter will therefore begin with an exploration of how a figure often used to restrict female speech became Caterina’s special ally in discerning Christ’s “holy mysteries.”

Transferring such divine complexities in a simple manner was the overall function of the *sermoni*. The main purpose of this chapter will therefore be to show precisely how Caterina expanded the possibilities of female speech through everyday practices of didactic exchange. Gabriella Zarri has written that Caterina instructed her nuns on exceptional “special occasions” as part of her duty to promote sacred conversation within her monastery.² Zarri has also pointed out that the abbess’s works were shaped by “liturgical tradition and devotional literature.”³ This chapter will show a portrait of communal life that both contrasts with this view and expands upon it. I will argue that Caterina taught her charges frequently in places and on occasions that were both mundane and exceptional, while taking care to cultivate close relationships with them. I will go on to expose the literal conversation between these Clarissans, the exchanges that constituted their daily *sacra conversatio*. I will also show that the content of Caterina’s

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³Ibid., 179.
sermoni was not principally determined by literary and liturgical paradigms but by the specific needs and inquiries of her nuns, who were active participants in their own education. For under Caterina’s guidance, chapter meetings became conversational question-and-answer sessions, and I contend that it was this format that gave them their unique instructional power. In a culture that viewed female curiosity as negative, the Corpus Domini communities created a space in which questions—real or rhetorical—formed the backbone of their learning experience.

The roots of such dialogical teaching, a mainstay of medieval culture, will be linked to contemporary practices of vernacular preaching and female education in the context of the Renaissance court. Ultimately however, I will argue that it was the Observant culture of frequent confession that most shaped conversation within the Corpus Domini communities. Further, my analysis of the nuns’ conversations will reveal that Clarissans, when they embraced physical poverty, became active consumers of the “things of the spirit.”

Imagining learning to be a process of material exchange will help to explain Caterina’s practice of constructing holy image, number, and anecdote as if they were physical objects that should, she said, be “felt with the hands.” The ultimate goal of this communal pursuit of knowledge was to speak, as exemplified by the quote above, with the tangible person of Christ. Our abbess’s own visionary experiences show that whenever she met Christ, she was careful to enter into the body of his wisdom through dynamic conversation.

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4Ser. V, v, 79. These words appear in Casanova’s paratext: “Rispose finalmente una de loro et gli disse: ‘Non so che mi dire né fare alle gran cose c’havete dette, imperocché abbandonare le cose del senso che tanto mi sono d’appresso, no ci veggo rimedio: Acquistar poi quelle dello spirito, che sono molta da me lontane, ci vogliono molte cose, né io sopra ciò trovo (quanto a me) partito d’assicurarmi il bene et fuggire il male. Trovatelo voi per me, suor Catherina.’”

5Ser. XXXIV, i. Caterina here speaks of the clear virtues and vices that she will teach through animal examples, ingraining them in the memories of her listeners: “come perché tocchiamo con mani...”
“I suffer not a woman to teach...but to be in silence.” So says Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12. Epistles attributed to St. Paul contain copious warnings of the perils of female teaching in an ecclesiastical context, since it endangers the prerogatives of male leaders. Caterina’s authoritative use of Pauline quotes to construct a community built on female speech is, therefore, rather paradoxical. This, however, is exactly what she does in the sermoni, where she speaks purposefully of the apostle Paul himself at least twenty times, more than any other source. Quotes from his epistles occur there with even more frequency. In addition, Paul makes several appearances in Sette armi spirituali, her autobiography, and her biographer Illuminata Bembo describes how the abbess “loved Paul very much” and used his words to teach her nuns about virtue. Caterina never mentions the dynamics of exclusion present in Paul’s work, instead using these references to include herself (and her sisters) in the ideal Christian community that he envisioned. Thus, through Paul, Caterina, though female, built her own identity as a charismatic leader and an able preacher. It is notable that a similar tactic was adopted early in the sixteenth century by another female preacher in Italy, Domenica da Paradiso of Florence. Troubled as to whether her words were authorized, she received a vision from Paul who says that he never meant to “bar anyone from preaching” God’s words.

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6The consensus of biblical scholars is that I Timothy, one of the so-called “pastoral epistles,” is not a work of the historical Paul, and was likely written after his death, in the second century. Fifteenth-century readers, however had no reason to doubt its authenticity. Note that all English translations of Vulgate passages are taken from the 1899 American Edition of the Duay-Rheims Bible.

7Specchio, III, xxxix, 23: “E alegava lo decto del glorioso apostolo Paulo, lo quale molto lei amava...”

Caterina never mentions talking to Paul in person, but she certainly converses with him in her works, and comes to a similar conclusion.

“San Paolo mio” (my Saint Paul) was the abbess’s affectionate epithet for Paul, and it often appears before one of his quotes from scripture.\(^9\) These words do not merely constitute a gesture of verbal devotion, however. They mark, instead, this apostle’s special familiarity to the women of Corpus Domini, given that Caterina regularly addressed her *consorelle* using similar phrases. To her, a companion asking about the workings of the Holy Spirit became “sorella mia,” the nuns as a whole were “sorelle mie” or even “figliole et sorelle mie charissime.”\(^10\) Thus she incorporated Paul into her sermons as an ally of her nuns, so that his scriptural advice on forming both divine and human alliances—the basic building blocks of Christian community—would be of special significance to them.

When addressing Christ in Sermon III, the abbess calls Paul “your Saint Paul and mine” (*tuo e mio San Paolo*), indicating that it was Paul’s affectionate alliance with Jesus that made him a good spiritual advisor.\(^11\) For, according to her, Paul is Christ’s “great servant.”\(^12\) She employed this particular epithet just before quoting his declaration that the nuns should “avoid all appearance of evil” in preparation for the uncertainties of Judgment Day. This is similar to a warning in *Sette armi*, where, in reminding Christians that they must die, she echoed Paul’s statement that, “whilst we have time, let us work good for all men.”\(^13\) Thus, for Caterina, Paul’s identity as God’s spokesman is tied to his

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\(^9\) *Ser.* II, xxvii, 31; III, v, 44; XVII, xxxvi, 168.
\(^10\) *Ser.* VII, i, 72; XVII, iii, 128; XXXII, i, 248.
\(^11\) *Ser.* III, vii, 46.
\(^12\) *Ser.* II, iv, 13: “gran servo,” Citation of 1 Thess V: 22.
\(^13\) *SA* V, i, 11, Citation of Gal 6:10.
prescription of strict personal morality. She similarly refers to the apostle as “my devoted Saint Paul” (il mio devoto San Paolo) in Sermon XII. This status, she suggests, derives from his statement, in 1 Corinthians 10:12, that he who “stands” should “take heed lest he fall” through temptation. Here, devotion to Christ again consists of a nun taking responsibility for her individual moral behavior at every turn, while refusing to adopt the sinful acts of her neighbors. Paul’s actions and words therefore helped Caterina to teach a lesson of self-control to her aspiring Observants.

This crucial lesson of self-discipline is echoed in Chapter Three of Specchio. Here, Illuminata remembered her abbess calling Paul the “glorious apostle” because of “the force of his will.” This was a will which led him to state that “neither hunger nor thirst nor fire nor persecution, nor fire nor knife nor anything present now or in future will part me from the love of Christ if I do not want it to,” a liberal paraphrase of Romans 8:38–39. Paul mentions neither knife nor demon in these verses, and perhaps more importantly, he also does not refer to his own will at any point. Instead he says that no obstacle “shall separate us from the love of God,” speaking to all Christians. This modification is crucial because it shows that Caterina used Paul and his individual personality as an example to her sisters of exceptional spiritual tenacity. In fact, it is because of his tenacious and “pure obedience” that Paul “acquired the grace to do miracles.” His actions were therefore of service to Caterina in her role as teacher of an exacting rule. And he made her an effective instructor, for in this instance, Illuminata’s

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14 Ser. VII, iii, 98.
16 Specchio III, xxxix, 23: “força della volontà”
17 SA VI. lxxx, 32: “si como se demostró in questo beato Paulo sinplice, lo quali, in poco tempo che servi a Dio in pura ubidientia, aquistò la gratia de fare miraculi.”
words match a passage of Sermon XXXI almost verbatim. Paul is an authority, however, who is also approachable, given that he, himself, was converted from a life of sin through “ignorance,” as is suggested within Sermon XVII.18 His miraculous turn from “persecuting Christians” to instructing them made him a role model for any woman shifting from a secular life to one of holy learning.

Paul not only helped Caterina to instruct her charges on personal behavior, but on Christian community as well. For, she says in Sermon X, each person who wishes to serve God should follow a set of fifteen steps toward perfection. The thirteenth of these was “unity” with the Lord, or, in the words of Saint Paul: “desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ.”19 Caterina was careful to note in Sermon II that such one-ness with God also meant unity with others, for, she said “we Christians, (with St. Paul) [are] all members of the mystical body of the Church and of Christ...”20 There is evidence that this particular evocation of Paul helped Caterina to teach effectively in community, for Illuminata reiterates her statement on the “thirteenth grade of perfection” in the very first chapter of Specchio, her biography.21 Within Sermon XIV, Caterina also uses Paul’s epistles to teach that loving your neighbor and carrying her burdens was the best way to fulfill “the law of Christ.”22 Thus, the apostle became an effective emblem of how community should function as a regulated whole. These traditional spiritual messages serve an authorizing function for Caterina. She was able to guide her sisters on small but

18Ser. XVII, xxxvi, 167: “nel secondo per ignoranza, come facea S. Paolo che perseguitava i christiani.”
19Ser. X, xiv, 87: “Unitas, cioè che di maniera tu ti unischi in opere et virtù con Dio acciò tu possi per desiderio et gratia degnemente con S. Paolo dire: Cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo (Phil 1: 23).
20Ser. II, xiii, 21: “Sendo donque noi christiani (con S. Paolo) tutti membri del corpo mistico della Chiesa et di Cristo...” See also 31: “dicendo il mio S. Paolo: Nescitis quoniam corpora vestra membra sunt Christi? Et qui adhaeret Dominio unus spiritus est”(1 Cor 6:15).
21Specchio, I, xxi; Laudi II, 84.
22Ser. XIV, ii, 111: “…anche in un altro luoco S. Paolo con dire: Alter alterius onera portate et sic adimpleritis legem Christi” (Gal 6:2).
important details of regulated life in a Clarissan cloister—from the proper distribution of personal possessions to the importance of being on time for meals—precisely because of her many uses of more general Pauline imagery concerning the importance of communal cohesion and uniformity.

Caterina told her consorelle that the reward for following communal guidelines was great, again using the words of Paul. Christians, she says, who “prevail over themselves by refuting sensuality and always embracing spirituality [are those who] combat legitimately in order to acquire, with Saint Paul himself, the victorious crown upon their heads.”23 This crown, she says in the Sette armi, is the “crown of justice” given in heaven.24 Paul’s statement on the ineffable nature of heavenly reward, his insistence that “neither eye, nor ear, nor heart of man” can comprehend what “God has prepared” for those who truly love him,” (1 Cor 11:9) was so important to Caterina that she used it in Sermon XI and Sermon XVII. In the first instance, she uses it to give sick sisters hope that their suffering would not go in vain. In the second she uses it after stating that “all of us nuns” should avoid the “self-butcher” of sinning out of “willful malice.”25 Thus, his promise of reward becomes a warning as well. Paul and the words of his epistles served Caterina in both compassionate and hardline approaches to teaching moral behavior. She used his work to teach personal morality, group cohesion, and

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23Ser. VIII, vi, 80: “...et che vincono sé stesso in rifiutare la sensoalità et abbraciano per sempre la spiritoalità et che legittimamente combattono per acquistare con esso S. Paolo la vittoriosa corona in capo.” See also Laudi, I, 122.
24SA VII, lxxv, 31: “Dio, quaxi per iustita lo coronava; e che l’appostolo Paulo per questa caxone diceva a ssi esser reposto la corona de la iustitia...”
25Ser. XVII, xxxvi, 167–8: “Fuggiamo, fuggiamo tutte noi monache, et fughino tutti gli altri fedeli questa horrenda et cruda maledittone, reprobatione et confusione, (here she is referring back to sinning through “malicia voluntaria” through which some “si fecero carnefici de lor medesimi.”) et amiamo la vera beneditione, salute et glorificatione, la quale, sarebbe in questo mondo non si possa capire né esprimere, come lo dice S. Paolo mio...Né occhio ha veduto, etc.”
anticipated punishment and reward. Caterina constructed a full system for communal life using Paul’s words, words that were often used to keep women from teaching at all.

Many aspects of the Pauline persona were useful to Caterina, but the most crucial by far was his identity as a preacher. She included a painted image of him in her breviary, and the prayer accompanying it clearly states that his message is for men and women and his mission is one of teaching through preaching.\textsuperscript{26} In addition, it is almost certain that she witnessed a common motif in the visual art of the Quattrocento—Paul speaking to a crowd of the faithful, often in contemporary dress.\textsuperscript{27} This would certainly be consistent with her characterization of Paul, in the \textit{Sette armi}, as a “great town crier” (\textit{banditore}), spreading abroad the Good News of the Passion.\textsuperscript{28} In aligning her communal agenda with this beloved apostle, the “true and real presenter of...the Gospels,” she could speak to her own cloistered crowd with confidence.\textsuperscript{29} An example of this effect occurs in Sermon VIII, in which Caterina again evokes the image of Paul-as-preacher by calling him the “resounding trumpet of [the] Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{30} Later in the same sermon, she quotes a passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “If any man should not love our Lord Jesus Christ, let him be \textit{anathema, maranatha}.” In addition to using a quotation from Paul to warn her sisters about the dangers of alienation from Christ, Caterina creates an opportunity to display and share her own erudition. For, she points out, “the first word is

\textsuperscript{26}See \textit{Pregare con l’immagini}, 132 for a reproduction of folio 296v of Caterina’s breviary, which contains the phrases: “viros ac mulieres…” and “beati paulli apostoloi predicacione docuisti da nobis…”


\textsuperscript{28}SA VIII, viii, 46: “E però ben dice el grande banditore Paulo apostolo: \textit{Si fuerimus socii passionum, erimus et consolationum}.”

\textsuperscript{29}Ser. XIV, ii, 111: “Dipoi fece dire a S. Paolo, vero et reale espositore de suoi Evangelii, che lo adempimento di tutta la legge consiste in un solo nuovo precetto, cioè d’amare il prossimo...”

\textsuperscript{30}Ser. VIII, iii, 77: “...S. Paolo, tromba sonora del suo Santo Spirito.”
Greek, [but] the following one is Syriac, not Hebrew.” Thus, Paul’s own words provide an occasion for her to preach about the nature of holy and educated speech. Caterina’s own identification of Paul as preacher, one specifically connected to Observant Franciscan identity, can be found in the seventh chapter of *Sette armi*. Here, Caterina recommends invoking the name of Christ repeatedly, a prayer certain to bring:

remedy and comfort according to the sayings and sweet memory of most holy Brother Bernardino whom I call and hold to be the Paul of our patriarch St. Francis, since Christ, wishing to have his life complemented in him, promised one of his brothers to make him as he made the Apostle Paul, who could not refrain from pronouncing the name of Jesus. This is precisely what the apostle of Francis, St. Bernardino, has exalted once again in the present, not only in his preaching, but also in the devout people who he leads. For this reason he can rightly be called the Paul of Francis.

In using Paul to construct her community, Caterina not only placed herself in the apostolic teaching tradition that he represented, but reinforced her ties to Francis, founder of her order, and Bernardino of Siena, great Observant preacher of the Quattrocento. Paradoxically, there could be no better figure to authorize her speech than the man who recommended that women be silent.

*Sisters’ Habits: Everyday Teaching in the Houses of Corpus Domini*

We have seen how Caterina was careful to authorize her pedagogy using both the Rule of Clare and the powerful words of a preaching Paul. What remains is to determine the mechanics of her teaching, first reinforcing that her preaching was anything but an exceptional act reserved for special occasions. Instead, its value lay specifically in the

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31Ibid.: “così apertamente dicendo esso Paolo a Corinthi: *Si quis non amat Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum, sit anathema, maranatha* (1 Cor. 26:22) (se il precedente vocabolo è greco, questo seguente è syrico, non hebraico).”

32SA VII, lxvi, 29. Here, I use the Feiss and Re Translation. See “The Seven Spiritual Weapons” [http://www.saintsworks.net/books/St.%20Catherine%20of%20Bologna%20Seven%20Spiritual%20Weapons.txt](http://www.saintsworks.net/books/St.%20Catherine%20of%20Bologna%20Seven%20Spiritual%20Weapons.txt), accessed December 8, 2014.
fact that it was an ordinary occurrence. To prove that this was the case, we have only to
analyze her own statements on the matter. Even in one of her deathbed sermons, as has
been analyzed extensively by Zarri, Caterina considers her audience, and apologizes to
them for preaching so long, as it is “not her custom.”

Thus, we can infer that she had a
routine of producing shorter speeches on a frequent basis. Since, as is indicated in the
Ordinazione, she spoke at weekly chapter meetings that were scheduled to fit within a
complex prayer routine, this would be logical. Even though her talks were disparate and
usually short, there are clues within them indicating that she conceived them to be part of
a unified pedagogical process. Consider the statement that opens Sermon XXXIV on the
animals, important in that it shows how she constructed lessons incrementally: “dearest
sisters, many times have we spoken together of the holy virtues that we must embrace,
exercise, and effectuate. But, following on from that, [we should know] the vices that are
their direct opposites so that we can avoid them...” Later in the same sermon, she
suggests to specific sisters that their learning should be as cumulative as her teaching.

For, after instructing them that “charity makes faith alive,” she says to the nuns who had
moved to Bologna with her “we have already conversed about this once before in the
monastery at Ferrara while all of the other nuns were present.” Phrases like, “I have
already talked about this on other occasions” and “just like I said other times already” are
scattered throughout the sermons, helping the modern reader enter into the quotidian

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33Ser. XXXV, xxxv, 330.
34Ser. XXXIV, i, 265: “Molte volte abbiamo (sorelle charissime) discorse insieme delle sante virtù a
dovere essere abbracciate, esercitate et effettoate da noi. Ma per conoscere conseguentemente gli vitii che
sono direttamente contrarii, affine di saper quali siano et doverli fuggire...”
35Ser. XXXIV, iv, 268: “Et già ancora di ciò con voi, che sete venute meco a Bologna, ve ne discorsi una
vola, presente anche tutte l’altra, nel monasterio di Ferrara.”
rhythm of Caterina’s teaching.\textsuperscript{36} She continuously emphasizes that her teaching mission was executed in repeated events containing related lessons. This tendency is evident when she explains, at the beginning of her sermon in honor of Saint Clare, “so that I am not too long in talking, I will tell you later—on another occasion—[about the gifts of St. Clare] one by one.”\textsuperscript{37} This is similar to her statement in her rather long sermon on the Trinity that her many examples should be “enough for you,” that is, she says, “for now.”\textsuperscript{38} The thirty five sermons that we have and the lesson-fragments embedded in extant manuscript texts prove that this teacher usually followed through on her promise to converse with her nuns about spiritual matters on a more than regular basis.

Though many of these preaching occasions were certainly chapter meetings where Caterina presided in her official capacity as abbess, some were not. According to Illuminata, Caterina taught in chapter at Ferrara, when, though she was still only Mistress of Novices, Abbess Leonarda would say, whenever conversation lagged, “and you, Sister Caterina, what do you think?”\textsuperscript{39} It was clear that Caterina thought a lot, and did not mind sharing those thoughts outside of chapter. According to Casanova, the nun whose cell was next to the novice mistress’ sought out her instruction there. In fact, “she could almost always be found present [near the cell], along with some other sisters, in order to listen to [Caterina’s] holy conversations.”\textsuperscript{40} Caterina indicates at the end of Sermon XXI

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36}Ser. XXXI, ix, 260: “et sicome in altr’occasioni n'ho già parlato;” XXXVI, i, 330: “sicome vi fu già detto altre volte.”
\item \textsuperscript{37}Ser. XXXII, i, 248: “Ma per non esser prolissa nel dire, le narrarò poi in altra occasione a una per una.”
\item \textsuperscript{38}Ser. XVII, xxxvii, 168: “Lasciando molt’altre simili, tutte le sopradette per hora vi bastarono per sossiciente prova…”
\item \textsuperscript{39}Specchio, VI, lxxxi, 48: “Etiam nelli capituli quando avesse proposto alcuna cossa e dicendo ciascuna el suo parere, e lei stando como quella che mai non preferiva e non proponea tropo parole, quella venerabile madre sore Leonarda a lei dicea: ‘E voi, sore Katherine, che diciti?’”
\item \textsuperscript{40}Ser. I, ix–x, 10: “et che quasi sempre si trovava con alcune altre suore presenti ad ascoltare i santi suoi discorsi et le spiritoet et dotte sue risposte che dava alli quesiti loro…”
\end{itemize}
that these discussions could take place anywhere. Here, the teacher, now abbess, makes sure that her nuns know that they can come to her with their problems, “even if it is nighttime and I am sleeping,” presumably in the communal dormitory.\footnote{Ser. XXXI, x, 244: “...voglio et commando che venghi liberamente a me, che provenderoli dolcemente et volontieri, intendendo che non habbiano, né meno habbiate giamaï alcuna di voi in ciò alcun rispetto, etiam che fosse di notte et io dormesse...”} She is eager, she says, to address problems of both “soul and body” through conversation, regardless of her location within the monastery. In these communities, the desire that drove spiritual curiosity was even stronger than the wish to observe their own guidelines requiring complete silence from 9:00 PM to 9:00 AM.

Caterina’s verbal cues promoted the comfort of her nuns, facilitating their engagement in her lessons at all times and places. In addition, she seems to have invited them to be physically comfortable while she was teaching. The Ordinazione suggest that sitting down was common practice during the instructional portions of chapter. This is in relaxed contrast to the standard positions of kneeling while praying or standing while singing the Divine Office. In addition, comments in the sermons often show that the abbess could hear one of her charges even though she was muttering under her breath, indicating that the entire community was probably close together in a relatively small space. As Zarri has pointed out, there is evidence that Caterina indeed spoke seated while her nuns “surrounded her,” at least for her penultimate Holy Thursday sermon. In fact, her mummy is still seated in this conversational pose today.\footnote{Zarri, Places and Gestures, 181.} There is additional proof from the sermons indicating that the community was seated at these meetings. For, in Sermon XXIII on St. Francis, Caterina illustrates that the enemies sin and grace cannot fully rest in a person at the same time by saying that just as she “is now sitting in a
particular place, none of you can sit down there while I am sitting here. Nor can I sit where you are, while you are sitting there.” It seems, therefore, the nuns were close and comfortable; even so much as to enjoy a possible joke counseling against sitting on the abbess’s lap. But is there any way to evaluate the results of such closeness and comfort?

Illuminata, as Caterina’s long-time companion, provides us with an answer of “yes.” She describes how Caterina cultivated a close pedagogical relationship with her nuns, something clearly exposed in the seventh chapter of Specchio:

When we had our chapter meetings, there was miraculous joy in our minds because of her [Caterina’s] sweet exhortations and admonitions that we should always think and say good things to each other, and should be comforted by holy humility and not worry ourselves about the deeds of others or temporal things, nor the matters of the monastery, for the person who truly tries to be at prayer, never wishing to hear, to understand and to know anything outside of God—all of her effort (studio) is for loving and uniting herself with God.”

An idealized Pauline vision of Christian community is clearly at work here, since it was hardly possible to have a chapter meeting and not talk a bit about monastery business.

Though Illuminata’s praise may seem somewhat too fulsome to be realistic, there is no denying that, though she was teaching them the exigencies of a strict Observant lifestyle, Caterina was held in high and affectionate esteem by her consorelle. This is a relationship that she cultivated deliberately. It was this bond with her sisters that led directly to the question and answer structure of her sermons.

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43 Ser. XXXIII, v, 257: “Et per il contrario dove regna il peccato et il vano amore, la gratia del divino amore non mai vi può resedere (sicome dove hora sedo io in questo particolar luoco, nissuna di voi, mentre ch’io ci sedo, mai vi potrà sedere. Né manco io posso sedere dove voi hora sete, mentre a seder ivi ve ne stiate).”

44 Specchio VII, xxiii, 57: “Come che quando ci facea li soi capitoli, era mirabile gaudio a le mente nostre per le sue dolce exortatione e amonitione, augumentando lor sempre a pensare et a dire bene l’una de l’altra e alla sancta humilità confortando esse a non se curare de li facti altrui né de cosse temporale e facti del monasterio, imperoché chi gusta e in verità sta a la oratione, mai voria udire intendere, né sapere niuna cossa fuora de Dio, e tutto il suo studio é in amare e unirse con Dio.”
Mutuality and leveling of status is a central theme of Caterina’s work. She uses the pronoun “noi”—we—continually in her sermons, making it clear that she had no advantage over her sisters, though she was their teacher. As indicated above, she continually referred to them with affectionate epithets. In addition to addressing them as “my sisters,” she also called them her “most dear” or “spiritual daughters” and “her beloveds in Christ.” She also refers to Christ as the husband of each nun. Thus, she created a triple relationship as the mother, the sister and the co-wife of each person in the monastery. Her stated purpose in preaching to them was to “make devotion grow greater in you listeners and also in me.” Thus, they were all on equal spiritual footing, and any lessons that they “conversed about together” were for “their common use and devotion.” Here she echoed the vocabulary of Clare in the Rule—communi utilitate—when Clare described how goods should be shared in the monastery. At each Corpus Domini, words, like goods, belonged not to one, but to all—a true conversation.

In her work on Caterina’s sermons (as well as those by Quattrocento holy woman Chiara Bugni) Gabriella Zarri has pointed out the importance of dialogue that took place between a community of nuns and their abbess. Her main focus, however, is on the emotional encounters that occur upon the leader’s death. Instead of dialogue in death, the following section will treat Clarissan nuns’ conversations in life by reconstructing the questions of the Corpus Domini community. It will also show how Caterina responded to them, often using inquiries drawn from scripture and further layers of rhetorical questions.

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46 Ser. II, vi, 15: “Hora con brevità narrarò il modo che tenesti et la cagione che ti mosse, et tutto ciò per accrescere maggior devotione in voi ascoltatrici et ancora in me.” For the first instance of “noi” see Ser. I, i, 5.
47 Ser. XXXI, i, 255: “Però desidero che insieme, per nostra commune utilità et devotione, discorriamo...”
48 RSC VII, 5.
in order to deepen her nuns’ spiritual reflections. Knowing the intellectual concerns of these women will help to balance historiography that privileges the passionate drama of their spirituality, while neglecting the equally important, if more prosaic, reality of everyday learning.

Sovrabbondante solutione del dubio: Caterina and her Questioners

Reconstructing the oral questions and answers that formed this conversation is easier said than done, however, given the written form in which they now exist. Many inquiries appear within the explanatory paratexts of Casanova, the sermons’ redactor, which seems to cast some doubt upon their full authenticity. Consider this introduction to Sermon VII: “It appears to me that one of her companions said to (Sister Caterina): We would be most grateful if you would teach us the effects of the grace of the Holy Spirit when he enters into us.”50 Thus, one could suggest that the dialogic structure was merely an arbitrary artifice used by Casanova as a way to organize the various materials left by the women of Corpus Domini. Such a view would coincide with the opinion of scholar Janet Smarr that Caterina’s advice does not bear the marks of “dialogue form.”51 Given the information presented above regarding Caterina’s teaching methods, however, it is more likely that Casanova was legitimately rebuilding words native to this Clarissan community. Let us consider, for example, the first question by a nun to appear in the sermon corpus, asked by the sister mentioned above, the unnamed “devoted companion”

50Ser. VII, 71: “Pare a me (suor Catherina) gli disse una delle sue compagne: che chi siate mo hora debitrice d’insegnarchi gli effetti della gratia del Spirito Santo (amor perfetto) quando entra in noi per quello che disopra accennato ne havete. Rispose subito...”
51Janet Smarr, Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 34. Here Smarr is specifically addressing the Sette armi.
whose cell was next to Caterina’s in Ferrara. Since the Novice mistress is noted for her “learned responses,” this sister asks her “what is the true goal of those who become nuns?” The favored teacher counsels her that, in her own case, “when I leave you on this earth it will have been my object and goal to do God’s will in all things and never my own, and to love him most readily and resolutely, with perfect love.”\textsuperscript{52} Quite a similar phrase appears in Chapter One of \textit{Specchio}, in which Illuminata recalls Caterina’s words thus: “When I leave this earth my only object will have been to do the will of God and to wish to love him with most perfect love.” In terms of what prompts this statement, Illuminata states that Caterina “used to say words similar to this in response (\textit{a proposito}) to something said to her.”\textsuperscript{53} Judging from the exchanges that occurred between her and Abbess Leonarda at Ferrara detailed above, she was perpetuating an important Observant practice learned early on. Thus, we can use Illuminata’s text to prove that Casanova is not imposing a foreign structure to Caterina’s words but actually recording something integral to them: the rhythm of call and response.

