

The Fifteen Prayers Attributed to Birgitta and Their Circulation in Early Modern Italy: Private Devotion, Heterodoxy, and Censorship

Marco Faini

Introduction

In his 1536 *Dialogo*, Pietro Aretino has his main character, the bawd Comare, tell the story of how she persuaded a nun to accept a lover's courtship. The Comare gets hold of a beautifully illuminated book of hours of our Lady and goes to the convent where the nun lives, pretending that she wants to sell the book. The young nuns gather around her and begin to contemplate the vivid illuminations, excitedly commenting on them. It is a masterful passage suffused with soft eroticism and sexual undertones as the nuns look at the “traitorous fig” (*fico traditore*), the “thieving snake” (*serpe ladro*), voicing the desire to live naked in the earthly Paradise.¹ As the abbess suddenly arrives, the nuns rush to show her the manuscript. The sudden burst of confusion gives Comare the chance to remain briefly alone with the young woman she had come for, to present her with some gifts sent from her lover, and to talk to her. Comare leaves the book with the nuns and returns in the following days with the excuse of finding an agreement on its price; in fact, this gives her the opportunity to make the necessary arrangements for the nun to meet her lover. In order not to arouse suspicions among the other nuns, Comare distracts them by talking about the current political situation, as well as telling stories she has heard about their relatives and acquaintances. In the conclusion of her tale, she states that she went as far as explaining to them “the meaning of the prophecies of Saint Bridget and Fra Giacomone da Pietrapana.”²

1 Pietro Aretino, *Aretino's Dialogues*, transl. Raymond Rosenthal, Preface by Alberto Moravia, Introduction by Margaret Rosenthal (Toronto: 2005), 337.

2 Aretino, *Aretino's Dialogues*, 339. The reference to “Giacopone da Pietrapana” seems to merge in one fictional character Iacopone da Todi, to whom several apocryphal prophecies were attributed, and one Francesco da Pietrapana, a hermit and the author of a prophecy now kept in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magl. XXVIII.12, fols. 20r–28r. I wish to thank Michele Lodone for this suggestion and for pointing out Francesco da Pietrapana's text to

Aretino's text, making fun of the arcane content of Birgitta's revelations, is certainly not the only work in the Italian and European Renaissance in which Birgittine works appear as the target of satire and bitter criticism.³ Martin Luther, in his *Table talks*, had condemned "so many Bridget prayers," in his view one of the embodiments of superstitious Papistic devotion.⁴ In the early 1540s, the Italian reformer and exile *religionis causa* Celio Secondo Curione (1503–1569) wrote in his *Pasquino in estasi*, a dialogue between the speaking statues of Pasquino and Marforio:

Marforio: O wretched and unhappy men, or, rather, beasts, who, while they could be true servants of Christ prefer to subject themselves to such utter foolishness, which far from being useful, is instead of incalculable damage.

Pasquino: Certainly He [i.e. God] does not push us in any other direction, nor wants anything else from us. Because the day he will come to make His judgment, he will not ask us "Have you been to Mass? Have you read the prayers of Saint Birgitta? Have you respected the third rule of St. Francis? Are you a virgin?" Nor will he ask other similar things. Rather he will ask whether we were observant of what he left in his testament with such emphasis when He said: "I give you my peace, peace I leave with you, so that you love each other."⁵

Certainly, one could find similar references to Birgitta in other religious and satirical texts from the 1530s and 1540s. For my purposes, it suffices to show

me. On Iacopone as a pseudo-prophet see Michele Lodone, "Iacopone profeta," *Linguistica e letteratura* 45 (2020), 227–79.

3 On the Italian circulation of the Revelations see Michele Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana. Volgarizzamenti e riscritture profetiche," *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 73 (2019), 69–84.

4 I use the translation by William Hazlitt (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society) available online at the following address: <https://ccl.org/ccl/luther/tabletalk/tabletalk.i.html> (accessed on 24/09/2020), here 12.

5 Celio Secondo Curione, "*Pasquillus extaticus*" e "*Pasquino in estasi*". *Edizione storico-critica commentata*, ed. Giovanna Cordibella-Stefano Prandi (Florence: 2018): "Marforio: O miseri e infelici uomini, anzi, bestiazze che, potendo esser servi di Cristo, vogliono più tosto sottoporsi a queste espresse pazzie che non sono di utile alcuno, anzi che sono di danno incomprendibile [...]. Pasquino: Certo che ei non ci sollecita ad altro, né cerca altro da noi. Imperò che, quando verrà a fare il suo giudizio, ei non ci domanderà: 'Sete voi stati a messa? Avete voi letto le orazioni di santa Brigida? Avete voi osservato la terza regola di san Francesco? Sete voi vergini? Né simil altre cose. Ma ei ci domanderà se noi abbiamo osservato quello che con tanta diligenza nel suo testamento ci lasciò mentre disse: 'io vi do la pace mia, io vi lascio la pace mia, acciò che voi vi amiate l'un l'altro'" (236). Curione's text dates from 1541(?)/1542(?).

how certain aspects of Birgitta's cult, especially the so-called and apocryphal "fifteen prayers" had become, by that time, the target of religious reformers, one of the signs of the corruption and superficiality of Roman Catholic devotion and of its fool "superstitions." Birgitta's prayers – but, one may suggest, her prophecies too – were at odds with the new evangelical and Christocentric devotion that spread in Italy from around the 1520s. We may recall for example a passage from the Inquisitorial trial of Vittore Soranzo (1500–1558), *coadiutore* of Pietro Bembo while he was serving as bishop of Bergamo (and bishop himself after Bembo's death in 1547). In September 1550, one Giovanni Consoli accused Soranzo of having subtracted several devotional books from the convent of Santa Grata, warning the nuns that "they should not recite so many prayers, such as the prayers of St. Augustine, of saint Birgitta, and the rosary."⁶ Soranzo had allegedly replaced these books with copies of the *Beneficio di Cristo* and other works more in tune with evangelical spirituality, apparently with the collaboration and support of the abbess Clemenza Vitali. In his defense in May 1551, Soranzo blamed this initiative on his vicar, arguing that in taking from the nuns some books "unworthy of religious persons or [concerning] false miracles" he may have inadvertently also taken copies of Birgitta's prayers.⁷ While this last passage seems to place Birgitta's prayers on a different level than the other unnamed works (although there is no evidence of a specific cult to Birgitta within the convent), the connection between the prayers of Birgitta and those of Augustine seems to point to a specific typology of books.⁸ Little books containing the fifteen prayers and a prayer to St. Augustine had been published from the late 15th century onwards, often accompanied by elaborated rubrics stating the supernatural and prodigious powers of said

6 "Non dovessero dir tante orationi, come sonno le orationi de santo Agostino, de santa Brigida et lo rosario," Massimo Firpo and Sergio Pagano, *I processi inquisitoriali di Vittore Soranzo (1550–1558)*. Edizione critica (Città del Vaticano: 2004), vol. 1: 62. On Soranzo see Massimo Firpo, *Vittore Soranzo vescovo ed eretico. Riforma della Chiesa e Inquisizione nell'Italia del Cinquecento* (Rome-Bari: 2006). For a review of the bibliography on Santa Grata see Giulio Orazio Bravi, *Il monastero benedettino di Santa Grata in Bergamo*, available on line at https://www.academia.edu/41731347/Il_monastero_benedettino_di_Santa_Grata_in_Bergamo_gennaio_2020_ (accessed on 08/25/2020). See also Vincenzo Lavenia, "La lunga possessione. Il caso del monastero di Santa Grata a Bergamo, 1577–1625," in *Non lasciar vivere la malefica. Le streghe nei trattati e nei processi (secoli XIV–XVII)*, ed. Dinora Corsi and Matteo Duni (Florence: 2008), 213–42.

7 "Non degni de relligiosi o de qualche miracoli falsi," Firpo and Pagano, *I processi*, vol. 1: 309.

8 Dario Personeni, "Santi, culti e reliquie nel monastero fra Medioevo e prima età moderna," in *Il monastero di santa Grata in Bergamo. Storia e segni di un'antica presenza in città. Studi e documenti*, vol. 3: *Piantato è su le mura al mezzogiorno. Il cenobio*, ed. Paolo Mazzariol (Bergamo: 2019), 183–221.

prayers. As such, these tiny books epitomized the kind of “superstitious” and “popular” devotion that the *spirituali* tried to eradicate.

These publications – along with other cheap prints and broad-sheets advertising the miraculous effects of the prayers – will be the object of this essay. After exploring their materiality and their content, I will turn to their circulation, especially in the post-Trent period, focusing on issues of censorship and on what these works can tell us about changes and continuities in popular devotion.⁹

Using the Prayers: Rubrics and Preternatural Powers

We can easily imagine what the books confiscated by Soranzo looked like. 31 editions of the fifteen prayers appeared from the 1470s to 1538; sometimes the prayers were published as an appendix to other works, such as the 1516 (ca.) edition of the *Traslato miraculosa ecclesie beate Marie virginis de Loreto* (Rome, Antonio Blado) or the 1543 edition of Bernardo of Clairvaux's *Divi Bernardi abbatis meditationes* (Venice, Bernardino Bindoni). In at least 24 of these editions, the oration to St. Augustine appeared alongside the main text.¹⁰ They were generally *in-ottavo* books displaying on the frontispiece a woodcut showing Birgitta kneeling in front of the Crucifix.¹¹ Thus, the image of Birgitta visualizes the title of the work, which states that what the reader is about to read are the fifteen prayers that Birgitta used to recite devoutly kneeling in front of the Crucifix.

