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## Introduction to *Franciscan Women: Female Identities and Religious Culture, Medieval and Beyond*

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## INTRODUCTION

The city of Bologna in northeastern Italy is well-known for its medieval buildings and spaces. Guidebooks will send visitors to Santo Stefano, a twelfth-century church modeled after the Holy Sepulcher, or suggest climbing the 498 steps of the Torre Asinelli, one of the surviving towers that once dominated the thirteenth-century skyline. They also will recommend a visit to Saint Dominic's tomb in the eponymous church, along with those of medieval law professors in its courtyard (some of whose memorials hubristically feature reliefs of students avidly listening to their lectures). Historically-minded tourists also can stroll under the famous *portici*, arcaded walk ways that created extra living spaces to rent to those university students who have hastened to the town since the later Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> But since you have picked up this book and therefore have some interest in Franciscan women and are perhaps curious about their origin in the Middle Ages, you also must go to the church of Corpus Domini, which has been home to a convent of Poor Clares since the mid-fifteenth century. The building itself may not be to your exact taste. Its façade is the only surviving Renaissance feature, while the interior was redecorated in the Baroque style over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But do enter, for the building's highlight is the *Capella della Santa* where the contemporary visitor can engage directly with the medieval past.

Ring the bell at the back of the nave. One of Corpus Domini's novices probably will answer it, although you will only see her in silhouette behind the curtained grate. She will give you access to an interior chapel. This space features a throne on which sits the incorrupt body of Caterina Vigri (d. 1453)—Saint Catherine of Bologna—dressed in a simple brown habit.<sup>2</sup> While gilt moldings and seventeenth-century frescoes dominate the chapel's decoration, make sure to look on the walls for items connected with Caterina. The most significant is the autograph copy of her best-known devotional work, *Le Sette Armi Spirituali* (*The Seven Spiritual*

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<sup>1</sup> The *Lonely Planet* guidebook is typical of such recommendations, see <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/italy/emilia-romagna-and-san-marino/bologna> (accessed July 15, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> My description is based on several visits to Corpus Domini in the 1990s and 2000s. A picture of the seated Caterina is available at Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caterina-bologna.jpg> (accessed July 15, 2019).

*Weapons*), but you also can examine her rebec (a viola- like instrument) and paintings attributed to her.<sup>3</sup> As you look around, you will notice that you likely are sharing this experience with local Bolognesi who have dropped by the chapel to pray or take a moment for reflection. There may even be a few curious tourists exploring this space. Thus, Caterina and the Corpus Domini community who have long sustained this space offer an ongoing interpretation of the Franciscan tradition.<sup>4</sup> The chapel promotes historical and theological dialogue among the pious, the curious, and the academic.<sup>5</sup> A similar locutory goal shaped the conference which inspired this collection of essays.

## THE CONFERENCE

*Franciscan Women: Medieval and Beyond* was held at Saint Bonaventure University under the auspices of the Franciscan Institute between July 12-15, 2016. Our organizing committee aimed for an ambitious program that would address examples of the long history of female Franciscanism from the thirteenth century to the present day.<sup>6</sup> However, we did not want to have papers drawn solely from academic research as is the usual practice for university-hosted symposia. Instead, we hoped to amplify the experiences of those living within the tradition as sisters, friars, lay members, and co-workers through presentations and workshops where practitioners could speak to elements of their ministry and their perspectives on the Franciscan tradition. Ample time for discussion after presentations, during coffee breaks, and over meals was designed to allow

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine of Bologna, *The Seven Spiritual Weapons*, trans. Hugh Feiss and Daniela Re (Toronto, Peregrina Publishing, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Corpus Domini's website provides details about contemporary devotion to Caterina as well as other liturgical events, see <http://www.santuariocorpusdomini.it/indexSite.html> (accessed July 15, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Caterina and Corpus Domini are featured in the chapters by Marco Bartoli and Kate Bush in this volume; for further information and a guide to additional scholarship about Caterina and other late medieval Poor Clares, see Kathleen G. Arthur, *Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety. Caterina Vigri and the Poor Clares in Early Modern Ferrara* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018). Modern editions now exist for many of her devotional writings, sermons, as well as a biography written by a fellow nun and the canonization process (see the seven volumes published under the series title *Caterina Vigri. La Santa e la Città* (Florence: SISMEL, 2000-2004).

<sup>6</sup> In addition to myself and the co-editor of the volume, David Couturier OFM Cap. who is also Executive Director of the Franciscan Institute, the organizing committee included Timothy Johnson, Jill Smith, and Diane Tomkinson OSF. The conference was part of an ongoing series of conferences by the Institute's Research Advisory Council, which is chaired by Dr. Johnson.

for new collaborations around the practices and ideals that have shaped Franciscan identities from the medieval to the modern world.

