

## The Semantics of Obedience. Birgittine Influences on Paola Antonia Negri's Letters

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Giovan Battista Fontana de Conti, the author of the *vita* of the controversial *Angelica* Paola Antonia Negri (1508–1555), was key to contributing to the fame of Birgitta of Sweden's reputation in Italy at the beginning of the Counter-Reformation. Although it was Fontana who explicitly associated Negri with Birgitta, it is not only in his work that we find a connection between the two prophets. This chapter discusses Birgitta's influence on Negri's ideas of obedience, starting from their common emphasis on the virtue of prudence, their similar thematization of the exemplarity of Mary, and the centrality of humility as a fundamental quality of governors.

A prophet and nun from Castellanza, Negri took vows of chastity in the convent of San Paolo Converso in Milan. The convent, which was founded in 1536, hosted the Paulines, who were divided into a male and female branch and, for a short time, a branch for married couples – the Barnabites, the *Angeliche* and the *maritati* respectively. The Paulines' early history is closely linked with the figure of Negri. Before the papal decree that ordered the enclosure of the *Angeliche*, the Barnabites and the *Angeliche* lived together, inspired by the universalist doctrines of Saint Paul.<sup>1</sup> Although Thomistic philosophy is present in their thinking, they did not identify with a precise theological or philosophical doctrine. They performed spiritual exercises together, held common retreats, and practiced an asceticism based on obedience and control over one's own will more than on corporeal control.<sup>2</sup> The Barnabites were a solid pillar of the Counter-Reformation,<sup>3</sup> as expressed in the three-fold aim stated

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- 1 Samuel Vollenweider, "St. Paul," in *Religion Past & Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Leiden: 2011), vol. 9, 633.
  - 2 Andrea Maria Erba, "Chierici regolari di San Paolo," in *Dizionario degli Istituti di perfezione*, ed. Guerrino Pelliccia and Giancarlo Rocca (Rome: 1974), vol. II, 948–9.
  - 3 Federico Chabod, *Opere:3.1: Il ducato di Milano e l'impero di Carlo V. Lo stato e la vita religiosa a Milano nell'epoca di Carlo V* (Turin: 1971), 264.

in their constitutions: “renunciation of the world, total consecration to God, zeal for the saving of souls.”<sup>4</sup>

Negri carried out charitable works in the hospitals of converted prostitutes in the regions of Veneto and Lombardy. Her charitable travels, ecstasies, and miracles were highly respected, to the point that she was considered an absolute authority over the whole order. Threatened by her extraordinary power as a woman and the growing influence of the Barnabites, the Venetian Council of Ten banned the Barnabites from Veneto. Subsequently the papacy carried out an investigation into her role in the congregation that led to her expulsion from the *Angeliche* and seclusion in the cloistered convent of Santa Chiara in Milan, where she died in 1555.<sup>5</sup> Negri wrote 133 letters, 70 of which were posthumously published with her *vita* written by Fontana. The *Spiritual Letters*, sent between 1538 and 1551, were ready to go to press in 1563, but their publication was blocked by a group of cardinals. After the deaths of the cardinals, they were finally published in 1576. In the intervening period, Giacomo (or Diego) Láinez, General of the Jesuits, subjected them to careful scrutiny and editing, censoring their most controversial parts. The *Spiritual Letters* primarily addressed Negri’s devotees in Veneto and Lombardy, which included her fellow Paulines, the *convertite* – converted prostitutes who had chosen convent life – as well as eminent people such as Alfonso del Vasto, who was the governor of Milan, the poet Gaspara Stampa, and various clerics, lawyers and merchants. The collection also includes a letter to Pope Julius III on the occasion of his papal election. Like Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena, Negri was humble and modest – for example, admitting her flaws of pride, ignorance, arrogance and presumption – but was at the same time incredibly assertive in prescribing rules of behavior to her recipients, whether devotees and fellows or notable people.

The letters contain not only pastoral messages but also complex theological positions on the universalism of the Church, revealing the impact of Paul’s ecclesiology on the role of the Christian people in the history of salvation and on the conduct of secular and ecclesiastical powers. The letters also demonstrate Negri’s desire to act as a spiritual guide for various groups and figures: for her community who demanded religious reform; for the believers disappointed by clerical corruption and continuous wars; for the pope, distracted

4 “Rinuncia al mondo, consacrazione totale a Dio, zelo per la salvezza delle anime.” Erba, “Chierici regolari,” 947.