For further proof that the pattern of question and answer was natural for these Clarissans, one can turn again to the \textit{Ordinazione}’s description of how the chapter meeting functioned. It builds upon Clare’s own declaration that the abbess should ask the opinion of her sisters, with the statement: “And then the abbess [should] confer with the sisters (as the Rule states) as to whether there is a need for something that would be

\textsuperscript{52}\textit{Ser. VII}, x, 71: “Quando mi partetti dal secolo solo fu mio oggetto et fine di fare in tutte le cose la volontà di io et non giamai la mia, et di voler dispostissima e resolutissima amarlo di perfetto amore.”

\textsuperscript{53}\textit{Specchio}, I, xxvii, 10: “Et disse più volte queste cotale parole a proposito de una cossa a lei dicta, e dicea: ‘Quando me partí dal secolo solo fu lo mio oggetto per fara la voluntá de Dio e per volerlo amare de perfectissimo amore...’”
useful, necessary or honest for the monastery.” Immediately after this exchange is when the abbess was meant to reprimand her nuns individually or communally, and was, subsequently, to “lead” her sisters with “holy words.” One can imagine these three practices—businesslike conversation, moral correction, and didactic preaching—merging quite often during weekly chapter meetings.

“And often talking amongst ourselves about her, we conferred and said ‘Oh would anyone believe you [if you spoke of how devoted, humble and patient she was] if they had never met her?” Caterina was thus discussed by her community because of her ability to guide it, a process that also occurred through discussion and dialogue. Illuminata records her own words with the abbess, saying: “If I were able to love God purely like you do, I would live content.” Caterina responds, saying “you have to work on yourself (meterli del suo).” Illuminata, probably a bit perplexed, said “please tell me, out of charity, how I need to do this?” The abbess obliged of course, outlining the fifteen steps for escaping “the world” as mentioned above. Casanova incorporated Caterina’s answer to this question as Sermon X. In fact, another twelve of the thirty-five sermons that he included in his manuscript were inspired by a direct question asked by a member of the community. These questions show us what anxieties living with the rule of Clare must have provoked regularly. Temptation and sin feature prominently, as

54 *Ord. 178v*, cap. 6: “E allora l abbadessa conferista come disse la regula cum le sorelle se gli parare a essere bisongino dequelle cosse che sono utile e necessarie e honeste del monasterio. Repredendo etiamdio le sorelle in comune o non in particolare si come gli parere essere necessario.”

55 *Specchio V*, lxxxi, 48: “...pura era decito fra nui e veduto essere una anima divotissima, humilissima e patientissima, e spesso fra noi parlando di lei, conferito e decito: ‘O che anima credeti sia quella non fa estima niuna di lei?’”

questions include: “How do we free ourselves from sin, since it is born in us?” and “What can I do—every time I go to communion and confession, my temptations come right back as if I never had gone?” In such questions, the personal met the theological. Some were even more erudite, as one nun asked if it were superfluous to love God, knowing, as she did, that God’s majesty was too great to need our petty emotions. Another sister asked why Christ mandates only one law of love in the gospels when scripture is obviously so full of other rules. Casanova states that the reason to ask questions was that it was “a way of doubting so as to have a more conclusive resolution.” Caterina lets us know that her purpose in answering thoroughly was to provide an “over-abundant” solution to doubt and to “take it away entirely.” Given her own struggle with theological doubts, as outlined in the Sette armi, this was a personal mission.

The first words of Sermon XXIV show how Caterina went about reinforcing this process of faith-strengthening inquiry. Here, she praised a nun for the “full and clear intelligence of all of her questions,” as they concerned doctrinal distinctions in God’s punishment for mortal sin. She also reinforced dialogical engagement with her audience by responding to their questions—even when they interrupted her—and by making spontaneous inquiries as well. Consider, for example, this passage from Sermon XV in

57 Ser. XXIII, 191, (Paratext): “Vorreï saper da voi suor Cattherina, come mai possiamo liberarci, fuggire et allontanarci dal peccato, se in questo naschiamo?; XXV, 197 (Paratext): “A me pare che subito confessata et communicata ch’io sono, mo soprabbondano tanto le sporch tentaetioni et instigationi al peccato, etiam mentre ch’io facio oratione, che mi pare haver più peccati addosso ch’io non havevo nanti che mi confessasse.”

58 Ser. VIII, 75, (Paratext): “Per modo di dubitare affine d’haver poi più concludente resolutione.”

59 Ser. VIII, vi, 80: “Elt queste cose tutte ho hette anche per sovrabbondante soluzione del vostra sopradetto dubio;” XXIV, iii, 196: “con queste decchiarationi et distinioni reali vi ho (le dicea essa Beata) soluti gli vostri argomenti et levato (credo io) ogni dubio.”

60 Ser. XXIV, i, 193: “Acciò habbiate piena et chiara intelligenza de tutt’i quesiti vostri...”
which she wrestles with how to explain why Christians are not as likely to love Christ now as they were in the early days of the Church: “And what does this come from, sisters? You—respond to me.” Apparently they were not quite sure what to say, so she asked another question like any good teacher: “Is not Christ the same now as he was in these early times? Yes, Yes. I will respond myself, for you.”

The fact that she often expected them to engage with her in discussion is indicated by her repeated use of the command “tell me” (dittemi), even after a question that seems nearly unanswerable, such as: “Tell me sisters, which and what kind of creature who is baptized and in her right mind does not know what we suffer for the health and salvation of a neighbor is nothing compared to what the Lord Jesus suffered for all of us?”

In order to deepen the meaning of such rhetorical questions, Caterina often used interrogatory quotes from scripture. These primarily took the form of challenges, which, if applied personally, would help the listener to evaluate her level of Christian devotion. The most obvious of these scriptural questions occurs in a passage warning against Satan’s influence: “Oh ye of little faith, why do you doubt?” There are other, more subtle inquiries, however. For example, when she laments, in Sermon I, that there are never enough hours in either day or night to spend in contemplation, she quotes Christ’s words to his apostles in Gethsemane: “Can you not wait up an hour with me?” (Matthew 26:40). Thus, with a single question, she impresses upon each sister that her lack of personal fortitude could damage her relationship with Christ. A similar dynamic is at

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61 Ser. XV, iii, 114: “Da che procede questo, sorelle mie? Rispondete no voi a me. Non è egli hora quel Christo vero Dio ch’era in quei primi suoi tempi? Si, si, risponderò me stessa per voi.” See also Specchio II, xxii–xxiv, 15.

62 Ser. XII, I, 96: “Dittemi (dicea) qual’è quella creatura battizata et di sano intelletto che non sapia che il pattir nostro per sanità et salute del prossimo è un niente appresso a quello che Dio Giesù ha patito per tutti noi?” For another example of “dittemi” see Ser. XVII, xxxvii, 168.

work in Sermon II, in which Caterina thanks God for his gift of forgiveness, even though sinners are foolish about their moral shortcomings, always asking: “What is there that I ought to do more to my vineyard, that I have not done to it?”64 This question performs an important pedagogical function, even if it does not require a verbal response from the audience, since it evokes the practice of accurate self-examination for wrongdoing. A similar quote appears in Sermon V, which includes the conversation that occurred between God and the prophet Isaiah: “And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: ‘Whom shall I send? And who shall go for us? And I said: Lo, here am I, send me.’”65

Conversation in the cloister mirrored this back and forth dialogue showing that for these nuns, questions-and-answers within sermons provided an active way to answer God’s call.

Though questions drawn from scripture may seem abstract and open-ended, the purpose of Caterina’s inquiries was always practical. For just as each nun was interrogated by the abbess before she entered religious life (in order to test her readiness to leave the world) she continued to be questioned about her spiritual preparedness when professed.66 Testing her charges for the rigors of Observant life also meant inviting them to consider, again, the evils of the world that they had willingly left behind. In Sermon XVI, prompted by a question on obedience, she asks the inquiring sister whether she is familiar with the image of the “faithful servant of an earthly king” one who would be willing to obey his sovereign to the point of dying “at his feet.”67 Of course, she uses this

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64Ser. II, xviii, 23: Is 5:4 (Sgarbi cites Mark 12:9 incorrectly): “Quid est quod debui ultra facere vineae meae et non feci ei?”
66See Ord., Cap. 1–2.
67Ser. XVI, iii, 120–121: “Oltre di questo non vi rammentate, sorella, di quello che volgarmente si dice, che il fedel obediente et ben creato servitore di un re et prencipe di questo secolo transitorio, volendolo et
image in order indicate that we should be even more willing to obey Christ without hesitation, in order to end up in His court. One cannot help but think that Caterina asked about a simpering courtier because she knew that these high-born women would be familiar with this image and would be reminded of the vain aspects of the “transitory world” that they left behind. A similar dynamic is evident in Sermon VIII, which is a response to the aforementioned question as to whether it is superfluous to love God. Caterina says that without the strength given by God’s love, humans would fall prey to the temptations of the devil, eventually realizing that such a state was like “sleeping on a fragile reed blown by contrary winds.” She then adds:

What would you say now to respond to this, sisters? Why are you now thus silent and almost alienated from yourselves (i.e.: reluctant to speak)? Have you not already heard by now that all of the worldly greatness that I mentioned before [consisting of nobility of blood, richness, titles, etc.] …is transitory, excepting the love of God…author of true and perpetual good things and honors...?

She goes on to ask them whether they know that those who refuse to give up worldly things will obtain only eternal death. This question apparently prompted one of her followers to ask how, once they gave up worldly goods, they could acquire “things of the spirit.” Caterina’s entire pedagogical project was an answer to this question.

dovendolo con ogni solecitudine, fedeltà et vigilanza ubbidire et servire, sicome sia necessario et se le conviene, ha per il suo re da morire in piedi?”

68Ibid.: “Et perché donde non debbo io feminuzza, piena di sterco e puzza, morire nei santi servitii de Re de tutt’i re? Poiché a questo fine di morire ubbidente, vigilante et servente mi ha quivi in sua corte accettato, et io a questo obligatami?”

69Ser. VIII, v, 78–79: “Che cosa mo respondete (sorelle) a questo? Perché state hora così mutole et quasi aliene da voi medesime Non vi risentite hormai che tutte le sudette mondane grandezze [nobiltà dal sangue, alle creature, alle ricchezze, alle commodità proprie, a titoli di precedenza et honore, e grandezze, all’affettare i primi officii del monasterio et ad altre simili passioni dell’animo...] et altre simili, sono transitorie, eccetto l’amare Dio (Omnia praetereunt praeter amare Deum) autore de veri et perpetoi beni et honori...”

70Ibid.: “quelle [cose] dello spirito”
Questioning Origins: Considering Conversational Genres in the Quattrocento

Before evaluating Caterina’s answers, however, it is first necessary to delve into a question of influence, inquiring as to which contemporary educational practices impacted her conversational pedagogy. This section will therefore show that the dialogic structure of the sermoni was influenced by both the environment of female education in the Renaissance courts and the speech patterns common in vernacular preaching to the public. The ritual that most affected the conversational rhythm of Caterina’s sermons however, was the nuns’ practice of Confession—not just sacramental penance with a priest—but their Observant culture of confessing to each other with great purpose and frequency.

Since the actual exercise and literary recapitulation of spiritual dialogue is a Christian tradition dating from Late Antiquity, it can be tempting to explain the sermoni in the context of this practice.\(^{71}\) Additionally, since conversations in a monastic milieu gave rise to the formalized questioning that characterized the high medieval scholastic dispute, connections could be made to this educational context as well. This would not be out of place, since there is proof that Caterina knew of Anselm of Canterbury, one of the founders of the dialogic genre.\(^{72}\) She shows familiarity with disputation in this vein when she recreates a formal argument between the personifications of Justice and Mercy in Sermon V. In this case, however, it is the many-layered educational experience of


\(^{72}\)See *Ser. XII, xiii, 138*, where Caterina quotes Anselm’s *Liber meditatio* et orationum. On female intellectual culture, dialogue, and reform in an earlier period, see Sarah M. Spalding, “Elisabeth of Schönau: Visions and Female Intellectual Culture of the High Middle Ages” (Ph.D. Diss., The Catholic University of America, 2013).
these Quattrocento women that is most relevant, the foundation of which was their training in the conversation of the court. The women of Corpus Domini, as was discussed in Chapter One, were all from families of urban notables in North-Central Italy. Caterina herself was a resident of the Este court in Ferrara, and the Este were special patrons of the Corpus Domini community there. So that families could maintain the prestige that came with the cultivation of their female members, these women likely began to acquire literacy and manners in girlhood. Such teaching was gender-segregated and largely informal, involving one-on-one instruction by a personal tutor or occasionally, in a small group guided by nuns.73 Thus, from an early age, these women, precisely because they could not obtain formal university training, experienced conversational learning based on their specific needs. In addition, as Janet Smarr has pointed out, the revivified dialogue genre of the Renaissance, though a literary form, was based on “real relationships” between upper class women of the Italian courts, and thus provides ample proof of how they learned during this period.74 One sixteenth-century dialogue text, for example, though written by a man, showed that “young women” learned through participation in social discussions. These “intelligent” conversations between the young and older ladies who were both “honorable” and “rhetorically skilled” functioned as models for Caterina’s preaching, especially when she and other monastic officials educated novices.75

74Smarr, Joining the Conversation, 13.
75Ibid., 102–103.
Another model for Caterina’s rhetorical techniques was Quattrocento vernacular preaching, most accessible to us today through one of Caterina’s intellectual heroes, Observant Bernardino of Siena, who shared with her a desire to be “respondent to the immediate needs of his listeners,” who he knew to be “an audience of willing students.”

To cater to these needs, Bernardino would “convert” says Lina Bolzoni, “an abstract discourse on religious doctrine into a dialogue consisting of a series of simple questions and answers.” An excellent example of this occurs in one of the sermons that he preached to the Sienese in 1427, in which he attempted to teach them the evils of astrology through logic. In the midst of his teaching, he asked and answered a number of questions, as follows:

Therefore, have faith in what you see clearly through reason. Who do you believe is more powerful, God, or an angel? God. Who is more powerful, an angel or a soul? An angel. The soul or the constellations? The soul. The constellations or the body? The body. Reason or sensuality? Reason. What is more powerful, the Church and its Doctors, or your opinion? The Holy Church.

Bernardino’s teaching, in that it fostered innovative ways to enforce orthodoxy, served as model for dozens of Quattrocento Franciscans. It seems as if Caterina was no exception. Other commonalities include his frequent interjections of “dimmi!,” and exclamatory questions like “what would you like me to demonstrate?” were often interjected as if he was responding to a direct inquiry. He was also fond, of course, of scriptural questions. In Sermon III, for example, on the ideal relationship that should

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78 St. Bernardino of Siena, Le Predice Volgari, ed. Piero Bargellini (Rome: Rizzoli, 1936), Ser. II, 63: “Adunque, abbi la fede a quelle che congioni vedi assai chiaro. Chi credi tu che possa piú, o Idio o l’angiuoi?—Piú Idio—Chi piú, o l’angiuoi o l’anima?—Piú l’angiuoi.—Chi piú, o le costellazioni o lo corpo?—Piú il corpo.—Chi piú o la ragione o la sensualità?—Piú la ragione.—Chi piú, o la santa Chiesa co’ Dottori o la tuo opinione?—Piú la santa Chiesa.”
79 Ibid. 80 and Ser. III 89, “che ti vuol demonstrare?”
exist between preacher and listener, he includes two scriptural questions meant to make his audience ponder the power of both God’s Word and his own. The first consists of the disciples’ words to each other in Luke 24:32: “Was not our heart burning within us, whilst he spoke in this way, and opened us up to the scriptures?” The second, from Jeremiah, quotes the words of God himself as in: “Are not my words as a fire, saith the Lord: and as a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?”

It is not difficult to see why Caterina would have mirrored Bernardino’s practice of constructing communal authority through the use of inquiries drawn directly from God’s word. And although it is difficult to prove precise occasions upon which Caterina experienced the vernacular teaching of contemporary Observants, the entry of male preachers into Corpus Domini was important enough to mention specifically in the *Ordinazione*. This inclusion proves that it happened with some frequency, perhaps even enough for male and female preachers to use similar conversational tactics with their audiences.

The practice that most influenced the kind of spiritual dialogue exhibited in the *sermoni*, however, was the nuns’ pattern of frequent confession. It was their habit of conversing with each other about sin that solidified group identity and provided opportunities for communal teaching. Smarr has pointed out that the “critical self-probing and resultant speech” of sacramental confession to a male authority figure “was a powerful type of dialogue for women.” Imagine, therefore, how much more powerful such a dynamic of question and answer could be when it occurred between female equals.

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80Ibid. *Ser.* III, 94–95: “Nonne cor nostrum ardens era in nobis, dum loqueretur in via et aperiret nobis Scripturas” and “Numquid non verba mea sunt quasi ignis, dicit Dominus, et quasi malleus conquerens petram?” (Bernardino also apparently translated these on the spot into Italian.)

81*Ord.* Cap 7, 180r. Normal rules of silence and restricted speaking with outsiders were to be suspended “per casione de predicantium et...capitolo de visitatione.”

82Smarr, *Joining the Conversation*, 34.
The *Ordinazione* provide several concrete details as to the ubiquity of confessional practice in Observant community. The Rule of Clare already called for confession to a priest twelve times a year. In her commentary, Caterina agreed that it should occur once a month. The reality is, however, that they confessed their sins to each other even more frequently. We have seen, in the previous chapter, how during every weekly chapter meeting, each sister professed her faults publically in a ritual manner. This, too, was called for in Clare’s Rule, but the emphasis that Caterina placed upon it indicates that Observants expanded the practice. According to the *Ordinazione*, this confessional practice was meant to occur just after the abbess taught her charges. One can imagine that, just as there was a blurring of boundaries between the discussion of monastery business, moral guidance, and sermon-giving during chapter, there was likely a similar blurring between conversational preaching and confessional acts. Confessional culture did not stop at this meeting however. The *Ordinazione* state:

> so that purity of conscience and the sanctity of life can be better preserved, we order that on Monday and Wednesday mornings after the first meal bell, the sisters standing in choir on the side of the abbess...should humbly tell the guilt of their well-known sins publically and briefly and receive penance from the mother...  

“On Tuesdays and Thursdays” she says, those who stand “on the side of vicaress” should tell their sins to her in a similar way. This practice, often called the “discipline,” meant that each sister was meant to confess to the community three times weekly. Use of the adjective “publichi” (having been made known) indicates that these were transgressions

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83 *Ord.* Cap 6, 178v: “Oltra da questo [the procedures of the chapter meeting] acio che la monditia/de la conscientia e santita de la vita meglie se/conservi ordinemo che le sorelle le quale stano/in choro de la parte de l abadessa lo lonedi e/lo mercoledi matina sonato lo primo signo de la refectione/ne lo luoco a cio deputato dicano humelmanle/la soa colpa deli defecti publichi publicamente/et brevemente e recevano la penitentia da la/ madre o vicaria o non altra in suo luoco de–/putata. Similmente lo martidi e la zobia fazi/ano le sorelle che stano in choro de la parte de la vicaria...”
that had been previously noted by others in the community, meaning that all sisters were perpetually engaged in the process of interrogating themselves and others for the sake of spiritual purity. What is just as telling is Caterina’s recommendation of what to do on days when such sharing is not compulsory. Then, the sisters are to “eagerly edify each other,” thus continuing the daily cycle of interrogation and conversation.  

Evaluating Effects: Forming and Consuming the Things of the Spirit

We have seen how Caterina constructed the authority to preach, and examined the setting in which she did so. We have explored the conversational nature of her teaching practices and the contemporary origins of such dynamics. What remains is to evaluate, to the extent that it is possible, the effects of this regular preaching on her community. Such an evaluation will show just how a conversational exchange became a material exchange of spiritual ideas and ideals, an answer to the curious nun’s question: How do I acquire the things of the spirit?

Such a process of knowledge exchange was built on the nuns’ status as discriminating consumers and collectors of Caterina’s able teachings. Illuminata herself describes listening to her abbess so intently that even when she was not able to write her words down, she remembered them as if she had written them. The reality of an attentive audience is reflected in summary statements like: “Do you want anything to be more clear now? Respond.” Also, when responding to a question about the Holy Spirit, Caterina finishes by saying: “And this, (my dear companion) is as much as I am able to

84Ibid.: “pero che in tale caso chiaschuna sol–licitamente debia rehedificare l altre.”
85*Specchio* II, xxvii, 15: “Unde diceva lei queste e altre assai parole le quale io non sono capace a poterle scriverle, ma questo bene me aricordo tutavia scrivendo...”
86*Ser.* VIII, iii, 77: “La volete mo così chiara?”
satisfy you,” indicating the eagerness of the original inquiry.87 Subsequent to this statement however, she continues to address the whole group on crucial points drawn from the original question, showing just how much the content of her teaching was guided by the needs that her audience expressed. Even her apologies when she preaches longer sermons indicates that not only the content, but also the form of her presentations was determined by the desires—and the attention span—of those to whom she was preaching.

Her Clarissan companions’ hunger to consume authorized “things” adds a new dimension to our understanding of Caterina’s teaching through lists and numbers, letters and images. In an attempt to exchange “things of the senses” for those of the spirit, they, created, ironically, thoroughly concrete modes of learning. Of course such tactics were time-worn strategies of monastic pedagogy, and each step in the “Quindici gradi di perfezione,” each letter in the word AMORE, each of the seven conditions for prayer was, in the words of Jean Leclercq, part of the “framework” in which the “imagination” of her audience was “disciplined.”88 They were also certainly tangible “mnemonic strategies,” the kind for which St. Bernardino was famous, that helped him “marry his intricate imagery to a detailed sermon structure.”89 In addition to being tools for discipline or memory, however, concepts like Caterina’s—created to be “touched with the hands”—should be understood as reified objects of desire forged by the spiritual

87Ser. VII, i, 72: “Et questo è (compagna mia chara) quanto satisfare vi posso.”
89Kimberly Rivers, Preaching the Memory of Virtue and Vice: Memory, Images and Preaching in the Late Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 332.
consumption of a Quattrocento audience, one that had removed itself from the material marketplace.

Since her audience treasured such spiritual things, Caterina made a habit of using enumerations of them in her work. The most well known of these lists is her tract on the seven spiritual weapons. Here, she makes intangible mental processes into concrete implements with which to battle Satan. Making knowledge accessible and functional in this way is a tactic that permeates the sermons, as well. The way in which Caterina describes the number three in Sermon XVII, for example, makes an abstract concept into an object with valuable properties. Three, she says, has “antique greatness, nobility, and perfection, most privileged and fruitful to us, for from its sacred and clear fountains spring the most Holy Trinity.” On such a profitable number she built one of her longest sermons, describing salvation history based on this number of the Trinity. Apparently, one of her sisters requested a similar discourse on the Virgin Mary, and Caterina responded by giving her The Twelve Stars, a summary of the “most singular and peculiar privileges” that the Virgin achieved and received. None of the nuns could aspire to bear God’s son, of course, but the language here is of interest, for these stellar virtues were those that Mary “accumulated through Grace.” Therefore, within Caterina’s pedagogy, to acquire and cherish the things of the spirit was to imitate the Virgin herself.

Manuscript evidence detailing Clarissan consumption of enumerated virtues is preserved in several codices in Bologna’s Archivio Generale Arcivescovile. It is

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90Ser. XVII, xxxvii, 168: “...per sofficiente prova et isperienza dell’antica grandezza, nobiltà et perfettione del numero del 3 privileggiatissimo et fruttuosissimo a noi per iscaturire dal sacro et chiaro fonte della Santissima Trinità.”
91Ser. XIX, ii, 173: “Ma gli singolarissimi peculiari privileggi a lei sola et non ad altri concessi sono fra gli altri gli dodici seguenti.”
92Ibid. 172–3, Emphasis mine: “...per gratia cumulati nella santissima Vergine Madre di Dio.” See also Laudi, VII, 94.
nowhere more notable than in *AGA* 25,1, which contains a particularly dense cluster of such teachings. They begin on fol. 41r, a section tagged by Casanova as containing “notable teachings of Blessed Caterina and documents and other things written—not in her own hand—but by others.” Here we see the sisters learning and preserving through deliberate acts of knowledge collection, acts made possible by her creation of spiritual “things.” The “notable teaching (dottrina) of Blessed Katrina da Bologna” is followed by her often-copied “fifteen steps toward perfection” as well as the “seven conditions for preparing oneself for prayer.” These are followed in turn by “the seven words of prayer to think and say day and night for those wishing to be in God’s grace,” the “fruits for those who say the divine office devotedly,” (according to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, there are six), the “eight teachings of St. Francis to his brothers” and so on. Thus, in these few folios, the nun-copyist has demonstrated that she best consumed knowledge when it came in a list of spiritual “things.” Notably, these lists are headed in the manuscript by the ultimate material encapsulation of a spiritual idea: Bernardino’s common and controversial symbol for Christ—IHS. On this manuscript page we get a hint, therefore, of the popularity of knowledge exchange imagined as material acquisition in the context of Quattrocento spirituality. While their secular counterparts purchased beautiful codices as luxury objects, these Clarissans preferred humble books. For this literate audience, the objects that conveyed true status were constructed of the words within. When Observants gave up their worldly possessions and replaced them with the accumulated treasures of

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93 *AGA* 25,1, 41v–45v: “notabili doti della Beata Caterina & documenti e altre cose schritti non da sua mano ma da altro.”
learning, they internalized their wealth, and wrote “God’s divine wisdom” on their hearts, says Caterina, in valuable “letters of gold.”

“Constretto a consolarti”: Conversing with Christ

Humble communal conversation also served as a model for Caterina’s visionary relationship with Christ. Consider the following anecdote, typical of the abbess’s habit of discussing herself in the third person:

Being in her cell one night, in front of her crucifix, she prayed intensely that He, through His singular grace, would grant her consolation. The most benign Jesus Christ spoke to her familiarly, as he had done other times: “My beloved soul, I am much satisfied by your desire and affection, and you give me great pleasure in often meditating on my passion, and having it continually in your memory, in such a way that you have compelled me to console you.”

Just as her sisters asked her questions and demanded answers, she sought answers from the ultimate authority. In Sermon XXVIII, Caterina even has a conversation with God the Father. She tells how he appeared to her “in spirit,” given how “eager and thirsty” she was for his presence, and “spoke to her very familiarly.” “Beloved little daughter, he said, if you want to know this, open your ears of your heart to what I will say to you, because in a few words I will explain to you what my mind and my will consist of.” Holy learning for Caterina was a process of demand and supply, a

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94 Ser. XII, iii, 98: “Legatevi donque per sempre al cuore in lettere d’ora questa verità della divina sapienza.”
95 Ser. XXIX, i–ii, 225: “...stando ella una notte d’esso venere in orazione nella sua cella dianzi al suo crocifisso lo pregava intensamente la volesse ci ciò, per gratia sua singolare, esaudire et consolare. Il benignissimo Giesù Christo, gli parlò familiarmemente, sicome altre volte fece, e le disse: Anima mia diletta, molto mi compiaccio in questo tuo desiderio et affetto et gran piacere mi dai a meditare spesso la mia passione et haverne continoa memoria, dimaniera tale che mi hai constretto a consolarti.”
96 Ser. XXVIII, v, 214: “apparse in spirito a quest’anima [Caterina], tanto di ciò sitibonda e bramosa, et molto familiarmemente gli parlò gli rispose...”
97 Ser. XXVIII, x, 216: “Diletta figliuola, se tu desideri saper questo, aprì l’orecchie del cuor tuo a quello c’hora ti dirò, percióché in pocche parole ti espicarò in che consiste la mente mia et il mio volere.”
conversational quest for God’s letters of gold. Presenting herself in the third person, she would often ask God questions like “what does your will consist of?,” and “how am I to love you perfectly with all of my imperfections?” Her inquiries to Him mimicked those of her sisters. Thus, her visions became both educational quests and pedagogical tools.

Additional manuscript evidence proves just how well Caterina taught her charges about conversing with Christ for their spiritual benefit. One codex contains a lengthy poem by someone in her community, in which a “devoted soul” asks Christ about how he was born in the flesh, and he “sweetly” responds to her. Within the poem Christ speaks to the nun about how she cannot give him any material thing, he merely asks for her heart. He can give her something material there, for, he says, it is his “marketplace” (merchato) where he can give “all riches.” And in fact, Caterina’s Sermon II, initially quoted above, states that the wound of Christ’s open side was not only the “true entry” into his wisdom, but also the “true archive and treasury” of his heavenly gifts. At Corpus Domini, the spiritual conversation that constructed community became material commerce in the open market of the heart. Though these Observant women exchanged life in the city for that of the cloister, they could not leave its metaphors of exchange behind.