Three plenary addresses laid the foundation for recognizing those ambitions.<sup>7</sup> Florence Deacon OSF opened the conference with reflections on the experiences of Franciscan women in the nineteenth-century United States. Her address considered how contemporary utopian ideals influenced the women who founded Franciscan community, and then in turn helped shape the Church's ministry.<sup>8</sup> The Italian scholar Marco Bartoli offered an overview of medieval Franciscan women who were inspired by the example of Francis of Assisi and his followers. His discussion of not only familiar names, but also relatively unknown figures affiliated with the Franciscan tradition such as the peace-maker Sperandea of Cingoli (d. 1276) and the prophetic beguine, Na Prou Boneta (d. 1328) expanded the landscape of female Franciscanism, particularly for conference participants who were not medieval scholars.<sup>9</sup> The American historian Amy Koehlinger shared her current research on the Franciscan sisters who helped establish the Mayo Clinic. While in part a history of institutional growth and the sisters' processes of discernment, her presentation also demonstrated how ideals drawn from Franciscan relationality and ecumenism shaped their partnership with local doctors.<sup>10</sup> Twenty-five other individuals presented their work in shorter talks. Some focused on more familiar historical figures like Clare of Assisi and Angela of Foligno, while others shared information about less familiar communities and individuals. Some of the most interesting presentations communicated insights from contemporary ministries in expected places like parishes and schools, but also unexpected ones such as work with first responders.

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<sup>7</sup> Two complementary sessions book-ended the conference. Professor Gert Melville, director of the Research Centre for the Comparative History of Religious Orders (FOVOG) at the University of Dresden, discussed opportunities for collaborative research on the afternoon before the conference started. On the final evening, the Franciscan Institute medal was awarded to Jacques Dalarun, the well-known European scholar whose research has opened many new avenues into medieval religious culture including Franciscan spirituality. He also delivered the Ignatius Brady Lecture on "The Rediscovered Life of Saint Francis by Celano: New Insights."

<sup>8</sup> Deacon's remarks also drew from her experiences as president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious during the period when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith conducted a doctrinal assessment of the group.

<sup>9</sup> Professor Bartoli's presentation was designed to introduce the complex and diverse medieval tradition to non-specialists. See the full range of his research on medieval Franciscan traditions at <https://consorziofortune.academia.edu/MarcoBartoli> (accessed September 9, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> The Academy of American Franciscan History is supporting Professor Koehlinger's Mayo project. For her wider work in American Catholic history, see her academic website at <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/users/amy-koehlinger> (accessed September 9, 2019).

The conference then concluded with two workshops designed to apply some of the lessons drawn from the discussions in real world settings, be they in ministry or classrooms.<sup>11</sup>

To what degree did we achieve our goal of bringing scholarly research into conversation with the lived tradition? Above our approach was characterized as *locutory*, which at first glance surely seems either like jargon or evidence of over-reliance on a thesaurus. Yet this word choice was deliberate in order to invoke the term's medieval Latin legacy as the room in a monastery where monks and nuns met with visitors.<sup>12</sup> The field of Franciscan Studies has long been populated by sisters, friars, and laity whose work bridges academic and faith communities. For example, Franciscan sisters like Margaret Carney OSF, Beth Lynn OSC, Pacelli Millane OSC, Ingrid Peterson OSF, and Diane Tomkinson OSF (to list only a few of the many possible names for reasons of space) have not only written about medieval Franciscan women in scholarly publications in addition to their outreach to fellow Franciscans, but they also have modeled ways to encourage non-religious academics in our explorations of the field. Indeed, I highlighted and want to thank here these five women for their early and sustained support for my own research on Clare of Assisi and Margherita Colonna. Like others who came into the field from outside the Franciscan tradition, I have benefited from their questions and come to new ways of understanding the historical evidence through their insights. This mutual respect serves as the foundation for the online network managed by the secular and religious members of the Women in the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition group (WFIT) and the sessions we sponsor at conferences like the International Congress on Medieval Studies held annually at Western Michigan University.<sup>13</sup> This creative goodwill and discovery was transferred to the Saint Bonaventure conference.

It offered new ways of seeing the tradition. For example, Alex Kratz OFM emphasized how the presentations had deepened his understanding of the “creative fidelity Franciscan women have exhibited over the ages to make their charism relevant to others and to meet people’s needs.” He also emphasized the mutual partnership of the friars and sisters, represented

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<sup>11</sup> The conference schedule is visible at [https://www.academia.edu/26407732/Franciscan\\_Women\\_Medieval\\_and\\_Beyond\\_Conference](https://www.academia.edu/26407732/Franciscan_Women_Medieval_and_Beyond_Conference) (accessed August 22, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> *Locutorium*, compare J.F. Niermeyer, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 620.