5 For a systematic account of the early history of the Barnabites, see Elena Bonora, *I conflitti della Controriforma. Santità e obbedienza nell’esperienza religiosa dei primi barnabiti* (Turin: 1998), and, more recently, Querciolo Mazzonis, *Riforme di vita cristiana nel Cinquecento italiano* (Soveria Mannelli: 2020).

by temporal affairs; and for civil powers such as the governor of Milan, caught between imperial obedience and reverence for the Holy See.<sup>6</sup> In many of Negri's recommendations, prudence is presented as the primary virtue, considered to be of particular importance to the powerful, but even to women, whom she believed capable of it despite being excluded from positions of power and thus supposedly lacking in leadership qualities. Prudence was also functional to her anti-Protestant critique: as a practical, action-based virtue, it was an antidote to the Lutheran dismissal of good works, epitomized in the *sola fide* doctrine. Prudence is also a relevant component of her interpretation of the legacy of Birgitta,<sup>7</sup> another powerful woman who also fought for the reformation of the Church but envisaged its future division.

Fontana explicitly compared Negri's destiny to that of Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. Fontana and Negri's devotees found in Birgitta the initiator of a tradition fostered by Catherine of Siena that combined a saintly reputation with the possibility of criticizing ecclesiastical and political institutions. Negri in turn aligned with the prophetic model initiated by Birgitta: she repeatedly used Birgittine images in her letters in order to convey a message focused on obeying God's representatives on earth while retaining one's own capacity to advance alternative models of power and virtue.

The underlying hypothesis of this chapter is that the rhetoric of obedience constitutes an essential albeit understudied aspect of the Birgittine legacy that Negri adopts and reshapes. Italy and Europe in the 16th century were marked by fierce upheavals, including the Protestant Reformation and the division of Christendom, continuous wars and occupations in Italy, and the proliferation of eschatological expectations that foresaw the coming of a Pastor Angelicus who would overthrow all earthly kingdoms.<sup>8</sup> In this context, both women and men reflected on the meaning of obedience, just as Birgitta had questioned the duty of trusting corrupt ecclesiastical and political powers during the Avignon papacy and the Hundred Years' War.

Negri elaborated a semantics of obedience which, while conforming to the new spiritual discipline of the Counter-Reformation, was fraught with tensions which complicated the concept of obedience itself. This chapter looks at the semantics of obedience, focusing on three elements: positive references to the Virgin Mary as a queen and as a woman; the understanding of prudence as

6 On the ambivalent position of Alfonso del Vasto, see Chabod, *Lo stato e la vita religiosa*, 283 ff.

7 My initial overview of the influence of the Birgittine prophetic model on Negri can be found in Eleonora Cappuccilli, "In the Steps of Birgitta of Sweden: The Reluctant Authority of Paola Antonia Negri (1508–1555)," *Renaissance Studies* 35 (2021), 582–99.

8 For a compelling account of the appropriation of Birgitta's prophetic identity and voice during the Italian Wars see Jessica Goethals and Anna Wainwright's chapter in this volume.

