

Introduction

Religious women's communities in the later Middle Ages varied in the strength of their connection to monastic orders. While some convents were founded as part of a large, centralized order such as the Cistercians, Dominicans, or Franciscans, in other cases religious communities were more focused on local matters, following a basic rule without a close connection to other similar houses. The histories of convents in high and late medieval Bologna demonstrate the diversity and fluidity of women's monastic life in this period. For example, the Dominican nuns of Sant'Agnese, founded by the Blessed Diana d'Andalò with the support of Dominic and his successor, Jordan of Saxony, began with a strong sense of belonging to the Order of Preachers and maintained that identity throughout their history. Other communities changed rules or orders over time. Santa Caterina di Quarto was established in 1205 as a double house with its own customs, and developed a small congregation of daughter houses in Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy. The house was given the Rule of Saint Augustine in the mid thirteenth century, and by the early fourteenth century was primarily a house for nuns. Though it was never formally incorporated, by the fifteenth century it had become a Dominican convent. An extreme example of fluctuating religious affiliation is San Guglielmo, which moved back and forth between the Benedictine and Augustinian Rules, identifying as Cistercian during some eras and becoming Dominican in

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the early sixteenth century. Still others, such as the Benedictine San Gervasio and the Augustinian Sant'Orsolina, followed a basic rule without developing strong connections to other similar houses, and maintained their autonomous status through the Middle Ages.

By examining the histories of religious women's communities in Bologna, which numbered over thirty by 1300, we can get a sense of how convents in the late Middle Ages negotiated their place in the church as an institution, both in their interactions with the clerical hierarchy and in their relationship to monastic orders. They sought support among local clerical and lay patrons. They were aware of their religious surroundings, and could use their knowledge of other women's communities – of their own and of different orders – to develop partnerships in difficult times. In other cases, conflicts arose between religious communities over resources or over issues of reform and observance, with the latter sometimes serving as a pretext for the former. In this study, I investigate the dynamics of monastic life for religious women in their local context, as well as their place in a network of regular and secular clergy – including other convents within and across orders – against a backdrop of social and political change.

Recent studies of religious women have led us to rethink the historical narrative of women's marginalization from emerging religious orders such as the Cistercians, Dominicans, and Franciscans.¹ These studies question early scholarship on women's monasticism

¹ On women in the Cistercian Order, see Constance Berman, especially "Were there Twelfth-Century Cistercian Nuns?," *Church History* 68.4 (1999): 824–64; Brigitte Degler-Spengler, "The Incorporation of Cistercian Nuns into the Order in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century," in *Medieval Religious Women*, vol. 3: *Hidden Springs: Cistercian Monastic Women*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995); Elizabeth Freeman, "Cistercian Nuns in Medieval England: Unofficial meets Official," in *Elite and Popular Religion: Papers Read at the 2004 Summer Meeting and the 2005 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2006), 114–15; Erin Jordan,

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that posited a deterioration of religious women's fortunes, thought to be influenced by the Gregorian Reform's greater emphasis on clerical celibacy and marked by periodic decisions of the orders' General Chapters to reject responsibility for the care of nuns.² Earlier works tended to evaluate the position of religious women by the extent to which they were accepted by their male monastic counterparts, focusing on women's marginalization from monastic orders because of monks' and friars' reluctance to provide religious care for nuns. This narrative has continued to exert influence on later scholarship on women's monastic life.³

For a little over a decade, scholars have sought to offer a more complete picture of religious women's lives, examining ways that they understood their own spirituality and their own place in the church and society. Newer scholarship on women's monasticism

"Gender Concerns: Monks, Nuns, and Patronage of the Cistercian Order in Thirteenth-Century Flanders and Hainaut," *Speculum* 87 (2012): 62–94; Anne Lester, *Creating Cistercian Nuns* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). On women in the Franciscan movement, see Maria Pia Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi and the Poor Sisters in the Thirteenth Century* (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2004) and Lezlie Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2008). On Dominican nuns, see also Alberzoni, "Jordan of Saxony and the Monastery of St. Agnese in Bologna," *Franciscan Studies* 68 (2010): 1–19 and Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing About Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004). For studies that look at women across religious orders in their local context, see especially Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England: Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350–1540* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1998) and Sigrid Schmitt, "Geistliche Frauen und städtische Welt: Kanonissen – Nonnen – Beginen und ihre Umwelt am Beispiel der Stadt Straßburg im Spätmittelalter (1250–1525)," Habilitationsschrift, University of Mainz, 2001.

² Two classic works in this vein are Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) – this was first published in 1935; Micheline de Fontette, *Les Religieuses à l'âge classique du droit canon* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1967).

³ The continuing focus on conflict between religious women and male-centered monastic orders is reflected in the chapters on high and late medieval nuns in Jo Ann McNamara's *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), especially 260–323. Since this work is in part a synthesis of scholarship on monastic women based on McNamara's extensive knowledge of the field, these chapters provide a useful overview of the state of scholarship at the time of the writing of the book.