<sup>13</sup> For more information about WFIT, see <https://www.franciscantradition.org/partners/women-in-the-franciscan-intellectual-tradition> (accessed on September 10, 2019). A history of the group needs to be written, but for a sense of the early participants and exchanges see the collection of essays dedicated to Ingrid Peterson, *Her Bright Merits* (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2012).

in both practical missions as well as theological relationality.<sup>14</sup> The post-conference survey reported appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on the vitality of female Franciscanism. One participant wrote that the sessions “captured the timelessness of our tradition as well as its geographic expansiveness—all of this the gift of the Spirit. I am energized to continue serious study of this treasure.” Others called for more opportunities to address how historical traditions can be transmitted to new generations and to foster identity in Franciscan Institutions.<sup>15</sup> These are matters that also concern academic scholars who may teach in these schools and colleges, many of whom were reminded or learned for the first time how rewarding it is to meet people who find medieval research deeply relevant. These essays collected here thus explore what it has meant for women to embrace a Franciscan identity from the thirteenth century through to the present day.

## THE VOLUME

The chapters below are all revisions of presentations from the conference from both participants and plenaryists.<sup>16</sup> A quick glance at the table of contents admits that most focus on the premodern world (before 1800) as well as on European contexts. This focus reflects a long-standing interest in the Franciscan movement’s origins and subsequent interpretations, as well as the richness of its evidence as Bartoli’s overview of the medieval period demonstrates. The chapters are organized chronologically, based on the main Franciscan woman or community on which they focus. Each author presents specific case studies that highlight the different ways women have contributed to shaping the Franciscan tradition. Some chapters are more comprehensively academic than others, with authors engaged in the scholarly literature of their fields. Their discussion of primary sources and extensive notes offer an entry to the scholarship, although anyone with an interest in these topics will find them accessible and thought provoking. Other chapters more intentionally address a contemporary audience curious to reflect on the implications of Franciscan exempla and their lived tradition. Indeed, the essays offer multiple points of reflection, although three themes are especially prominent: the wide-ranging expressions of female Franciscan

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<sup>14</sup> Alex Kratz, OFM, “Franciscan Women: Medieval and Beyond:’ Conference Reflections,” *Franciscan Connections: The Cord—A Spiritual Review* 66 (2016): 28-29.

<sup>15</sup> Responses to an online survey, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/X3KRNZK>.

<sup>16</sup> Not all participants were able to contribute to the volume. The structure certainly also reflects the Franciscan Institute’s traditional research strengths and the professional networks of the conference organizers.

identities, the agency of women to shape their vocations, and their contributions to shaping Franciscan spiritual and theological traditions. Rather than moving sequentially through chapters, I have suggested some thematic groupings of essays and their arguments below, although overlap between them quickly emerges. Franciscan women lived out their vocations in varied ways. Ella Kilgallon's contribution examines how women participated in the Order's eremitical tradition in the early thirteenth century. Both Umiliana Cerchi (d. 1246) and Rose of Viterbo (d. 1251) were urban recluses whose domestic cells became a key part of their local communities. These women also participated in spiritual and practical networks with the Friars and Poor Ladies (as the enclosed sisters were still known). These connections were critical for promoting the saintly memories of Umiliana and Rose, as well as revealing what a common phenomenon female penitency was, even as later sources sought to regularize them as enclosed nuns. Sean Field in turn looks at two women who organized rather different Franciscan institutions in thirteenth-century France. Douceline of Provence (d. 1274) led a group of women who lived an active life of service outside a cloister, while Isabelle of France (d. 1270) wrote a monastic constitution to secure her vision of enclosed female Franciscan life. These beguines and nuns, while institutionally diverse, similarly emphasized their embrace of Franciscan humility. Notably both women collaborated with friars in shaping their institutions. Cristina Andenna presents another royal woman (Isabelle of France was the sister of King Louis IX, Saint Louis). Sancia of Mallorca (d. 1345) navigated both secular and monastic worlds, acting as a patron and supporter of Franciscans in the Kingdom of Naples. Andenna discusses how Sancia connected her vision of female Franciscan life to Clare of Assisi and her form of life. At Corpus Christi in Naples she both became *soror Clara* and secured a copy of the 1253 *Rule of Saint Clare* from Assisi for the communities. These three cases, which can be expanded with examples in Bartoli's survey, vary in their institutional structures as well as the particular Franciscan ideals they emphasize, with not one being more authentic than the others as Field stresses. They also speak to the notable agency of women in shaping their lives in the

Franciscan tradition, which Deacon and Koehlinger demonstrate continued well into the modern era.