98Ibid. 216, 217: “dove insomma consiste la tua volontà?;” “mi dichi in che modo io ti possa amare perfettamente con tante mie imperfettioni?”
99AGA 32, 3 91r–105r. For Serventi’s citation of this poem see Laudi, LXXI. Serventi transcribes the rubric as: “Qualiter anima devota humiliter aloquitur Christum natum in carne et qualiter Christus dulciter ad anima respondet.”
100Ibid. 95v–96r: “De fora de ti che dare me poy/Per pagamento/Cossa di valimento/Non ne de tuo largire//Questo me fa impacite/Amore che hay in balia/Che lo to core me dia/Qual domando atute hore//In cio sta el mio merchato/ Che voglio techo fare/ E pero voglio dare/ Me con tuta richeca.”
101Ser. II, xxxi, 33: “vero ingresso alla sapienza tua, vero archivo et thesoro de tuoi doni celesti et vera risplendente lampade accessa della luce del tuo santo Spirito.”
In the chapters that follow, I will move from examining the dynamic exchanges that shaped Caterina’s preaching performance to exploring the thematic content of the sermons themselves. In the process, her interest in familiar “Others” will come to the fore. Caterina used images of transgressive Jews—whom her nuns may have met in the streets of Ferrara—and exotic animals—which they likely encountered when serving as ladies of the Este court—to construct their identities as members of a cloistered Clarissan elite. For these Observant women observed expressions of power in their rich surroundings and reshaped them to suit the needs of their poor enclosure.
CHAPTER 3

_Ostantissima o_stitutione: Anti-Judaism and Observant Identity

The fact that late medieval Christianity fostered anti-Judaism is such a truism among historians that some shrink from further analysis of why or how such sentiment was propagated. Franciscan friars’ active polemic against Jews in Italy has been quite well documented, especially as it intensified during the Observant period. It is intriguing, therefore, that scholars have at no time considered how Franciscan women felt about the Jews. Jeremy Cohen, for example, in his pivotal and detailed work on the

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1 I have chosen to use the “anti-Judaism” as opposed to “anti-Semitism,” agreeing with Anthony Bale’s recent assessment that the latter term has become an “anti-critical, ahistorical and totalizing term that obscures more than it illuminates,” given that it was invented in 1873 to describe race-based theories of Jewish difference. He correctly states that “it is a fundamental misunderstanding to see medieval Christians as “anti-Semites” according to the conventions of racial difference, genocidal ambitions or psychopathology which characterize modern understandings of the term.” See Anthony Bale, _Feeling Persecuted: Christians, Jews and Images of Violence in the Middle Ages_ (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 184–186. In choosing not to use ‘anti-Semitism’, I differ with Gavin Langmuir, who has asserted that “by the fifteenth century, Catholic Christian anti-Semitism was deeply embedded in European culture, and it remained so right down to the twentieth century.” For his complex definition of anti-Semitism as related to Christian irrationality, see his _Christianity, Religion, and Antisemitism_ (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 306.


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origins of mendicant scorn for Jews, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, does not consider women, be they Jewish or Christian. Even more recent considerations of the phenomenon, the essays comprising *Friars and Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, do not consider the role that anti-Judaism played within the ideological framework and daily practice of Poor Clare life. This could be due to the fact that women are often placed in similar historiographical categories as Jews, since the voices of both groups were often silenced by a dominant culture, a classification that often impedes examination of interactions between such “Others.” Historians heretofore may also have not believed that the sentiments and actions of religious women on the question of the Jews were at all connected to the vicissitudes of Italian civic politics, given that these women were, so often, strictly cloistered. More practically, the failure to address this issue can be put down to a lack of substantive evidence in the writings left to us by Franciscan women. Caterina Vigri’s sermons afford us the unique ability to fill this lacuna, as she mentions Jews and Judaism over forty times therein. Gilberto Sgarbi, the editor of her sermon collection and the *Rosarium*, claims that these many mentions mean little, given that Caterina, in her treatment of the Jews, “adheres rigorously” to religious statements as found in the New Testament and “does not make use of social and political categories” of analysis.2

In this chapter, however, I will argue that Caterina’s outcries over Jewish perfidy reveal specific and vital historical details about the religion, the society, and perhaps even

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1Consider Mormando’s own categories of underworld otherness (witches—mostly female, sodomites, and Jews), or the categories found in Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

the politics of the fifteenth-century Emilia-Romagna. To begin, I will discuss the vocabulary of her anti-Judaism and its roots, connecting it to both the heated preaching of male Franciscan Observants and the contentious Ferrarese politics over Jewish moneylending that occurred during Caterina’s formative years. Next, I will explain how Caterina used the anti-Jewish discourse that she had learned as a pedagogical force for discipline within her cloistered communities, a process that occurred in three distinct yet interconnected ways. Firstly, her rhetorical exploration of Jewish error functioned as a mechanism whereby Caterina taught her sisters to think critically about their own actions, thus promoting core tenets of the Rule of St. Clare. This tactic worked because she created an implicit parallel between the Jews and the sisters as “chosen” people. Depicting the Jews—a once elect group—as obstinate, rebellious, and full of avarice showed exactly which behaviors the sisters should avoid and reinforced key Clarissan ideas like obedience, repentance, and poverty. Next, I will demonstrate that Caterina further inculcated such ideals by creating vivid portraits of Jews victimizing a vulnerable Jesus. She relied upon the rhetorical spectacle of Jewish violence to incite empathy for, and oneness with, the crucified Christ. Her consorelle were to cultivate the emotional discipline they needed by means of meditation on the supreme patience of God-made-man, and the supreme evil of man, specifically Jewish man, towards God. I will argue, as a third point concerning Caterina’s pedagogy, that she believed that the Jews’ ultimate evil was their observance of the “vecchia legge,” Old Testament Law that was dangerously flawed because it failed to recognize Christ as Savior. In contrast, she likened the communal observance of Clare’s Rule to obeying a New Law: the superseding law of love mandated by Christ in the Gospels. Thus, for Caterina, the Old
Law of the Jews became emblematic of everything that opposed the new divine
dispensation embodied by the Observant movement. Her pedagogical project was
therefore built upon anti-Judaism at a fundamental level. This chapter, through its
examination of Caterina’s thought in its communal context, will conclude by proposing a
conceptual link between the rigorous rules that Observant Franciscans followed, and the
late Quattrocento Italian statutes that prosecuted Jews with the same sort of rigor.
Finally, I will suggest that Caterina’s anti-Jewish rhetoric has the power to shift our
perspectives on the empathetic and emotional content of late medieval female spirituality.

Crimes and Punishments: Caterina’s Anti-Jewish Vocabulary

One key to understanding the nature of Caterina’s anti-Judaism lies in examining
the repeated epithets she uses to describe Jewish behavior. For, although Jews are
mentioned forty-two times in the sermons, it is often with the same word or set of words.
These epithetical phrases are repeated so frequently as to seem ritualistic, a deliberately
didactic part of sermon performance. All of Caterina’s criticism is built upon the fact
that Jews were once God’s “popolo eletto,” his “most beloved, peculiar,” and chosen
people, set apart from all other groups in Old Testament times. It is her contention that
they abused God’s favor, disregarding the words of his prophets and ignoring his gifts.

3Mary Suydam, “Background: An Introduction to Performance Studies,” in Performance and
Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E.
4Ser. V, vii, 63: “…del già suo eletto popolo hebreo;” XVII, xxiii, 149: “…carissimo et peculiare suo
popolo israelita;” XXXIV, xxxii, 287: “…antichi Hebrei popolo suo eletto et peculiare.” Note that, contrary
to what one would expect, Caterina does not make a clear differentiation between “ebrei” and ‘judei’ in her
works. As a rule, both could have negative connotations, excepting the few instances in which she refers to
Old Testament Jews as “antichi fidi hebrei nanti Christo” and compares them to “christiani buoni dopo
Christo” (Ser. II, xiii, 21). Both terms were used to refer to contemporary Jews. Documents in the
Ferrarese archives use “ebrei”, for example, and Bernardino of Siena was more likely to use “judei.”
even as he led them to the Promised Land. Thus, even before the advent of Christ, they had shown “ingratissima ingratitudine:” most ungrateful ingratitude, as they ignored the Divine Covenant which bound them. Later, Jewish failure to recognize Jesus as the Messiah rendered them treacherous: “perfidiosi…,” manifesting “infideltà”—extreme unfaithfulness. This persistent infidelity led Caterina to refer continually to their rebellious nature. The Jews as a people are “most hard” (“durrissimo”) and “most obstinate” (“ostantissimo”) in their refusal to convert.

Caterina’s characterizations go beyond mere stubbornness, however. Since she believed the Jews to be the principle agents behind Christ’s betrayal and death, a belief supported only by extra-scriptural sources, their violent acts before and during His Crucifixion render them thoroughly cruel and “maligni”—evil. They are so corrupt that their behavior is described as “diabolica” and “indiavolato”: influenced by the Devil himself. In fact, Caterina often uses the same adjectives to describe the Jews as she does Satan and his fallen angels. In her desire to marginalize Jewish evildoers even further, she labels them with a de-humanizing epithet: “cani”—dogs. They are called “cani” particularly when Caterina wishes to stress their role in actually killing Christ, painting a picture of the lowest creatures bringing down their most high Creator. Thus, the Jews

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5Ser. XVII, xx, 146; XXXIV, xxxii, 287; XXXIV, xlvii, 307. Caterina’s Old Testament citations on the subject are extensive.
6Ser. XVII, xxii, 148: Jewish ingratitude is mentioned in the sermons a minimum of eight other times.
8Ser. XVII, xiii, 150: “…per volere rimanersi durissimo, rebelle et ostinatissimo d’abandonarlo” (lo= Christ). For repeated use of “obstinate,” see: XXIII, i, 191; 194 and XXXIX, xxxii, 287.
9Ser. III, vii, 50: “Et poiché non solo non si volsero pentire mai di questa loro malignità ma ancora crescevano ogni giorno di perfidia, di persecuzione et di malignità maggiore, V, viii, 63: “…per l’antiveduta malignissima malignità et inaudita ingratitudine et crudeltà del gia suo elletto popolo hebreo.”
10Ser. XVII, xxi, 143; 144: “tutta diabolica,” a page later, Judas is described as “indiavolato.”
11See Ser. XIII, ii, 100; v, 101 and vii, 103 for examples of this tendency.
12Ser. II, xxxii, 35: “Coronatus corona de spinis/Crucifixo canibus a Judaeis.” Also see: XVII, xxi, 143: “Il concilio che fecero I cani Giudei,” and: XVII, xxiv, 150; XIX, xv, 175; XXX, liii, 310. On the origins of
complete their discursive downfall; they go from being a chosen people to not being people at all. In contrast to the virtuous animals that we will meet in Chapter Four, Caterina’s Jews are utterly vicious, worthy of any punishment they receive.

The inevitable punishments that Jews endure, according to Caterina, are terrible indeed. In light of their behavior, God takes away their chosen status forever, meaning that they are to live without his “graces or favors perpetually.”13 In fact, God calls upon Gentiles to take their chosen place “working in His spiritual vineyard.”14 Jews have fallen so much out of favor, not only are their worldly and spiritual goods taken away from them, they are “dispersed throughout the world” so as to be deprived of community as well.15 It is because they are reprobate for eternity that their lives on earth are full of the “most deadly” suffering.16 And the eternal pain that Jewish souls will face upon death is made abundantly clear. Caterina uses vivid language to describe their punishments; in a Latin verse section of Sermon II she explains that “the whole synagogue—along with the Jews/And all others outside of our Faith/Is eternally hateful to You [God].”17 And in the “infernal abysses” where the Jews suffer, they can expect nothing but “eternal fire” in return for their faithlessness.18

Given the relative rarity of such subject matter in the writings of fifteenth-century women, it is a logical question whether such negative sentiments are somehow

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the image, including its use by Chrysostom (whom Caterina references elsewhere), see Kenneth Stow, *Jewish Dogs: An Image and its Interpreters—Continuity in the Catholic-Jewish Encounter* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
13*Ser.*, XXXIII, xlvi, 307: “...con loro demeriti...privandoli del tutto et perpetuo della sua gratia et de suoi favori.”
14Ibid.: “...chiamò a se i gentili in lor cambio a lavorare in la sua vigna spirituale.”
15*Ser.* III, xvii, 50–51: “...privi anche di beni spirituali et di fortuna, etc.”, “…dispersi per il mondo”
16*Ser.* V, vii, 63: “...poi degnamente in eterno reprobato, derviria temporale, cioè per tutto quel sol tempo che in lui tal mortalissimo patimento duraria.”
17*Ser.* II, xxxii, 35: “Tota Sinagoga cum Judeis/Et cum aliis a tua fide exeris/Tibi est sempiterne odibilis”
18*Ser.* III, xvii, 51: “...infernali abbissi”; XXXV, ii, 332: “...fuoco eterno.”
interpolations on the part of Casanova, Caterina’s seventeenth-century redactor. The extent of his influence on this kind of content is difficult to evaluate, however, as his works outside of the Vita manuscript do not survive. What is certain is that similar terms—descriptions of the Jews as “maligna,” “tyranni,” displaying “ingiustitia,” and behaving “crudelissima”—do appear in the section of the manuscript (comprised of historical material and astrological tables) that Casanova authored himself.19

Additionally, many passages concerning the Jews are included in the margins, as if they were tacked on to Caterina’s main sermon narratives. This, in itself, is not unusual, however, as side notations fill the codex.

One must consider, too, tracts of an anti-Jewish nature found in materials created by Caterina and her contemporaries, present long before Casanova’s interventions. For example, in one of the vernacular poems attributed to the abbess, cited below, she uses the words of the Virgin to blame the Jews for Christ’s cruel death.20 A longer Passion lament of the Virgin, this time in Latin prose, appears in the same volume as the Ordinazione. Its narrative structure and emotional language place the blame for Christ’s lurid torment squarely on the Jews, using episodes not found in scripture. At the outset, Christ is taken into the temple so that he can be scourged by the Jews, where they go on to mock him. While he is being insulted, Mary says: “Listen, listen, children of iniquity, children of wickedness, listen, I beseech you, blind Jews.”21 She goes on to liken their scourging of Christ to their how they were punished while held captive in Egypt. This, of course, is just one of the truths that they cannot see. Later, she goes on to call them

19Ser. MS, 221v–222v.
20See n.117 below.
21AGA 25, 2, 64r: “Audite, audite filii iniquitatis, filii scelerati, audite obsecro ceci iudei…”
“perfidious and “hard of heart” as well. A sermon of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Benefits of Redemption*, follows the Marian Lament in this volume. It contains similar subject matter as relates to the Passion, stating that even after the excessive torture of Christ’s body—to the point that they figuratively chewed it and spit it out again—the “impiety” of the “perfidious Jews” was not “satiated” by such cruelty. Finally, a tiny codex in the archives contains a treatise on mental prayer that Serventi believes to be in Caterina’s own handwriting. It begins with a list of gifts for which a Christian owes God thanks. In addition to praising Him for the good health of one’s body and mind, Caterina insists that He should also be thanked for making one a “Christian” and not a “Jew” (or for that matter “a Saracen, or a Turk.”) This is a sentiment echoed almost exactly in Sermon II, and it provides archival proof that this Second Order house read and produced works disparaging to Jews with some frequency.

We must consider, as well, the differences between Caterina’s period and Casanova’s. By the time that the latter was composing the *Vita* manuscript in the early 1600s, Jews had already been banished from Bologna. (The population there, having enjoyed a resurgence in the early 1500s, was pushed into a central ghetto in 1556, banished in 1559, and banished again in the 1590’s by order of the Holy See.) He had no active community to oppose with his rhetoric. Though she was cloistered, Caterina’s civic experience during the mid-1400s was one in which Jews were very much present, as I will explore below.

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22Ibid., 66v: “perfida;” 67v “duriora… corde”
23Ibid., 77v: “In omnibus hi(i)s non est saciata perfidiorom iudiorum impietas.”
24AGA 35, 4, 113v. She is also thankful for not having been made a serpent, a devil, a rock or a piece of wood. In *Laudi*, 166 Serventi transcribes the passage thus: “…facto christiano e non çudeo né turcho né saracino né uno diavolo né serpente né preda [pietra] né legno… “
Patterns and Precedents: Evaluating the Observant Influence

However disturbing the totality of Caterina’s anti-Judaism may be to modern readers, it is clear that, to her, it was not without precedent or purpose. Anti-Jewish beliefs (based on the perception that Jews denied Christ’s divinity and played a willful role in his Crucifixion) are well-documented in surviving Quattrocento works, specifically sermon texts produced by Observant Franciscans. The preaching of these friars against the Jews seems to have possessed a particular “persuasiveness, persistence and a sense of menace” motivated by deep social prejudice.25 The preachers viewed themselves, however, not as vectors of discrimination but as crusaders for economic justice, concerned with the unfair practices of Jewish lenders, whose interest rates often topped twenty percent.26 Regardless, their words are well known. Caterina’s are not. What remains, therefore, is to explore the commonalities between her rhetoric and that of the most prominent Observant leaders, those whose work is most closely associated with the Second Order during her life-time. This part of my study will therefore focus on the three of the Four Pillars of Reform, those that interacted most with the Second Order: Bernardino of Siena, John of Capistrano and Alberto of Sarteano.

Tracing the specific outlines of Observant anti-Judaism is not a simple task and would, itself, be a topic worthy of a monograph. As Franco Mormando has pointed out in The Preacher’s Demons, his book on Bernardino, “no one has yet done the in-depth

26Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, La Denaro e la Salvezza: l’invenzione del Monte di Pietà (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001), 20. Here, Muzzarelli cites a statute from thirteenth-century Bologna declaring that any charge of interest over twenty percent was to be considered usury, and that Jewish lenders accused of such practices during a later period could have been charging this amount or more. It is important to understand however, that this was often one of the only professions open to Jewish families in an increasingly restricted urban economy. See Lester K. Little, Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).
research into the thought and activity of this host of friars (Franciscan Observants) on the Jewish question,” noting, as well, that they were all “autonomous agents with…distinct messages” regarding Jews.27 Thus, what follows below will not be an exhaustive discussion of anti-Judaism in the works of these men, but a consideration of how their conceptualizations of Jews may have had a real impact on Caterina’s communal teaching mission.

To begin with Bernardino, it is possible that much of Caterina’s anti-Jewish vocabulary was learned from him, specifically that detailing Christ’s Passion.28 Due to the extent of the Sienese preacher’s corpus, Mormando’s synthetic analysis of his work is the most accessible way to compare his sermons to hers. Common terms that Caterina uses to describe Jewish people also appear in Bernardino, words like “perfidiosi” and “cani.”29 He made it clear in various sermons that the Jews are avaricious and evil, even associating them with Satan by calling them “membra del demonio.”30 He and Caterina are both sure that Jews, along with all the unrepentant, are going to hell.31 There is at least one passage, as well, in which Bernardino likens immoral Sienese Christians to Jews as a shaming tactic, one that Caterina may have employed too, when attempting to regulate behavior in her Observant community.32

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28 Ibid., 168.
29 Ibid., 193. See also St. Bernardino of Siena, *Opera Omnia*, vol II (Florence: College of St. Bonaventure, 1950), 211.
30 Ibid., 197. For Caterina’s criticism of the Jews’ avarice, see *Ser. XVII*, xvii, 143.
31 Ibid., 199.
32 Ibid., 181, and Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, “Jews and Judaism in the Rhetoric of Popular Preachers: The Florentine Sermons of Giovanni Dominici (1356–1419) and Bernardino da Siena (1380–1444),” *Jewish History* 14, 2 (2000): 18, citing Bernardino’s *Prediche Volgari*, vol I, 657 in which he asks the unruly Sienese if there are any Jews in the audience and then takes back his comment, saying if there had really been Jews present he would have known them from their badges.
In spite of these similar dynamics, there are just as many themes about Jews in Caterina and Bernadino’s work that do not match up. Since he was preaching in public, he felt a great need to tell his audience to stay away from financial transactions with contemporary Jews and, in fact, to avoid physical contact with them entirely. Speaking from the cloister, Caterina did not share that same need; and no such specific warnings appear in her sermons. Perhaps because of his large-scale public presence, Bernardino also felt the need to urge Christians to show some measure of neighborly love towards the Jews in their midst. Such an exhortation appears nowhere in Caterina’s work. In some ways, her rhetoric is actually harsher than that of the friar. For example, Bernardino claims that the Jews were ungrateful starting with their New Testament rejection of Christ, while Caterina dates their intransigence to a time early in the Old Testament. Caterina also condemned Judas Iscariot and his greed, linking it to his Jewish identity. Mormando claims that Bernardino, though he mentions him, “does not dwell” on scenes of Judas’ betrayal. The evidence seems to suggest, then, that it is just as probable that Caterina received her supply of ideas about Jews from Bernardino’s work as from a long tradition of medieval preachers and writers—Franciscan and otherwise—that preceded him.

One concrete example of this tendency is a source that they both read and quoted liberally, the Arbor vitae crucifixi Jesu, a thirteenth-century devotional treatise by Spiritual Franciscan Ubertino of Casale. Caterina most likely read this work in the

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33Ibid., 170.
34Ibid., 210–212.
35Ibid., 99. For Caterina’s lamentation on Jewish ingratitude throughout biblical history, see Ser. XXXIV, xxxvii, 307.
36Ibid., 195. See below for discussion of Caterina’s tendency to dwell on Judas’ betrayal, and use of such an incident to discuss Jewish wrongdoing.
original, and did not learn of it through Bernardino, as she makes several direct
borrowings from its vocabulary (translating, as she did so, of course, into the vernacular.)
Two of the most common words that Caterina uses to describe Jews: “most cruel” and
“impious,” appear at the heart of the passion-narrative portion of the *Arbor vitae*.\(^{37}\) In this
same section, Ubertino also uses the phrase “spini iuncti marini fuerunt fortes et acuti” to
describe Christ’s crown of thorns. Caterina’s Sermon XVII contains a strikingly similar
phrase, saying that the crown was made of “spini gionchi marini.”\(^{38}\) Ubertino in turn
quotes another source for his information: Bernard of Clairvaux, one of Caterina’s
favorite authors, revealing that she was drawing from a complex bank of available
sources. Thus, we can see that she was choosing from a variety of possible portrayals of
Jews from virtually the same pool of traditional texts as contemporary male Observant
preachers, and that her work was not simply derivative of their points of view.

John of Capistrano and Caterina also shared a common pedagogical vocabulary
on Judaism: they agreed that Jews were full of excessive “hate,” and that they had a “hard
heart against our Messiah.”\(^{39}\) Paolo Evangelisti, who has evaluated John’s text *Tractatus
de adventu messae* as well as those works in which he discusses Christ’s Passion, points
to his use of the trope of the greedy Jew to reinforce the parallel Franciscan virtues of
humility and poverty.\(^{40}\) Thus, both he and Caterina shared this tendency to use Jews as
the negative inverse of Observant virtue. His well-known technique of using preaching
to convert Jews, however, may have impacted Caterina’s didactic principles most of all.

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\(^{37}\)Ubertino da Casale, *Arbor vitae crucifixi Jesu* (Turin: Bottega d’Erasmo, 1961), Book IV, Chapter xi,

\(^{38}\)Ibid., 313; *Ser. XXVII*, xxii, 149.

\(^{39}\)Paolo Evangelisti, “Metafore cristologiche per l’etica politica: fonti e percorsi di ricerca nei testi di
Giovanni da Capistrano,” in Giovanni da Capistrano e la riforma della Chiesa, ed. Alvaro Cacciotti and
Maria Melli (Milan: Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, 2008), 159.

\(^{40}\)Ibid., 163–164.
John was famous for his ability, on his long preaching tours, to convert the Jews in his audience. Certain phrases in his sermons support the claim that practicing Jews were forced to come and listen to his words.\textsuperscript{41} Lucianus Luszczki, redactor of these manuscript works, compiled a collection of such phrases that either indicated a Jewish presence, such as: “those Jews should listen” or ones that suggest that John was addressing Jews directly, like: “Therefore look…the mysteries of the true Messiah were splendidly foretold by your prophets.”\textsuperscript{42} If you believe John’s own publicity, these tactics worked. He once claimed to have bested a prominent Jew at a debate in Rome, and elsewhere boasted of having converted over three hundred Jews to Christianity.\textsuperscript{43} In one terse yet vivid anecdote, John stated that:

There was a certain Jew in our parts who had a wife and six sons. The wife refused to convert to the faith, and I said to the Jew, since you have been baptized, baptize your sons, and he did so. His wife, seeing her sons taken away from her, asked for baptism as well. Since then, both parents lived [as Christians] and were accepted into the Third Order of Saint Francis.\textsuperscript{44}

Coercion is built into this story, as John explains how he, as a preacher, manipulated the emotional dynamics of a Jewish family in order to enlarge the Christian community.

This sort of conversion via emotional coercion seems, at first, to be unconnected to

Caterina’s preaching mission, since her audience was composed entirely of women who

\textsuperscript{41}Otto Geeser, “Preaching and Publicness: St. John of Capistrano and the Making of His Charisma North of the Alps,” in Religious Authority: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Preaching, 1200–1500, ed. Katherine L. Jansen and Miri Rubin (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 156–158. There is also the possibility that Jews sometimes came to listen because of civic curiosity and not legal compulsion. Note that Mormando claims that Bernardino was not particularly interested in conversion, see The Preacher’s Demons, 216.

\textsuperscript{42}Lucianus Luszczki, De Sermonibus S. Johannis a Capistrano: Studium Historico-Criticum (Rome: Pontifical Antonianum, 1961), 213. The notes indicate that the first phrase “audiant illi Judaei” is extracted from Sermon 294 (fol. 213 r.). The second “videte igitur vestros prophetas splendide prophetasse mysteria veri Messiae” is from Sermon 440 (fol. 33 v).

\textsuperscript{43}Geeser, “Preaching and Publicness,” 156; Luszczki, De Sermonibus, 214 (citing Sermon 493, fol. 220v.)

\textsuperscript{44}Luszczki, De Sermonibus, 305: “Judaes quidam in partibus nostris… habebat…uxorem cum sex filiis, quae noluit converti ad fidem, et dixi ego judeo: ex quo baptizatus es, baptizata et filios tuos, et fecit. Videns autem uxor se privatim filiis rogavit etiam pro baptismo et adhuc vivit uterque parens et ambo receperunt tertium ordinem Sancti Francisci.”
were already Christians and professed Second Order Franciscans. In addition, she makes only one mention of converted Jews in the sermons, and that one instance seems an afterthought, tacked onto the end of a long anti-Jewish diatribe.\(^45\) I believe, however, that she took John’s prize preaching tactic: using both logic and emotion to convert the Jewish community, and used it to regulate behavior in her own Observant family. As a cloistered Clarissan, real Jews existed outside of her everyday routine, but unrepentant sisters were a daily problem. Thus, she implicitly likened disobedient sisters to obstinate Jews in need of spiritual transformation, shaming them—as Bernardino did the Sienese—by questioning their very identity as Christians. In bringing up the concept of Jews turning toward a Christian God, these Observant Franciscans, bent as they were on renewing their own Order, echoed what was at its very foundation: conversion. The stories of Francis and Clare, after all, were tales about converting love of a corrupt material world into desire for the transcendent reality of a spiritual realm. The parallels to these conversion experiences are brought forth plainly in John’s own story of the Jewish couple who became Christians, then Franciscans.

One passage within the extant sermons of Alberto of Sarteano also creates a scene of Jewish repentance and conversion, based upon the events of Pentecost as related in Acts 2.\(^46\) After speaking of the inspired enthusiasm of the apostles preaching on that day, Alberto says:

In another place, these same Acts of the Apostles testify that Peter admonished the Jews, (those pious ones who were listening), that they must submit to

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\(^{45}\) See final line of translation of Ser. III, xxvii, 50–51 below.

\(^{46}\) Alberto’s works are less accessible than either Bernardino’s or John’s. The text that I consulted is a microfilm of a seventeenth-century edition. See Blessed Albert of Sarteano, Opera Omnia, ed. Patrick Duffy and Francis Harold (Rome: Johannes Baptistus Bussottom, 1688). The three works that Pierre Santoni would call “sermons” are labelled here “opuscula” or “orationes.” See also Pierre Santoni, “Albert de Sarteano: Observant et humaniste, envoyé pontifical à Jérusalem et au Caire,” Mélanges de l’Ecole française de Rome 86, 1 (1974): 165–211.
penitence so that the crime perpetrated by them—that of killing Christ—might be abolished. “And now brothers” he said “I know that you did this because of ignorance, and because of your leaders. Therefore, repent and convert, so that your sin may be destroyed.”  