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has aimed to understand nuns' experience, paying more attention to religious women's agency. Bruce Venarde, Constance Berman, and Lezlie Knox have persuasively argued against the historiographic narrative of religious women's decline in the late Middle Ages.⁴ Knox and other scholars, especially those working on religious women in German-speaking lands, have drawn on convent chronicles, visionary literature, patronage of artistic activity, and nuns' own scribal, artistic, and musical creations to study women's experience and expression.⁵ Where such sources are available, they provide valuable insight into how religious women understood their own lives.

These recent scholars have moved beyond the long-standing focus on legislation by the leadership of monastic orders such as the Cistercians, Dominicans, and Franciscans in the early and mid thirteenth century that sought to limit or reject the care of nuns, demonstrating instead that these decrees and statutes do not tell the whole story. Some women's communities were part of the growth of these orders, and houses of religious women continued to integrate into monastic orders over time. This research has been vital to our growing understanding of the lives of religious women in the High and late Middle Ages.

⁴ Bruce Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890–1215* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Constance Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Knox, *Creating Clare*.

⁵ Fiona Griffiths, *The Garden of Delights: Reform and Renaissance for Women in the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *By Women, For Women, About Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1996); Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles*; Erika Lindgren, *Sensual Encounters: Monastic Women and Spirituality in Medieval Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Anna Harrison, "I Am Wholly Your Own": Liturgical Piety and Community Among the Nuns of Helfta," *Church History* 78.3 (2009): 549–83; Harrison, "Oh! What Treasure Is in This Book?": Writing, Reading, and Community at the Monastery of Helfta," *Viator* 39.1 (2008): 75–106.

Yet as important as these studies have been to our knowledge of the lives of religious women in the High and late Middle Ages, a focus on large religious orders misses the substantial portion of women's monastic communities that did not have stable ties to any particular order. In the older narrative of women's marginalization from religious orders, this status might have been explained by failure to gain acceptance and religious care from the emerging religious orders. Evidence from the archives of nunneries in Bologna suggests instead that the women in these communities may not have sought incorporation into orders, preferring instead to remain under the bishop's jurisdiction. At times, they took steps to avoid falling under the authority of religious orders. In important ways, the histories of convents in late medieval Bologna follow paths that suggest the need for further re-evaluation of our understanding of religious women's place in monastic orders and in the church as a whole.

SOURCES

This study is based on analysis of the archival holdings of women's monasteries in the records of suppressed pious organizations (the *Fondo Demaniale*) at the Archivio di Stato in Bologna. As the second city of the Papal States for much of the period under investigation, Bologna provides a useful case for studying the actions of nunneries within a local context and within the larger church. Church officials – many of whom had spent time in the city's university – were attentive to events in the city and knew its religious communities. Despite papal attempts to promote norms of association with recognized and centralized orders, many nunneries remained independent well into the fifteenth century, generally following the Rule of Augustine or Benedict but without ties to larger monastic organizations. Bologna also experienced political changes that were common to many Italian

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city-states. Families and factions rose and fell as the city shifted from republican government to alternating rule between local despots and papal legates, with a brief republican resurgence in the late fourteenth century. Examining the histories of convents in a small geographical area allows a detailed study of houses of a variety of religious affiliations, including those that maintained a close alignment with one order or rule as well as those that changed their rule or practices over time. As a case study, Bologna provides an example of a city that is close to the center of Catholic power, and therefore would be strongly influenced by papal reform programs.

The archival holdings of the convents in Bologna include over 3,000 charters for the era from the last decade of the twelfth century through the first decade of the sixteenth century. I have followed the history of houses founded during the era of robust growth of monastic houses in Bologna – roughly from 1190 to 1290. Dynamics in the church and in the civic environment led to continued changes in rule, order, and location of many convents through the early sixteenth century, when many of the trends I trace in this study reached a stasis. Tracing these changes provides the opportunity to examine how religious women in the later Middle Ages fit into the institutional structures of the church (including religious orders, diocesan clergy, and general church hierarchy) and how they interacted with their local environment.

Of roughly thirty-five convents that were active in Bologna by the end of the thirteenth century, there are fourteen convents with significant remaining documentation, along with an additional five that have a smaller number of remaining charters in the holdings of other monastic houses, usually because of the unions of those houses. The number of extant documents for each community from the approximately three centuries that are the focus of this study varies substantially, from the thirty-five charters in the records of

San Pietro Martire to the voluminous archival holdings of Sant'Agnese, for which over 1,000 documents remain from its founding to 1500. For those houses with few remaining charters, brief mentions in civic and ecclesiastical documents as well as in chronicles and histories written in the Middle Ages and early modern period can at least provide basic information, such as the approximate foundation date, rule, and circumstances of suppression or dissolution.

A large percentage of the documents in these archives were kept for their economic importance – sales, purchases, long-term leases, wills, and appointments of proctors with a general mandate to manage the community's economic and legal activities or to deal with specific issues. For both property transactions and wills, many of the documents in the convent archives involve the community itself, but many do not. In these cases, the convent may be serving as a repository for a family's documents, or the charter might be part of an earlier chain of evidence for the community's right to a particular piece of property.