integral to obedience; and the critique of theologians, priests, and Christian philosophers who neglected the value of good works. Reinterpretations of the role of the Virgin Mary, ideas of prudence, and attacks on the vain sciences are the fundamental pillars of Negri's doctrine of obedience, which was inspired by Birgitta. Negri's argument for obedience to God-appointed powers draws on a tradition shaped by St. Augustine and St. Thomas, who based obedience on "the order of natural and Divine law" (*ex ordine iuris naturalis et divini*).<sup>9</sup> Birgitta renewed this tradition by arguing for the Christian duty of obedience by the governed, but maintained that this did not exempt secular and spiritual governors from demonstrating that they were worthy of obedience.<sup>10</sup> As both the king and the pope had a divine mission, she believed that her duty as a prophet was to instruct them on how to behave in order to fulfill their mission. In the *Treatise to the Highest Pontiffs* and the *Heavenly Emperor's Book to Kings* she reminds the king and pope of the limits of their power and explains how they should behave towards their subjects in order to fulfill their Christian obligations, seeing this as a crucial part of her prophetic task. It is possible that Negri's concept of obedience, which includes ideas not only on how to obey, but also on how to be worthy of obedience, drew on Birgitta's ideas on the subject, as expressed in her instructions to princes and popes. When Birgitta said that the king "should not take pride in his privilege but be humble in consideration of the burden of his office,"<sup>11</sup> she meant that royal prerogative did not entitle him to unrestrained power or allow him to escape divine commandments. On the contrary, the ideal king was aware of the limits of his power.<sup>12</sup> Complying to his *officium* was key to the king's legitimate authority, which required obedience to God's superior orders and the execution of his precepts.<sup>13</sup> Just like Birgitta during the troubled years of the Avignon papacy, Negri transformed obedience into a concept with which to criticize spiritual and secular powers that were unmindful of their mission.

After discussing how Fontana, Negri's hagiographer, fashioned her around the model of Birgitta of Sweden, I will explore Negri's construction of a semantics of obedience through Mariology, prudence, and a critique of the vain

9 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Rome: 1882), II-II, q. 104, a. 1, responsio.

10 Unn Falkeid, "The Political Discourse of Birgitta of Sweden," in *Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Maria H. Oen (Leiden: 2019), especially 97–101.

11 "Portauerit non superbiat ex permissione set humili et se considerando onus officii sui." Rev. VIII: 3.3.

12 Falkeid, "The Political Discourse," 99.

13 On the constitutional relevance of the idea of *officium*, see Pierangelo Schiera, *Il cameratismo e l'assolutismo tedesco* (Milan: 1968), 247 ff.

sciences. My analysis will show that her semantics of obedience was influenced by her reception of the Birgittine prophetic model.

### Hagiographic Crystallization of a Fragmentary Legacy

In Negri's *vita* Giovan Battista Fontana compares her destiny to that of "those blessed saints Catherine and Birgitta," observing that, unlike Negri, they were not persecuted for their good works.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in constructing Negri's hagiography, it is likely that Fontana adopted the model of *Vita abbreviatae sanctae Birgittae*, published by the Catholic reformer Olaus Magnus in 1553. As Enrico Garavelli notes,<sup>15</sup> Fontana, like his contemporaries, acknowledged that evoking Birgitta in the 16th century meant not only reminding the Pope and the Emperor of their responsibilities, demanding Church renewal, and condemning those who divided rather than reunited it, but also summoning up a prophetic model capable of conferring authority on a highly controversial woman. Indeed, Fontana reports that the Lord was pleased with Birgitta and Catherine as well as with a "Spanish matron" (*una matrona spagnuola*) – most likely St Isabella of Portugal – who all received papal sanction for their preaching (*andar predicando*) and saintly works (*sante opera*). These women, like Negri, were divine "vases and instruments" (*uasi, & instrumenti*) and persecuting them "would mean tying the hands of his divine goodness" (*sarebbe un uolere legar le mani a sua Divina bontà*)<sup>16</sup> Likening Negri to a holy vase, into which God poured his spirit and word, and an instrument through which he realized his will, was part of a strategy for legitimizing her sanctity.

This idea was shared by Negri's devotees, especially Giovanni Paolo Folperto, who collected the material for the hagiography and entrusted it to Fontana. Folperto also wrote the dedication for *Lettere Spirituali*, which has strong echoes of the preface written by Olaus Magnus to *Vita Abbreviata*. The life of Negri, Folperto writes, is a true example of "natural goodness and Christian charity" (*natural bontà, e christiana carità*), and enticed all sorts of people onto the path of being good Christians: "[Negri] drives lay people and regular

14 "Né mi raccordo, che per tali buone operazioni fussero mai perseguitate quelle beate antiche santa Brigida, e santa Caterina da Siena." Giovan Battista Fontana, "Vita" (hereafter *Vita*) in Paola Antonia Negri, *Lettere spirituali della devota religiosa Angelica Paola Antonia de' Negri Milanese. Vita della medesima raccolta da Giovan Battista Fontana de' Conti* (Rome: 1576) (hereafter LS), 104.