Other small vignettes could be placed here and there in the text. For example, in a copy printed in Rome by Eucharius Silber not before 1510 (*Orationes sancta Brigitte cum oratione sancti Augustini*) the prayer to St. Augustine is introduced by a woodcut occupying roughly three-quarters of the page, showing the saint in full episcopal attire in an interior, kneeling in front of an image of Christ on a wall, with an open book on the floor.¹² Another edition

9 On “popular religion” see Ottavia Niccoli, “Cultura popolare: Un relitto abbandonato?,” *Studi Storici* 56 (2015), 997–1010; Ottavia Niccoli, “Malintesi. Fenomeni di incomprendione tra livelli di cultura,” in *Un mondo perduto? Religione e cultura popolare*, ed. Lucia Felici and Pierroberto Scaramella (Rome: 2019), 33–58.

10 I am relying on the census on the editions that can be consulted on the website of the project *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden* at the following address: <https://birgitta.hf.uio.no/works/709/>.

11 Same or similar woodcuts appear also on many editions of the prophecies: I thank Anna Wainwright for pointing this out to me.

12 The same set of woodcuts appears in an edition also printed in Rome around 1513 by Marcello Silber.

(probably Rome, Johannes Besicken?) is accompanied by the customary image of Birgitta, while the beginning of the text has a tiny woodcut showing Christ with a chalice and host at his feet. This particular edition does not contain the prayer to St. Augustine – replaced by the *Stabat mater* and by two short prayers to the Virgin Mary. The beginning of the *Stabat mater* is marked by another small woodcut showing a crowned Mary holding a scepter with one hand and the baby Jesus with the other.¹³ Most of these editions were printed, with few exceptions, by German typographers active in Rome such as Johannes Besicken or by Eucario Silber and/or his son Marcello. Another German typographer, Stephan Planck printed in 1495 a version of the text with the title *Hec sunt quindecim collecte sive orationes*, while an edition by Johann Bull dates back to 1478: I shall return to both of them. The fifteen prayers seem to have been extremely popular from the 1470s to ca. 1515; later editions are indeed quite rare.

I must pause at this point to recall that, although Birgitta's authorship of the "fifteen prayers" has been dismissed by scholarship, "to a large part of the wide 15th century audience the question of authorship was not a problem. Birgitta was regarded as the author, a fact that is clearly shown by rubrics in many manuscripts."¹⁴ Besides, I shall recall how the textual tradition of the prayers is rather fluid and unstable both in their manuscript and printed versions. It has been observed that "as the popularity of the prayers grew, there seems to have been a tendency to elaborate the Latin versions by adding words and filling in new phrases where possible." To further complicate the picture, one should recall that "in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the diverging textual tradition is hard to follow, as new versions were printed and disseminated."¹⁵ All these caveats should not prevent us from acknowledging that the fifteen prayers can be fruitfully put in dialogue with Birgitta's works. The emphasis on the Passion of Christ, the vivid, if not morbid, depictions of the torments inflicted on his virginal body find echoes in famous passages penned by Birgitta, such as the vision of the Passion of Christ as described in chapter 15 of *The Book of Pilgrimage (Revelaciones VII)*. During her pilgrimage

13 I saw the copy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, shelfmark *Inc.c.a.142m°Beibd.3*. The work is available at the following address: <https://bildsuche.digitale-sammlungen.de/index.html?c=viewer&bandnummer=bsb00006701&pimage=00001&v=2p&nav=&l=it> [accessed on 03/22/2020].

14 Claes Gejrot, "The *Fifteen Oes*: Latin and Vernacular Versions. With an Edition of the Latin Text," in *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden into the Medieval European Vernaculars*, ed. Bridget Morris and Veronica O'Mara (Turnhout: 2000), 213–38: 213. On the circulation of apocryphal works by Birgitta, see Brian Richardson's chapter in this volume.

15 Gejrot, "The *Fifteen Oes*," 221 and 222.

to the Holy Land in 1371/72 Birgitta received three visions, the last of which occurred “in ecclesia Sancti Sepulchri in capella montis Calvarie.” In her vision, Birgitta witnessed not only the tortures that Christ endured, but also Mary’s grief. According to Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, the vision gives the tale a “dual structure” which culminates in the idea of Christ and Mary sharing the same heart: an idea that serves the purpose of installing Mary at the very center of the process of redemption of mankind.¹⁶ The description of Christ’s passion plays a central stance also in the second of *The Four prayers* (*Revelaciones XII*), where the aforementioned “dual structure” is less evident, as is in the fifteen prayers.

Over the course of the 16th century, religious authorities became suspicious of the fifteen prayers, despite their learned content, deeply rooted in late Medieval spirituality.¹⁷ Although their Christocentric spirituality could resonate with some evangelical ideas, the Church seemed more troubled by the rubrics that often accompanied the text, showcasing in full detail its talismanic and preternatural powers. Therefore, the prayers came to be included in lists of “superstitious” works, and they had to undergo processes of expurgation.¹⁸ Recent scholarship has explored with growing interest these “superstitious” prayers (often referred to as “historie,” “leggende,” “orazioni”) which provide an invaluable access to domestic and private devotion. The study of rubrics, in particular, allows for a move away from traditional perspectives such as that of the history of the book and the history of devotion toward a more “anthropological” understanding of this production.¹⁹ Before turning to a closer study of censorial practices, I will linger on these rubrics. I was able to consult the following editions: Rome 1478; Rome ca. 1481–85; Rome ca. 1492–98; Rome 1495; Rome 1510; Rome ca. 1510; Rome 1513; Venice 1525 (Paolo Danza); while my

-
- 16 “Ma tratto peculiare del racconto di Brigida era la struttura duale della *passio*, dove il dolore del figlio era speculare a quello della madre, una vera e propria compenetrazione carnale, sino alla condivisione di uno stesso e medesimo cuore. [...] Questa sofferenza muta e straziante innalzava Maria al ruolo di corredentrice,” Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, “Brigida di Svezia e la reinvenzione della Storia Sacra. Il cammino la terra la visione,” in *Predicatori, mercanti, pellegrini. L’Occidente medievale e lo sguardo letterario sull’Altro tra l’Europa e il Levante*, ed. Giuseppe Mascherpa and Giovanni Strinna (Mantua: 2018), 189–217: 194. On this role of Mary see Beth Williamson, “The Cloisters Double Intercession. The Virgin as Co-Redemptrix,” *Apollo* 152 (2000), 48–54.
- 17 See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven and London: 2005), 249–56.
- 18 Giorgio Caravale, *Forbidden Prayer: Church, Censorship, and Devotional Literature in Renaissance Italy* (Farnham: 2011); Gigliola Fragnito, *Proibito capire. La Chiesa e il volgare nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: 2005), 232–59.
- 19 Marco Faini, “Vernacular Books and Domestic Devotion in Cinquecento Italy,” *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 6 (2019), 299–318.

corpus may appear comparatively restricted, one should recall that many editions were in fact reprints.²⁰ For example, the Silber family issued fourteen editions of the prayers; Johann Besicken printed nine, although one of these may have been printed with or by Andreas Freitag.

In some of the editions I consulted, an articulated rubric precedes the fifteen prayers, boasting their power and their manifold effects. The same does not happen with the prayer to St. Augustine: in the copies I was able to consult the prayer is generally introduced by a laconic rubric saying: "Prayer of the eminent doctor St. Augustine" (*Oratio eximii doctoris sancti Augustini*). In the 1495 edition by Stephan Planck the rubric gives simple instructions on how to recite the prayer: "Prayer to St. Augustine, to be recited most devoutly for 33 days on your knees to obtain grace."²¹ As in the case of similar works, besides suggesting the powers of a given prayer, rubrics also provided instructions on how to perform it to achieve the desired results.

The rubric introducing the fifteen prayers, in fact a rather articulated Latin text, conveys more information, starting from a few notes on the famous episode of Birgitta's prayer in the church of San Paolo fuori le mura in Rome [Fig. 5.1 a/b], when the Crucifix spoke to her as a reward for her fervent devotion. Scholars suggest that it was only in mid-Cinquecento that the miracle entered official hagiography on Birgitta, thanks to the publications of Olaus Magnus (1490–1557), the Swedish humanist and geographer (but active in Rome) who published a series of works on Birgitta, among which the *Vita abbreviata sanctae Birgittae* (1553). The episode of the prodigious dialogue between Birgitta and the Crucifix was already circulating in Roman devotional culture but was not part of official Birgittine hagiography at the time of her canonization (1391). However, Claudia D'Alberto alerts us to the fact that this does not imply that the tale originated in the late 15th century, at the time when the booklets we are examining began to appear. More likely, Birgitta's strongly Christocentric devotion was already well known and those crucifixes she venerated the most may have enjoyed special consideration. Hence, tales on Birgitta's prodigious relationship with the crucifix at San Paolo may have been born.²²

20 The copy in the Biblioteca Marciana of Venice (*Hec sunt quindecim collecte siue orationes illius preclarissime virginis beate Brigitte*, Rome: Eucharius Silber, after 1500, shelfmark Misc. 4044 003.A) lacks the first folio.

21 "Oratio sancti Augustini devotissime dicenda xxxiii diebus genibus flexis ad obtinendam gratiam," *Quindecim orationes sanctae Brigidae* [...] (Rome: Stephan Planck, ca. 1495), fol. 7r (see *infra*).