A relatively small percentage of the documents relate to the religious life of the community as a religious house. These documents include the elections and confirmation of abbesses, visitations and other investigations into issues of observance, and indulgences for those who visit the church on particular days, sometimes specifying that the person must assist – through monetary aid or labor – with building, repair, or sustenance of the monastery. They also include petitions to acquire or affirm privileges and exemptions from various levies and forms of jurisdiction.

In my understanding of the overall histories of these communities, I have been greatly aided by the work of Gabriella Zarri on women's monastic houses in medieval and early modern Bologna. Zarri's 1973 study begins with an essay outlining trends in foundations and dissolutions of women's monastic communities. The

second part of Zarri's study includes details about every nunnery in Bologna from the twelfth through the seventeenth centuries, organized alphabetically by house. Using evidence from the monasteries' archives as well as information from chroniclers and historians that in some cases refer to documents that are no longer extant, Zarri describes the foundation or earliest evidence of the existence of each convent, their rule and order, and also any changes that occurred in these practices or affiliations. Beyond this information, she notes the location of the convent, any changes in location that might have occurred, and other such significant events in the convent's history.

Zarri's work provides an overview of the landscape of women's monasticism in Bologna, but the scope of the study did not allow her to delve into the details of the events and changes she outlined. My aim is to expand on her work, using the histories of these convents as case studies in order to investigate two main questions: how did monastic women interact with religious institutions and officials to form and sustain their communities, and what influence did local factors (many of which are not specifically religious) have on the lives of religious women? The histories of convents in Bologna raise questions about the frameworks scholars have employed for understanding the complexity of monastic life in the later Middle Ages.

Where possible, I have drawn on secondary scholarship to provide a way to compare Bologna to other cities. Though a study of one city cannot be generalized to offer a description of women's monastic life in all of Italy (and especially not in Latin Christendom as a whole), I hope that this book will contribute to the ongoing collection of detailed information about the workings of monastic life for women, along with the continued questioning of older scholarly assumptions about religious women's lives. Variation and changes may happen to a greater or lesser extent in other locations depending

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on many factors such as urban or rural environment, forms of local governance, era of greatest growth (for example, is there a tradition of independent Benedictine and Augustinian houses, or are monasteries primarily founded after centralized religious orders begin to become the norm?), and regional influence of particular monastic orders. In-depth archival studies of convents in their local context can confirm, complicate, or contradict received ideas about women's religious life.

RELIGIOUS WOMEN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
CENTRALIZED MONASTIC ORDERS

In order to understand the place of women's monastic communities in religious orders and in the church at large, it is useful to examine briefly what it meant to be part of a monastic order in the Middle Ages. Monastic organizations could vary greatly from place to place and over time. Recent work by scholars such as Constance Berman and Maria Pia Alberzoni – on Cistercians and on mendicant orders, respectively – has focused attention on the impact these changes had on monastic life in general and on women in these orders in particular.⁶ In her work on the Cistercian Order, Berman has demonstrated that over the course of the twelfth century, the term *ordo* transitioned from primarily referring to a general way of life (for example, the *ordo monasticus*) to increasingly designating a particular group to which an individual or a house could belong (for example, *ordo Cisterciensis*). In the course of the twelfth century, the Cistercian Order became a model for a new, highly organized form of monastic life, which included regular meetings of General Chapters for decisions that would apply to all member houses and

⁶ Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution*, 46–92; Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi*, 159.

mechanisms for visitation and correction of monastic communities belonging to the order. In her studies of women in the Franciscan and Dominican Orders, Alberzoni argues that papal efforts in the early thirteenth century to organize disparate women's communities into relatively cohesive groups associated with the new mendicant orders led to a significant change in the concept of the religious order, and that the promotion of this new kind of religious order is part of the emergence of "papal monasticism."⁷

I shall use the term "centralized monastic orders" to refer to orders that had General Chapters and governing officials for the order as a whole, had developed some mechanisms for determining which houses did or did not belong to the order, and had some means of regulating member houses, including visitations. Actions of popes in the thirteenth century make clear that they were attempting to promote a standardized and centralized form of monastic order. While women were not easily integrated into new, centralized orders, this was not the only form of monastic life available. Women continued to participate in a monasticism that resembled the earlier, more local form of religious organization.

The difficulty of integrating women into monastic orders was not only because of men's reluctance to accept responsibility for the care of nuns – it was also because of the existence of competing models of monasticism. Variation in monastic organization continued through the period under investigation. Affiliation – either through incorporation or through looser forms of ties – to centralized religious orders was a developing norm from the mid to late twelfth century, promoted by thirteenth-century popes. Nevertheless, many communities remained locally focused, or existed in an intermediate state between incorporation and autonomy.

⁷ Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi*, 155; Alberzoni, "Jordan of Saxony," 19.