15 Enrico Garavelli, "Introduzione," in Ludovico Domenichi, *Vite di Santa Brigida e Santa Caterina di Svezia*, ed. Enrico Garavelli (Rome: 2016), 21.

16 *Vita*, 104.

clerks, male and female, big and small, beginners and experts, lords, middle-sort and lowly people, and – in short – everyone, on the path of increasingly perfecting oneself in the profession of the true Christian.”<sup>17</sup> In his preface to *Vita Abbreviata* Olaus Magnus had attributed to Birgitta the same capacity to guide all people towards religious devotion: “by spreading the perfumes of her virtues Birgitta induced many to the glory of the divine cult and away from errors and vices.”<sup>18</sup>

Another sign of Folperto’s imitation of Birgitta’s hagiography is the tactic employed to defend Birgitta’s identity as a prophetic vessel. As Unn Falkeid points out, unlike Catherine of Siena, Birgitta and her confessors and hagiographers played on the “supposed inferiority of the female sex.”<sup>19</sup> Olaus Magnus, drawing on the 16th century opposition between *femina* and *donna*, reverses this conception by distinguishing Birgitta as a *woman* from Birgitta as a member of the female sex:

[God] destined Saint Birgitta, who was not a fragile but a strong woman [...] even though she belonged to the fragile sex, to be a healthy and fruitful plant, endowed with spiritual seed, that was going to benefit many, for the singular ornament and consolation of his militant Church.<sup>20</sup>

Belonging to the fragile sex does not exclude the possibility of being as strong as a man.<sup>21</sup> In the dedication for Negri’s hagiography, Folperto clearly replicates this gesture, presenting Negri as having been elected to nourish the “fragile sex,” leaving the stronger sex with no excuses:

Here is she who will bring food for the fragile sex, above all one woman who collected much milk, that is, who converted many into spiritual

17 “Conduce laici, e regolari, maschi, e femmine, grandi, e piccioli, incipienti, e provetti, Signori, mediocri, e bassi, & insomma tutti nel sentiero dell’affinarsi sempre più nella professione di vero christiano.” Giovanni Paolo Folperto, “Dedica,” in *Vita*, s.p.

18 “[Birgitta] plurimos ad divini cultus gloriam ab erroribus & vitis suarum diffusis virtutum aromatibus incitaret.” Olaus Magnus, *Vita Abbreviata* (Rome: 1553), preface, s.p.

19 Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested. An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge: 2017), 153.

20 “Et quamvis sexu de fragili, non tamen fragilem, sed mulierem fortem, sanctam scilicet Birgittam, [...] velut plantulam salubrem, fructiferam femine spirituali multis profuturo, Ecclesiae suae militanti in singulare decus & solatium destinavit.” Magnus, *Vita Abbreviata*, 11.

21 On the reversal of the female fragility *topos* into a possibility for practicing *imitatio Christi* as women, see Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist. Studies in the Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: 1995).

people and gathered them together. Here is she, I say, who will remove all excuses from the stronger sex.<sup>22</sup>

Subtly rephrasing Magnus's opposition between the strong woman, i.e. the ideal virago or *femina virilis* who exceeds the limits of her femaleness, and the fragile female sex, Folperto pits the fragile sex against the stronger sex and substitutes the metaphor of the fruitful plant with those of food and milk, which are linked to the woman as mother. In this way, Folperto connects the figure of Negri to that of Birgitta – both of whom were able to prove their strength as women – and reinforces this subtle connection through the symbology of spiritual food, which, as we will see below, was used by both Birgitta and Negri.

Fontana adds to Folperto's effort, interspersing the hagiography with Birgittine motifs. For instance, he readapts the Birgittine image of Mary as a magnet to Negri herself. In Birgitta's *Revelations* Mary says to her: "As a magnet attracts iron to itself, so too I attract hard hearts to God."<sup>23</sup> Fontana uses the same metaphor for Negri, describing her as being like a "magnet" (*magnete*) that attracted even "iron and hardened hearts" (*ogni cuor di ferro e duro*).<sup>24</sup> In fashioning Negri around the model of Birgitta and employing Birgittine images and metaphors, Folperto and Fontana were using references that would have been familiar to an Italian Renaissance audience. In this sense Fontana's *vita* constituted an example of a "literary crystallization of a collective conscience."<sup>25</sup> However, below we will explore the hypothesis that the Birgittine references in Negri's *vita* were used not only to meet the expectations of the audience but also to reflect Negri's own use of elements of the Birgittine theological and political legacy.