Like Sancia and Isabelle, the fifteenth-century Franciscan sisters studied by Kate Bush and Christina Bruno actively worked to shape their communities, although perhaps in ways contrary to what we might have expected them to have wanted. Bush considers the internal impact of the strict monastic constitutions emphasizing enclosure and silence promoted by Observant reformers. While the nuns' own desire to follow these

rules might suggest their passive acceptance of their pastoral ministers' religious ideals, Bush argues that these strictures paradoxically amplified the women's spiritual conversations and even preaching within convent walls. Caterina Vigri and Corpus Domini serve as notable examples for how we can still hear these women's voices. Bruno investigates a protracted legal battle in which the Third Order sisters at Santa Maria Maddalena in Piacenza engaged to become fully enclosed. While enclosure was usually associated with the Order of Saint Clare, especially in contemporary Italy, Bruno shows how the women successfully fought to preserve their status as part of a larger network of tertiaries, while also maintaining pastoral care from the Observant Friars Minor. The nineteenth-century sisters discussed by Florence Deacon and Amy Koehlinger may seem rather distant from these medieval women. In fact, some modern observers might even assume that their family circumstances (such as poverty and a surfeit of siblings) led them to join a religious community. However, both authors demonstrate how these modern women directly shaped their vocations around values like humility, simplicity, and labor, this shaping their identity as Franciscans as intentionally as their medieval foremothers.

These transhistorical examples of women creating their religious identities around particular values connects to our third theme: vernacular theology. This term has come to embrace expressions of complex spiritual issues and religious experiences outside formal scholastic or monastic models. While "vernacular" refers on the one hand to their language of transmission, its role as a modifier for "theology" points to the fact that these discourses were no less sophisticated than many Latin examples. Indeed, Marco Bartoli calls our attention to Angela of Foligno's mystical autohagiography and Caterina Vigri's poetry as representatives of a significant tradition within the Franciscan movement. Moreover, theological expression included material culture. Linda Burke considers how four companions of Elizabeth of Hungary contributed to shaping her saintly reputation. The ways later hagiographers used their testimony, collected by papal investigators for her 1235 canonization, has received much attention from scholars. Burke, however, evaluates intersections between their accounts of Elizabeth and the remarkable windows in the Elizabeth Church in Marburg (before 1249). She connects their emotional and expressive intensity directly to these female witnesses who stressed Elizabeth's embrace of Francis' piety to craft their own sense of identity as Franciscan sisters.

Other chapters take on the question of audience for these theological reflections. Steven McMichael assesses how Isabel of Villena (d. 1490), added emphasis to women's roles as witnesses to Christ's life and resurrection. Isabel wrote primarily for the sisters in her community, as did



the nuns whose sermons Bush studied. In contrast, Kevin Elphick presents an abbess and visionary whose sermons reached outside her cloister. Mother Juana de la Cruz (d. 1534) prepared sermons on both Francis and Clare, drawing on examples from the early Franciscan movement to offer a vision of an encompassing humanity where gender blurring examples underscored a shared devotion. Elphick notes that many of her ideas seem radical in her early modern context (or even today for some). Juana avoided trouble with the Inquisition in part due to the patronage of a powerful Franciscan. Not so lucky were the two nuns studied by Lourdes Blanco whom the Spanish Inquisition investigated in Peru in 1675. The investigation concerned whether the women had been possessed by the devil as represented in their visions, or if these were in fact heaven-sent.

Blanco's careful analysis demonstrates how the various testimonies preserved in the case's records represent contemporary understandings of the soul and shows the women's savviness and theological sophistication around the discernment of spirits.

Taken together, the chapters thus reflect how Franciscan women have long been seizing opportunities that can best use their talents to serve God and society as a sort of lived—vernacular— theology. Beth Toler's contribution suggests another application. She considers how an historicized reading of the Italian mystic Angela of Foligno (d. 1309) and her suffering as she journeyed toward God offers insights for a modern, therapeutic practice. David Couturier extends these reflections in an afterward to this volume, modeling how historical evidence can shape contemporary theological reflection on Franciscan values. Indeed, one of the Rochester sisters studied by Amy Koehlinger neatly brings together the connections between lived experience and spiritual ideals. Sister Ramona Miller OSF explained "We lived it, and then later in religious life we found language and concepts from Francis to explain it."

While this volume can only capture a part of the conference experience, the essays and their themes seek to lay the groundwork for new discussions and collaborations. Let the conversations continue.

*The editors have preserved some authorial choices within the essays to reflect individual interests and scholarly conventions, while also demonstrating the varying registers of our conversations.*