22 Claudia D'Alberto, "Il crocifisso parlante di santa Brigida di Svezia nella basilica di San Paolo fuori le mura e i crocifissi replicati, copiati e riprodotti a Roma al tempo del papato avignonese," *Studi Medievali e Moderni. Arte letteratura storia* 15 (2011) [= Gaetano Curzi

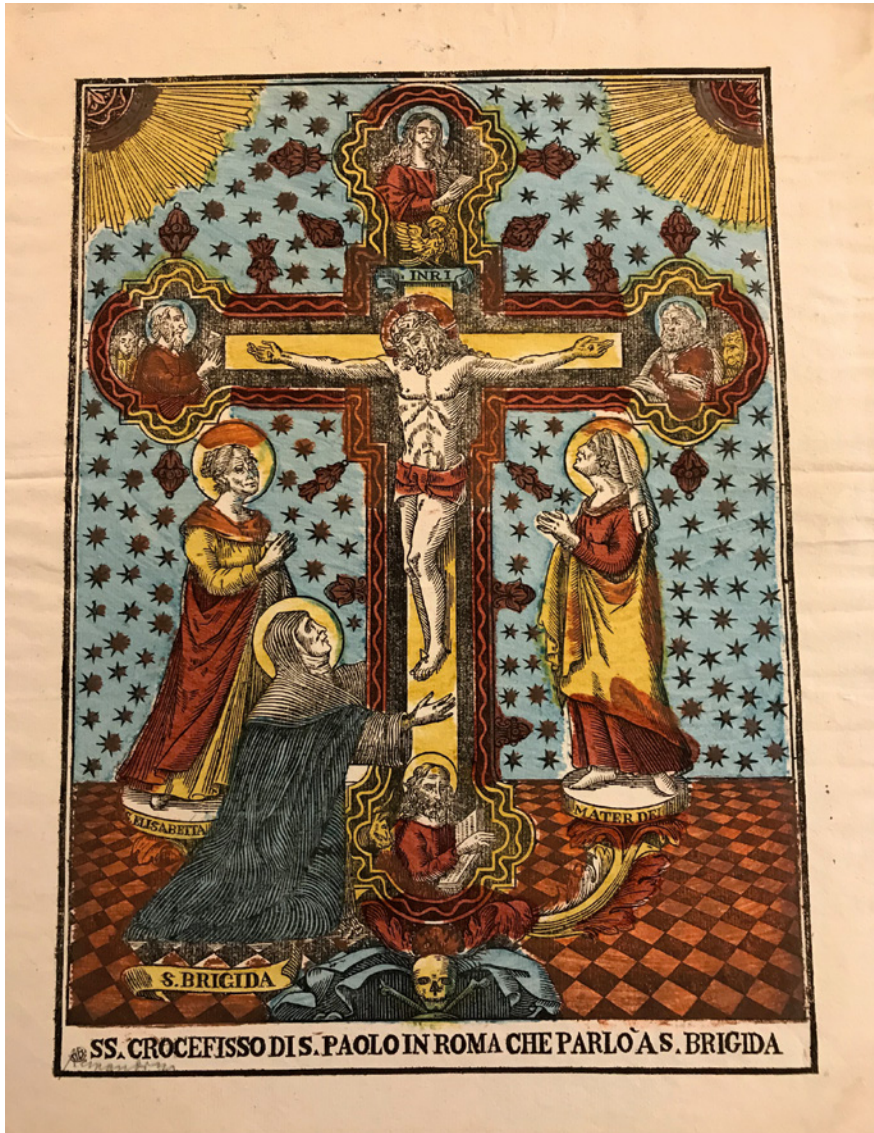


FIGURE 5.1A *ss. Crocefisso di San Paolo in Roma che parlò a S. Brigida*. Woodcut. Milan, Civica Raccolta Bertarelli, *Sacre Popolari* m. 36, 54

The rubric purports to report the words that Christ spoke to Birgitta, warning the reader that they will read “amazing things” (*stupenda leges*). In fact, the printed text is an abridged version of the legend that often precedes the prayers

et al. (eds.), *Abruzzo: un laboratorio di ricerca sulla scultura lignea*], 229–55, esp. 234 and 236–37. See also the chapter in this volume by Virginia Cox.



FIGURE 5.1B *Il ss. Crocefisso di San Paolo in Roma che parlò a S. Brigida.* Woodcut. Milan, Civica Raccolta Bertarelli, Sacre Popolari m. 36, 55

in some manuscript versions. The printed text lacks the first part of this legend, wherein an old woman – sometimes identified with Birgitta herself – who lives “solitary and reclusive” (*solitaria et reclusa*), desires to learn the number of wounds inflicted on Christ during his Passion. In a 15th-century French book of hours (now ms. *Lat. 13285* of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France) the incipit of this legendary tale reads: “A certain woman, alone and a recluse, because she

wanted to know the number of Christ's wounds, prayed to God that he reveal it to her, and God said to her [...]."²³ The rubric then claims that the person who will recite the prayers for a whole year will be able to free from Purgatory fifteen souls of relatives (*de eius progenie*), and will convert fifteen sinners into fifteen just persons. They will also obtain knowledge of, and contrition for, their sins, thus achieving the first degree of perfection. Fifteen days before the death of said person, Christ will share his body with them so that they will not suffer eternal hunger, and he will share his blood with them so that they will not suffer eternal thirst. Christ promises to place his Cross in front of this person as a protection against all enemies (*in subsidium contra omnes insidias inimicorum eius*). Before the death of said person, Christ will descend with his mother to greet their soul and escort it to eternal joy (*ad gaudia eterna*). If someone who has been in a condition of mortal sin for 30 year decides to recite the prayers, Christ will offer his pardon to them, protect them from temptations and will guard their five senses (from sin, i.e.), save them from sudden death and their soul from eternal damnation. In addition, Christ will erase all the sins this person has committed from their childhood onwards, while also supporting their spiritual path to improvement, perfecting their virtues. If this person were to die of sudden death within a day, Christ would prolong their life (*si cras mori deberet vita eius prolongabitur*). The text then promises other indulgences and, interestingly, spiritual happiness to whoever will teach the prayers. Finally, the text states that God will be present with his grace in every place where Birgitta's prayers shall be recited or in whatever place they happen to be placed (*ubicunque locorum fuerint vel dicantur*). This last passage stresses the talismanic power of the text, whose mere presence grants spiritual benefits.²⁴

The bulk of this introductory text appears also in the version of the fifteen prayers printed along with Bernard of Clairvaux's *Meditationes devotissime* by Bernardino Bindoni (Venice, 1543). In Bindoni's edition, Bernard's *Meditationes* are followed by a series of other spiritual works, among which the *Exercitium vitae et passionis domini ad modum rosarii distinctum*, which immediately

23 "Femina quaedam solitaria et reclusa numerum vulnerum Christi scire cupiens, oravit Domino ut sibi rivelaret et dixit ei Deus [...]" the text of the legend is published in Abbé V[ictor] Leroquais, *Les Livres d'Heures manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris: 1927), vol. 2: 97–98 (97); see also Duffy, *The Stripping*, 254–55.

24 I use the 1478 edition (Rome: Johann Bull), copy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, *Inc.5.a.11#Beibd.4* <https://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/0003/bsb00035645/images/index.html?seite=00001&l=de> [accessed on 03/22/2020]; and the edition of Rome, 1481–85, copy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, *Inc.c.a.71#Beibd.3* <https://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/0003/bsb00035647/images/index.html?seite=00001&l=de> [accessed on 03/22/2020].

precedes the fifteen prayers. Its author is the German Carthusian monk Johann Landsberg (Johannes Lanspergius, 1489–1539), whose works enjoyed a great success in Italy in the 16th century. It is not by chance that this work – a series of prayers, or meditations, connected to each one of Christ’s wounds and interspersed with Hail Marys and Holy Fathers – precedes the fifteen prayers. An edition of the two works had in fact already appeared in Cologne in 1530 and the association between Lanspergius and Birgitta was sensible, since Lanspergius had published in Cologne in 1536 the life and revelations of another Medieval saint, St. Gertrude of Helfta (Gertrude the Great, 1256–1302 ca.).²⁵ Moreover, the *Exercitium* and the fifteen prayers share some features, in particular the strong focus on the Passion of Christ. In the same year, 1543, Bernardino Bindoni printed the *Beneficio di Cristo*, the most influential text of the Italian evangelical movement (the very work with which Soranzo wanted to replace the fifteen prayers in the convent of Santa Grata). It may appear at first surprising that the same person could print the manifesto of the new spirituality and late-Medieval fossils (although focused on Christocentric spirituality), especially the fifteen prayers with their long “superstitious” rubric, utterly at odds with the austere (for all its “sweetness”) spirituality of the *Beneficio*. Possibly, in Bindoni’s eyes, the rubric must have been less relevant than the strongly Christocentric content of the fifteen prayers; as we shall see, some passages in this text could even resonate well with the *Beneficio di Cristo*, helping to bridge an otherwise seemingly problematic gap. It is probably not too far-fetched to suggest that the 1543 edition of the fifteen prayers establishes a dialogue with Italian evangelism, *pace* Soranzo.