This portrait of Peter’s preaching forms an important parallel with John of Capistrano’s appeals to contemporary Jews. It shows that John’s calls for change were rooted in the New Testament; and it demonstrates the feeling of many Observants that the need to convert wayward Jews was no less urgent in the fifteenth century than it had been in the first. The deep link that these Franciscans made between the Jews of antiquity and the Jews of their own day helps to explain, at least partially, why Caterina does not speak more explicitly about the Jews of present day Ferrara and Bologna, while focusing on their historical counterparts. To her, the continuity between these two groups was perhaps so great as to render them indistinguishable. Their perceived lack of agency allowed her to manipulate the image of the Jew and adapt it for her own educational purposes. For Caterina, the Jews were a symbolic shorthand. They represented the pollution and unreason that the Christian community must expel at all costs. But whatever symbolic uses they were put to in fifteenth-century Italy, the Jewish community there was also very real.  

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48 See Debby, *Jews and Judaism*, 176 where she states that though the preachers had two “distinct strategies”—Giovanni using traditional scriptural arguments and Bernardino focusing on the practices of contemporary Jews—they had the “shared mission” of keeping Jews from corrupting Florentine civic life.
Nascere et allevata: Jewish Presence in the Quattrocento Emilia—Romagna

“I could have been born and brought up among the obstinate and perfidious Jews, scandalous heretics, unfaithful and cruel Turks or among other nations of your enemies. But you, most gracious God, created me of Christians and made me Christian.”

Here, Caterina adds a personal dimension to her anti-Judaism, thanking God to have not been born amongst Jews—a statement not altogether true. It was inevitable that in the Emilia-Romagna of her time there were a few Turks and perhaps many that could have been called heretics. But neither of those groups is so well documented in the archives as the Jews. Upon her birth in Bologna in 1413, there was already a small group of Jewish families doing business there. She, of course, was raised in Ferrara, where there are over five hundred extant documents attesting to a Jewish presence during her lifetime alone (1413–1463). A group of Jews held a monopoly on money-lending in the early Renaissance period, and although Christians were technically allowed into their ranks, it appears as if none joined them. Ferrara is, in fact, one of the few Italian cities in which there is testimony of a Jewish community from at least the thirteenth century until the present day. A similar pattern of continuous Jewish presence was not the rule in many other large Quattrocento urban centers, like Milan, Florence or Genoa. There, Jews were either intermittently or totally absent, and were forced to do business just outside of city-limits.

It is difficult to say if and how Caterina’s personal encounters with Ferrara’s Jewish community shaped her convictions, but some conjectures can be made. As has

49Ibid.
been discussed, while a young woman, from 1424–1425, she was a lady in waiting to Marguerite d’ Este, daughter of Niccolò III d’Este, Duke of Ferrara. In addition to its well-known reputation as a center of Renaissance learning, the Este court was noted for its “remarkably open” attitude towards minority populations, a trait curiously absent from Caterina’s work.\textsuperscript{52} Historians are uncertain as to how her family ended up at court, but at least one has hypothesized that her father served the governing family as a notary. Recall that not much is known of Giovanni Vigri except that his family members were property owners of some standing in Ferrara, and that he most likely had scholarly training, perhaps in law. This training would be unsurprising given the University of Bologna’s status as the original law school in Europe. It would also, incidentally, help to explain his daughter’s intense preoccupation—as will be discussed below—with the theory of law.\textsuperscript{53} In terms of law in practice, the documents concerning Jews produced by the Este chancery and the city government during Caterina’s early life, just before she began writing her sermons, reveal substantial civic tension.\textsuperscript{54} Just as his predecessors Alberto and Niccolò II had done since 1370, Niccolò III continually renewed money-lending licenses for Jewish bankers (both within the city of Ferrara and elsewhere in his realm) valid for periods of five or ten years. For example, in 1414 he granted rights to a large association of Jews to operate three banks within the city for a decade. Their ability to establish such operations was exclusive and they could lend to whomever requested their

\textsuperscript{52} Hughes, “Distinguishing Signs,” 16.

\textsuperscript{53} Recall Foletti’s discussion of “La Famiglia Vegri e il Padre di Caterina” in a section spanning Sette armi, 16–40.

\textsuperscript{54} I have chosen to focus on the period from her birth in 1413 to the approximate date that she adopted strict seclusion under the Prima Regula, 1431.
services, be he Jew or Christian. For such a privilege they were to gild the city coffers with 2,300 lire yearly.\footnote{Franceschini, \textit{Presenza ebraica}, Summary of Doc. 215, 96.}

Since the contract was mutually beneficial, there is little evidence that it incited controversy, that is, until 1419, when the head of the Twelve Wise Men (Ferrara’s city council) took issue with the leader of this same body of Jewish bankers for improper handling of pawned items.\footnote{Ibid. Doc. 337, 118.} This tug-of-war between the opinions of the duke and those of the council on what constituted public good continued in the years that followed. In June 1420, the Wise Men elected two of their own to police lending houses owned by Jews in order to crack down on common practices that they viewed as usurious.\footnote{Ibid. Doc. 341, 119.} In April 1422, since the Jewish community had complained of their actions to the duke, they had to reissue a similar decree against “extortion” giving a total of four men the command of physically inspecting the property being held by Jewish pawnbrokers.\footnote{Ibid. Doc. 345, 121–122.} The inspectors were charged with verifying that the lots were not being sold off prematurely nor being under-valued by the lender. (This purported practice would have meant a more prolonged period of both principal and interest repayment on the part of many a cash-strapped Christian borrower.) The Wise Men made other attempts to regulate the lending trade later in 1422 and in 1427.\footnote{Ibid. Doc. 350, 125–126; Doc. 366, 134. The duke was in agreement with the first of these plans.} Then, in 1430, in an attempt to expand their powers

\footnote{Here, the Wise Men were attempting to appropriate some of the funds earned from the sale of improperly pawned goods for themselves, probably to help pay for the cost of extensive inspections. The Council of Jewish lenders were, unsurprisingly, angry and let the Wise Men know it. The next year, a regular tax on Jewish lenders was established specifically to pay pawnshop inspectors.}
further, they issued a document prohibiting Jews from being present in their own shops when the agents of the Council came calling to estimate the value of their property.\textsuperscript{60}

In spite of the apparent objections of many citizens, Niccolò continued to protect the Jewish community, issuing further renewals of banking licenses and offering documents of safe-conduct or pardon to Jews accused of crimes like rape, adultery, and sodomy.\textsuperscript{61} Such accusations are, themselves, proof of communal hostility, as they were sometimes falsely leveled against prominent Jews for the purpose of disrupting their business. He also exempted certain Jews from the ban on property ownership and the obligation to wear the “sign of the O” on the outside of their clothing.\textsuperscript{62} Even Niccolò’s successor Borso d’Este sought and received papal permission to maintain moneylending operations in his territories, meaning that, considered as a whole, Caterina’s time in Ferrara was one of tolerance toward the Jewish community on the part of the ruling family.\textsuperscript{63}

If Caterina learned Latin and painting during her brief time at the Este court, why, then, did she not adopt a tolerant attitude toward Jews and Judaism that seem to have prevailed there? One answer could be that she absorbed, instead, the antagonistic attitude that the Wise Men seemed to have had toward Jewish moneylenders. Her father, though a landholder, was not noble, and thus came from the same civic class that these

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{60}Ibid. Doc. 381, 141.
\textsuperscript{61}Ibid. Doc. 338, 118 contains a protection from a rape accusation dated 1420. Doc. 359 bis, 131 is a safeconduct document for a Jew accused of having sex with a Christian woman in 1424. Doc. 375, 138, is another safeconduct dated 1429, this time for a Jew accused of sodomy by his own father. See Doc. 391, 143, and 135 (dated 1432), which exonerates a Jew who had been falsely accused of adulterous conduct by Modenese citizens upset by his high rates of interest.
\textsuperscript{62}Ibid. Doc. 378, 140 for exemption on immovable goods prohibition. Original dispensation granted in 1430 and was repeated by Niccolò’s successors, Docs. 368, 369 and 135 (dated 1427) for signum exemptions. Wearing of the signum was most likely not strictly enforced during this period in Ferrara in any case.
\textsuperscript{63}Ibid. Doc. 539, 199.
councilmen did. Thus, he likely shared their opinions, not the duke’s. Another answer is that to turn away from this environment of tolerance was to turn away from the practical, everyday world of urban business transactions administrated by those of high social status and towards a cloistered life focused on poverty and contemplation of a heavenly world.

Although she retained life-long links with the Este family, Caterina, as a cloistered Clarissan, explicitly rejected the comfortable life represented by her brief career as a lady-in-waiting.\textsuperscript{64} Within Sermon II, the same in which she proclaims happiness to have not been born a Jew, she thanks God for giving her victory over both the Devil and the World. Her victory over the world took the form of rejecting offers of marriage from the “many powerful Ferrarese” men who wished to marry her, adopt her, or make her “the spiritual companion of their daughters” in their own houses; all because she would have inherited her father’s money.\textsuperscript{65} As we have seen, in Quattrocento Ferrara, such a comfortable lifestyle was often made possible because of the presence of Jewish lenders. Therefore, Caterina’s rejection of Judaism in her sermons was a way of turning away from the materialistic world in which she grew up. Rhetorically equating her consorelle with Jews was a way to deride them for a failure to remove themselves from this same sphere of worldly corruption.

\textsuperscript{64}For her communication with Niccolò III’s daughter Margarita Malatesta, see Foletti, \textit{Sette armi}, sec. 39–40; 44. For the well known attempt by Borso d’Este to keep Caterina from going to Bologna, see Gabriella Zarri, “Dalla profezia alla disciplina,” in \textit{Donne e fede: santità e vita religiosa in Italia} (Rome: Laterza, 1994), 183.

\textsuperscript{65}\textit{Ser.} II, xxix, 32: “L’undicesimo d’havermi donata una tanta segnalata vittoria contra due particolari, fortissime, aspre and importune battaglie, una del mondo, l’altra del Demonio: del mondo, ch’essendo io remasta unica herede del padre mio, ero da molti ferraresi potenti assediata a dovermi maritare, overo fossi almeno compagna di spiritualità con le loro figliuole in casa loro…”
In the Ferrara of Caterina’s day, it was even common practice for members of religious communities to borrow money from Jews. There is evidence consisting of episcopal licenses from 1424–1426 that proves that many monks, nuns, and friars were putting up ecclesiastical property as collateral for loans, often to keep their foundations going. Missals, bibles, psalters, liturgical vestments, and sacred implements like chalices or tabernacles were all traded for currency. Franciscans, the group we expect to have the most compunction about such transactions, participated as well. As an Observant reformer, Caterina’s mission was to create communities that were truly separate from the secular sphere and thus from such mundane interactions between religious and Jews. Her stance against Judaism, therefore, though it may seem distant in its biblical context, can actually be read as a contemporary declaration that her new foundations were going to be comprised of a true Franciscan elite. Implicitly comparing her sisters to Jews was surely a way to deride them for a failure to give up the worldly behaviors that marked them as privileged. It also became a method for reminding them that they, as Observants, formed a spiritually privileged group with much to lose should they stray from the straight and narrow path ordained by St. Clare.

Teaching the *Prima Regula*: The Use and Abuse of Jews in Caterina’s Pedagogy

Caterina’s implicit rhetorical identification of her consorelle with the Jews was only possible insofar as both groups are recognized in the sermons as chosen people set apart by God. Just as the Jews were initially set apart as a “popolo eletto,” Caterina uses

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66Franceschini, *Presenza ebraica*, Docs. 361, 363, 131 and 133 are all collections of episcopal licenses for the pawning of religious goods.

67Ibid., see Doc. 361. Entry c. has two Franciscan friars putting a bible in hock in the presence of the vicar of their convent. Entry n. also deals with a member of the “Frati Minori.”
numerous examples to reveal the divinely chosen nature of both her own religious calling and sanctified status of her communities. In fact, her Sermon to the Novices likens the call to religious life to the call that Abraham and the Jews received from God: “Go forth out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and out of thy father’s house, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.”68 She, herself, proclaims happiness that she was personally led to religious life because God took her by the hand and put her on the path towards Ferrara and Corpus Domini, thus choosing her to be his servant.69 She is equally grateful when this same house finally took on Clare’s strict rule instead of an Augustinian one, as she believed it to be the only choice that would please God. When the new monastery was to be established at Bologna, Caterina had a divine vision that she was to be its leader, her other options of either staying in Ferrara or going to Cremona (where she could also have been abbess) were not part of the path chosen for her.70 She once dedicated her writing to the future sisters of her monastery, having faith that the foundation’s sanctified status would ensure the longevity of her community, as it had been selected by God for success among the Bolognese.

These chosen Franciscan women were considered to be prime examples of sanctity in an urban environment precisely because of their cloistered separation from it.71 At Corpus Domini in Ferrara and the new Corpus Domini in Bologna, they were a spiritual élite, physically isolated because they were called to live in “perpetual enclosure,

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68 Ser. XXX, iv, 232: “E anche fa sapere hora a ciascuna di voi (sicome a noi altre) quello stesso ch’esso Dio disse a Abraam: Egedere de terra tua et de cognatione tua e de domo Patris tui et veni in terram quam monstravo tibi.” (Genesis XXII, 1)

69 Ser. II, v, 1: “…quasi pigliatami per la mano…”

70 SA, 52–53.

71 Many thanks to Dr. Sarah Spalding, who provided this insight upon reading an earlier draft of this chapter.
consisting of a closed and shadowy grate between (them and) the world.”72 Their virginity also set them apart from other people, for within the sermons, as in the ancient tradition of St. Jerome, virginity is the choice most preferred by God, humanity’s “very first class and order.”73 But why should their special chosen status, all the many gifts that they had been given, render them so vulnerable as to be like the Jews, whose chosen status became so disastrous? Caterina gives the answer, unsurprisingly, as a way of explaining a quote from scripture: “to whom much has been given, much shall be required.”74 Precisely because they have been blessed enough to have been called to a religious life, and have accepted its requirements, God held them to a higher standard. Therefore, “the punishment” says Caterina “for our sins is…always greater than that for the sins of lay people.”75 To keep them from this great punishment these women needed vivid examples of what it would look like to the world should they become ungrateful for their calling and dismissive of God’s will. For Caterina, there was no greater and more palpable example of this problem than the Jewish people, still present, yet still intransigent.

Just as Caterina’s Jews disregarded their divinely ordained Covenant, her sisters often neglected their profession to observe the Rule of St. Clare, with its particular focus on strict obedience to authority, continuous repentance for sins, and absolute poverty of both spirit and goods. In spite of the tailored provisions made in the Ordinazione, the strictures of Clare’s Rule were bound to provoke some rebellious instincts in such a strictly enclosed community. Caterina was clear, however, that “disobedience and other

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72 Ser. XXXI, viii, 243: “…perpetuo carcare, fabricato a chiuse et oscure grate in fazza al secolo.”
73 Ser. XXVII, v, 206: “…primeva classe et ordine.”
74 Luke XII, 48: “…cui multum datur, multum exigitur ab eo.”
75 Ser. XXII, i, 188: “…il castigo de peccati nostri è anche sempre maggiore di quello de peccati dei laici.”
misdeeds” towards Christ would merit His “eternal indignation” and would result in “perpetual damnation.”

As Mistress of Novices at Ferrara for over a decade, Caterina must have been indignant herself at the consistent failure to follow orders amongst new postulants, for, in describing their resistant disobedience, she often uses the word “obstinate”—the same adjective she uses to describe the Jews.

In Sermon XXVII, there is anecdote dealing with obstinacy. Here, Caterina asks the abbess to admonish a nun who refuses to attend to prayer. Her exhortation is as follows:

For your salvation and mine, and for the glory and honor of God, I urge you most humbly, mother abbess, that you must remain alert and vigilant—for the benefit of souls of your spiritual daughters—so that when you see a nun who does not devote herself to prayer (even if it is me) do not have hope for her, for, not being bound by the three aforementioned cords [continuing scriptural reference to Ecclesiastes 4:12] she is in a state of great danger as regards her soul. If, having been admonished and exhorted charitably by your Reverence, she remains obstinate in her opinion; it is then good that her case—as far as she is concerned—is taken care of quickly. As for the other sisters they should pray to God for her with tears, for she will need them.

Though Caterina’s language is vague, it is clear that an intransient nun would be punished for her failure to adhere to the Rule with humility. In fact, she may have been vague deliberately, as the threat of an unknown but severe punishment could seem more ominous to her audience. Perhaps the obstinate nun in question will have need of the tearful prayers of her consorelle because she was expelled from the monastery and thus

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76Ser. I, v, 7: “…con le disubbidenze et altri misfatti, se non vogliamo perdercelo con nostra perpetua dannatione et sua indigatione.”
77Ser. XXVII, vii, 207: “Di queste cose tutte dette da me, per vostra et mia salute, et per gloria et honore di Dio, prego ben humilmente [dicea] voi, madre Badessa, a dover stare avertita et vigilant, per giovare a l’anime delle vostre spirituali figliuole, ché quando vedrete uma monacha qui non si dà alla oratione, se ben fosse io una di quelle, non gli habbiate speranza, [perciocché non essendo cita della tre fune sopradette,] il stato suo (quanto a l’anima) è molto periculosso. Ma se charitevolmente ammonita et esortata da vostra Reverentia starà di sua opinione ostina, è ben poi del tutto espedito il caso suo quanto a lei, ma quanto a l’altre sorelle pregurano per lei, ché n’havrà bisogno.”
her soul remained in great danger of damnation. In Sermon XXXI, Caterina again lists such “obstinacies” as something that ought to be forbidden in a monastery. It is mentioned in a list of other transgressions like the formation of “hates” and “divisions” among the sisters, something there would never be if an ideal atmosphere of “holy obedience” could be maintained.78 In yet another sermon, when speaking of the need for prayer, she makes it clear that obstinacy in sin is “inexcusable” considering God’s strong desire to save us and the Church that he has put on earth for that purpose.79 What would have happened if a new and impressionable nun heard and read the same word used to describe her transgressions and that of the Jews repeated in this way? It is likely that she would have come to feel that her own disobedience would render her marginalized in this world and lost in the next, thus accomplishing Caterina’s pedagogical purpose: an uncompromised teaching of the Rule of St. Clare.

The enactment of repentance through the sacrament of Confession was another part of Clare’s rule and Caterina’s perpetuation of it. (Recall the importance of confessional conversations as examined in Chapter Two.) Jewish behavior helped to reinforce the idea of repentance through negative example as they were the first people of the Christian era whose confession was necessary because of their horrible crime. In fact, the passage of Alberto of Sarteano referenced above, in which the Jews are called to “repent and confess” of the error of killing Christ, comes from a sermon on the virtues of sacramental Confession.80 Extreme examples of the healing power of confessing past

78 *Ser.* XXXI, ix, 243: “…che non vi siano mai in questo nostro convento gare, odii, divisioni, partialità, ostinationi, sette né fattioni.”
79 *Ser.* XX, xviii, 24: “Et ecco (Signor mio) che a tanti salutari remedii trovati da te per me et per tutti noi, come sopranodo desiosissimo di salvarti, non manca più cos’alcuna alla tua santa Chiesa cattolica et apostolica per rendere me et tutto il mondo humano del tutto inescusabile, se nella perdita dell’anime nostre ostinati staremo nel peccato.”
80 The *Oratio* is entitled *In Laudem Poenitentiae*. See Albert of Sarteano *Opera Omnia*, 136.
wrongs, as contained in John of Capistrano’s story of the reluctant Jewish couple who
became Third Order Franciscans, were necessary in order to enforce a stricter policy on
frequent confession of transgression to both abbess and priest. Clare’s original rule
called for confession about a dozen times a year, a requirement of course repeated in
Caterina’s *Ordinazione*.\(^81\) Her exhortations to receive the sacrament and thus obtain
forgiveness for any disobedient acts are numerous. In fact, she recommends an
examination of conscience at the end of each day so as to recall whether it was spent
‘fruitfully.’ Any transgressions discerned during this process of self-judgment should be
told to “the father confessor.”\(^82\) The confessor and the act of confession were thus
integral to the mindset and communal life of both Corpus Domini houses. A father
confessor was a “protector of souls” and a “lieutenant of God” whose counsel should be
sought eagerly in times of spiritual danger, for he would remove doubt and provide
consolation, ensuring that a sister would not return to the “vomit of sin.”\(^83\) “Bad thoughts,
bad speech and bad actions” alienated a sister from her peers, necessitating confession so
that she could “turn away from (sins) in the future” and achieve not only pardon from
them but also “gracious reintegration” into religious community.\(^84\) Failure to repent
placed a nun outside Christ’s saving grace, just like a Jew.

\(^{81}\) *RSC, III: “Duodecim vicibus ad minus de abbatissae licentia confiteantur in anno,” Ordo., v, 178r.
\(^{82}\) *Ser. XXXII, iv, 252–253: “Poi ogni sera contreparesi et crivellare ben l’attioni nostre del giorno già
passate et come si sia fruttuosamente dispensato.”
\(^{83}\) *Ser. XXXV, vi, 337–8: “…di non tornar giamaì più al vomito del pecatto et in ogni occasione, dubio et
pericolo di potere cadere, ricorrere sempre prima al suo Patre confessore, delle anime protettore
luogotenente di Dio.”
\(^{84}\) *Ser. II, xviii, 23: “…ricorrer subito et quanto prima alla vera contritione et confessione per ottenere da
te la gratiosa reintegrazione con la perdonanza d’essi peccati.”; “Et se alcuna volta trascoressero in cose mal
pensate, mal dette e male operate, farli tal rarito con le confessioni, che non più per l’avvenire gli
tornino.”
The sermons suggest that absolute poverty was another element of Clare’s rule that was difficult to enforce, as it forbade personal ownership of any goods. In order to make financial transactions or material gain look appropriately horrific, Caterina again used Jewish behavior as a negative example of material selfishness, even while refraining from discussion about contemporary usury. Instead she used repeated descriptions of the gospel episode in which the Jewish high priests pay off Judas. These descriptions would forever link, within the minds of her listeners, the handling of money to the betrayal of Christ. The most vivid example is as follows:

The Jewish dogs [i.e.: the Pharisees] gave the counsel to kill Christ for three reasons. Namely: because of envy, because of unfaithfulness, and because of avarice, which, in this world is called “Reason of State”—completely diabolical. They punished him with these words: “If we let him alone so, all will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away our place and nation.” (John 11: 48). They accomplished their goal using three things: Judas, the betrayer, spy, and seller, the 30 denarii for a price, and by going during the night with the Jews to spy and to take Christ’s own person by means of a false kiss.

Referring to Judas as a greedy “traditor” (in contrast to their own pursuit of poverty) is a Franciscan trope that goes back to St. Francis himself. Elsewhere, however, Caterina goes out of her way to specify to her audience that Judas Iscariot was “a Jew,” indicating that his identity as such may have contributed to his treacherous sin. Indeed, as bad as Judas appears here, the Jewish leaders that chose him as their “spy and betrayer” seem

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85 Two instances include: *Ser.* XVII, xvii, 144: “Et questo lo sapea ivi solo Giuda indiavolato, che si partì subito da tutti loro (the Last Supper) per tal effetto, et gli capi dell’hebraismo che l’h’aveano pagato.” XIX, xv, 175: “Alle quarto et un carroto d’hora fu dalli cani Giudei pigliato mediante Giuda Scarioth spia et traditore.”
86 *Ser.* XVII, xvii, 143: “Il concilio che fecero i cani Giudei d’uccidere Christo fu per tre cause, cioè per invidia, per infedeltà et per avaritia la quale presso di questo mondo è chiamata Rasone di Stato, tutta diabolica, et ne furono castigati per quelle parole, *Venient Romani...* (Gio. XI, 48). Et assortirono l’intento mediante tre cose, cioè Giuda il traditore, spia et venditore; gli trenta danarii per il prezzo, et l’andare la notte con i Giudei per spione a pigliare la propria persona di Christo per mezzo del bacio falso.”
88 *Ser.* XVII, xxxvi, 167: “…et nel terzo per malitia voluntaria et scientia del peccato, come fu Giuda Scariotto Giudeo...”
even worse. Caterina takes great pains to show that the Pharisees who victimized Christ were motivated exclusively by material, worldly concerns. Not only did they pay Judas off for his betrayal, they did so because they felt that their socio-political status was endangered by Jesus’ ministry. The phrase “…In this world (it) is called Reason of State” was a tacit warning to the sisters that they must give up any desires for worldly status and avoid conflict over non-spiritual matters, lest they betray Christ themselves.

This demonization of currency and goods was necessary, as management of means was always one of the most tendentious issues in fifteenth-century Franciscan houses. Caterina specifically mentions the sharing in common of all goods that entered Corpus Domini in Bologna in an insistent way. This insistence could indicate that the nuns were not originally inclined to share personal gifts that they received with their fellow sisters, though the rule required it.\textsuperscript{89} In another instance, Caterina declares that they, as Clarissans, have no alms to give, but should pray steadfastly to their own benefactors.\textsuperscript{90} Her tone seems to indicate that she needed to remind her nuns that their vow separated them from the ability to possess goods, which makes sense, as they were giving up lives of high-status. In respect for the spirit of poverty, Caterina goes on to say that a Christian should not simply put herself in the metaphorical place of the needy, but should rather physically transform herself, through charity, into a poor person, “stripped of clothes.”\textsuperscript{91} If her audience was composed of new Franciscans who did not understand

\textsuperscript{89}Ser. XXXI, ii, 238–9: “…offerto in comune a tutte l’alte monache.”

\textsuperscript{90}Ser.VIII, ii, 77: “alli miserabili et altre povere pie case, luochi et persone, intendendo anche di noi, poiché di sole limosine viviamo sotto la regola di S. Chiara, ma però et noi et loro dobbiamo continoamente (sicome ogni giorno faciamo) pregare per gli benefattori…” Caterina inserts another reminder that as poor religious women: “possiamo né vogliamo possedere niente di proprio” in the Sermon on the Animals. XXXIV, LXI, 320 contains a warning against desire for “commodità proprie,” which also occurs in Sermon 8: VIII, v, 78.

\textsuperscript{91}Ser. VIII, ii, 76–77: “…Quamdiu fecistis uno de his fratribus mei minimis, mihi fecistis” dice egli. Et non simplicemente sostituendo tali persone povere in luoco suo, ma (ch’è più) transformandosi lui
what Clare’s hard-won poverty meant—and thus found it difficult to give up handsome possessions—using the Jews as ugly examples of materialism could help to convince them.

*Tutti questi dolori: Anti-Judaism and Christocentric Devotion*

We have already seen how the Caterina’s sisters were made to seem like disobedient Jews were they to break the main tenets of Clare’s Rule. Now I will explore how the Abbess, while unfolding narratives of the Passion, also uses images of Jewish transgression to foster the Christocentric devotion that she wished to cultivate in her community. For the end purpose of the Rule, and the nuns’ overall goal, was “to unite… with [Christ’s] love, becoming a single, identical substance as Him, excluding all other exterior loves and affections.”\(^9^2\) I will first explain Caterina’s use of emotion and its roots in the Franciscan tradition of empathetic piety. Then, I will show that her performance of anti-Jewish rhetoric was a visceral way for the sisters to enter into the bloody crucifixion scene, thus experiencing both the physical and mental suffering of Christ and the Virgin directly. The deep metaphorical linkage between her wayward audience and errant Jews echoes consistently in Caterina’s crucifixion narratives. She tells us that, “it was because He [Christ] wanted to heal our hearts of every wound of sin that he voluntarily wounded and killed his own heart…”\(^9^3\) Thus, our sins and transgressions are at the root of Christ’s

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\(^9^2\) *Ser.* VII, ii, 73: “…ci uniamo con l’amor suo, acciò diveniamo una sola istessa cosa con lui, esclusi tutti gli altri esteriori amori et affetti.”

\(^9^3\) *Ser.* I, vii, 8: “Anzi per voler sano da ogni fistola de peccati il cuor nostro, ha volontariamente infistolito et ucciso il suo…” Caterina goes on to mention the wound in Christ’s side, inflicted by Longinus, as going through his heart. Although Longinus was a Roman, not Jewish, I would still submit that since Caterina blamed the Jews for the crucifixion, all of her crucifixion images possessed a strong and undifferentiated element of anti-Judaism.
suffering; and just as the biblical Jews cut Jesus with instruments of torture, contemporary sisters could hurt him with disobedient deeds. In fact, in Sermon III, a suffering Christ states that it is not only the “perfidious Jews and the infidels” who hurt him, but “those who abandon me that are Christians in name and not in deed, who live and move in their sins…”94 Thus, if a sister lived in sin, she was abandoning Jesus like the Jews did upon his execution. If she imagined herself, instead, standing by Christ’s side and engaged emotionally in the pains of his passion, she could prove herself worthy of his sacrifice, and forge a new identity as a devoted Christian.