It is clear that Birgitta, the most notable canonized widow, was known to Negri not only from the social and historical context of Renaissance cities like Milan and Venice, in which Birgitta's name was widely known,<sup>26</sup> but also from textual fragments scattered throughout Negri's letters. One hidden allusion is contained in the redefinition of the meaning of women's virtues. First, she redefines virginity, so that it no longer refers to the mere integrity of the body,

22 "Ecco chi le vivande porterà per il fragil sesso, massimamente una che pascendo l gregge, latte assai raccolse, cioè spirituali molti fece, e congregò. Ecco, dico, chi potrà al sesso più forte levar ogni iscusazione." Folperto, "Dedica," s.p.

23 "Magnes attrahit sibi ferrum, sic ego dura corda attraho Deo." *Rev.* III: 32.3.

24 *Vita*, 19.

25 Jacques Fontaine, "Introduction," in Sulpice Sever, *Vie de Saint Martin*, ed. Jacques Fontaine (Paris: 1967), vol. I, 188.

26 For a full account of the circulation of Birgittine and pseudo-Birgittine works in Renaissance Italy, see the chapter by Brian Richardson in this volume.

but is seen as an active virtue. Thus, it is not limited to women who never married but can also be applied to widows.

One must be a virgin not only in the body: many other Saints who were not virgins were crowned with the legitimate crown of which they were made worthy, but I speak of virginity as the status of being a virgin after the rebirth of Christ from the darkness of the first errors; that virginity consists in having not only an uncontaminated body, but also an uncontaminated mind.<sup>27</sup>

True virginity, then, is not only a bodily quality, but also an attribute of the mind. The implication of this statement is two-fold. On the one hand, Negri minimizes the ideal of bodily integrity and in so doing shows devotion not only to eminent virgin saints, such as Catherine of Siena, but also to married and widowed saints, including the renowned widow Birgitta. On the other hand, Negri's extreme redefinition of the idea of virginity removes its usual association with "fragile states" such as purity, chastity, and *clausura*.<sup>28</sup> As we shall see below, this is a first sign of Negri's general redefinition of the scale of virtues: it is not virginity that is at the top, but more active virtues such as prudence.

This reformulation of virtue as attached to the intangible part of the self, rather than just its material part, suggests that sin, the contrary of virtue, should also be defeated in the soul (or mind, which Negri uses as a synonym) rather than in the body. Mortifying the body, as Negri makes clear, means mortifying its metaphorical limbs of "foulness, pride, [and] avarice" (*immondizia, Superbia, auarizia*). Invoking the teaching of St Paul, Negri argues that it is dangerous to self-discipline the body alone, as it risks creating "a good opinion of oneself and contempt of others" (*buona opinione di sé stessi, e dispregio degli altri*). In order to foster virtuous conduct, the body should instead "become the servant and subject" (*serva, e stia soggetto*) of "our will and reason" (*volontà nostra e ragione*), and not vice versa.<sup>29</sup> Negri is more interested in disciplining the soul than in disciplining the body. This anticipated the prevalent conception of discipline in Italy from the late 16th century onwards – which

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27 "Bisogna essere vergini ma non solo di corpo: molti altri Santi non vergini [sono] stati coronati della legittima corona, della qual però so fatti degni, ma parlo di quella verginità, dilla qual si è Vergine doppo il rinascimento Dio dalle tenebre dei primi errori, la qual verginità consiste non solo in non havere il corpo contaminato, ma ne anco la mente." LS IV, parte seconda, 278.

28 Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: 1999), 134.