The Bindoni edition deserves some further scrutiny. Firstly, the printer claims to have drawn the text from some most ancient and authoritative copies, possibly manuscripts that allegedly served to emend the text.²⁶ The rubric serves as a prologue to the “prayers of the blessed widow Birgitta” (“Prologus in orationes beatae Brigittae viduae”) and is longer and more detailed (one may say more “superstitious”) than in the editions considered so far. The story of the miraculous speech of the Crucifix is more elaborate and we read that Birgitta herself wanted to know from the Crucifix the number of Christ’s

25 *Exercitium vitae et passionis Christi, ad modum [sic] rosarii quinquaginta articulis et totidem oratiunculis distinctum. Item, Divae Brigittae orationes xv de passione domini* (Cologne: apud Io. Soterem, 1530). Giolito printed the life of Gertrude in the vernacular translation by Vincenzo Buondi five times between 1562 and 1589.

26 “Sequuntur Orationes 15 d. Brigittae de passione Domini, ad vetustissima exemplaria diligenter correctae,” [Bernardus Claraevallensis], *Divi Bernardi Abbatis meditationes devotissime* (Venice: Bernardinum de Bindonis, 1543), fol. 278v (= MMviv).

wounds (*scire cupiens numerum vulnerum Christi*).²⁷ Christ reveals that there are 5,460 (*Quinque milia, quadringenta et sexaginta corporis mei extiterunt vulnera*) of them.²⁸ To honor these wounds, one should recite for a year, kneeling, the fifteen prayers and an equal number of Holy Fathers and Hail Marys.²⁹ The text that follows reproduces the one I have already considered. However, the final section is slightly different and puts a stronger emphasis on the protective and practical powers of the text in everyday occurrences:

Finally, wherever these prayers are recited or placed, be it in fire or in water, God will intervene with his grace and will protect and save him [who recites or owns them, i.e.], in the same way he saved St. Peter on the stormy sea and rescued St. Paul, who was shipwrecked three times, from the depths of the sea.³⁰

The fifteen prayers are a complex, somewhat anamorphic textual object: a refined work of late-medieval spirituality and an aggregate of apocryphal tales and popular beliefs; as such, it could simultaneously resonate with Christocentric evangelism and be utterly at odds with it. It is probably not entirely inaccurate to say that the fifteen prayers live in a sort of grey area between orthodoxy and what might be labelled as heterodoxy, and between “high” and “popular” culture.

Before turning to issues of censorship and to the circulation of the text in the second half of the century, I would like to illustrate another printed text connected with Birgitta’s cult, which enjoyed a lasting popularity well into the 20th century. This text finds its place within the “popular” section of the spectrum on which the fifteen prayers are located. I am referring to a letter sent to Birgitta by Jesus Christ himself. Although the text does not contain the fifteen prayers it is easy to detect the reciprocal connections between the two works, starting from the recurrent presence of the number “fifteen.”

27 Ibid., fol. 279r (= MMviii).

28 Ibid.

29 “Quae si veneratione aliqua persequi volueris, has xv. orationes et totidem Pater noster cum Ave Maria dicas per annum integrum flexis genibus,” Ibid.

30 “Postremo, ubicunque orationes istae dicuntur vel erunt, sive sit in igne, sive in aqua, Deus cum gratia sua aderita protegens et salvans eum, quemadmodum sanctum Petrum in mari fluctuantem, et Paulum tertio naufragantem de profundo pelagi liberavit,” Ibid., fol. 279v (= MMviii). The reference to the three shipwrecks comes from 2 Corinthians 11:25; the whole passage concerning “Paulum, tertio naufragantem, de profundo pelagi liberavit” is also part of the liturgy on the octave day of the apostles Peter and Paul.

A Letter from Jesus Christ to Birgitta and Her Sisters

In 1899, a note in the journal *Monitore ecclesiastico*, devoted to the publication of decrees issued by the various Congregations of the Holy See, reported that the Sacra Congregazione delle Indulgenze had declared apocryphal the indulgences connected with some prayers, therefore prohibiting them. The forbidden texts were published in their entirety on the journal. The first was titled *Lettera di Gesù Cristo delle gocce di sangue che sparse n. s. g. c. mentre andava al Calvario* (A letter from Jesus Christ on the drops of blood that Our Lord Jesus Christ spilled on his way to Calvary). The letter, reporting the apparition of Christ to Birgitta, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, and St. Matilda, was allegedly the copy of a prayer found in the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, kept guarded in a silver box by the Pontiff and the Christian Emperors and Empresses (although this is not entirely clear: were there more copies of the prayer? Was it passed from hand to hand?). Because the three saints desired to know certain details (*alcune cose*) regarding the Passion, Jesus Christ had spoken to them. His revelations regarded the number and the quality of the wounds and blows he suffered during the passion, the number of his sighs as well as the number of the soldiers who took part in his torture. The count is very precise, and we learn, for example, that throughout the entire Passion Jesus spilled 28,430 drops of blood. Jesus Christ will grant five special graces to those who will recite seven "Pater, Ave, Gloria" each day for fifteen years, until they match the number of his drops of blood. These five graces are: 1) full indulgence and pardon of all sins; 2) liberation from Purgatory; 3) if someone should die before the fifteen years are over, Jesus will act as if they had completed the whole cycle; 4) Jesus will consider them as if they had died for the Holy Faith (as a martyr, in other words); 5) at the moment of their death, Jesus will descend from Heaven to escort their soul and that of their relatives within the fourth degree. Other favors are bestowed on the persons who will carry the letter on their bodies: for example, they will not drown, or die suddenly, nor will they suffer from plague or lightning, and the power of Justice will not harm them (the preoccupation with justice and tribunals is a recurrent theme in this kind of texts). Women who will carry the prayer on their body will give birth easily, and those who have been infertile until that moment will be able to give birth. While in the above-mentioned editions of the fifteen prayers their benefits were mostly spiritual, in the case of the letter its talismanic power comes to the fore, extending its influence on everyday life. In addition, the letter describes two wondrous episodes that should prove its authenticity and effectiveness. The first concerns a Spanish captain who, while walking towards Barcelona, came across a severed head that told him to please go and fetch it a confessor because otherwise it

would not be able to die. After the confession the “living head” (*la testa vivente*) died; once the corpse to which the prodigious head belonged was found, people discovered on it a copy of this letter – approved by numerous tribunals of the Spanish Inquisition (again the discovery of a magic prayer in Spain and its alleged approval by the local Inquisition is a commonplace).³¹ Another copy of the letter, written in golden characters, was found miraculously on a seven year-old boy near Marseille.³²

This text shows the degree to which popular religion could appropriate the cult of Birgitta, mixing it with wondrous tales. Versions of the text circulated until at least 1928 and possibly later, sometimes printed on textile, and various versions of it can still be found on the Internet, testifying to its long-lasting influence. A slightly different version of the letter circulated declaring an apocryphal blessing by Pope Leo XIII carried the date of 5 April 1890.

Curious as it may be, this text had a long story behind it. The Inquisition had been worrying about it at least since 1642, when it ordered the bishop of Nepi and Sutri to confiscate all the existing copies in his diocese.³³ It is likely, however, that at that point the text had been circulating for some time, as one can gather from another version of the text now in the *Raccolta Bertarelli* in Milan [Fig. 5.2]. It is a flysheet, printed probably at some point in the 19th century.

-
- 31 See Katherine M. Tycz, “Material Prayers and Maternity in Early Modern Italy: Signed, Sealed, Delivered,” in *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Maya Corry, Marco Faini, and Alessia Meneghin (Leiden-Boston: 2018), 244–71: 258–60.
- 32 The text is in *Monitore ecclesiastico* 11 (1899), 534–35. This particular version of the text was printed in Fiorenzuola d’Arda in 1893 by the typographer Pennaroli, who specialized in popular literature and fly-sheets. The letter belongs to the “micro-genre” of fictional letters; see Genoveffa Palumbo, “Lettere immaginarie, apocrife, inventate,” in Gabriella Zari (ed.), *Per lettera: La scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia secoli XVI–XVII* (Rome: Viella, 1999), 151–177.
- 33 See the entry by Mario Marino “L’unica e vera lettera [...],” in *Rari e preziosi. Documenti dell’età moderna e contemporanea dall’Archivio del Sant’Uffizio*, Alejandro Cifres-Marco Pizzo (eds.) (Rome: 2009), 136–37. See Antonio Leoni, *Breve raccolta d’alcune particolari operette spirituali proibite, orazioni e divozioni vane e superstiziose, Indulgenze nulle, o apocrife* [...] (1708?), p. 80: “La rivelazione di S. Brigida delle Piaghe di N.S. Giesù Christo. Per Decreto del S. Officio primo luglio 1642 e 2 giugno 1662.” See also *Appendix novissimae appendici ad Indicem librorum prohibitorum* [...] (Romae: typis Hieronymi Mainardi, 1739), 536: “Indulgenze che si dicono fondate ed annesse alle Rivelationi fatte a Santa Brigida, o a Santa Metilde, o a Santa Elisabetta.” In this case, the reference comes from the *Raccolta d’alcune particolari operette spirituali, e profane proibite* included in the volume. A similar text titled *Revelatione fatta dal nostro Signore della sua santissima Passione a S. Brigida, alla beata Melchiade [= Matilde] et a santa Lisabetta* is in Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 1783, fols. 136v–137r. The manuscript was written by the Dominican Gherardo di Fiandra which suggests the circulation of these texts also within convents. I thank Michele Lodone for this reference.