The scant literature that discusses Caterina’s sermons does not treat her use of affective emotion as a didactic tool. Roest does write of her desire to impart knowledge to her nuns, but claims that, in so doing, she “consistently refuses to give in to an overly sweet and emotional spirituality” because “she had a more analytic style of theological thinking.”95 I would agree that Caterina’s Christocentrism is not “sweet” and affectionate in the same way as that of other female mystics of the later medieval period. I think that it is crucial to recognize, however, that her purpose in calling on the emotional faculties of her audience was to help them to learn complex theological lessons. In a similar vein, Gabriella Zarri (citing Caterina’s preaching behaviors as documented in Specchio d’illuminazione) states that there “is nothing melodramatic” in Caterina’s teaching, indicating that she was not an overly emotive speaker.96 Again, I would argue that her practical didactic purpose did not keep Caterina from using emotional tactics and performative dramatic techniques. To separate these emotional and theological modes of

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94Ser. III, ii, 42: “…et di quelle che mi abbandonariano, come sono gli christiani di nome et non de fatti, che vivono et mouiono nei peccati loro…”
95Roest, “Ignorantia est mater omnium malorum,” 79.
96Zarri, Charisma and Religious Authority, 181.
thought in medieval texts is a false dichotomy. Such a dichotomy did not exist because it was a Clarissan nun’s duty to both behave in accordance with the Rule as a theological construct, and to cultivate the proper use of her emotional faculties in order to become one with the source of that theology: Christ.

Consider how a sister was to foster empathetic emotion and devotion for Christ’s Passion in order to become one with him, all the while cultivating emotional restraint as regards destructive personal passions. In contrast, the sins of the Jews involved in the Crucifixion are transgressions that arise from unrestrained or extreme emotional states, thus teaching a positive with a negative example. Unstable Jewish feelings resulted from their purported lack of humanizing reason. Their unseemly emotions are the inverse of sorrow at the death of their Messiah. For, upon his capture in the Garden, Christ “was tightly bound, struck and dragged with fury, anger, and rage to be interrogated in front of the three supreme judges of Judaism (hebraismo). One after another accused him, that is: Annas, Caiaphas and Herod Antipas, unjust, greedy and thirsty for his death.” When Christ is brought to the pillar to be scourged, Caterina says that Jews again do so with an inexplicably great “rage,” subsequently nailing him to the cross with “extreme happiness.” Their failure to reign in their negative emotions leads to Christ’s death, an important lesson for a Poor Clare to internalize and apply to her own daily life of necessary self-control. As we will see, however, one of the places that a Clarissan could express her emotions freely was in prayerful contemplation of a condemned Christ.

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Emotional engagement with the physical pains of the Passion, prompted by a desire to “perform compassion” as one who followed her savior to the cross, was a tactic deeply rooted in Franciscan textual pedagogy.99 Caterina, as an Observant, was thus using a familiar medium to make a fresh impact on the sentiments of her audience. The most widely disseminated text reflecting this empathetic practice was the Pseudo-Bonaventuran Meditationes Vitae Christi, composed during the mid-fourteenth century. Sarah McNamer has recently pointed to the feminine origins of the text, tracing its more affective passages to a female author, or at least an initially female audience in Tuscany. Being Franciscan, female, Italian, and highly literate, the Quattrocento communities of Corpus Domini were in an ideal position to have absorbed the logic of “empathetic piety” promoted by texts like the Meditationes.100 One of the tools that she used to make this impact was the rhetoric of anti-Judaism.

In the context of such rhetoric, it was the Jews’ irrational emotional states that led to their excessive torture of Christ’s body. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John make but terse mention of the scourging at the pillar, which, they state, was carried out by Roman soldiers under Pilate.101 In Caterina’s hands, this episode is embellished with scenes that are not in scripture, and therefore becomes a story of extreme Jewish violence, designed not only to excite hatred against them, but to rouse pity for the flesh-bound humanity of Christ.102

100Ibid., 87–88, 114.
102Rab Hatfield, “The Tree of Life and the Holy Cross: Franciscan Spirituality in the Trecento and the Quattrocento,” in Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento, ed. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 133. Hatfield states that “The Franciscans, more than the Dominicans, elaborately developed several mystical images and legends of and about Christ’s cross which might bring them closer in spirit to the fact and lesson of
In order to see Caterina’s empathetic logic at work, it is worth quoting a key passage in Sermon XVII in its entirety. It describes the crucifixion; and it exhibits Caterina’s use of graphic and even gory detail. Section twenty-two begins by explaining that the Jews were ungrateful in the Old Testament, and were even worse in the New. The sermon continues by explaining three episodes displaying Jewish ingratitude. The first occurred when they attempted to stone Christ so that he had to escape by becoming invisible, the second when he was slapped when brought before the high priests, though he had miraculously reattached the ear of Caiaphas’ servant Malchus. The third reads as follows:

...having done all good things for this unfaithful and ungrateful people, they gave him over to the cruel and infamous passion and death of the cross. Among the many great and innumerable martyrdoms that the body of Christ endured, they numbered three all the same. First there was the beating at the pillar with three kinds of scourges: that of ox tendons or rope with hooks at the end to tear off the flesh, rods of thorns, and chains of iron in three rows and divided two by two—well paid for by the Jewish rogues (thus say some saints). Second, he was crowned with thorns from sea rushes. Third, he was lifted up on the cross after he had been nailed upon it and (this was made even worse) because three vertebrae of his spine had already been broken by the aforementioned beating at the column, as was revealed to St. Bernard [of Clairvaux].

It is in multi-layered passages like these that Caterina’s gift as a visual artist comes to the fore. In creating an unrelentingly detailed imagistic sequence of torture-instruments created by Jews, she paints an almost unbearable portrait of pain that resonates with the Christ’s redeeming death.” I would assert that Caterina’s elaboration on the Scourging at the Pillar is part of this tradition. McNamer, Affective Meditation, 93 mentions that these extra-evangelical legends about Christ were called arcana by Ubertino da Casale.

103Ser. XVII, xxii, 149: “…in haver fatti tutt gli beni a quel popolo, verso di lui infidele et ingrato, gli dettero la crudele et infame passione et morte di croce. Ma fra gli massimi et innumerosi martiri del corpo che Christo patì furono medesimamente de numero de tre, cioè prima le battiture alla colonna con tre sorte di flagelli, cioè nervi di bue, over fune, con unzini in capo, da strarli le carne, bacchette de spini et cathene di ferro da tre nude de manigoldi ben pagati dai Giudei, compartiti a due a due, così dicono alcuni santi, secondo l’esser coronato di spine de giovchi marini, terzo, l’esser alzato in croce dopo ce vi fu inchioddato, et tanto più perciocché havea già rotto tre nodi della schina dalle dette battiture alla colonna, come fu revelato a S. Bernardo.”
listener at a bodily level. As Jill Stevenson has pointed out, in the late medieval period, images (even created ones like these, I would argue) “were active entities” meaning that “the viewer’s body and the object of perception physically interacted with each other” so that “seeing was… kinesthetic, a form of movement.”\footnote{Jill Stevenson, *Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture: Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 45–46.} In addition to providing an opportunity to be physically “moved” to empathy, the creation of images that were both mystical and concrete served as mnemonic teaching devices for experiences that would otherwise be “ineffable.”\footnote{Chiara Frugoni, “Female Mystics, Visions, and Iconography,” in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 137; 149.} The scourges that she describes were indeed a concrete part of religious culture, as medieval people not only imagined but collected the “arma Christi”—the relics of a bloody passion.\footnote{Anthony Bale, “Christian Anti-Semitism and Intermedial Experience in Late Medieval England,” in *The Religions of the Book*, ed. Matthew Dimmock and Andrew Hadfield (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2008). See 30–31 for discussion of the “arma Christi,” objects that must have played a crucial role in Caterina’s imaginative spirituality, since her autobiography is entitled the “Seven Spiritual Arms.”} It was the precise physical detail used to describe these objects that triggered the deep “affective response” of Caterina’s audience, so that they “became” the image in contemplating it, thus experiencing Christ’s pain—the pain inflicted upon him by the Jews—in a direct and personal way.\footnote{Jill Bennett, “Stigmata and Sense Memory: St. Francis and the Affective Image,” *Art History* 24 (2001): 11; 8.} But even though the audience may have been moved to physical empathy with Christ when they heard such descriptions, Caterina told them that His bodily suffering was nothing compared with the emotional pain that plagued his mind and heart. Again, she makes sure that her listeners understand that this was the fault of Christ’s own people.
“You will never be able to understand, nor grasp with your intellect, how great all of these sorrows were.”

These are the words of Christ, whose authoritative first-person voice Caterina often adopted as an instructional tool. He is speaking here of the pains of the Passion, and the last transgression that triggers this statement is Judas’ betrayal of him to “leaders of the Jews.” It is ineffably hurtful that “one so beloved to her (his mother Mary) and to myself had “sold” him.” Earlier in the passage, Christ speaks of the suffering inflicted by “his chosen people, who desired him and then rejected him, castigating him most severely.”

It is clear that Caterina is using the purported cruelty of the Jewish people as a tool to elicit empathy not only for a suffering Christ, but also for the mother who watched him die. Another similar passage occurs in Sermon III when Christ, again speaking in the first person, tells of the horror of hanging on the cross, but then says: “But much more was my mental punishment, as when seeing the grief of my beloved mother and then thinking of the greatest ingratitude and of the perdition of souls who did not believe in me.”

Yet another passage of the same sort occurs in Sermon XVII, in which Caterina describes Christ on the cross as feeling pain in his “heart, senses and spirit” for his dolorous mother and then, for the “unbelieving” Jews, the people he was born into, who should have shown loyalty. He laments that they were in Jerusalem in great numbers for Passover, but were either ignoring his torture, or participating in it.

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108Ser. XXIX, iii, 227: “Tu non potresti mai comprendere, né capire col tuo intelletto, quanto grandissimi furono tutti questi dolori.”
109Ibid.
110Ser. III, ii, 42: “Ma molto maggiori mi furono le pene mentali, vendendomi aresso l’addolorata mia dilettata Madre, et pensando poi alla grandissima ingratitudine et perdittione di quelle anime che non me credessero, sicome sono gli perfidiosi Giudei et gl’infidi.”
111Ser. XVII, xxiii, 149–150: “Fra le pene poi che con estremissimi dolori pati nel cuore, nel senso et nell’anima, furono altre tre: le prime di vedersi sotto la sua croce la sua dilettissima et dolcissima Madre di lui infinamente addolorata et reciprocamente da lei amato, et questo era il coltello di Simeone, le seconde di
Mary’s presence at the Crucifixion allowed the nuns a human intermediary, whose reactions “provided the model for compassionate response,” since it could be difficult to conceive of Jesus’ pain, as he was God himself.\(^{112}\) Caterina also makes it clear to her *consorelle* that Mary was the very first nun—“la prima et vera monacha”—making her capacity as a stand-in for the sisters at the Passion even more powerful.\(^{113}\) One of Caterina’s many poems, entitled “Laud of the Virgin Mary Lamenting at the Cross,” features Mary speaking in the first person to the cross, which holds the bloody body of her son. She leaves no doubt as to who is responsible for his execution. “O my little son,” she says, “was lifted up on the cross”/[He] was [put there] by the hand of the Jewish people.”\(^{114}\)

Fruitfully employing the late medieval tradition of polyvalent symbolism, Caterina not only includes a motherly Mary as a witness to Jewish cruelty, but makes Christ a mother as well, a doting mother hen in fact, who struggles to keep her chicks, the Jews, under her wing.\(^{115}\) (Caterina was actually quoting scripture: Matt 23:37 and as she pointed out herself, the apocryphal Old Testament book Esdras 4:1.)\(^{116}\) This extended simile occurs within her “Animal Sermon,” in which Caterina describes Old Testament Jews as “perfidious, loud-mouthed, rebellious, ungrateful and evil” in the face of a protective, motherly God. Once Christ appears on Earth they continue to be “more

vedersi intorno un infinito numero delle sue creature tanto amate da lui, et in particolare il carissimo et peculiare suo popolo israelita (el quale nacque) venuto innumerossissimo alla santa Pascha, tanto incredelito et ingrato contra di lui.”


\(^{113}\)Ser. I, iii, 6.

\(^{114}\)Laudi 14.1, 57: “O figliolo mio in croce sei levato/sei nelle mane del popolo iudaico.” See 14.2 for a reformulation of the same work.

\(^{115}\)Ser. XXXIV, xlvii, 306.

\(^{116}\)Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 113 ff. In this section Bynum also explores the equivilancy of Christ as Hen and leader of religious community (in her case an abbot) as watchful mother.
hardened and perverse than ever… doing even more evils, injuries, cruelties, persecutions and obstinate things. They incarcerated him, martyred him and in everything abused him the worst way they knew how.” This is in spite of a patient Christ, who, “in imitation of the aforementioned hen, called his chicks to him, until his voice was hoarse and he (had) exposed himself to every deathly danger to defend them and keep them alive.”

Caterina uses the figure of both Mary and Christ-as-Mother to elicit heart-felt compassion for him among her audience. The binary emotion of such empathy was, of course, a severe disdain for the Jewish people.

A further likening of the sisters to the Jews is built into the familial metaphor of a mother-Christ. Just as the Jews are here described as the children of a leader who wishes to guide them out of their immature obstinacy, the nuns are continually referred to as “daughters” (figiliole) of the abbess who were in need of her constant teaching. In addition, it is not so great a leap to say that listeners used to examining their consciences could have heard themselves described with other phrases used for the Jews, such as “they desired me and then rejected me.”

In Caterina’s Passion narratives, Christ’s worst pain takes place in his mind and heart, which is an invitation in itself for the audience to use both of those faculties in intense contemplation of his sorrow, the guilt of the Jews, and their own guilt. Caterina suggests implicitly that the only means for the sisters to minimize personal and communal guilt was to prioritize living according to their Rule. As we will see, Caterina used the Jews once more to show that old forms of

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117 Ser. XXXIV, xlvi, 306. The passage is quite lengthy, so I will not quote it in its entirety. The excerpts quoted read as follows: “né mai perfidi, volubili, rebelli, ingrati et maligni volsero starvi… Ma essi, più induritii et perversi che mai, et fatti maggiormente maligni, ingiuriosi, crudieli, persecutori et ostinati, lo carcerorno, martirizorno et del tutto lo vituperorno alla peggio che seppero et potero… Et nondimeno Christo patientissimo, immittendo la predetta gallina… c’havendo I pulcini gli chiama a sé, sino con voce rauca, et si espone ad ogni pericolo di morte per deffenderli et conservarli vivi…”

118 Ser. XXIX, iii, 226: “il popolo mio eletto, quale mi desiderava et po mi rifiutò…”
religious life were invalid within her convent, and that a life lived in accordance with the renewed rule of Clare was the only one that truly fulfilled Christ’s new evangelical mandate of love.

**Voiding the *Vecchia legge*: Supersession and Law in an Observant Community**

When Jesus died, says Caterina:

> The curtain of the temple was torn from its top to the earth to signify that the shadows, and the divine worship of the Hebrews were finished, and also scriptural ceremonies, the circumcisions of young boys and the sacrifices of animals because the figured and true cult of the Son of God had already been manifestly uncovered there.”

This passage not only succeeds in making the Jews seem primitively superstitious, but uncovers a key dynamic of Caterina’s anti-Jewish thought, one shared with many medieval thinkers: supersession. Belief that Christ’s New Law superseded the covenant of the Old Testament, rendering it null and void was a frequently cited cause of anti-Judaism. Caterina often celebrated Christ’s new law of love, his “announcement” that he wished all Christians to enter spiritually into the wound in his side, where his heart was a “fiery furnace of charity” and to learn from this experience of divine intimacy.

One of the nuns even asks her sermonizer, why, out of all laws in the Old and New Testament that God provided, there is really only one: that of love. Her final answer is

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119 *Ser.* XVII, xxvi,154. The torn curtain is mentioned in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Caterina couches her reference as the second of the miracles that occurred when Christ died, the first being a universal earthquake and the third the fact that many rose from the dead: “La seconda si spaccò il velo del tempio, dalla cima sino a terra per significato d’esser finite l’ombre, le figure et il culto divino hebraico, et parimente le cerimonie scritturali, le circoncisioni puerili et gli sacrifici d’animali, poiché ivi era già manifestamente scoperto il figurato et vero culto del Figliulo di Dio.”


121 *Ser.* VII, iii, 73: “il publico et eterno suo bando, che mandò per tutto il mondo in occasione…di mostrarci palesemente…nell’aperta sua piaga del costato amorosa, questa sua infuocata fornace di carità.”

122 *Ser.* XV, 112–116.
that Christ endured all suffering only for charity and love of our souls, and that “his action was also our instruction.” New Testament law was thus constructed with a single didactic action, and its universal simplicity trumped the “superfluities” of the Old Jewish Law.

A symbolic representation of supersessionary thinking occurs in Sermon XXX, given to the novices in Bologna. There, Caterina mentions the very first physical places that Christ passed through on Earth. First he entered into the “house” of his mother’s womb, then into the “house of this miserable world.” Then he enters, as an infant, into the holy temple of Jerusalem to be circumcised. He put himself voluntarily in the hands of the priests to cut off superfluity, signifying that he wished to end his old law and to the kinship and consanguinity that he had in Judaism so that he could institute a new one, regulated by his evangelical law of love, made and observed by him and then observed by us and all of the other nations of the World.123

Caterina goes on to create a parallel between Christ’s life and that of a nun, who passes through the houses of the world, finally ending up in the cloister, where she must cut herself off from her worldly family so that she loves individuals not because of consanguinity but because of “the love of God.”124

Another parallel exists between Christ’s “evangelical law of love,” which is observed (ob servarsi) by all good Christians and the “Rule of our Saint Clare” the observance (osservanza) of which, Caterina says later in Sermon XXX, is the way to heaven for these chosen women. According to the internal logic of this Sermon, there is a connection between the fact of supersession (that God has regulated [regolata] a law

123Ser. XXX, ii, 228–9: Tertio da questa volse anche uscirne, et se n’andò al santo tempio di Gierusalem a farsi circoncidere nella sua infantile età...sottoponendosi do di voler dar fine alla vecchia sua legge et ala sua parentella et consanguinità che have con l’hebraismo per istiturne una nuova regolata dalla sua evangelica legge amorosa da esso composta et osservata et poi da osservarsi da noi et da tutte l’alte nationi del mondo.”
124Ibid., 230: “amore di Dio.”
that renders Judaism invalid) and the special *regola* that the nuns of Saint Clare must follow.\(^{125}\) Thus, the Observant law that governed their daily behavior was made one and the same as the Gospels’ most supreme Law: the mandate of Christian love. Like Abraham, they were called to a covenant, but the Rule that governed it superseded his completely. Here, we see why Caterina chose to use the rhetoric of anti-Judaism so frequently, as it was a cornerstone at the very foundation of her pedagogical project.

The complexities of the Observant adoption of the *Prima Regula*, as Clare’s rule was often called, were treated in Chapter One. What is crucial to consider, as well, is the innovative spirit that surrounded its institution. Important in this context is the sheer number of new Observant foundations that were emerging in and around the Franciscan Province of Bologna during the mid-fifteenth century. Although they may have taken over structures or communities that were, themselves, old, between “1403 and 1492 twenty-five reformed communities were founded” there.\(^{126}\) But in fact, this was the number for men only, women’s houses, which were also multiplying all over North-Central Italy, grew at least as fast as those of their male counterparts.\(^{127}\) Enthusiasm about their founding was even greater than these numbers. Recall, for example, Bernardino’s claim to have reformed two-hundred female communities all by himself. In addition, the foundation of Corpus Domini in Bologna in 1456 helped to reverse a one-hundred fifty-year decline in the number of women’s communities in that city.\(^{128}\) In this atmosphere of

\(^{125}\)Ibid., 231: “la osservanza di essa regola di S. Chiara nostra.”


\(^{127}\)Zarri, *Donne e Fede*, 185. See also Knox, *Creating Clare*, 130, which has an inter-urban map of female Franciscan networks, showing that there were a minimum of twenty-two Observant houses founded between the 1420’s and 1500.

vigorous expansion, the Poor Clare nuns of both Corpus Domini foundations, especially those selected to found a new, papally-sanctioned community, would have responded to Caterina’s language of a new divine dispensation built upon the true observance of a New Law: Clare’s Rule.

**Giustissima vendetta: Clarissan Anti-Judaism and Quattrocento Intolerance**

Proving that Caterina’s disdain for biblical Judaism and its laws was linked to prejudice against post-biblical Jews, specifically the increasingly discriminatory civic laws that evolved throughout fifteenth-century Italy, is a difficult task. I would argue that the quote below is the passage in the sermons that comes closest to an endorsement of anti-Jewish legal measures. It is from one of Caterina’s early sermons, preached, in all likelihood, while she was still Mistress of Novices in Ferrara, c. 1430-1450:

Thus this peculiar people [the Old Testament Jews] knew Him, desired Him and often called upon Him. A great prophet [Moses] said “God, send whom you will send” [i.e.: a great prophet] Then—in the worst and most severe way they could— they refuted and betrayed Him. Thus they also gave and still give a clear sign to future generations that Roman justice (mediated by Emperor Titus Vespasian) was most great and conformed with the divine justice of the eternal Father against his iniquitous offenders, the ungrateful and perfidious Jews (once so beloved to Him) [now] castigated in the severest way by a most just vendetta. And because they never turn to repent of this, their evil, but grow more in perfidy each day, in persecution and greater evil, they are worthily deprived of spiritual goods and of fortunes, titles, dignities, honors and of their continued divine protection. Dispersed, then, through the world, they are scattered and hated by all nations and damned living and dead with all of their descendants to the eternal punishment of the infernal abysses because of their perfidious infidelity which will last until the arrival of the Antichrist, always excepting those who are baptized and live as Christians.129

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129 *Ser*, III, xxvii, 50–51: “Anzi lo sapeano, lo desideravano et ispeso lo chiamavo essi suoi peculiari popoli… disse un gran profeta, et poi lo rifiutarano et lo trattorno al peggio che poterono et sepero. Et di cio ne dette anche, et tuttavia ne dà, significato evidente a futuri secoli la grandissima giustitia romana (mediante Tito Vespasiano imperatore) conforme con la divina del suo Padre eterno contra gli suoi offensori iniqui, ingrati, et perfidi Giudei (già di esso tanto diletti) severissimamente con giustissima vendetta castigati. Et poiche non solo non si volsero pentire mai di questa lora malignità, ma ancora crescevano ogni giorno di perfidia, di persecuzione et di malignità maggiore, et pero degnamente privi
Caterina’s endorsement of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE is a striking declaration of her desire that civil law be merged with divine justice as regarded the Jews. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that this was similar to what happened in Ferrara and Bologna during the latter half of the fifteenth century, as secular and ecclesiastical authorities joined in an effort to restrict and disrupt Jewish businesses and lives. Although various decrees endorsing discrimination had been on the books for decades or even centuries, the late Quattrocento saw a new rigor not only in legislative action but in civic enforcement. In 1456, for example, Pope Calixtus III appointed a legate (with the help of the Observant Franciscans) to collect a heavy tax on Jews in and around Ferrara, based upon the “unreasonable” interest that they were ostensibly earning as money-lenders. The revenue was to go to fight the Turks in the Holy Land.\footnote{Franceschini, \textit{Presenza ebraica}, Doc. 603, 227–230.} The establishment of the Inquisition to Ferrara had similar effects; there is evidence that in 1457–1458 they also levied heavy fines on the city’s Jews.\footnote{Ibid., Doc. 624, 237 and Doc. 628, 239.} In 1452 the Bolognese government, consisting at this time of the legation of Cardinal Bessarion and the Council of Ancients, reissued a decree from earlier in the century that all Jews were obliged to wear a yellow badge—a \textit{signum}—on their chests while in public.\footnote{Rossella Rinaldi, “Topografia documentaria per la storia della comunità ebraica bolognese,” in \textit{Banchi ebraici a Bologna nel xv secolo} (Bologna: Mulino, 1994), 82.} Even though this law was tempered to some extent during the following years, a Jewish man was put to trial for violation of it in 1458, and faced an unknown fate.\footnote{Ibid., 80–83.} The 1460s saw the foundation of numerous Monti di Pietà, beginning in Perugia. These funds, designed
to help the poor by lending to the public at no (or low) interest, were also aimed at eliminating the need for Jewish lenders. And in 1473, Michele de Carcano, a second-generation preacher of the Franciscan Observance, encouraged the founding of a Monte di Pietà in Bologna. Accounts show, however, that after functioning for only a year, operations of the Bolognese mount were suspended for about thirty years because “apparently the credit service offered by the Jews was satisfactory, and the city did not feel the need to maintain (it).” This fact shows that Observant preachers were part of a Christian vanguard that imagined their ideal city as a space free from Jews. Their persuasive tactics had effects that were often immediate, but just as often longer-term, resulting in recurrent waves of intolerance that persisted well into the modern era.

Their rhetoric thus foreshadowed the stricter laws that would emerge in the next century, as Italian Jews were expelled from many communities or forced into urban ghettos. So Caterina’s statement, prior to 1450, that Jews are “worthily deprived of spiritual goods and of fortunes, titles, dignities, honors” shows that, though cloistered, Clarissans indeed shared the belief of male Observants that Jews had no rightful place in civic life.

Part of my purpose in explicating the role of the Jews in Caterina’s work has been to question our assumptions about the trajectory of emotion and punishment in the writing of late medieval women. We have come to expect that Caterina might call herself

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135Maria Muzzarelli, “Pawn Broking Between Theory and Practice in Observant Socio-Economic Thought,” in A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond, ed. James Mixson and Bert Roest (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 225.
136Ibid., 226.
a “little dog” as a form of self-abasement to further her emotional relationship with Christ, a topic that will feature prominently in the following chapter. What we do not expect is that she will debase the Jews by calling them dogs who victimized that same Christ. It is perhaps time, therefore, to reevaluate the rhetorical and real connections between cloistered women and urban Jews at the end of the Middle Ages, exploring the possibility that the former group used the traditional and renewed subjugation of the latter to conceptualize and execute their projects of religious reform.

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137Caterina repeats the epithet “cagnola” numerous times in almost all of her works, most famously in the preface of *Sette armi spirituali* where she is a “minima cagnola.”
CHAPTER 4

Loro discepole: Scripture, Poverty, and the Animal Voice

[This little work] was made—with divine aid—by me, the smallest little dog barking under the table of the excellent and most beloved servants and spouses of Christ Jesus the immaculate Lamb, the sisters of the monastery of Corpus Domini in Ferrara. I…the little dog, wrote this book with my own hand, only for fear of divine reproof if I should keep silent about what could bring others joy...Every creature must be praiseworthy for its Creator…”

The quotation above comes from the introduction to Caterina’s autobiography, Le Sette armi spirituali. It contains one of her most striking images: a portrayal of herself as a small animal with a big voice. Its origins can certainly be traced to traditional statements of humility by monastic writers, or to general strains of emotional self-abnegation in female piety. But how is Caterina’s oft-quoted statement of animal identification related to her immediate context, to contemporary Clarissan practices of increased textual production, accelerated scriptural learning, and negotiated material poverty? The most relevant source that we can turn to in order to answer this complex question is Sermon XXXIV: On the Vices and Virtues of Various Animals.

Elsewhere in her sermon corpus, Caterina firmly upholds the border between humans and animals. In Sermon II, for example, she states that she is proud to be one of God’s “reasonable creatures,” and is grateful to Him for her soul, which is both “intellectual and rational.” It is this soul that allows her to “conquer and rule over every

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1SA, 1: “questa picoleta opera facta con lo divino aiuto per mi, minema chagnola latrante soto la menssa delle excelente e dillichatissime serve e spoxe de lo immaculato angnello Christo lesù, sore del Monasterio del Corpus di Christi in Ferrara…questo prexente librezolo, lo quale io sopra dicta cagnola de mio propria mano scriso solo per timore de la divina reprensione se io tacesse quelo che ad altri porraia zoare… chiaschaduna creatura se debe rendere laudabile nel suo Creatore…” As connects with the themes of this chapter, the animal imagery of a humble dog eating table scraps is taken from scripture: Mark VII, 24–30 and Matt XV 21–2. For more discussion of this imagery, see Ser. 274–275, n658 and n661 as well as n78 below.
wild animal.” She gives boundless thanks to have been made a human, instead of a “most vile and repulsive little animal,” for then she would be merely “sensory and corruptible.”¹ In Sermon XXXIV, however, though Caterina still insists that beasts can typify vice, her tone of dominion over the animal world is tempered into one of admiration for it. This admiration is exemplified in the following passage, in which Caterina tells the sisters why she has called herself a “little dog” in the past:

Dear Sisters and Daughters, there have always been occasions upon which I have called myself a little dog, and not only so that I should follow, obey, and serve my superiors of both sexes, and you, my other spouses in Christ my Lord, but also so that I may imitate and continually exercise in myself the good and noble properties and customs of such a faithful animal.²

It will be the purpose of this chapter to investigate the rest of Sermon XXXIV, discovering thereby why the “good and noble properties” of lowly animals were so important to Caterina’s identity as an Observant Clarissan of the Quattrocento.