29 LS X, parte prima, 126–127.



might have been a factor in the posthumous publication of Negri's letters at that time.<sup>30</sup>

For Negri, then, spiritual improvement is of more value than bodily improvement. It is only God who can provide the possibility for such improvement, expressed by the image – to which we shall later return – of “spiritual food” that will never wholly satisfy your hunger. This is another example of the subtle influence of Birgittine imagery. In the *Revelations*, Birgitta plays with the idea that God provides food for the soul, an idea that has a partially scriptural origin:<sup>31</sup>

O, Lord, how sweet are the words of your mouth! It truly seems to me, as often as I hear the words of your Spirit, that my soul within me swallows them with an indescribably sweet sensation like that from the sweetest food that seems to drop into my heart with great joy and indescribable consolation. It seems wonderful to me that while I listen to your words, I am made both fully satisfied and yet still hungry. I feel satisfied because nothing else pleases me but your words. Yet I feel hungry because my appetite for them keeps increasing.<sup>32</sup>

This powerful Birgittine image – God's words as the food that will never completely fill you up – returns in Negri's letter on the Assumption, where she describes Virgin Mary's attendance at the banquet of God.

By following in her footsteps, we will be able to see her triumphant in Heaven and, through imagination, while still being on earth, we will taste the crumbs that fall from that rich table, where she sits, is waited upon, eats, and nourishes herself, and while she is eating, she does not satisfy her hunger.<sup>33</sup>

30 Gabriella Zari, “Disciplina regolare e pratica di coscienza: le virtù e i comportamenti sociali in comunità femminili (secc. XVI.XVIII),” in *Disciplina dell'anima, disciplina del corpo, disciplina della società*, ed. Paolo Prodi (Bologna: 1994), 257–78.

31 E.g. Ps. 107:9 and Ezek. 3:3. On the meaning of spiritual food for Medieval mystic women see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: 1987) and Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: 1985).

32 “Videtur vere michi, quociens verba Spiritus tui audio, quod anima mea in se illa degluciat cum quodam sentimento ineffabilis dulcedinis sicut suauissimum cibum, qui cadere videtur in corporis mei cum magno gaudio et ineffabili consolacione. Mirabile tamen hoc esse videtur, quoddum verba tua audio tunc utrumque efficio scilicet saciata et famelica. Propter hoc autem saciata, quia nichil tunc aliud michi libet nisi illa; propter hoc vero famelica, quia semper augetur appetitus meus ad illa.” *Rev.* IV: 77.5–6.

33 “Seguitando le uestigia sue, ci potremo assicurar di uederla trionfante in Cielo, e potremo per imaginazione al meno stando ancora in terra gustar de migolini, che calcano da quella

Given that the image of spiritual food that does not satisfy hunger is framed within a eulogy to the Virgin Mary, it is reasonable to assume that Negri was using one image to reference two Birgittine fragments – spiritual food and the lofty example of Mary.

These fragments suggest that in this letter Negri crafted her pastoral message through mixing together various theological images that she found in Birgitta's work. Fontana, like Negri's devotee Folperto, added a prophetic link by explicitly introducing Birgitta of Sweden's name. However, Birgitta is never named in the Barnabites' constitutions, and, unlike Catherine of Siena, the other woman prophet and canonized saint whom Fontana likens to Negri, she is not listed amongst the authors which the Barnabites and the *Angeliche* were supposed to study.<sup>34</sup> Given that Birgittine devotion was not part of the Barnabites' tradition, the peculiarity of the hagiographic reference to Birgitta is particularly striking. This reference could be partly motivated by the hidden references that Negri makes to Birgitta's visions in the *Spiritual Letters*, as well as by similarities in the two women's use of Mariology.

### Marian Rewritings

Negri's letters contain a multifaceted and sometimes contradictory conception of Mary. She is a symbol of both obedience and power, the utmost example of virtue but not a unique woman; she is the ultimate role model but can also coexist with the prophetic model of Birgitta of Sweden. Negri's superlative Marian devotion clearly emerges in an unpublished letter, which her devotees left out of the 1563 collection. Negri argues that Christ recognized in the Virgin the highest example of virtue, rather than a grieving – thus passive – subject. "Although he saw his mother so sorrowful, and full of angst and anxieties, Christ did not want to call her mother, but woman, in order not to condescend to affection, but to keep the rigor of virtue."<sup>35</sup> It is unclear why Negri's devotees Folperto and Giacomo Rainoldi did not select this letter for publication, but it

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ricca mensa, oue ella siede, oue le uiene ministrato, si pasce e si nodrisce, e pascendosi non si sazia." LS XX, parte terza, 462.