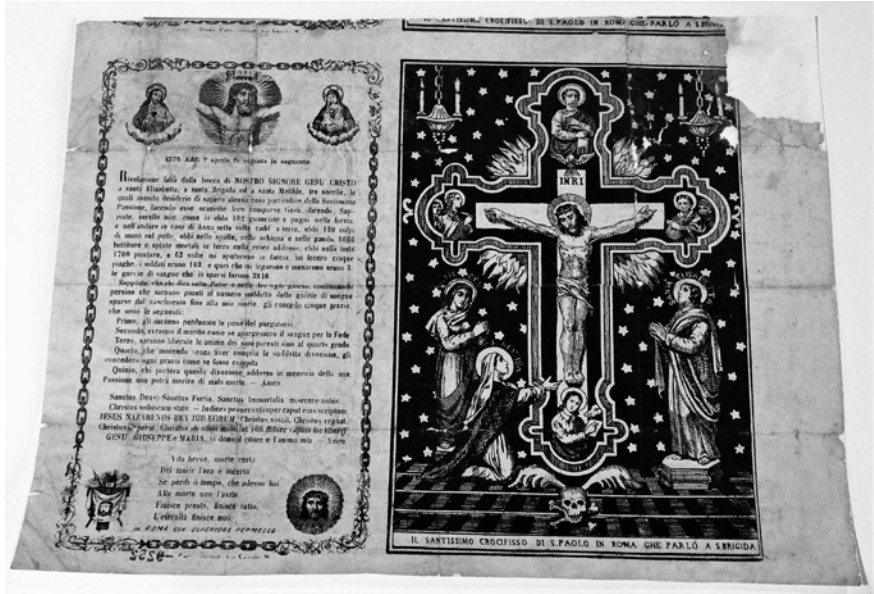


FIGURE 5.2 *Rivelazione fatta dalla bocca di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo.* Woodcut. Milan, Civica Raccolta Bertarelli

On the left-hand side there is the text of the letter accompanied by small images of Christ and of the Virgin. On the right-hand side of the sheet one sees a woodcut showing Matilda and Elizabeth at the sides of a Crucifix while Birgitta is kneeling in front of it. The text, allegedly printed in Rome “with permission” does not have a proper title, but a sort of epigraphic incipit declaring that “On 7 April 1575 the following revelation was copied.” The text is shorter than the one published on the *Monitore*; the numbers differ, but its talismanic power is clearly stated. It is possible that this flysheet reflects a simpler version of the *Lettera*, already circulating in the sixteenth century. The letter seems to point to a conflation of Birgitta’s revelations with the talismanic power attributed to the apocryphal fifteen prayers. For sure, it entirely lacks the profound spirituality of the prayers themselves.

Censorship

In the second half of the 16th century and until the 20th century, the Inquisition and the Congregation of the Index fought a long battle against “superstitious” prayers. As a consequence, many of them have disappeared, a combined result of the authorities’ efforts, of these works’ poor material quality, and of their

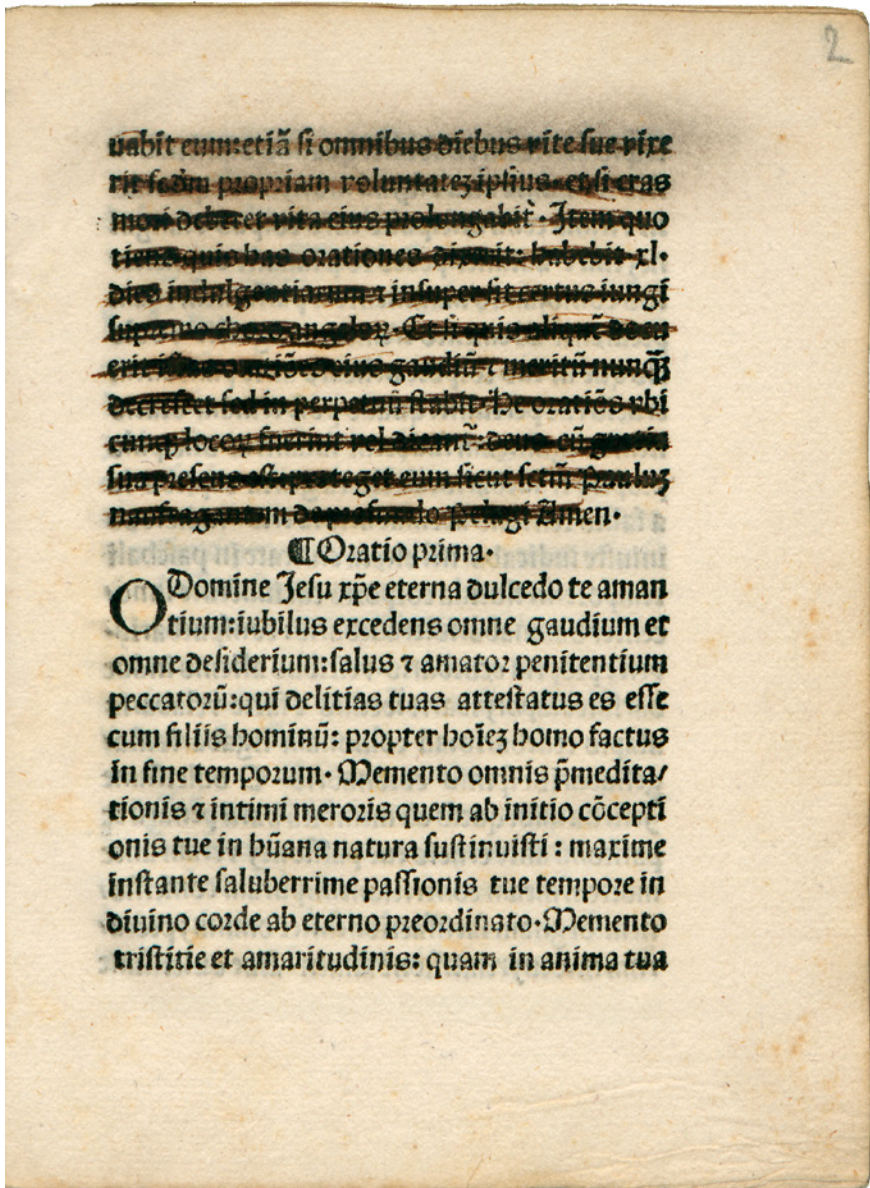


FIGURE 5.3 *Quindecim orationes sanctae Brigittae de passione Domini* (Rome: Stephan Planck, ca. 1495), fol. 2v. Biblioteca de Catalunya, Inc. 26/1-12

heavy use. Some survive, sometimes bearing signs of censorial interventions: this is the case with the copy of the 1495 edition of the fifteen prayers now in Biblioteca de Catalunya [Fig. 5.3]. The rubric that introduces the text is missing its first part (due to the loss of the first page) and an anonymous reader

has censored the rest of the rubric, covering it with heavy pen strokes.³⁴ It is an interesting example, showing that this edition may have been still circulating some 75 years after it was printed. In fact, although the fifteen prayers did not appear on the Index of prohibited books for a long time, as early as the 1570s they featured among a group of works requiring corrections. In March 1571, Pius v issued a bull concerning the Offices of the Virgin, which prohibited most of the Offices printed until that moment. The bull also addressed “superstitious” prayers in general, dealing with them in a section titled *Modo, et regola di espurgare gl’ufficioli, et altri libri d’orationi* (A method, and rule to purge the Offices and other books of orations). The *Modo, et regola* provided a sort of general “methodological” introduction on how to perform censorship on superstitious prayers, focusing especially on those rubrics “speaking of uncertain indulgences, or vain or superstitious practices, or of the prayer’s powers, telling things neither credible nor reasonable.”³⁵ It then provided two lists of prayers: the first included prayers to be absolutely prohibited; the second, prayers that could be tolerated but required censorial interventions. The fifteen prayers feature on this second list along with the prayer to St. Augustine [Fig. 5.4a/b]. The text of the *Modo et regola* is reprinted, with few variations, in the *Modo, et regola di espurgare li ufficij, & altri libri di orationi*, a flysheet printed in Rome at some point after 1571 and before 1590 [Fig. 5.5].³⁶

Before turning to the content of the instructions concerning the fifteen prayers, it is worth recalling that the list provided by the *Modo et regola* is at the basis of similar catalogs of prohibited prayers printed throughout the 18th century. In some cases, these catalogs were additions to other works; in some other cases, they were printed autonomously in the form of booklets.

-
- 34 The shelfmark of the copy is *Inc. 26/1–12°*; the passage at fol. 2v. The copy is available online: <http://mdc.csuc.cat/cdm/ref/collection/incunableBC/id/121198> [accessed on 03/22/2020]. The fifteen prayers inspired similar works which, analogously, ended up being prohibited for their “superstitious” content; an extraordinary example is the so-called *A muyto devota oração da empardeada* (an “empardeada” or “emparedada” being a walled-in woman who lived a life of prayer and repentance); see Noel Blanco Mourelle, “The Voice inside the Wall: *A muyto devota oração de empardeada* as a Confession of Enclosure,” *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 11 (2020), 264–71. I thank Michele Lodone for providing me with this reference.
- 35 “Parlano d’Indulgentie incerte, o d’osservazioni vane, o superstitiose, overo del valore dell’Orationi, con raccontare cose non verisimili né ragionevoli,” “Sommario della bolla del Santiss. Padre papa Pio v sopra la recitatione dell’Ufficio della B. Vergine Maria, colli decreti e indulgentie,” in Giovanni Battista Porcelli, *Scriniolum Sanctae Inquisitionis Astensis* [...] (Asti: apud Virgiliulum de Zangrandis, 1612), 55–57. The *Modo et regola* is at 56–57. See Caravale, *Forbidden Prayer*, 81–87.
- 36 Rome: per gli Heredi d’Antonio Blado Stampatori Camerali. I use the copy in the Biblioteca Passerini Landi of Piacenza – shelfmark (C) *TT.03.034.04*. I thank Dr Massimo Baucia for providing me a free image of the work.