I will begin by explicating the structure of the “Animal Sermon” as it exists today, navigating the narrative threads of a treatise that, though perplexing, remains, (in the words of Casanova), one of the abbess’s “most beautiful.” Next, I will turn to Caterina’s sources on animals, a search that seems, initially, to involve a vast number of books. In the end, however, I will contend that just one book drove this work’s production: the bible. The text of the “Animal Sermon” thus provides a singular opportunity to explore how women of the Observant Reform learned from scripture and incorporated it into their daily lives. The biblical stories used therein prove that Caterina’s focus throughout was

²Ser. XXXIV, xiii, 274–275: “Queste donque (sorelle et figliuole dilette) sono le cagioni per le quali mi ho sempre chiamata cagnola, et non solo per seguitare, ubbidire et servire le mie superiore et superiori, et voi altre spose in Christo mio Signore, ma ancora per immiture et continoamente effettoare in me queste buone et nobili propietà et costumi d’un così fedele animale.”
the power of poverty. In preceding chapters, we have seen just how—for these Poor Clares of high status—the virtue of voluntary poverty was a site of continuous anxiety and negotiation. In this chapter I will explore this theme further, and argue that although late medieval Clarissans did not walk in the precise footsteps of their poor foundress; they integrated performative poverty into the practice of reading scripture, the production of devotional texts, and the process of imitating the behaviors of virtuous beasts. This sermon shows that in becoming like lowly creatures, these nuns overturned their culture’s insistence on dominion over animals. In so doing, they gave voice to the voiceless, and expressed the ultimate form of Franciscan spiritual poverty.

*Ingegnoso, longo e bello: The Content and Structure of Sermon XXXIV*

Parsing the “Animal Sermon” today can be a bewildering task, as it contains anecdotes about over one hundred animals in a text occupying sixty printed pages and fifteen manuscript folios.³ This, Caterina’s longest extant sermon, has thematic contents so varied and complex that the sub-categories included in the structural analysis below hardly scratch its surface. It make sense, therefore, that Casanova himself admitted that he did not know quite what to make of this treatise, since it was found after her death “written in pen” among her “most private” writings.⁴ Caterina made it clear, however, that she did not want it to go unshared, since she closes the work with an exhortation that it was meant to prove a “salutary instruction” to the future nuns of Corpus Domini.⁵ The

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³In Sgarbi’s edition, Casanova’s introduction to the work is printed on 264, the sermon occupies 265–325. In Ser MS it occupies 146v–162r.
⁴Ser., 264: “Il presente sermone, dopo la felice morte di questa Beata Cattherrina, fu trovato anch’esso scritto a penna nelle sue più secrete scritture fra il numero de suoi belli sermoni. “
⁵Ser. XXXIV, lxv, 325. The last phrase of the sermon reads: “...et finalmente per instruttione salutare di tutte quelle monache che succederano in questo presente monastero.”
confused redactor felt a “great obligation” to include it his collection; but not knowing its “proper place,” he ended up transcribing it “conveniently” after her other works. Thus, it appears within chapter twenty-nine, close to the end of the corpus, labeled as one of the three “familiari” (familiar, or related) sermons of “Blessed Abbess Caterina.” The wisdom of this placement is debatable, as the first two sermons in this chapter are fairly short pieces in honor of Saint Clare (Sermon XXXII) and Saint Francis (Sermon XXXIII), meant to be given on their respective Feast Days. These scarcely seem related to the mysterious animal treatise, the work that Casanova knew to be not only long, but also “quite ingenious… and beautiful.” Proving him right will take further explication of the work’s composition and structure.

As we have seen, most of Caterina’s sermons are brief and could have been delivered in a single chapterhouse teaching session. The “Animal Sermon,” however, would have been impossible to deliver in one day. Its length and complex structure indicate that—in spite of its oral roots—the piece was conceived as a unified written project, meaning that it was likely the work of years. Caterina says early on that she shared some of it with her nuns at the Clarissan community of Corpus Domini in Ferrara when she was novice mistress. She did not complete it until she was abbess at the new

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6 *Ser.* 264: “Però parmi d’esser in grande obligo di doverlo porre in questo volume, ma non sapendo io quale fosse il proprio suo luoco, ho pensato doverlo convenientemente descrivere dietro alli precedenti.” (Sgarbi reads “transcrivere” for “descrivere”, which is logical.)

7 *Ser.* 246–247: “De tre Familiari sermoni della Beata Cattherina Badesa.”

8 Ibid.: “…il terzo molto ingegnoso, longo e bello, trovato, dopo la sua morte, fra gli suoi scritti.” (Nb: This passage can be found on 142v of the manuscript.)

9 *Ser.* XXXIV, iv, 268: “Et già ancora di ciò con voi, che sete venute meco a Bologna, ve ne discorsi una volta, presente anche tutte l’alate, nel monasterio di Ferrara.” Sgarbi insists, based on the fact that Caterina mentions the Marian content of section xxxv within Sermon XIX, (dateable to her time in Ferrara), that she wrote half of the the Animal Sermon in her community there (not just a few sections) and composed the other half in Bologna. Regardless of what was written at which location, the very fact that she referenced her “discorso delle virtù et vitij degli animali” (XIX: i. 172–n. 467) in another work proves that it was not only a time-consuming project but a meaningful one for both Caterina and her audience.
convent of the same name in Bologna, confirming that it was, indeed, the work of decades. In fact, she probably worked on the material therein from the 1440s until just before her death in 1463.\textsuperscript{10} The presence of many fragmented topics suggests that it was never completely finished, but was always a work in progress. It is indeed a conundrum of a piece: lengthy but segmented, serious and amusing, public but private, one that commands attention still for the intriguing nature of its content.

In the summary that follows, I will highlight Caterina’s major thematic shifts as she uses animals to enumerate traditional Christian virtue/vice pairings, to create compelling portraits of contemporary sinners, to elucidate the moral meanings of natural phenomena, and, finally, to illustrate a “handbook” for Observant religious.

Caterina’s primary topic, she states at the outset, is to explicate the “various vices and virtues” of “diverse species of animals,” for the purpose of teaching about sin.\textsuperscript{11} Her warnings about human virtue and vice are clear: those who commit mortal sin and die “like beasts” in them will be “damned” like the “devil’s angels;” and those who follow the warnings of the beasts (presumably the virtuous ones) will be “saved,” and will end up in paradise like God’s “good” and “obedient angels.”\textsuperscript{12} Caterina goes on to say, rather confusingly, that some animals possess natures that contain both virtue and vice, and that the behavior of still other animals fall outside this binary construct altogether. Such insistence on a black and white conceptual framework, immediately followed by qualification thereof, is certainly not a clear way to begin a treatise. Though Caterina

\textsuperscript{10}One internal dating clue appears in a passage from Section xxvii translated below, which had to have been composed after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. 
\textsuperscript{11}Ser. XXXIV, i, 265. She states at the outset that she intends to use “vivi essemplii” of “varii viti et virtú che provengono sino dalla natura et naturale costume de diverse specie d’animali…” to teach her audience. 
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid. Some humans “s’accostarano alli vittij et peccati mortali et…morirano come bestie in quelli.” They are “dannati, come furono anche gli angeli diabolici.” Some humans, instead, “per l’osservanza d(e)… sante virtù si sono salvati, come anche furono gli buoni angeli ubbidienti a Dio in Paradiso.”
states that she will “return to [her] first intent” at the end of section three, such a disordered start may explain the fragmented quality of the anecdotes that follow later.\textsuperscript{13}

The first few animal stories—that is those of section four—do largely reflect this “first intent,” albeit with some digressions. Caterina begins by speaking of animals that embody the three theological virtues: the faith of baby crows who rely on God for their sustenance, the hope of the dog who has lost his owner, the charity of the camel who stops eating when any one of his fellows lacks food, and the equally great charity of the baboon, who not only mourns for his dead companions, but buries them too. At this point, our abbess stops to tell us that her teachings thus far will be familiar to some of the nuns hearing or reading it, as she preached about these stories earlier to the entire Clarissan community in Ferrara. After this declaration, Caterina includes a digression on the importance of the integration of faith and works in the lives of the virtuous. Faith, hope, and charity, she says, are opposed by the vices of infidelity, desperation, and cruelty; these are symbolized by the mule, the tiger and creatures like the manticore (he is half animal, half human, and all cruel predator).\textsuperscript{14} She continues this pattern of oppositions with the four cardinal virtues, the seven deadly sins, the five bodily senses, the four pure elements, and the four passions of the soul, specifying at least one animal for each quality. Sections fourteen through sixteen loosen this clear pattern of

\textsuperscript{13}Ser. XXXIV, iii, 266. Caterina transitions into the body of her sermon with the sentence: “Hora seguiremo il primario intento nostro…”
\textsuperscript{14}Caterina presented all animals, mythical or real, foreign or familiar, with an equal level of credulity. Materials within the bestiary genre, though they were not Caterina’s only source pool, share this trait. See Jeanetta Rebold Benton. \textit{The Medieval Menagerie: Animals in the Art of the Middle Ages} (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992), 17.
It can be difficult, therefore, to find clear thematic divisions as the sermon progresses. From roughly section eighteen until section thirty, Caterina seems simply to start each segment with a random animal or quality and expound upon its moral significance. A closer look at the anecdotes therein reveals a series of sinful human faces drawn from contemporary culture. Many of these portraits are of religious deviants or heretics, showing our abbess’s concern with orthodoxy. She includes a comparison of a hypocritical preacher, with his sweet and false words, to the predatory panther, who attracts his victims with the sweet smell that emanates from his mouth. He is a “black and sad hypocrite” with a “twisted neck, mincing face and eyes and gestures of compassion” who “holds his hands open in the manner of showing his stigmata, his long beard and tunic … leaning unto the earth” thus, he “deceives people, ravishes their faculties and also would devour their hearts if he could.” Later, the infamous moth drawn to a flame symbolizes the “curious and presumptuous” who wish to “penetrate God’s secrets” thus committing “heresy.”

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15 They contain topics that are simultaneously disparate and germane, including: the proper habitat of the temperate hedgehog, the active vs the contemplative life, and virginity’s superiority over other manifestations of sexuality.

16 Ser. XXIV, xxvi, 282. This is one of Caterina’s most compelling descriptions, given that it depicts her contemporary opposite; instead of a sincere, female, cloistered teacher, he is a false, male, public preacher. “L’hipocrita nero e tristo, con il torto collo, con l’odore delle belle et dolce paroline, per forma del sua finta santità et con la fazza macilente, barba et zazzara longa, habitò nazzereo et inchini sino a terra, inganna le genti, gli rapisce le facoltà et anche gli devorarebbe il cuore, pur che potesse.”

17 Ser. XXXIV, xxii, 279–280. This example, in its specificity, shows Caterina’s staunch advocacy of orthodoxy and her continuous use, in all her works, of positive and negative fire imagery: “Li curiosi et prosontuosi, che vogliono penetrare i segreti di Dio immittano il costume delle parpagli, zenzali alias zampane…et altre simili quali…vanno volontieri al lume delle candelle over lucerne, ma poi tanto s’invaghiscono di quella nobile luce, che non contente di solo mirarla, vorebbono anche transformarsi in essa, overo almeno intendere et sapere la sua diffinitione et di che sostanza sia. Però s’aggrirano con tant’avidità intorno, che s’abbruggiano l’ali et al più delle volte lor medesime, overo (cadendo) s’afluocano nell’oglio, dimodoché, convertitesi nel suo diffinito e nella stessa ignea sostanza, vengono tosto in
world, and in the next—their souls. “Ambitious, angry, proud” heretics are also like the wild ox, who, driven mad by the color red, embeds his horns in a tree and is captured by hunters. This image represents the “putrid member cut off from the body of the Catholic faith, who (like Arius of Alexandria and others) since he was not able to dress himself in purple and become a Cardinal, has…hatred for the holy habit and those who wear it.” His mad disrespect for orthodoxy, the twin “horns” of his “fetid language and false interpretations” are his downfall, for he ends up lodged in the wood of Christ’s cross and hunted down by the Popes, who are “vicars of Christ on Earth” and “God’s true hunters.” In this section of the sermon Caterina creates a zoo of people familiar to her audience from their time outside of the cloister. Like the animal zoo we will encounter later, these portraits represent the danger of worldly excess.

Section thirty-one begins another shift in tone, and with Caterina treating one of her favorite themes: animals that reflect proper behavior in religious communities. This is the concern of section thirty-three as well, but strangely, these creatures do not return until over twenty sections later. In the interim, we are faced with a mass of material attempting to describe, in fact, “all natural things,” from the furthest stars in the sky to the inmost bones of the body. Caterina’s own theories about natural phenomena (including one of biological generation) initially seem misplaced, but they end up functioning as a

cognitione troppo lor curiosità et ardire, cadono ostinati in qualch’heresie, che finalmente se gli abbruggiano l’ali, cioè in questo secolo gli corpi, et l’anime nell’inferno.”

18*Ser. XXXIV, xxx, 286: “Quanto al bue, eccovi l’ambitoso, iracondo et superbo heretico, membro salvatico et putrido, preciso dal corpo della catholica fede, che, non havendo potuto vestirsi di porpora et esser vescovo et cardinale (come fu Ario alessandrino et altri) ha tanto in odio questo santo habito et chi lo porta, che pensando con le sue due puntute et attossicate corna della pessima et fetida lingua, et delle false et ingiuriose interpretazioni e triste operationi…all fine percuote nell’arbore della croce di Christo…e (la) Santa Madre Chiesa. Et con le sue proprie corna et armi rimane preso et legato dalli santi universali concilii et sommi Pontefici, Vicari di Christo in terra et veri cacciatori di Dio…”

19*Ser. XXXIV, xxxiv, 291: “…Dio habbi creato il tutto, con la natura istessa contioamente produttiva di tutte cose naturali,* etiam monstruose…”
foundation for her survey of salvation history, one that begins with the Old Testament. Here, Caterina’s signature interest in merging scientific discourse with religious principles surfaces. Moving on to the narratives of the New Testament, she begins with an exaltation of the Virgin, and the animals that symbolize her. Quickly, she moves on to Christ’s birth among the beasts. Before going on to describe animals that represent the Savior at different points during his mission on earth, Caterina speaks of his adversary, Satan, the animals that are like him, and the dangers he presents to man’s integrity. Visible here, albeit disjointedly, is a discussion of animal virtue and vice on a cosmic scale. As she continues to trace New Testament writers and content, it is no surprise when we reach the topic of the Last Judgment in sections fifty-six and fifty-seven. This is not, however, where the sermon ends.

The explication of the New Testament, whose rule is Christ’s “law of love,” ultimately leads Caterina to a discussion of the compassionate directives followed by ideal religious communities.20 These, specifically the mutual obligations of superior and inferior nuns, are the subject of the last seven sections of the animal treatise. Like the heads of communities of bees and cranes, abbesses are to show “justice, vigilance and charity” while their charges exhibit “vigilance, obedience, humility and observance.”21 After so many pages spent treating abstract subjects, sections fifty-eight through sixty-

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20 Ser. XXXIV, Iviii, 317. But not just Observants: “…(la) legge amorosa di Giesu Christo…sono anche state inspirate et trovate le christianee dottrine e gli salutari instituti per i laici con le lor scolhe et congregazionioni spiritoali, e le sante regole non solo de preti regolari et secolari, ma ancora de monaci et frati osservanti et conventuali, et parmente di monache et suore d’ogni religione…”

21 Ser. XXXIV, Ixiii, 321: “Li superiori donque d’ogni sesso sudetti, nel carico dell’officio loro, rettemente con con giustizia, vigilanza et charità governarano i religiosi et le religiose loro suddite a guisa delli due principi et re sudetti, uno dell’api, l’altro delle grue, li quali usano un simile governo verso le lor specie. Parimente le monache et i religiosi nella loro suggetionone usarano quella medesima vigilanza, ubbidienza, humilità et osservanza alla loro superiore et superiori, che costumano di fare esse suddite grue et api ai lor re et capi…”
four reward the persistent reader with a discussion of animal behaviors that reflect practical Observant norms. The abbess was to show just and proper leadership, serving her flock like the rooster in the morning (calling everyone to prayer) and like the hare at night (sleeping with her eyes open should one of her charges need her aid). Her inferiors, in turn, were to take their enclosure seriously, for just as a “fish cannot stay out of water for a long time…,” monks and nuns cannot “stay outside of the cells and practice (their vocation) among lay people,” for if they do engage in such “conversation” and “commerce” with the world “they lose the quiet of their mind and the fervor of their devotion, and, in the end, die in their vanity.”

Instead of indulging in selfish behavior, all members of the community are to “become like the dolphin…who is friend with all species, but much more of man. Thus all of us should be friends to all men…” With such affection comes the obligation to “pray continually to God for all people without any partiality at all.”

Embodying such love is necessary for salvation. Caterina makes this clear at the end of her sermon, where she reiterates her initial purpose: to use animals to teach her audience proper behaviors, so that they are not among the “disobedient or inobservant” sinners condemned to “eternal punishment” on Judgment Day.
Thus, close examination of the sermon’s complicated structure yields valuable clues as to its communal purpose. Clues as to where Caterina’s material originated, however, can be hard to come by. She was often quite laconic on the subject of her source-base, stating (in her introduction) that she “found” her information about animal nature in “various books of the saints as well as in the various things that our Fathers preached.” But which books, saints, or preachers? The obvious source for fifteenth-century work involving the animal kingdom is the bestiary tradition. But Caterina, though she uses some anecdotes derived from them, did not duplicate the content or organization of any notable Italian bestiary of the later medieval period.

Did Caterina instead draw inspiration from Franciscan preaching? She could certainly have “listened” to animal-inspired sermons of some contemporary “father preachers,” including Bernardino of Siena, who was wont to use small snippets of animal imagery in his work. Evidence supporting this conclusion, however, is scant among the sources.

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26 Ser. XXXIV, 1, 265: “…varii libri de Santi et nelle varie prediche dei nostri padri.”
27 Literature on the medieval bestiary (and the Physiologus—the Greek text that spawned it) is too voluminous to cite here in its entirety. For helpful introductory sources, see Benton’s work, cited above in n.20 as well as: Ron Baxter, *Medieval Bestiaries and their Users* (London: Stroud, 1998); Willene B. Clark, *A Medieval Book of Beasts: the Second-Family Bestiary* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006); Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 69–100; Michel Pastoreau, *Bestiares du Moyen Age* (Paris: Seuil, 2011); and Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12–33. The website www.bestiary.ca is also quite comprehensive. A search for parallels is complicated by the fact that by the fifteenth century, the composition and use of these texts was on the decline. Additionally, though the manuscript families of English and French bestiaries have been documented extensively, Italian examples are not only more difficult to research, but woefully undertheorized. Useful resources include: Francesco Maspero and Aldo Granata, *Bestiario medievale* (Casale Monferrato-Alessandria: Piemme, 1999); Luigina Morini, ed. *Bestiari Medievali* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1996), 425–579 and Mirella Levi D’Ancona, *Lo Zoo del Rinascimento: il significato degli animali nella pittura italiana dal XIV al XVI secolo* (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi, 2001).
surviving Quattrocento preaching texts, Observant or otherwise. The Franciscan Anthony of Padua certainly composed sermons heavy with animal symbolism, but Caterina did not mention his name in her work, nor does she seem to have privileged him as a source in any way. Anthony mentioned nearly all of the animals that Caterina used to represent the seven deadly sins: the falcon (pride), the dragon (envy), bear (wrath), toad (avarice), ass (sloth), wolf (gluttony), and bat (lust). The moral significance that she attached to each creature, however, was different from Anthony’s in every case. Perhaps the most remarkable absence of any preacher-father is that of the beloved patron of animals himself, St. Francis of Assisi. The many tales involving Francis’ interactions with beasts are notably missing from the sermon.

Older authorities dating from the high medieval and late antique periods appear, however, with greater frequency. In creating her own multi-dimensional work about the natural world, she mirrored the concern of the encyclopedic tradition and consistently employed source information from works by Isidore of Seville, Albertus Magnus, and many others.28 The authorities that she did cite, whether on animal behaviors or theological constructs, are largely from the patristic era. Since Caterina’s name-dropping was relatively infrequent, her selection of prominent early Christian figures was most likely deliberate, and served as a special list of “must-reads” for her audience. The particular works that she favored—Ambrose’s Hexameron, Jerome’s Commentary on

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28 Sgarbi found numerous instances when Caterina used materials from such classic medieval sources as Isidore’s Etymologiae, Rabanus Maurus’ De rerum naturis, Hugh of St. Victor’s De bestiis et aliis rebus, Albertus Magnus’ De animalibus, and Vincent of Beauvais’ Speculum naturale. There is no other record, however, that these works graced the library of Corpus Domini. It is probable that she accessed them in redacted handbook form, or perhaps during her limited time at the court of the Este. Still, it is impressive that she consolidated knowledge dating from the turn of the seventh century to well into the thirteenth. If her interest in patristic sources is taken into account, Caterina mastered roughly nine hundred years of Christian writing on animals.
Jeremiah and the Psalm Expositions of both Gregory and Augustine—were clearly those of biblical exegesis. As we will see, this was anything but accidental.

For within the very last section of the sermon is a key passage that justifies using animal symbols and stories to teach, and it hinges on scripture alone. These are Caterina’s own words describing her motivation, for the greatest “book” and “father” of all was at her disposal:

I was moved, most loving sisters, to give nearly all of this earthly life over to my Lord Jesus Christ because of His many salutary instructions and teachings, including those concerning the properties and customs of various animals. His highest, eternal Father God spoke to His once special and beloved people, the Hebrews (through His faithful angels, the patriarchs and the prophets), using these same animal parables, figures and properties, and also using other natural things…

And our Lord Jesus Christ, in order to signify that He was the true and eternal Son and God, willed that his four Evangelists—described in the Book of Ezekiel—be figured and prophesied in the form of four animals. Christ also preached using similar parables of animals and other things and inspired his beloved Saint John, too, to use figures of diverse animals and monstrous beasts in his gracious and prophetic Apocalypse. Thus, as we discussed above, Christ himself was content to be [likened to a number of animals] because of his similarity to them. Since all divine actions are our instruction, such a task as writing this sermon has not been off point. Christ’s actions have taught me, through divine grace, to listen to the things that our learned Fathers preached, and to read certain holy books. Besides which the book of Job advised me, saying this:

But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee: and the birds of the air, and they shall tell thee. Speak to the earth, and it shall answer thee: and the fishes of the sea shall tell. (Job 12, 7–8)²⁹

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²⁹Ser. XXXIV, lxx, 323–324. The relevant passage is quite long; thus I have not translated all of it above. The full Italian reads as follows. [Note that the first phrase is especially difficult to render into English]: “La cagion (scrive lei) che mi ha mosso (sorelle amantissime) d’haver appoggiata quasi tutta la presente vita del Signor mio Giesu Christo, con le molte salutarì sue instruzzioni e documenti, alle proprietà et costumi de vari animali, è questa che, se Iddio sommo Padre eterno parlò sempre alli Hebrei, suo popolo già unico et dilecto (medianti li fedeli angeli, patriarchi et profeti) in parabole, figure et proprietà d’animali, et anche d’altrè cose naturali—e ciò è tanto più vero che non volea da loro essere placato, se non col pentimento, in sacrificarli varie specie d’animali et in buon numero, secondo la molteplicità et gravezza dei commessi pecati loro, simcome n’è piena la santa vecchia Scrittura—et che poi esso Signor Nostro Christo Giesù (per significato d’esser suo vero et eterno Figliuolo et Dio) volse che gli suoi quattro evangelisti, già in Ezechiele (come disopra) descritti, fossero in quei quattro animali figurate et profetati, così predicare anche egli in simili parabole d’animali et d’altrè cose, et con inspirare purmente al suo diletto S. Giovanni la gratiosa et profetica Apocalisse in figure de diversi animali et mostruose bestie. Anzi si contentò di
Caterina’s scriptural justification for her pedagogical mission shows just how important recapitulating sacred text was to her work. Her numerous scriptural references within the “Animal Sermon” embedded further didactic narratives in her text, while revealing to us the complex ways in which Quattrocento nuns encountered God’s word. The moral message that she reinforced the most—poverty—was not only in keeping with the community’s Franciscan mission, but embodied its very identity.

*Per foramen acus transire: Teaching Poverty through Scripture*

In Caterina’s scriptural world, poverty took on many modalities; and it could mean simply giving up material goods. The scriptural narrative of voluntary poverty that she created also reinforces the idea that seeking worldly status is futile, since, as she continually emphasized, all that is of this world is destined to perish. Letting go of earthly ambition and consumption required faith that God would provide for physical needs, and belief in the personal obligation to imitate His gift through almsgiving.

Throughout the sermon, animal anecdotes functioned as a simple, accessible means of entry into the complexities of this ideology. And just as her scriptural treatment of poverty is multifarious in theme, it existed on at least two textual levels. Caterina often referenced poorness outright, but just as often, she quoted a verse that is embedded in a biblical narrative treating poverty. Her references were just as likely to be allusions as

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chiamare semedesimo et essere per similitundine chiamata (come disopra) agnello, peccora, verme, pietra, *etiam* angolare, vigna, suo Padre agricola, noi agricoltori et operari, egli vite et noi palmiti, gli suoi apostoli discepoli, seguaci et peccorelle, et esso pastore buono et maestro, quanto alla dottrina, et pecorella quanto al sacrificio, gli Giudei vipere, gli’idolatri gentili lupi, et simili altre. Così se tutte le attioni sue divine sono nostri ammaestramenti, non è donque stato in tutto fuori di proposito un tale appoggiameto fattovi, poiché me l’hanno imparato (per gratia divina) l’udire le prediche de nostri dotti Padri et leggere alcuni santi libri, oltre che me n’ha avvertito Giobe a 12 con dire: *Interroga jumenta et docebunt te et volatilia coeli et indicabunt tibi; loquere terrae et respondebit tibi, et narrabunt pisces maris.*
direct quotations, highlighting that she both relied on the fact that her nuns were well-versed in scripture, and invited them, with oblique references thereto, to reach back into the text for knowledge. In the discussion below, I will explicate both the poverty-related themes that emerge from Caterina’s biblical quotes, and show how this Poor Clare worked hard to make sure that her scripture-savvy audience confronted the challenge of God’s Word.

There can be no more obvious gospel line to choose when dealing with the theme of wealth vs. poverty than Matt 19:24. Reference to this line happens early on, when Caterina speaks of the brotherly habit of camels in section four. For, she explains, when one camel stops eating, be it from sickness or want, the others around him react empathetically:

And know that on the day of Judgment, Christ will come to confound all of the rich people, who could have—with the great charity of similar animals—treated their needy neighbors with charity but did not wish to do so; saying to them: “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” It is an easier thing for a camel to enter by transforming into a tiny drop than for a tight-fisted rich man to save himself…30

Her teaching tactic here is to use an animal anecdote to elaborate upon and intensify a well-known verse of scripture, one whose meaning was crucial to her community. Since

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30Ser. XXXIV, iv, 267: “Et sapiate che nel giorno del Giudizio Cristo vorrà confondere etiam con la grande carità de simili animali tutti gli ricchi che hanno potuto, et non hanno voluto, usare la carità verso il prossimo bisognoso, dicendo egli facilius est camelum per foramen acus transire, quam divitem intrare in regnum coelorum: più facil cosa è che un camello entri per il transforma d’una minuta gocchia che un ricco tenace si salvi…” Sgarbi insists, (n. 26) that the use of the word “tenacious” prior to “rich man” means that only the truly avaricious will be damned. I think that an argument can be made for precisely the opposite meaning, namely that holding on to any wealth was an obstinate and dangerous choice. Note that this particular quote from Matthew was significant within the Franciscan tradition for its use in Clare’s letters. See Martina Kreidler-Kos, “Come una seconda Rachele, avendo sempre presente il punto di partenza: Chiara d’Assisi e la Bibbia,” in Donne e Bibbia nel Medioevo, secoli XII–XV: tra ricezione e interpretazione, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (Trapani: Il pozzo di Giacobbe, 2011), 28.
members of Caterina’s audience came from wealthy families, this line would have read as an exhortation to give over all—and not just most—of what they possessed, and a stern reminder that voluntary poverty had its advantages when it came to saving one’s immortal soul. Caterina’s vivid extrapolation from one verse, shows that, for the nuns of Corpus Domini, the bible was both ancient and immediate, a text both authoritative and alive.