34 Antonio Maria Zaccaria, "Costituzioni," in Orazio Premoli, *Le lettere e lo spirito religioso di S. Antonio M. Zaccaria*, ed. Orazio Premoli (Rome: 1909), 70.

35 "Vedendo la madre sua tanto dolorosa, spasimosa e piena di angoscie e ansietadi non dimeno non volse chiamarla per madre, ma per donna, per non condescendere alla tenerezza e tenere il rigore della virtude." Rome, Centro Studi Storici – Archivio Storico dei Barnabiti di Roma (hereafter ASBR), L.b.1.primo, 12, fol. 2r.

could be that they found its depiction of Mary to be too controversial, making her overly godlike and not sufficiently human.<sup>36</sup>

They probably thought that not publishing that letter would help to reduce the perception of Negri's role in the confraternity, which was the main reason that the Barnabites were investigated by the Inquisition. As Renée Baernstein pointed out, the Barnabites believed that Negri – whom they called “Divine Mother and Teacher” until the Inquisition declared her “mother no more” – was “an intermediary through whom Christ favored their congregation,”<sup>37</sup> just as the Virgin Mary was an intermediary of grace for all Christians. As the Barnabites had gone too far with their devotion to Negri – leading to their being banned from Veneto and the seclusion of Negri herself – any exaggeration in the veneration of the Mother of God was probably considered to be alluding too much to the Barnabites' relationship with their Divine Mother. Thus any ambiguous reference to Mary – especially if depicted as active and powerful – had to be eliminated from the letters if they were to be published.

The Marian cult had already been a point of conflict for two centuries, with a longstanding controversy on the nature of the Virgin Mary leading to intense debates between Dominicans and Franciscans.<sup>38</sup> However, within the religiosity promoted after the Counter-Reformation, Mary took on the role of the *mediatrix* of all graces.<sup>39</sup> In addition, she began to be used as a universal figure meant to unify the local cults of the saints.<sup>40</sup> By the 1520s and 1530s, the cult of Mary had already spread across the entire Church in Europe and the New World,<sup>41</sup> and after the Council of Trent, Catholic institutions supported the worship of Mary as a universal emblem of the Church Triumphant.<sup>42</sup>

As Miri Rubin compellingly demonstrates, from the 15th century onwards theologians and reformers understood conjugal obedience to be Mary's highest virtue. Jean Gerson and Martin Luther were prominent interpreters of this

36 On the Renaissance humanization of Mary see Theodore Koehler, “Storia della Mariologia,” in *Nuovo Dizionario di Mariologia*, ed. Stefano De Fiore and Salvatore Maria Meo (Cinisello Balsamo: 2006), 1256.

37 P. Renée Baernstein, *A Convent Tale. A Century of Sisterhood in Spanish Milan* (New York: 2002), 58.

38 Thomas M. Izbicki, “The Immaculate Conception and Ecclesiastical Politics from the Council of Basel to the Council of Trent: The Dominicans and Their Foes,” *Archiv Für Reformationsgeschichte* 96 (2005), 145–70.

39 See Adriana Valerio, *Maria di Nazaret* (Bologna: 2017).

40 Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540–1770* (New York: 2005), 57.

41 Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: 2009), 356 ff.

42 The spatial extension of the Marian cult is an innovation of the Counter-Reformation. Gabriella Zari, “Marian City in the Drawings of Francesco Cavazzoni (1559–1616),” in *Innovation in the Italian Counter-Reformation*, ed. Shannon McHugh and Anna Wainwright (Newark, De.: 2020), 260.

vision of Mary as the perfect wife, who was obedient, meek and resilient,<sup>43</sup> and even Girolamo Savonarola, who promoted women's religious reform, privileged this reading over a representation of the Queen of Heaven as more vocal and active.<sup>44</sup>

Immediately after the Council of Trent, the debate over the Virgin Mary acquired new significance, with the question of how to reconcile the cult of Mary – as a woman and mother of God – with the new Tridentine directives on the discipline of women in the Church and society.<sup>45</sup> Mary had to incarnate a model of virtue that could confirm women's new place in the *ecclesia* as separate and secluded. As convent reform demonstrated,<sup>46</sup> the ecclesiastical authorities aimed to tame women's unruly behavior in the Church, with all women having to internalize and incarnate the virtue of obedience that Mary exemplified.