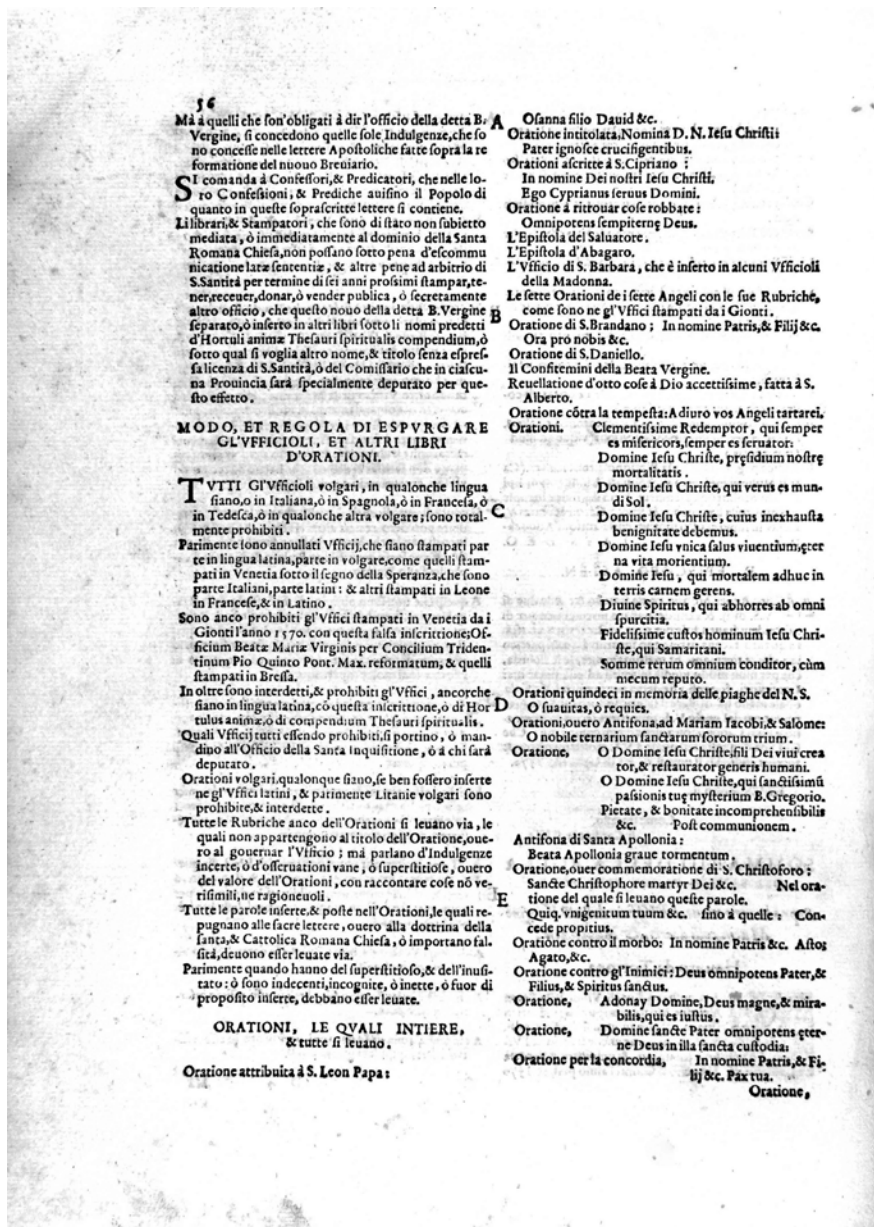


FIGURE 5.4 A/B

Giovanni Battista Porcelli, *Scriniolum Sanctae Inquisitionis Astensis* [...] (Asti: apud Virgiliulum de Zangrandis, 1612), 56–57

Oratione, O Iesu Nazarene, respice ad meas miserias, & angustias.
Oratione, Domina mea sanctissima, Dei genitrix perpetua virgo &c.
Oratione, Deus pater pijsime, Iesu Chrifte dulcissime, spiritus dulcissime &c.
Vtilitates Misſe &c. Si Homo peregrinaretur per totum mundum.
Hino di Gildo Rei Deus summe, pacis, & cęli habitator.

Oratione di S. Rocho.
Oratione contra il male della gotta.
Oratione contra la febre.
Oratione che è intitolata, Oratio quam dicebat Beata Maria.

ORATIONI, ANTIFONE, LETANIE, ET HINI, che debbono esser corrette, come di sotto.
Oratio S. Augustini, O Dulcissime Dñe. In questa oratione si leua la rubrica, & si facci. Orò in afflictione. Nel testo d'essa oratione, leuansi queste parole: Saul, ouero, Populum tuum de monte Gelboe.
Item si leuano queste: Quia inimici mei super me faciunt, & facere volunt mala consilia, sino à quelle parole, Per sancta beneficia tua.
Auxilientur mihi Domine Iesu: In questa oratione si leuano queste, Scio enim quod, sino à quelle, ideo de tua pietate confitis.
Gaspardus dicit: In questa oratione leuasi, Iesus autem transiens per medium illorum ibat. Item si leua: Si ergo me quæritis, finite hos abire. Tetragramma con. Nelle Letanie della Madonna si togli: Spiritus sancti solatium. Item, Calandra sancta.
Nel Gloria in excelsis della Messa della Madonna si leuano quelle particole aggiunte. Ad Marię gloriam, Mariam sanctificans &c.

O intermerata, & in æternum. In questa oratione si leuano primieramente tutte queste parole: Te enim vnigenitus filius, & omnipotens Deus, & quel che seguita sino à Inclina aures &c.
Dipoi si togliano quest'altre: Rogans pro me apud fontem pietatis, & il resto sino à O Ioannes beatissime Christi familiaris.
In altre si leuano queste: Credo enim firmiter, & factor indubitanter, quod velle vestrum &c. sino ad Posce queso, & di qui si lascia tutto il restante sino alle parole, Benignissimus paraclitus, doue è da terminare l'oratione, & troncare il rimanente.
Obsecro te Domina mea &c. si leuano circa il fine le parole: Et in nouissimis diebus, sino, Et hanc orationem supplicem.

Nell'oratione, Salue sancta facies, che è al S. Sudario, si leua, Salue decus sæculi, sino al verso, Adoramus te Chrifte.
Aue facies omnipotentis in throno: In questa oratione è da leuare, Aue nostra gloria, sino al verso, signatum est.
Oratione di Beda. Domine Iesu Chrifte In questa si leuano, Vt semper illa verba in memoria habermus: Item, Per virtutem illorum verborum.
Oratio S. Bepida: nella xiiij. si leua, ruptoq; corde, nella xy. Ita vt minima gutta, sino ad, Per hanc amarissimam.
Oratio ad dexteram manum Christi: Domine Iesu Chrifte, qui ista manu, si scancellano queste due parole: Ista manu.

Nell'Vfficio del santissimo Sacramento all'Hino di Noana, leuasi, Iudus cum heloy clamauit, hoc est Deus meus.

L'Oratione, Conditor Cęli, & terra, s'intirola. Oratio preparatoria ad confessionem. Nell'oratione istessa si leuano queste parole, In superbia, auaritia, gula, &c. sino à Cogitando.
La Salue Regina, doue in alcuni Vfficioi è intitolata, Canticum Angelorum, s'intirola, Antiphona Beate Marię Virginis.

Oratio deuotissima ad Beatam Virginem Mariam, Scabam mater dolorosa, s'intirola, Planctus Beate Marię Virginis.

La Institutione Christiana intitolata di S. Antonio, è da correggere per modo, che la dichiarazione del primo Precepto dica, Che tu facci reverentia à vn Dio, & che tu l'ami sopra tutte le cose &c. sino à Nota, leuando via quel, Non, Et Se non: & ne à cose temporali, sia' à che tu ami. & nel fine si leua: Nota, che quando dicit la bugia &c. Nella dichiarazione dell'articolo ortauo, Credo in Spiritum sanctum, si leua via, Et sua il padre vno. Doue si parla del Battesimo, è da leuare, Et nota, Che sono quattro cose, sino à Et nota, Che quello sacramento &c.

Doue si parla dell'alcantara contra l'iradone dice, Sappi che non ti lecito &c. si leua il, Non, & Se non. Nella seconda maledictione dell' figliuoli discedentium all' patri si leua, Percio che niente altro è offer male detto &c. sino al fine d'essa.
Nell'Institutione alla Christiana religione, doue nel sermone della confessione si dice, La confessione rimette li peccati, si leuano queste parole, tutta la speranza della remissione de i peccati, &c. sino, Della quale esso Saluatore.

EDITTO DI MONSIGNORE REVERENDISS. Il Vescouo di Tortoua, per effecutione delle sopradette lettere Apostoliche.

Volendo Monsig. Reuerendiss. Cesare di Gambara Vescouo di Tortoua effequire la piua mente di N. Sig. comanda ad ogni Curato così della Città, come della Diocesi di Tortoua, che il primo giorno di festa doppo che le sudette lettere Apostoliche li saranno peruenute alle mani, le publichino al suo popolo nel tempo della Messa.