Caterina treats the voluntary renunciation of goods in two other references to scripture, one from the Old Testament, and one from the New. In section forty-one, while teaching how the hyena is like the devil, she also points out the devilish nature of the King of Sodom in the book of Genesis; and quotes his words to Abram “give me the living beings, the rest (of the spoils of war) take for yourself.” In the Latin of the Vulgate, this passage reads: \textit{Da mihi animas, cetera tolle tibi} (14:21). This statement is meant to reinforce her point that Satan works by deceit in order to pursue his ultimate goal: stealing human souls—\textit{animas}. But Caterina’s citation: “as is written in Chapter Fourteen of Genesis,” is unspecific enough as to invite her audience to read this whole chapter.\textsuperscript{31} Such a reading of the chapter’s full narrative uncovers a secondary meaning, one related to the holiness of poverty. Within Genesis 14, the King of Sodom and his allies are cruelly routed by the armies of a group of neighboring Kings. As a result, Abram’s nephew Lot is taken captive. Abram rounds up his own army and manages to take Lot back, and win back the spoils stolen from Sodom, thus winning the approval of

\textsuperscript{31} Gen 14 presented a unique (and perhaps deliberate) challenge for Caterina’s pupils, as it begins with a list of warring Kings in the vicinity of Sodom and Gomorrah, all of whom have incredibly complex names. Note that citing the entire chapter—Casanova’s rendering of Caterina’s citation throughout—seems to have been her deliberate choice. Citing of chapter and verse, though not the rule, was possible at this time, on which see Sabina Magrini, “Vernacular Bibles, Biblical Quotations, and the Paris Bible in Italy from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Century: A First Report,” in \textit{Form and Function in the Late Medieval Bible}, ed. Eyal Poleg and Laura Light, (Leiden: Brill. 2013), 237–259.
the King, who—in verse twenty-one—offers him these material goods as a reward. Abram explicitly rejects these goods, saying, in verses 22–24: “I lift up my hand to the Lord God the most high, the possessor of heaven and earth, that from the very woof thread unto the shoe latchet, I will not take of any things that are thine, lest thou say: I have enriched Abram. Except such things as the young men have eaten, and the shares of the men that came with me…” This statement, read in a fifteenth-century context, would sound like a declaration of Observant voluntary poverty. Abram is rejecting goods gained by traditional worldly commerce in the name of a God who alone possesses all. He is able to do so because he is “protected” by God, and blessed by the priest Melchisedech, who provides him, as is described in verses eighteen through twenty, with the “tithes of the people.” Abram’s good deeds are here supported by both religious hierarchy and the generosity of the pious, just as late medieval Franciscans’ were meant to be. Chapter Fourteen of Genesis flows swiftly into Chapter Fifteen in which Abram’s favored status is cemented, and God promises him innumerable heirs. This story would have resonated with Caterina’s own community, in their wish to establish their own renewed covenant with God that would include heirs to their way of life. In pointing her sisters to this passage, Caterina showed that material sacrifice could bring heavenly reward. Such a multi-layered approach to scripture was a hallmark of the “Animal

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32 Vul. Gen 14: 22–24: “Qui respondit ei: Levo manum meam ad Dominum Deum excelsum possessorum cael et terræ quod a filo subtegminis usque ad corigiam caligæ, non accipiam ex omnibus quæ tua sunt, ne dicas: Ego ditavi Abram, exceptis his, quæ comederunt juvenes, et partibus virorum, qui venerunt mecum…”

Sermon.” Here we can see that Franciscan themes of poverty and humility persisted in the midst of stories and symbols describing other, seemingly disparate, phenomena.

The New Testament reference to voluntary poverty occurs in section forty-five. This section features number symbolism, another tactic that Caterina used to coax her nuns to delve back into biblical texts in order to absorb their teachings. She cited no passages directly, but described them simply, showing how seemingly disparate verses were connected through the appearance of the mystical number twelve. As with her rather vague citation of “Genesis Chapter 14” above, I believe that this habit of extracting symbols from biblical episodes would not only have led her nuns back to the text to find the stories that she told, but would have encouraged them to think synthetically and symbolically about the content that they encountered. In section forty-five, the various recurrences of the number twelve in the bible are explained as a prefiguration of the ultimate sacrifice, that of Christ, the Lamb of God who drew twelve disciples to him like a magnet draws iron. The twelve disciples are lauded because of their own sacrifice, for they “abandoned their jobs [literally: exercises or activities—esercitii], their parents, their houses and their homelands to follow Jesus, their Lord and ours, in the fragrant sacrifice of themselves for love of him.”

Here, voluntary poverty is directly related to following Christ, imitating him by giving up earthly goods or relationships of any sort. The language of this passage echoes the one immediately before it, describing the twelve calves sacrificed to God by Moses and the sweet odor produced by their bodies as they burned. These images show how Caterina used the vocabulary of animal identity to

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34 Ser. XXXIV, xlv, 303–304: “Gli verificati et figurati donque de tutti li quali furono (come disopra) li 12 sudetti discepoli che, abbandonati i loro esercitii, parenti, case et patrie loro, seguirono Giesù loro et nostro Signore etiam in sacrificio odorifereo de lor stessi per amor suo.”
depict impoverishment of the self in the eyes of the world. The “missio apostolorum” was a theme deeply embedded in Franciscan consciousness, given the fact that it both inspired and legitimized their simple way of life.\(^\text{35}\) Thus, Caterina used traditional Franciscan concepts in new ways to promote the spiritual health of her community.

For Caterina, poverty did not simply mean giving up goods, but giving up status as well. After all, this is precisely what she had tried to do when she departed the Este court and refused marriage to Ferrarese notables in order to pursue one with Christ. These decisions to be poor, themselves mirrors of the choices of St. Clare, are also reflected in the scriptural passages in Sermon XXXIV. In section twenty-two, as mentioned above, Caterina compares the over-curious heretic to a moth devoured by flame, describing him further with a verse from Proverbs, saying that “he who is a seeker of majesty will be overwhelmed by Glory.”\(^\text{36}\) This statement, accompanied as it is with imagery of hellfire, seems a straightforward warning against the pursuit of novelty and acclaim. A slightly more oblique reference in this same vein occurs in section forty-seven. Here, Caterina aligns each evangelist with his animal symbol and a material element (earth, water, air or fire). Thus, she implicitly invites her audience, through these unusual new associations, to read all of the gospels once more, with new possibilities of interpretative meaning. Luke, the bull, is curiously associated with air, and is significant since Christ died up in the air on the cross. Caterina chooses to highlight this fact with a line drawn from John: “and I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all things to

\(^{36}\text{Vul Prov 25: 27: “Sicut qui mel multum comedit non est ei bonum, sic qui scrutator est majestatis opprimetur a gloria.”}\)
myself,” in which Jesus refers to both his manner of death and his dominion over the material world. This line can certainly be read as an a condemnation of secular thinking, but a verse even more telling immediately precedes it, and reads: “Now is the judgment of the world, now shall the prince of this world be cast out.” (Here, in the wake of the Transfiguration, Christ is referring to the words of his Father come down from Heaven.) If these Clarissans did not know this context right away, they could have encountered it upon their re-reading of the gospels, an act perhaps prompted by their desire to test this strange elemental interpretation of Christ’s mission.

Caterina reinforced the idea that mortality rendered worldly status useless through the use of animal-centered verses. Such is the declaration that “when a man shall die he shall inherit serpents, beasts, and worms,” a quote from Ecclesiasticus found near the end of section forty. She continues here with a further criticism of the material body itself, citing the popular belief that the human spinal cord, after burial, could actually become a snake. As this discussion is part of a larger one about Satan, it shows that Caterina could use animals as vectors of vice while simultaneously exploiting their symbolic power as emblems of human impoverishment—a positive virtue that led one to Christ.

The rejection of goods and status required the individual, as discussed above, to reform their patterns of consumption, and trust that God would provide. Consider that the first part of the verse of Proverbs 25:27 makes it clear that the fate of one who seeks too much majesty, is like that of the man who “eats too much honey.” According to the logic of the

37 Vul John 12:32: “Et ego, si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad meipsum.”
40 Ser. XXXIV, xl, 299. “Dio ha voluto che della medulla della spina corporale di dietro d’ogn’huomo et donna già morti ne naschi un serpe.”
scripture verses that Caterina chose, the key to eradicating such inappropriate appetites was to rely upon the sustenance provided by God. This was an important lesson for her Franciscan community, which relied upon the generosity of those in God’s service for its very existence.

Three emotional citations from psalms, and two animal anecdotes, provide Caterina with proof of the material and spiritual sustenance that God gives. Psalms, according to Alcuin Blamires, were “perhaps” the part of the bible “considered most suitable for women” in the Middle Ages.41 These Poor Clares would have been well acquainted with them since psalms were used as part of their daily Divine Office.42 That psalms were not simply familiar to these women, but actually memorized, is suggested by the fact there is no citation by psalm number, or any contextual references included in the manuscript at all. It simply mentions that the words included were those of “David”—the Old Testament figure believed to have composed them. The musical nature of psalms may have been especially important for Caterina, a lover of both music and poetry.43 And though there is scant evidence of other biblical texts in the Archivio Arcivescovile, Caterina made sure that a psalter was part of her capacious personal breviary, and another book containing psalms from the early days of Corpus Domini Bologna is still extant.44

43 Zarri, “Places and Gestures,” 180 cites passages in Bembo’s Specchio about the importance of communal song. Consider, as well, that the abbesses’ giga (a small lyre) rests with her in the chapel at Corpus Domini Bologna.
44 Claudio Leonardi, “Le glosse di Caterina Vigri al suo Breviario,” in Pregare con l’immagin: il breviario di Caterina Vigri, ed. Vera Fortunati and Claudio Leonardi (Florence: Sismel, 2004), 9–27. Here, Leonardi breaks down the area of the breviary (fol. 194–272) containing psalms. Interestingly, as we will see below, this psalter is part of the the giant work that Caterina did not copy herself, due to the fact that, after the age of forty, her eyes began to fail her. Also, AGA 35.1 is a tiny devotional book labelled, in the sixteenth century, “Prayers, Psalms, Spiritual Praises—with other things written in the hand of Blessed
Caterina’s first citation of psalms in the “Animal Sermon” occurs in section four, with a touching story of baby ravens born with white feathers. Their parents, not recognizing their pale offspring, refuse to feed them until their feathers darken. In the meantime, God responds to their hungry cries and feeds them with “heavenly dew,” making good on the words of Psalm 146 that it is He who “gives the beasts their food” and it is the “young ravens who call upon him.” The message woven into this story is one comforting to the voluntarily poor: even if those around them should deny them sustenance, God was always ready to provide.

The ultimate goal of earthy existence, for Caterina, was to prove worthy of such heavenly nourishment. In section twenty-seven, she elaborates upon the thirsty deer of Psalm 41, her scriptural symbol of persistent desire for such refreshment:

Our great thirst is compared, by David, to the thirsting deer, and he says often, “Just as the deer desires streams of water, so my soul desires You, God. My soul thirsts for God the Living Stream.” These [souls who thirst] are finally satisfied by God when they die. Then, they are taken by their guardian angels to the sole and celestial font, that which our most worthy protectors Saint Francis and Saint Clare came to, and from which they are still happily drinking. They are there, with all of the other saints, male and female and with David, singing continually, he has filled our hungry souls with good things (Ps 106, 9). Doesn’t it seem like there are many occasions upon which people who are covetous of power, gold, silver, possessions and greatness, the more they get the things that they want, the more their thirst and desire to get these things grows? This is because our hearts are not as big as this one world, but bigger than a thousand worlds, and are never content with what they possess, because they are insatiable, just like the heart of Alexander the Great, and that of the great Ottoman Turk who, today, not content with having taken Constantinople, burns and threatens to take Rome, first seat of all the Vicars of Christ, along with all of Europe. 

\[^{45}\text{Ps 146: 9: “qui dat jumentis escam ipsorum, et pullis corvorum invocantibus eum”}\]

\[^{46}\text{Ser. XXXIV, xxvii, 283: “Et appropriano con David quella asedato cervo, dicendo spesso Quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum, ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus. Sitivit anima mea ad Deum fontem vivum. Iché finalmente sono da Dio esauditi et in morte portati dall’angelo lor custode a quell’unico et celeste fonte a cui (tuttavia felicemente bevendo) arrivorno Santa Francesco et Santa Chiara, nostri dignissimi protettori et tutti gli altri santi et sante, cantando continoamente con esso David: Et animam nostram esurientem satiavit bonis. Qual sia poi la cagione che gli troppi avidi di}\]
Thus, using a pressing anecdote from contemporary politics, Caterina summed up her negative feelings about those who attempt to feed their souls a diet of worldly excess. Those who thirsted for heavenly joys instead aligned themselves not only with current Observant goals, but with Francis and Clare, originators of this laudable lifestyle. This particular quote from psalms actually reflects the everyday practices of Observant life. For Caterina’s use of the word “fontem” to describe God—from which her extended metaphor derives—does not come from the Vulgate version of the Psalms, where the word “fortem” (strong) is used instead. “Fontem” appears, however, in the versions of the psalms used in the Roman breviary, employed mainly for singing the divine office. Thus, the rhythms of their devotional practice echo in the very language of this sermon. The biblical images used were aimed specifically at changes in everyday behavior; when the abbess insisted that her listeners become more like the faithful hungry birds and the patient thirsty deer she advocated becoming more—not less—like the animals, a dynamic that I will explore further below.

We have seen that Caterina’s scripturally based ideology of poverty necessitated a reorientation of individual hunger while requiring that a divine mode of exchange replace a secular one. In addition, it promoted the concept that a person, no matter how poor, continues to give of herself. This duty to “give alms to the poor,” out of “Christian liberality” for the sake of the “precepts and love of God” applied to both “temporal and

facoltà, oro, argento, possesioni et grandezze, quanto più n’acquistano, tanto più gli si agomenta quella sicchità et voglia d’acquistare? Questa mondo tutto, et perciò é insatiabile, non mai contentandosi di quel che possede, che sempre più possedere vorrebbe, sim’era il cuor d’Alessandro Magno, et hoggidi quello d’Ottomano gran Turco che, non contento d’haver pigliat’hora Constantinopoli, ardisse e minaccia di voler Roma, prima sede de tutti gli Vicarii di Cristo, con tutta l’Europa.” Note that in the same section she also mentions the wild asses of Psalm, 103: 11, who David says “will expect in their thirst,” waiting for God to provide water. This one paragraph reveals just how Caterina layered the psalms in her teaching.
ecclesiastical goods." She states in section twenty-three that this behavior was exemplified by the eagle, an animal who “teaches” Christ’s statement in Matthew 26:11 that the “poor are always with you.” The eagle, says Caterina, almost always shares the prey that he takes with the smaller birds that continually follow in his wake. This image is of generosity and positive leadership, one that shows how Christian community should function. The eagle’s evil opposite is the vulture that “devours everything for himself alone and throws the rest away.” The vulture, of course, symbolizes the “cruel miser,” who, is condemned because, like the “tenacious rich man” of section four, he could have shared his wealth, but did not. For Caterina, to miss the opportunity to be voluntarily poor was to lose out on the promise of salvation; and she employed the twin tools of sacred scripture and animal anecdotes to communicate this message to her audience. Importantly, however, Caterina’s creatures were not just static symbols but active teachers of virtue.

*Commo da fidellisima madre:* Franciscan Women Encountering the Bible

Scripture, as we have seen, was an indispensable tool for Caterina and her nuns, one that served as a common touchstone for memory, a source for storytelling, and a conduit for sacred symbols. Knowledge of God’s Word in Latin, often kept from women during the high medieval period, was so important to Caterina that it was not just an academic tool but a spiritual weapon. For in her autobiography, *The Seven Spiritual

\[\text{Footnotes:} \]

47 *Ser.* XXXIV, xxiii, 280: “Il superfluo che n’avanza si deve per liberalità christiana per precetto et ammore di Dio, dare a poveri per limosina, così de beni temporali, com’ecclesiistici.”

48 Ibid.: “Ce lo insegna l’aquila ch’è continoamente seguitata da gli altri uccelli (pauperes semper habeibitis vobiscum)...” Caterina does not include a citation with this quote but merely states “dice il Signore,” proving again the deep familiarity that these nuns had with scripture.

49 *Ser.* XXXIV, xxiii, 280: “Il contrario fa l’avultore (per significato del crudele avaro) che ogni cosa devora per sé solo et tutti gli altri discaccia.”
Arms, the “memory of holy scripture” is the ultimate means of defense, number seven in her arsenal. “Our memory” says Caterina, is also the faculty we use to encounter, to ‘read’, as it were, symbolic animals. Just like scripture, their nature and behaviors were also “created by God” so that we would have more “occasions to remember” the contrast between virtue and vice. The strength of holy memory, “carried in one’s heart,” is necessary to vanquish Satan. Thus, a chance to absorb the words of scripture was never to be passed by. Scriptural “lessons,” like Caterina’s preaching sessions, could occur daily, “in choir and at table,” “at mass” and in each “cell.” Here, Caterina’s own words indicated that scripture texts of various sizes and forms—from the large lectionary to the portable pandect to the personal psalter—were used daily in both of her monasteries, though we cannot see or touch them any longer. It is clear that such scriptural literacy allowed these nuns to interpret God’s wisdom on their own terms. It is telling, as well, that Caterina refers to scripture, in its ability to teach, as “a most faithful mother,” for she tried her best to imitate scriptural methodologies in her own writing, undertaken while teacher and mother of her community.

50 SA VII, 2, 14: “La setima arma con la quale possiamo vincere li nostri nemici si é la memoria della santa Scriptura…” Resources for researching how cloistered women in Italy encountered biblical texts can be surprisingly difficult to find. Such classics as Beryl Smalley, The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) and Pierre Riché and Guy Lobrichon, eds. Le moyen âge et la Bible (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984) provide limited relevant information. Thus, I have relied upon lesser known works and Caterina’s own words to reconstruct the particular encounters of the women of Corpus Domini.

51 Ser. XXXIV, i, 265: “…così da Dio creati, si per nostra memoria locale, da poterci tanto più facilmente nelle occorrenze raccordare.” For medieval memory, see Mary Carruthers The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture (Cambridge University Press, 2008). A classic that is particularly useful in Caterina’s context is Leclercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God. See, in particular, 73–77 on “Reminiscence” and “Biblical Imagination.”

52 SA, VII, 3: “Pertanto, dillectissime sorelle, non lassatì andare vacue le cotidiane lecione che se leze in corro e alla mensa; e anco penssati che li evanzeli e pistole che ogno di oldite nella messa siano novelle letere mandate a vue dal vostro celestiale spoxo, e con grande e fervente amore reponitele nel vostro pecto e, quanto più spesso possite, pensati inn esse, e massime quando stati in cella, aciò che melgio e più seguramente possati dolcemente e castissimamente abrazare collui ve lle manda…”

53 Ibid.
from literate culture; but the sermons show that Caterina was fully engaged with scripture, the very wellspring of it.

Such sophisticated engagement was possible because even before their entry into Franciscan religious life, books containing the scriptures were available to these women of means. As Sabrina Corbellini has pointed out, the urban bourgeois of Northern Italy—the class from which much of Caterina’s community came—were large-scale consumers of biblical texts by the beginning of the Quattrocento. Bologna itself, as a university center, rivaled Paris as a hub for production and distribution of cheap, standardized Latin bibles. The courts of Italian noble families, where the most prosperous were educated, instead produced beautifully customized and expensive devotional works that incorporated scripture. In fact, at the same time as Caterina was creating her sermon, master artists under the guidance of Taddeo Crivelli were busy crafting the famous Bible of Borso d’Este. The Este court, the location of Caterina’s early education, became, from the 1450s on, a home for some of the most intricately decorated devotional books in Italy, works like the ornate Gualenghi-Este book of Hours. Just after her death in the 1469, Guglielmo Giraldi, one of the court painters who illuminated the Hours, made a vivid likeness of Blessed Caterina herself in a manuscript, framing it in gold leaf and richly colored inks.

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54 Sabrina Corbellini, “‘Looking in the Mirror of the Scriptures: Reading the Bible in Medieval Italy,’” in Wading Lambs and Swimming Elephants: The Bible for the Laity and Theologians in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Era, ed. François and Hollander (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 27.
56 For an examination of bible texts as objects of prestige in a slightly earlier period, see Cathleen A. Flec, The Clement Bible at the Medieval Courts of Naples and Avignon (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).
In contrast, Caterina’s ideal devotional text was a humble one. Though it is dangerous to argue from absence, the very fact that no full copy of the bible remains in the Archivio Beata Caterina proves that their scripture texts were likely well-thumbed and non-descript. The devotional books that do survive support this conjecture. All of the composite texts originating from Corpus Domini and dating from the mid- to late Quattrocento are of a small size and reveal deliberate re-purposing of materials. They also bear indications of heavy wear. Most are sparsely decorated and include disparate texts copied down for the practical, everyday use. Caterina’s breviary seems to contrast with this model. Indeed, it is a large-scale work composed of five hundred seventeen folios and decorated with her own illustrations. Illuminata Bembo tells us, however, that the abbess was quite careful to include only the most modest marginalia in this book of praise and was wont to say:

Why make flowers and branches [in a breviary]? Isn’t it better to have “Jesus” or “Christ” in the capital letters since it is for praying and reading? What feeling could such branches bring about if not the wandering of the mind? [The name] ‘Jesus Christ,’ though, is sweet and smooth to remember!

58 See AGA 25, 32, 34 and 35. Even the sixteenth and seventeenth century texts there show that the community valued utility and simplicity in their texts well after Caterina’s death.

59 AGA 34, 4 is a ritual book that perhaps belonged to Caterina herself, and is an excellent example of reuse of materials. It is clear that the book passed through many hands due to the extensive wear on the pages and the many comments in the margins and marks in the text. But it may have had a life even before it arrived at Corpus Domini. For, each time a female noun or pronoun occurs therein, it looks as if a copyist has removed the underlying male pronoun, with the effect that each “sororibus” appears to have once been a “fratribus.” Perhaps this ritual book was passed to the nuns of Corpus Domini from one of their male confessors.

60 AGA 35, 1, for example, the tiny and well-worn book mentioned above, measures only 10.5 x 8.5 x 2.75 cm. It is crammed with at least a dozen different texts in several hands—everything from a laud for the Virgin, to a tract of Bernardino of Siena, to a hymn to St. Clare. The margins may have been cut down to fit the pocket-sized binding and it appears to be comprised of both paper and vellum folios. Another small volume, AGA 25, 1 measures 15.5x10.1x5 cm. It is an easily portable compendium containing a diverse selection of materials. Even if these works were compiled by the nuns of Corpus Domini at a later date, this book suggests that most of the texts produced during the Quattrocento were of a simple and sensible nature.

61 Specchio V, xxx, 36: “Non volendo però che fusse facto vilmente li breviarii, li quali dicea se doveano fare e tochare con molta solemnità e reverentia, como se fusse uno calice per respecto delle sacre parole, le quale se ministrano in laude de Dio. E dicea: ‘Che li fa quello fiorire e ffrasche? Non sta meglio Ihesu o Christo nelli capi versi, como è delle oratione e lectione? Che sentimento si pò trare de quelle fasche se non
Though one can find flowers and branches in her breviary, this statement goes far in explaining the humble textual style that Caterina preferred, in spite of her court training. This preference has been pointed out by art historian Kathleen Arthur, who calls the breviary miniatures examples of “poor art” that, in contrast to most of those produced by non-Franciscan women, displayed “deliberately crude” figures. This kind of production was therefore a way for Caterina to “render (her) vows of humility and poverty visible,” while copying scriptural words describing these same values.62 Thus, she made her images preach; and one of the most repeated phrases in the breviary is “listen to me” or “listen beloved sisters.”63

In Sermon XX (which treats human folly and the importance of spending time wisely) we can read Caterina’s own words about creating “poor art” in a simple style, and they reveal just how much these tactics were part of her vocation. First, she defends her creativity, saying that though she may seem to waste time in copying holy books in reality the opposite is true. Instead, she engaged in these efforts for “a just cause, and that is to increase—in me and in you—pure devotion.”64 This statement is just the beginning of her personal defense to her sisters of devotional work that was valuable precisely because it was not comprised of materials of value. To make much of art, she said, was

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64Ser. XX, ii, 178: “…stato per sola giusta causa, et cioè di accrescere maggiormente in me et in voi la pura devotione.”
to go against my first profession, which holds that I should always be doing and saying good things, instead of staying all day painting away with my brushes. I am supposed to discipline myself—not paint little pictures. I have to hide, not glorify myself, to do penance—not make secular art all of the time. I have to observe my holy rule and not stain myself with red earth or liquid pitch. And finally I have to praise and adore my Creator…and not seek the praise of [His] creatures…Don’t you see that to make a profession out of painting miniatures in silver and gold and with fine colors, trying to make them perfect, would be to spend my time wrongly? It would be found out and severely punished by God at the point of my death, especially because I am (as an unworthy servant of St. Clare) obligated to lament the bitter death of my Christ.  

Though she chides herself for being “really ignorant” about art, and for painting the breviary “shoddily…with figures that do not have any good design at all,” Caterina’s lack of pretension fed into her mission to make work that was of “common use” to all the nuns. In doing so, she managed to create a “radical” aesthetic, in which her very art made “the superiority of the Word” manifest. In showing her community how poverty could be built into literary self-expression, this abbess let them know that the medium was the message.  

For Caterina’s words above about the profession of painting and her knowledge of materials used by early Renaissance artists suggest sophisticated training, likely gained when she was at court. Thus, she could have imitated conventional technique if she

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65 Ibid., 178–179: “Altrimenti farei contra la mia principale professione, nella quale son tenuta a fare e dire sempre del bene, et non stare tutto il di con li pennelli a dipingere. E ho me stessa da disciplinare et non da miniare. Ho da macerarmi et non da gloriarmi: ho da far penitenza et non esercitare arte secolare con frequenza. Ho da osservare la mia santa regola et non tingermi di terra rossa, over di pegola. Et finalmente ho da lodare et adorare…il mio Creatore et non cercare le lodi dalle creature…Non vedete che il far professione di miniare con oro e argento et con fini colori et darli la sua perfezione, sarebbe tempo tutto mal speso da me et ne sarei nel punto della morte mia da Dio ricercata et severament punita, et massime ch’io sono (come indegna serva di S. Chiara) obligata a pianger del Christo mio la morte amara.”  
66 Ibid.: “perché dell’arte ne sono ignorantissima;” then Caterina says that she paints “vilemente, con figure che non habbino alcun buon disegno” even though breviaries should be “dipinte con grande eccellenza.” Still, she does not feel weight on her conscience, because “che sia uso commune di farne.” Counterintuitively, perhaps, her discussion of aesthetics, rather than just showing that she had a low opinion of her work, would have actually caused her audience to consider the choices behind its composition.  
67 Fortunati, “Pregare con l’immagini,” 45.  
68 Arthur, Il brevario, 97.
desired. But a poor process was so important to her that she even impoverished her health while she worked on her lengthy breviary. Since her body was exhausted and her eyes weakened due to incessant writing and drawing—as well as frequent devotional tears—Casanova tells us that members of her community actually took the breviary from her suddenly in order to protect the health of both book and nun. It was sent off to be finished by a professional copyist in Ferrara.69 This episode illustrates the truth that these sisters could well afford to outsource their art if they wished. But pursuing impoverished literary labor, thus becoming a creature who praised Creator through holy word (even while sacrificing the body) was part of the ideal identity of an Observant Poor Clare. This same dynamic, constructing identity on a foundation of material poverty and spiritual sacrifice, explains Caterina’s adoption of the animal voice.

Un zero et un niente: Poverty, Identity, and Franciscan Animal Becoming

It may seem strange, therefore, that Caterina’s Breviary has few if any animals in its margins. This makes sense, however, when one considers that instead they are found in the text, or, to go further, in the behavior of those who read the work. To see how different this was from trends in contemporary culture, one has only to turn to Borso d’Este’s bible, and the images Taddeo Crivelli chose to paint in its margins. There are flowers and branches to be sure, but also dozens upon dozens of animals.70 One in

69Ser. 20, 177: “Et così fu più volte trovata...copiare et in un medesimo tempo miniare et lachrimare. Ma finalmente... gli levorno improvvisamente esso breviario dianzi, dipoi li comandorno per santa obbedienza che più non copiasse, né miniasse libri, etiam per rispetto delli colore che sono mal sani, dimodoché lei lo fece poi finire di scrivere da un publico copista ivi in Ferrara.” See Arthur, Clare & Francis, 182–183 for the different type of script discernable in the psalter. Caterina stated specifically within the breviary that it was not copied by her.

70Ivano Ansaloni, Mirko Iotti and Marisa Mari, “Il Bestiario,” Bollettino d’Arte 6: 93,14. (2008) [La Bibbia di Borso d’Este]: 41–58. Note that a leashed ape was commonly an symbol of appetite under control, a fact perhaps belied by the lavish nature of this illuminated text.
particular, stands out: a monkey on a leash. Those who have examined this image point out that Crivelli likely drew it from life, as the Dukes of Este not only enjoyed hunting but also possessed a collection of exotic animals. This zoo could explain some of Caterina’s familiarity with certain non-native species. More importantly, though, it shows that animals, and possession of them, was a strong symbol of social status in the early Renaissance period.

Expressing rulership through dominion over animals was in fact, an evolving tactic of the powerful during the mid to late Quattrocento. The keeping of pets, especially lapdogs, for personal amusement became a preoccupation of wealthy ladies. Interestingly, during this time, “Bologna emerged early on as a major breeding and training center for such dogs.” 71 Isabelle d’Este (1474–1539) and her husband Francesco Gonzaga built on the practices of their predecessors in the region by making ownership of both common and exotic creatures part of their charisma as rulers of Ferrara. 72 As Caterina knew well, in her day, animals served not only as a symbol of wealth, but as a source of it. Note, for example, that in 1415, Rinaldo, father of Giovanna Lambertini, vicaress of Corpus Domini Bologna, received a concession from Joanna II, Queen of Naples, consisting of income from her animal gabelle. 73 Thus, allowing “beasts to teach” through their example instead of exploiting them for their economic value was a reversal of the dominant aristocratic culture, and a deliberate way to embrace Franciscan poverty.

71 Juliana Schiesari, Beasts and Beauties: Animals, Gender, and Domestication in the Italian Renaissance (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 19.
72 Scholar Sarah Cockram’s calls such animals “living heraldry.” Her current research project is: “Courtly Creatures: Animals and Image Construction at the Italian Renaissance Court.” http://www.academia.edu/3025029/_Courtly_Creatures_Animals_and_Image_Construction_at_the_Italian__Renaissance_Court_ , accessed October 3, 2015.
73 Dolfi, Cronologia della famiglie nobili Bolognesi, 442: “Rinaldo dalla Regina Giovanna di Napoli gli fu concessa la gabella de gl’Animali, carico non ignobile.”
At the outset of her sermon, Caterina made a clear statement about the ability of some animals to teach humans, one that is easy to miss in the midst of her discussion of virtue and vice. In fact, it makes sense only in light of the quote from Job near the sermon’s end that explains her mission as one that allows creatures to speak. In section three, she told her sisters the following:

We will leave out of the discussion—for now—those various animals that, outside of the virtues and vices written about above, have other virtuous and vicious qualities that are not part of our subject. They are not part of it, because they have more lively feelings than man and are more industrious and ingenious [than him] in finding the appropriate remedies for their infirmities, and other similar problems. As far as concerns things of the body (and our natural, bodily properties and qualities, things that we will talk about below) all of us—men and women of whatever religion, state and condition we may be—really must resolve to rid from them each vice of pride, ambition, vainglory, arrogance and any other great sin. We should always live humbly, meekly, and devotedly, to please God alone. We must realize the truth of that fact that almost each one of us is a zero and a nothing because we have conquered and overcome all of the beasts, as if they were the very lowest [beings] when truly, in nearly all natural and bodily things we should be, as much as we can (I dare say) their disciples. These animals should have a voice so that they are able to tell the perfections of their natures.74

The Italian words that Caterina uses in the last sentence quoted “loquella” (voice) and “narrare” (to tell), closely mirror the Latin verbs “loquere” and “narrabunt” of Job 12, 7:8, found in the sermon’s last section. Thus, the content of the sermon is bookended

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74 Ser. XXXIV, iii, 266. “Ma lasciaremo per addesso il discorrere sopra quelli vari animali che, fuori degli’infischi vitii et virtù, hanno altre qualità virtuose et vitiose che non fanno al nostro proposito, come più dell’huomo vivaci nei sentimenti, et più industriosi et ingegnosi in trovar gli remedii appropriati alle loro infermità et chi in quelunque altre simili. In quanto però al corpo et alle proprietà et qualità corporali et naturali, dalle quali et da queste altre c’hora diremo da basso, ci dovessimo ben tutti, huomini et donne di qual religione et stato et condizione si sia, risolverci a deporre del tutto, per piacere solo a Dio, ogni vitio di superbia, d’ambizione, di vanagloria, di persuasione, et di qual si voglia altro peccatazzo con vivere sempre humili, mansuete, et devote, riconoscendoci per verità che siamo meschinissime et per certo quasi del tutto un zero et un niente poichè veniamo di gran lunga superate et vinte da tutte le bestie, come veramente infimissime, quasi in tutte le cose naturali et corpore a loro, in tanto che potessimo anche (son per dire) d’esser in ciò loro discepolo, s’essi animali havessero loquella di poter narrare le perfessioni delle lor nature.” Note that the phrasing concerning the avoidance of pride and vainglory is a strong echo of RSC Chapter X.
with biblical language describing the dignity and power of animal speech, that is, their ability to communicate ineffable good through bodily behavior. A closer reading of section one actually reveals a parallel between “Catholic preachers” and the “beasts themselves” both of which issue figurative words of warning to the disobedient on how to avoid the punishments of the damned.75 Acknowledging the simple power of the lowliest creatures and thus becoming their “disciple,” was not just a way for Caterina to refute contemporary culture of animal dominion. It became, in addition, a way for this preacher to acknowledge the real nothingness of human identity, the “zero” that we earn through worldly striving. The sensitivity of embodied animal feelings (“vivaci sentimenti”) and the intelligence of their natural problem solving (“ingegnosi…loro infirmità”) are markers, for Caterina, of true and absolute poverty. Her definition of animal feeling seems to fall between the medieval, Aristotelian concept of the embodied sensibilities of beasts and the burgeoning Renaissance conception of their “emotional integrity.”76 This tension between two modes of thinking shows that the sermon was ideologically complex but had a clear and practical goal. For this animal model of communication through positive behavior instead of empty speech revealed to Observant Franciscan women the core of their vocation. The words of scripture, says Caterina, modelled this process of animal becoming too, showing us the truth that “all of us Christian servants are [God’s] little dogs…”77

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75 Ser. XXXIV, i, 265. Caterina predicts woe for those who “non habbino hauti per prima chiara notitia, cognizione et avvertimento sino dalle bestie istesse; oltre che principalmente ne sarano stati certificati non meno dalla propria lor conscienza et dalli catholici predicatori…”


77 Ser. XXXIV, xxxii, 274. This quote occurs in a section detailing the virtuous behaviors of the dog. These, says Caterina “non senza instruttione delli christiani, suoi cagnolini, sicome ciò misteriosamente si
The true Franciscan nature of the idea of animal voice is exemplified by an anecdote in section eighty-six of Celano’s first biography the Order’s founder. In it, we find not simply a reproach, as in the story of Francis preaching to the birds, that animals listen to God’s word better than humans. Here we find a suggestion that animals talk better than we do as well. For here, Francis actually becomes an animal, or at least speaks like one. Celano says that Francis, in celebration of Christmas

...sang the holy Gospel in a sonorous voice. And his voice was a strong voice, a sweet voice, a clear voice, a sonorous voice, inviting all to the highest rewards. Then he preached to the people standing about, and he spoke charming words concerning the nativity of the poor King and the little town of Bethlehem. Frequently too, when he wished to call Christ Jesus, he would call him simply the Child of Bethlehem, aglow with overflowing love for him; and speaking the word Bethlehem, his voice was more like the bleating of a sheep. His mouth was filled more with sweet affection that with words...

In this quotation, we see the seed of Caterina’s animal ideologies as regards both scripture and sentiment. Here Francis, while preaching, tells a bible story containing animals. This story fills him with such bodily affection that he praises Christ using the

verica nella Chananea e nella risposta del Signore et nella gratiosa replica di lei et poi netta ottenuta gratia da esso Dio in confirmatione d’esser tutte noi christianie et christianiani servi et serve, sue cagne et cagnolini, che tutta via per gratia ci nodrisce di brisole sante del suo celeste et deifico pane, cadenti dalla sacra mensa del suo etero Paradiso...” Here, Caterina is referencing the scriptural story in Mark VII and Matt. XV in which a Canaanite woman follows Christ when he visits her area, beseeching him to heal her daughter of a demonic possession. An exchange follows in which Jesus says “It is not good to take the bread of children and cast it to the dogs,” referring to the faithless reputation of her people. The woman responds “but even the whelps eat the crumbs off the tables of their masters.” Because of her faith and humility, Christ heals her daughter immediately. It is interesting to note, apropos of Chapter 3, that John Chrysostom uses this passage to exhibit the reversal of the chosen status of the Jews, saying that, in the Christian era, the Gentiles are God’s children and the Jews have become dogs. Caterina is thus shown to be carefully attuned to how to fashion herself as at once humble and chosen; taking advantage of the abundance of ambivalent images embedded in the Christian homiletic tradition. See Stow, Jewish Dogs, 4.


78 Celano, 77 (XXX, 86). I was alerted to this passage by Felice Moretti, Dal ludus alla laude: giochi di uomini, santi e animali dall’alto Medioevo (Bari: Edipuglia, 2007), 155–156. See also Marini, Sorores alaudae, 83.
voice of humble sheep. Caterina, when she preached—or barked—to her sisters like a little dog, became animal-like to praise Christ as well. To go a step further, both of them, in sacrificing their humanity, imitated their Savior, who himself became, through sacrifice, a most immaculate lamb.

Thus, though it certainly does not appear so at the outset, the “Animal Sermon” is a text that engages with the Franciscan past to address contemporary concerns and core Christian beliefs. When seen in this light, far from being an obscure piece, simply one of Caterina’s “most private writings,” this treatise is shown to be one of her signature works, a sermon that advances our knowledge of female scriptural literacy and religious culture as the Middle Ages became the Renaissance. It also shows just how rich and relevant the premodern past is for the current field of animal studies, whose current proponents are fruitfully investigating, just as Francis and Caterina did, the concept of the animal voice.80

CONCLUSION

All nuns, whether they follow our Rule or any other, should be warned when one of them… falls into thinking, (or even slips up and says out loud), “If I would have stayed in the secular world, I would have been fruitful, because I would have had children to serve God, but inside the monastery I do not do anything, I am not useful and I waste my time.” Such a thought is wholly diabolical for a professed nun…for…worldly marriages fill up the earth, but those of Christ fill up heaven…and in comparison to the few children born in the secular world, those who are born to a good nun… are innumerable.

[For] God wants you to be not children of the flesh, but children of the spirit,…and to work for the edification of your neighbor and to win souls for Him with daily supplication for the conversion of all sinners, all of whom become your happy births—children won for and offered to God. You can have two, twelve, or twenty children of the flesh, over many years, but even after you have the most extreme birth pangs…they will move away from you quickly…sometimes too soon, and cause great tribulation to their parents. But you can have hundreds [of spiritual children] every day, children who cannot be lost, but are saved and cleansed eternally in Heaven…[where they] will meet you with infinite celebration, thanks, honor and the highest of praise, these [children] who through you, their spiritual and most beloved mothers, were born happily unto salvation.¹

This passage, from Sermon XXVII, encapsulates the overall purpose of Caterina’s preaching. Here, and throughout the sermons, she addresses the practical, everyday concerns of the women under her care, turning their personal spiritual struggles into opportunities for communal discipline, devotion, and ultimately, celebration. In this

¹Ser. XXVII, viii, 208: “Avertiscano ancora tutte le monache, et nostre et di qualonque altra regola, che qualc’una de loro si lanciano alcune volte cadere in pensiero et anche scappare di bocca, con dire: S’io fosse restata nel secolo, sarei stata fruttuosa, perché havrei fatto delli figliuoli per servire a Dio, et qua dentro nel monasterio non facio nulla, sono inutile et perdo il mio tempo. Percché questo è pensiero a monache professe tutto diabolico…Imperoché…le nozze del mondo riempono la terra et quelle di Christo riempono il Cielo…E però quelle del presente secolo partoriscono pocchi figliuoli rispetto a quelli che partorisce la buona monacha et tutti gli altri buoni religiosi a Giesù Christo, quali sono innumerebili…perciòché se Dio…vuole che siamo tutti suoi buoni figliuoli non già di carne ma di spirito…et guadagnare delle anime a Dio con supplicarlo costidianamente per la conversione de tutti gli peccatori, tutti questi (voglio dire) sarano vostri felici partì e figli a Dio offerti et guadagnati…Et sapiate che non sarano due, dodici né venti figli carnali in molti anni, et con estremissimi vostri dolori partoriti, che poi, per l’ordinario, in breve tempo et presto se ne muoiono, et qualche volta troppo presto, con tribolazione de lor parenti, ma sarano le centinaia ogni giorno, li quali non già perduti, ma salvati et saliti poi tutti eternamente al Cielo…Et…vi verranno incontro con infinita giubilazione festeggiando, regratiandovi, honorandovi et con somma lode magnificandovi, ché per voi madre lor spirituali et amantissime, partoriti con allegrezza alla salute…”
conclusion, I will highlight the various—sometimes disparate—historiographical fields that have been enriched through my examination of the *sermoni* and Caterina’s related works. After considering present contributions, I will point to directions for further study of the Observant movement, suggesting analysis of additional archives, Rule commentaries, and female sermons from the Quattrocento and beyond.

The overarching historiographical contribution of this project has been to women’s history. One has to look no further than the passage above to see that Caterina used the sermons to describe a life in which traditional female social and biological stresses—the obligations of materialistic marriage and risky childbirth—are transmuted, for enclosed nuns, into powerful spiritual advantages. The *Ordinazione* reveal, that, in a similar manner, adopting features of a stricter observance actually allowed these women more freedom to pursue an ambitious communal program of do-it-yourself learning. In documenting the practice of preaching on the part of abbesses, and the catalyzing power of Observantism upon such speech, my work has exposed the true extent to which Second Order Franciscan reform in Italy provided unexpected opportunities for women at the end of the premodern age. An important lesson that Caterina’s sermons teach us today is that to study these women is to study all aspects of the culture that surrounded them, so that future directions in women’s history are shown to be truly inclusive, propelling scholars outward to explore multiple, overlapping territories of the social past’s complex terrain.

The chapters of this dissertation have mapped out multiple areas of interest that can intersect with women’s history. In Chapter One, examining the roots and branches of Franciscan Observant reform allowed us a singular opportunity to delve into the history
of the Catholic Church. In investigating the interactions of the First and Second Orders in Italy, as well as the relationship between normative ideals and daily practice in enclosure, I hope to have brought some clarity to internal processes of the Quattrocento reform, showing that its dynamic and often unpredictable trajectories forever put to rest the idea that decline, waning or stasis characterized institutional religiosity at the end of the Middle Ages. In Chapter Two, I have shown what we can learn about women’s history from enclosed preaching and also suggested that the genesis of such exhortative spiritual conversation can be found deep in the histories of medieval pedagogy, court culture, and even economic exchange. Most importantly, however, they were linked to daily practices of communal confession. Chapters Three and Four brought up further historiographical intersections, showing how sermon rhetoric and symbols generated Clarissan identity, and how this identity was in turn related to larger cultural trends outside of the cloister—those that dominated Italian civic life. Chapter Three contains the unhappy truth that anti-Judaism, a much-discussed feature of Quattrocento society as a whole, was also part of Caterina’s Observant mission. In fact, her new normative practices were built on the ultimate rejection of the Old Law and its increasingly persecuted followers in North-Central Italy. In Chapter Four, I showed that though this abbess was unable to muster feelings of human solidarity with the Jewish people, she felt more than comfortable aligning her sentiments with those of various animals. This final chapter has therefore contributed to the burgeoning field of animal studies, perhaps the most improbable and intriguing of all historiographical contributions afforded by the complex subject matter of Caterina’s sermon corpus. Though I attempted to treat these works in a comprehensive way, there is certainly room for additional investigation, beginning with analysis of
further archival materials, specifically rule commentaries and additional female-authored sermons.

Future versions of this project will begin with further research at the state archives in both Ferrara and Bologna, first seeking additional prosopographical information for the women of both Corpus Domini communities. More familial information will help to make even more connections between these nuns and the court, civic, and material culture of their fifteenth-century cities. During this process, I wish to undertake a complete investigation of the private archive at Corpus Domini Ferrara, which was not possible for this iteration of the project. In a similar manner, I would like to further trace the patterns of reform by studying relationships between various Italian Observant communities—themselves religious families—even more closely. An especially desirable goal would be to create a definitive list of the documented encounters between notable male Observant preachers with female communities. Smaller-scale interactions between male and female Observants, specifically dealing with confessors, would also prove a productive area for investigation. Another future step will be to examine Clarissan Rule commentaries of the period, a first goal being to create an edition of Caterina’s Ordinazione through consultation of not just the Archivio Arcivescovile copy, but of those versions available at the Biblioteca Communale and within the small archive of Corpus Domini Bologna. This edition could then be compared to the multiple Italian commentaries of the Observant period by both men and women. A good starting-point would be the female-authored statutes of Monteluce in Perugia as well as those of Battista da Varano in Camerino, followed by the more obscure guidelines composed by the women of Pesaro and Sarzana.
An even more fruitful genre for future exploration, is, of course, that of sermons delivered by Clarissans and other reforming women in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. For Caterina’s work is only one manifestation of a larger movement of female preaching in enclosure—usually by members of the Franciscan or Dominican orders—in an age of expanding vernacular expression. As I will show briefly below, these addresses incorporate many features already explored in preceding chapters, including intensive and innovative use of scriptural content, cultivation of a conversational approach rich in questions, and the vivid physicalization of spiritual concepts so as to render information exchange both practical and concrete.

Although interpretation of scripture was often a task deliberately kept from women at the end of the Middle Ages, preaching abbesses were, like Caterina, experts at using the bible to teach. The Spanish holy woman Juana de la Cruz (1481–1534), for example, vividly reenacts the drama of the gospels in her sermons, focusing on the incarnation and the early life of Jesus. Although she uses direct quotes from scripture, her preference was to re-tell the stories of Christ and the virgin in more relatable ways. This tactic is especially evident in her retelling of the episode of Luke 2, in which a boy Christ separates from his parents during their trip to Jerusalem in order to teach in the temple. Juana tells of Mary’s frantic return to the city, saying “When she arrived in Jerusalem, she went crying for him through all of the streets, moaning and sighing and sobbing, fainting and faltering, worried to death and asking everyone that she came across, saying with a sad and quavering voice...‘have you...seen...my son?’”

1Juana de la Cruz, *El Conhorte: Sermones de una Mujer, La Santa Juana*, ed. Inocente García Andrés, 2 vols (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española–Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, 1999), vol. 2, 533: “... y cuando llegó a jerusalén, que iba llorando por todas las calles, y gimiendo y suspirando y sollozando, desfalleciendo y desmayando, y preguntando a todos los que topaba, con ansias mas que de muerte,
This kind of embodied, emotional story telling with scripture was a deliberate choice, designed to render God’s word more immediate for her audience. Juana, however, could also make a more traditional and intellectual use of scripture in her sermons. Sermon Nine displays this tendency clearly, for here she bases her discourse entirely on a gospel passage for Septuagesima Sunday.² Domenica Narducci da Paradiso (1473–1553), a visionary Dominican abbess from Florence, was also recorded as using a gospel pericope for roughly half of her extant works. Her prized tactic was to explicate the mysterious parables and figures of Christ for her charges. As we know, Caterina went so far as to say, in Sermon XXXIV, that she was modeling Christ’s own tactic of using parables and symbols. And this kind of practical, customized approach to biblical content was perhaps epitomized by the abbess of Santo Sepulcro in Venice, Chiara Bugni (1471–1514), in her addresses to her sisters.³ Her way of lending immediate relevance to gospel words was to follow each Latin quote from scripture with an explication in the vernacular as to how it related to the everyday obligations of their vocation. In all cases, these nuns consumed Holy Scripture, as put forth in sermons, as a sustaining spiritual “food.”⁴

As we know from Caterina’s work, it was not just the voices of teaching abbesses that are preserved in female sermons but those of their many students, too. It has been noted that female didactic discourse across time is marked by a desire for “connection
diciendo con voz muy quebrantada y dolorosa: Oh señores y señoritas habeis pro ventura visto...a mi hijo...?"
²Ibid., 444–465.
⁴Da Paradiso, I Sermoni, 3: “cibi della sacra scriptura.” Domenica’s works are full of metaphors aligning spiritual learning with physical eating and drinking.
and dialogue,” and therefore many women’s works have a conversational structure.\(^5\)

Surviving sermon-texts show that these conversations started with a demanding audience, eager to consume spiritual information from their teacher. Chiara Bugni’s sisters, for example, rush to finish their dinner at one point because they had the “great desire” to hear their abbess speak.\(^6\) These communal conversations were merely imperfect practice, however, for a form of ideal communication—conversation with Christ. We have already seen Juana de la Cruz’s intense interest in dramatic recreation of gospel paradigms, and this does often take the form of familiar dialogues featuring Jesus. A good example of this tendency occurs in visionary Sermon Thirty-Six, which features Christ’s Dialogue with Saints Peter and Paul, in their capacity as keepers of his sheep.\(^7\) Domenica da Paradiso, in her Sermon Seven, presents her own visionary quest for scriptural meaning. Her journey begins and ends with an intellectual conversation, a request for and an exchange of knowledge with Christ, who comforts her with an understanding of his mysteries.\(^8\) Recall, too, Caterina’s conversations with Jesus, during which he “spoke to her in a familiar way” as a reward for her continual contemplation of his Passion.\(^9\) When they discussed their enlightening conversations with Christ, these sermon-givers mirrored

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\(^6\)Bugni, *La Vita e Sermoni*, 279. In the paratext preceding the Sermon on Obedience, the vicaress urges the ailing abbess to speak, for she says her charges have “il gran desiderio...d'udirvi, hanno accelerato il desinare e tutte sono volute venire ad ascoltarvi...”

\(^7\)De La Cruz, *El Conhorte*, 987–991.

\(^8\)Da Paradiso, *I Sermoni*, 67–95; 94: “Alhora disse: ‘Confortati.’” He then gives her to drink of a cup that gives her “la doctrina,” which in turn helps her to understand “molti mysterii.”

\(^9\)Ser. 29, 225: “standing ella una notte d’esso venere in orazione nella sua cella dianzi al suo crocifisso lo pregava intensamente la volesse ci ciò, per gratia sua singolare, esaudire et consolare. Il benignissimo Giesù Christo, gli parlò familiarmente, sicome altre volte fece, e le disse: ‘Anima mia diletta, molto mi compiaccio in questo tuo desiderio et affetto et gran piacere mi dai a meditare spesso la mia passione et haverne continoa memoria, dimaniera tale che mi hai constretto a consolarti.’”
positive behaviors to their communities, showing that female inquiry, far from being negative, could bring them ever closer to the “mind and will” of God.\textsuperscript{10}

In the context of female preaching, the rewards of such knowledge exchange were often expressed in a form that made it seem tangible, as if, in the words of Caterina, they could be “touched with the hands.”\textsuperscript{11} Cloistered women were often forbidden to acquire physical goods of the secular marketplace at the end of the Middle Ages, though it was an economy that often catered to their wants as domestic denizens of the upper classes. They transferred this desire, however, to reified spiritual objects, and this dynamic is a driving one within female sermons, themselves designed for an audience of eager intellectual consumers. Thus, in the hands of these female preachers, the timeworn monastic habits of teaching vividly embodied images through mnemonic lists were greatly amplified. Domenica’s da Paradiso’s quest, (referenced above) was for the meaning of just one such substantive symbol: the sacred biblical number forty. For Chiara Bugni, the embodied concept of obedience takes on a material quality, as in one sermon she describes its attributes twenty-four times in succession, saying it is a “glorious ornament,” a “decoration of the soul,” and a “garment of beauty.”\textsuperscript{12} She goes on to say that “obedience and humility” are indeed the “rich and wealthy things” that a nun should have. Recall that Caterina’s work is peppered with didactic lists of such spiritual objects, like the “Twelve Stars (or Privileges) of the Virgin,” and the “Fifteen Steps toward Perfection,” and that one of Caterina’s sisters asked her how to acquire

\textsuperscript{10}Ser. XXVIII, x, 216: This comes from one of Caterina’s conversations, this time with God the Father, in which he says to her: “Diletta figliuola, se tu desideri saper questo, apri l’orecchie del cuor tuo a quello c’hora ti dirò, perciocché in poche parole ti esplicarò in che consiste la mente mia et il mio volere.”

\textsuperscript{11}Ser. XXXIV, i, 265: “tocchiamo con mani.” She also uses the phrase “palpitte con le mani” in Ser. III, vii, 46.

\textsuperscript{12}Bugni, La Vita e Sermoni, 280–281: “glorioso ornamento;” “il decoro della anima e il vestimento della bellezza;” ”L’ubbedienza et la humilita sono la ricchezze e le divitie delle monache.”
things of the spirit, once she had let go of the things of the “senses.” For Caterina and other preaching abbesses, the answer to such a question was clear: through active listening to sermons and dedication to an Observant, reforming lifestyle. Only through these actions would they come to know Christ, who was the real “treasure” and the ultimate object of disciplined desire. Thus, women’s sermons, just like Caterina’s efforts, can often be characterized as reform-in-action. Ursula Haider’s sermon-giving can be connected with the reform at Villengen during the 1480s. Chiara Bugni’s mention of reform is direct: she emphasizes the importance of the “Osservanze Regulare” in her sermon on Charity.

Such content shows nuns used reform energy to take full advantage of the fact that there was no prohibition against women teaching other women in a convent setting. Preaching to her charges became, in the fifteenth century an increasingly crucial part of the office of the abbess, and designed to dispel the dangers of vice or ignorance through regular spiritual instruction. Taken as a whole, the content and development of sermon-giving in pre-Tridentine women’s communities challenge the idea that extreme mysticism, prophecy or heterodox ideology were the inspiration for female instruction during this period. Just as in Caterina’s case, other abbesses’ works show that occasions upon which they taught were not exceptional. It is, in fact, their everyday, orthodox

13 Ser. XIX, 173 for the Twelve Stars; X for the Quindici Gradi; V, 79 for “things of the spirit.”
nature that makes them important windows onto Europe’s educational culture at the end of the Middle Ages.

In fact, these frequent sermons came to constitute an important part of communal identity, memory, and history. The Brigittines at Syon Abbey in England exhibited an early example of this, and commemorated the *Sermo Angelicus* of St. Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373) by placing sections of it in their daily liturgy.\(^\text{16}\) In addition, the New Years’ sermons that Clarissan abbess Ursula Haider (1413–1498) gave to her nuns were placed in the extensive Chronicle of the Bickenkloster at Villingen, thus becoming a part of the house’s official record.\(^\text{17}\) Quite often female sermons are preserved in *vita* manuscripts, and were therefore woven into an abbess’s personal history as part of the narrative of her sanctity, just as in the case of Caterina and Casanova. This also happened to the work of Chiara Bugni. Just a few decades after her death, her nuns and their confessor compiled her works. The preservation of an abbess’ words often occurred thanks to such acts of collaborative reconstruction, in which men and women interested in commemorating her sanctity worked together as compilers. In doing so, they not only enhanced the abbess’ reputation, but their own as well.

Manuscript compilations of this nature constituted attempts to widen the audience for teaching that occurred in cloistered settings. Those receiving it therefore recognized their spiritual mothers’ exceptional ability to teach and give solace. This dynamic of expansion and ability to appeal to a variety of spiritual consumers is suggested by the title


given to the sermons of Juana de la Cruz: “The Book of Comfort,” first copied down by her “amanuensis,” sister Maria Evangelista. Often, those who publicized these women’s addresses assured such consumers of their authenticity by recounting, like Casanova, the circumstances of their dramatic delivery in introductory or summation text. Dominica’s redactor, for example, often made sure to state that her preaching was recorded “word for word,” while noting the “fervor, speed,” and enthusiasm with which the abbess spoke.  

The care taken in perpetuating these works shows that giving sermons could be a mark of prestige for enclosed women at the end of the Middle Ages. It reveals, as well, the fact that female sermon-giving existed in a challenging and evolving “borderland between private and public” speech. The authority claimed by teaching abbesses rested on the designation of convent space as exclusively female and detached from the world. Yet Caterina sometimes taught using both female and male pronouns, and Domenica da Paradiso preached to both men and women in her cloister. Chiara Bugni preached on the streets of Venice prior to enclosure, and Juana de la Cruz even preached in church. The lives and works of these women exhibit, therefore, the dissemination of female speech to wider “publics” of their own design. Women’s sermons empowered those who gave them, and now empower historians to show that, at the end of the Middle Ages, the traditional distinctions between gendered spheres of action were anything but absolute.

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18Da Paradiso, I Sermoni, 94.
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