Inoltre comanda sotto pene arbitrarie à sua S. Reuerendiss. che fra termine di dieci giorni à venire doppo la publicatione delle predette ciascuna persona seculare o regolare, o laica debbia hauer portato in mano del del R. P. Inquisitore di Tortoua, o del tutti li Vfficio della B. Vergine, che habbia appresso, così latini, come volgari, à fine, che si effequisca la mente di S. Beattitudine eipressa nella sopra detta bolla.

Et volendo sua S. Reuerendiss. che li libri, & vfficioi della disciplina quali vñano nelle loro cascacie, & oratorij siano purgati nel medesimo modo, com'ada sotto le medesime pene all' Priori di detti Disciplinanti, & à ciascun d'essi in specie, che nel detto tempo habbino consignato al detto P. Inquisitore, ouero al detto libri, & vfficio, che hanno presso di se, affine, come si è detto possino esser purgati come li altri. Dat. Det. conq. in Aedib. Epil. noit. reſidit. die 16. Aug. 1571. Bartholom. Paderus Vic. Gen.

F. Claudius de Cherio Inq. Dertone.
 M. Ant. Cauagnolus Cur. Epil. Dert. C. cell. &c. Reuer.

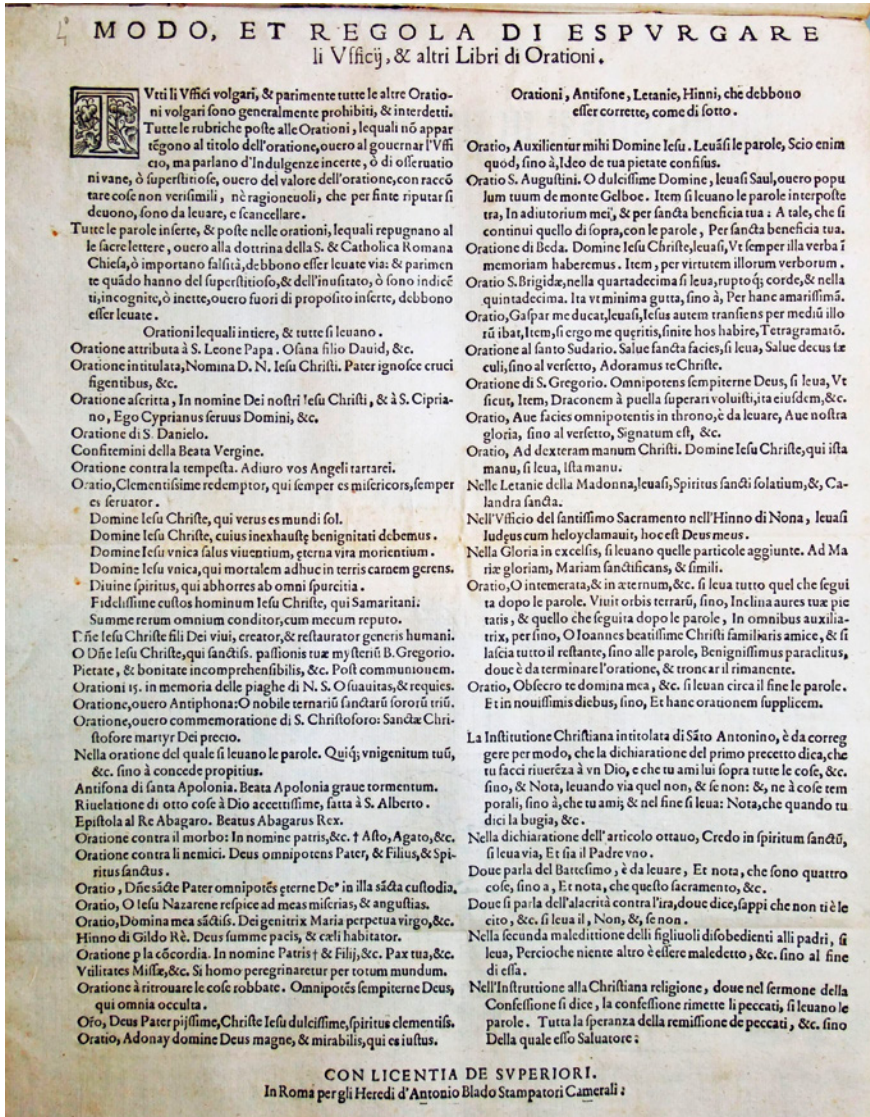


FIGURE 5.5 *Modo, et regula di espurgare li ufficij, & altri libri di orationi* (Roma: per gli Heredi d'Antonio Blado Stampatori Camerali). Piacenza, Biblioteca Passerini Landi, (C) TT.03.034.04

The *operette* that appear on these lists are generally small booklets – prayers, histories, legends – containing apocryphal and/or superstitious texts. These lists, variously titled *Aggionta d'alcune operette, et historiette prohibite* (An addition of some prohibited little works and histories), *Nota d'alcune operette, et historiette prohibite* (A list of some prohibited little works and histories) and

similar tended to increase over time, including a growing number of works. Generally issued by local and not Roman authorities, they were in turn banned in 1621, only to resurface in the second half of the century.³⁷

To some extent, the church tolerated the *operette*, *orationi*, and *historiette*, at least as long as they did not interfere with the official and public cult. Both the Inquisition and the Congregation of the Index adopted a sort of compromise, allowing them for domestic and private devotion, and banning them from public devotion and liturgy. In doing so, the authorities acknowledged the practical impossibility of restraining their circulation. Easily printed and easily memorized, sometimes copied, requiring a low level of literacy, these works circulated widely. The fifteen prayers were part of this world of cheap religious print that the lists of superstitious works tried, often in vain, to chart. Interestingly, after their precocious insertion in the *Modo et regola*, the fifteen prayers seem to disappear from the radar of 17th-century lists of superstitious prayers. In fact, they do not appear in the *Breve informazione del modo di trattare le cause del Sant'Officio* (A short information on the way of handling the Holy Office trials) issued by the Modenese Inquisitor Michelangelo Lerri (1608) nor in the *Syllabus sive collectio librorum prohibitorum et suspensorum* (Syllabus, or a collection of prohibited and suspended books, Bologna 1618). They do not even appear in the 1687 edition of the *Regole del tribunale del Sant'Officio* (Rules of the Tribunal of the Holy Office) by Tommaso Menghini. In fact, they feature in the 1665 edition of Eliseo Masini's *Sacro arsenale* (The sacred arsenal), a sort of manual for Inquisitors, in which Masini reprinted the early-1570s *Modo et regola*. After Masini's work, they appear on the 1704 Index of prohibited books and, again, in a work printed after 1708 by the Bolognese Inquisitor Antonio Leoni titled *Breve raccolta d'alcune particolari operette spirituali proibite, orazioni e divozioni vane e superstiziose, indulgenze nulle o apocrife, et immagini indecenti ed illecite, che più frequentemente sogliono oggidi andare intorno* (A short collection of some particular prohibited spiritual works, vain and superstitious orations and devotions, invalid or apocryphal indulgences, and obscene and prohibited images, which nowadays circulate more frequently).

Within this tradition, we see two approaches to the fifteen prayers. One is the approach we find in the *Index* and in the *Breve raccolta*, focusing on the rubric or prologue to the prayers, formally prohibited by a decree issued on June 30, 1671 [Fig. 5.6].³⁸ The 1704 *Index* declares that "the prologue should be

37 For this paragraph I acknowledge the importance of the essay by Rudj Gorian, "La *Distinta notitia di molte orationi et istorie proibite*: due edizioni censorie minori del 1710," in *Dalla bibliografia alla storia. Studi in onore di Ugo Rozzo*, ed. Rudj Gorian (Udine: 2010), 141–70.

38 Romae: ex typographia Reverendae Camerae Apostolicae, 1671: "Ex folio quodam circumfertur cum hoc titulo le quindici Orationi di S. Brigida deleatur Prologus." The text

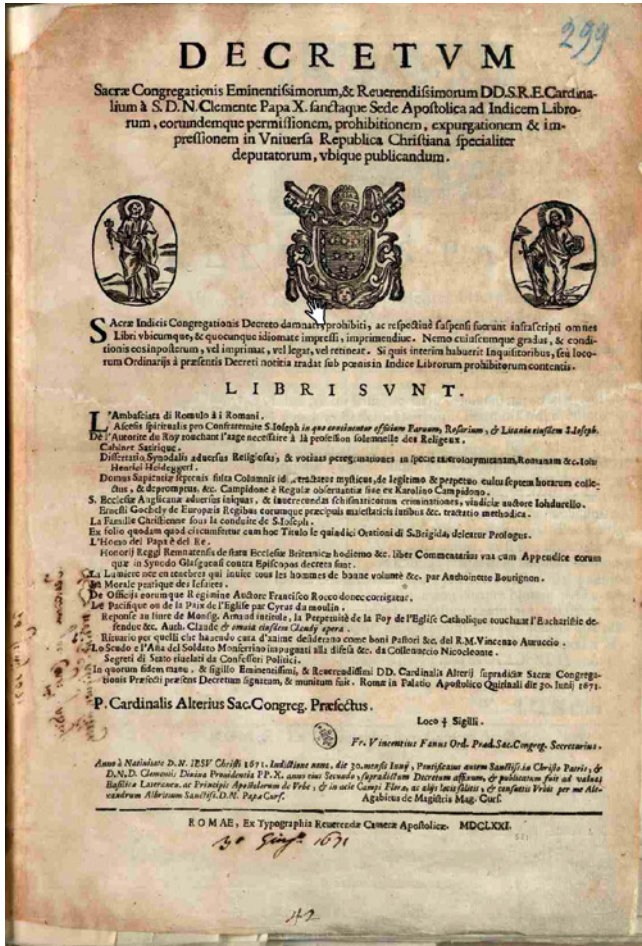


FIGURE 5.6 *Decretum Sacrae Inquisitionis* [...], June 30, 1671 (Romae: ex typographia Reverendae Camerae Apostolicae, 1671). Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense

deleted from a certain sheet circulating with the title “The fifteen prayers of S. Brigida.”³⁹ A few years later, we read in the *Breve raccolta* that “The fifteen

is available on line: The text is available on line: <http://dr.casanatense.it/drviewng.html?action=jumpin;idbib=394;idpiece=-1;imageNumber=1> [accessed on 27/03/2020].

39 “Ex folio quondam, quod circumfertur cum hoc titulo: Le quindeci orazioni di S. Brigida, deleatur Prologus,” *Index librorum prohibitorum* [...] (Romae: typis Rev. Cam. Apost., 1704), 104. In 1737, the Congregation of the Index prohibited a book titled *Corona d'oro a Maria Vergine* which also included the fifteen prayers; see *Appendix novissimae appendici*, 485.

prayers to S. Brigida are not permitted with the prologue but only if said prologue is taken away."⁴⁰

The second approach is that of the *Modo et regula* and, consequently, of Eliseo Masini's *Sacro Arsenale*. In addition to the general instructions on rubrics, which had to be eliminated altogether from all printed prayers, the *Modo et regula* suggested two cuts from the text of the fifteen prayers:

Prayer to St. Brigida: from [prayer] 14 *ruptoque corde* should be taken away; from [prayer] 15 *Ita ut minima gutta* until *per hanc amarissimam*.⁴¹

While the first required intervention is surgical, the second suggests a more substantial cut; the incriminated passage reads as follows:

Et ex lancea militari perfosso latere tuo nobis sanguinem et aquam propinasti, *ita ut nec minima gutta in te remansit. Tunc demum quasi mirre fasciculus in altum crucis suspensus fuisti et medulla ossium tuorum emarcuit et liquor viscerum tuarum exaruit et caro tua delicata caro tua evacuit*.⁴²

They pressed your blessed body on the press of the cross and gave us both blood and water to drink out of your body pierced with a knight's spear so that not one drop of blood or of water was left. Then at the end you hung high on the cross like a bundle of myrrh; your tender flesh changed color because the liquor of your bowels and the marrow of your bones was dried up.⁴³

Arguably, the insistence on graphic violence and morbid descriptions, as well as the presence of apocryphal details not included in the Gospels, lie at the base of both censorial interventions. Interestingly, authorities seem to pay no attention to certain passages of the fifteen prayers that could resonate with evangelical ideas. Their preoccupation seems to lie instead in a different kind of "abuse": superstitious and apocryphal passages. So, for example, in the fifth prayer the reference to the predestination of the "chosen souls", or of the elect

40 "L'orazioni quindici di S. Brigida non si permettono col prologo, bensì levato che sia lo stesso prologo," Leoni, *Breve raccolta d'alcune particolari operette spirituali proibite* [...], 70.

41 "Oratio S. Brigidae: nella xiii si leva ruptoque corde; nella xv *Ita ut minima gutta* fino ad *Per hanc amarissimam*," *Scriniolum sanctae Inquisitionis*, 57.

42 Gejrot, "The *Fifteen Oes*," 228.

43 I use the translation of Rebecca Krug, "The Fifteen Oes," in *Cultures of Piety. Medieval English Devotional Literature in Translation*, ed. Anne Clark Bartlett and Thomas H. Bestul (Ithaca and London: 1999), 107–17: 117.

goes unnoticed: “Remember how you beheld the chosen souls predestined to the saved through the merit of your Passion.”⁴⁴

A Case Study: The *Selva di orationi*

So far, I have considered the prescriptive aspects of censorship. Did readers or printers comply with these rules? The reader of the above-mentioned 1495 edition now in the Catalunya Library certainly did, and they duly censored the rubric in their copy. A systematic study of all the surviving copies of late 15th- and 16th-century editions of the text could yield interesting results, although no one of the nine copies (in eight different editions) which I was able to consult bear any trace of censorship apart from the Barcelona one. Here I will examine an interesting example of the circulation of the prayers in the second half of the sixteenth century, a very popular collection of prayers titled *Selva di orationi di diversi s. dottori e di molti scrittori antichi, & moderni* (A collection of prayers by different holy doctors and several ancient and modern writers). This anthology was assembled by the Sienese Carmelite Niccolò Aurifico Bonfigli (ca. 1530–ca. 1603). The work, printed by the Giolito brothers in Venice, was a best-seller, published at least ten times from 1569 to 1598 (and again in 1603 and 1616). The *Selva di orationi* – whose first edition immediately precedes Pius v’s bull on superstitious prayers – contains a vernacular translation of the fifteen prayers along with several other texts, including a vernacular version of the Psalms. The *Selva* soon became a concern to local authorities: despite not featuring on any list of prohibited books, it was nevertheless a potentially problematic text. Fra Girolamo, Inquisitor of Pisa wrote to the Roman Inquisitors as early as 29 December 1571, sending, among others, a copy of the *Selva*, asking whether it was to be censored or prohibited.⁴⁵ Another document now in the Archive of the Congregation of the Holy Office, a list of books requiring some kind of censorial intervention (drafted probably around 1597), also mentions the *Selva* “because it contains the Penitential Psalms in the vernacular and the Passion of St. John [also in the vernacular].”⁴⁶ Interestingly, the vernacular

44 Ibid., 114. The Italian version reads “Rammentati Giesù [...] la predestinatione di quegli eletti che per i meriti della tua Passione dovevan salvarsi,” Niccolò Aurifico Bonfigli, *Selva d'orationi* [...] (Venice: Giolito, 1597), 351. See the Latin text in Gejrot, “The Fifteen Oes,” 225: “conspexisti predestinationem electorum tuorum per merita tue passionis salvandorum.”

45 Caravale, *Forbidden Prayer*, 173–74.

46 “Selva di orationi di Nicolao Aurifico perché contengono li salmi penitentiali volgari, et il passio di S. Giovanni,” transcribed in Jennifer Helm, *Poetry and Censorship in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Leiden-Boston: 2015), 369.

version of the Passion according to the Gospel of John immediately follows the fifteen prayers, which do not appear to be of any concern to the authorities.

Unfortunately, I could not perform a systematic survey of the copies of the *Selva*. However, I was able to see the following copies:

- Copy of the 1597 Giolito edition in the Biblioteca Statale of Cremona;
- Copy of the 1610 edition (? The frontispiece is missing) in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek;
- Copy of the 1616 edition (Venice, Vincenzo Fiorina) in the Biblioteca Nazionale of Naples
- Another copy of the same edition in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana of Venice (220 C 107)

None of these bear traces of censorship, meaning that the printer printed the prayers disregarding official guidelines and no reader ever took pains to erase the prohibited passages from the text (notably, the Munich copy belonged to a religious library). More interesting is the other copy I was able to consult, a 1597 Giolito edition now in the Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon, in which the fourteenth prayer shows no signs of censorship. Instead, in the fifteenth prayer, the prohibited section has been partially erased: “your tender flesh changed color because the liquor of your bowels and the marrow of your bones was dried up.”⁴⁷ From the concluding line *et liquor viscerum tuarum exaruit et medulla ossium tuorum emarcuit* – which reads in Italian “seccossi il liquore delle tue viscere, marcì finalmente la medulla delle ossa tue”⁴⁸ – a reader has deleted the portion “marcì [...] tue.”⁴⁹ This particular copy bears another sign of censorship: in orations eight to eleven, in the initial formula “O Signor mio” a reader has erased “mio,” a word that in fact does not appear in the original text (the same reader forgot to correct the same formula in the last prayer). Whether this was due to a philological scruple, or to preoccupation with decorum, we do not know.

Conclusion

The fifteen prayers contributed to shaping Birgittine devotion in Italy from at least the 15th to the 17th century. Perceived as an authentic text they presented the reader with numerous spiritual and material benefits. Placed half-way between the prophetic inspiration of Birgitta’s authentic texts and “popular”

47 Krug, “The Fifteen Oes,” 117.

48 Nicolò Aurifco Bonfigli, *Selva d'orationi* [...] (Venice: Giolito, 1597), 356. Copy of Cremona.

49 Nicolò Aurifco Bonfigli, *Selva d'orationi* [...] (Venice: Giolito, 1597), 356. Copy of Lyon.

allure of prayers such as the Letter sent from Jesus to Birgitta, they could attract a diverse readership. As I have suggested, they might even have resonated with some aspects of Italian evangelism although, as we have seen, the number of their editions drops dramatically in the central decades of the century. In the second half of the century, their printed circulation is granted by anthologies such as that by Nicolò Bonfigli. Once severed from their rubrics and surgically censored, their intense Christocentric devotion is not perceived as problematic or threatening. Further studies should investigate their presence in other printed collections of prayers as well as mapping their manuscript circulation. However, it seems to me undeniable that the fifteen prayers remained appealing to generations of devotees throughout the most troubled decades of Italian religious history.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Unn Falkeid and Anna Wainwright for their suggestions and their help. Michele Lodone has read this article and provided invaluable feedback and precious bibliographical references. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the reviewers' suggestions.