For Negri, obedience was not the only Marian virtue, as Mary also represented “a very powerful medium between her son and us.”<sup>47</sup> Like Birgitta, whose “*imitatio Mariae* authorized her prophetic speech,”<sup>48</sup> and 16th century women mystics and humanists,<sup>49</sup> Negri privileges a proactive and powerful image of the Virgin Mary. This representation was uncommon for the Barnabites who initially primarily saw the Madonna as “Our Lady of Sorrows.”<sup>50</sup> As in the Bible, the Pauline letters – which were the Barnabites' (and so Negri's) main source – are virtually silent on the Virgin Mary, apart from a brief reference in Gal. 4:4. It is thus clear that Negri's theological reflection on Mary does not derive from her Pauline upbringing.

The fact that Negri's conception of and devotion to the Virgin Mary was autonomous from her congregation and its Pauline teachings, raises the question as to whether Birgitta was among those who inspired her. It would not

43 Ibid., 323–4.

44 See in this volume Clara Stella, “A Lineage of Apocalyptic Queens.”

45 Wolfgang Reinhard, “Disciplinamento sociale, confessionalizzazione, modernizzazione: Un discorso storiografico,” in Prodi, *Disciplina dell'anima*, 101–24.

46 Gabriella Zarri, “Gender, Religious Institutions and Social Discipline: The Reform of the Regulars,” in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London: 1998), 193–212.

47 “Un mezzo potentissimo tra suo figliuolo, e noi.” LS XII, parte seconda, 400.

48 Unn Falkeid, “Constructing Female Authority. Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and the Two Marys,” in *Sanctity and Female Authorship in Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena*, ed. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid (New York: 2020), 58.

49 Robert Fastiggi, “Mariology in the Counter reformation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford: 2019), 466; Vittoria Colonna, Chiara Matraini, and Lucrezia Marinella, *Who is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Susan Haskins (Chicago: 2008).

50 Erba, “Chierici regolari di San Paolo,” 948.

have been the first time that Birgitta was used in this way. She had already been an authoritative source in Marian disputes, as in the case of Pope Sixtus IV, born Francesco della Rovere, who used Birgitta's revelations as a source in his defense of Immaculate Conception.<sup>51</sup> Even adversaries of the Immaculate Conception, such as Cardinal Thomas Cajetan, placed Birgitta among the "*doctores*" (doctors of the Church) who upheld the Immaculist thesis.<sup>52</sup>

There are some textual correspondences that support the hypothesis that Birgitta's Mariology, which in turn relied upon Franciscan theology, was an influence on Negri. For instance, Negri's 1549 letter on the Advent echoes the fourth revelation of Birgitta's *Liber Quaestionum* concerning the intermingling of humanity and divinity in Mary's womb, in which Christ speaks to his mother:

Your breast was so full of every virtuous charm that there is no good in me that is not in you as well [...] it both pleased my divinity to enter into you and my humanity to live with you and drink the milk from your nipples.<sup>53</sup>

Negri echoes this dialogue between Mary and her son when she affirms that Christ sucks "the celestial nipples, through which [he] will not only give [his] divinity but will also draw out her humanity from her milk."<sup>54</sup> The image of the milk as a symbol of humanity "drawn" from the nipples encapsulates the connection between God and humanity enabled by Mary. While Mary's humanity is the condition of Christ's humanity, the Virgin is like no other human being, because she is also the seat of divinity. This bond between humanity and divinity is what gives Mary her superior status.

It returns in the description of Mary as a "mediatrix between her son and us,"<sup>55</sup> which recalls Birgitta's *Revelations*: "You are the wise mediatrix who makes peace [...] between humankind and God."<sup>56</sup> The majesty of the Virgin is embedded in her double nature as the queen of heaven and a humble woman. In her 'Letter on the Presentation', Negri invites us to follow the example of the

51 Francesco della Rovere, *L'orazione della Immacolata*, ed. Dino Cortese (Padua: 1985), 72–103.

52 Thomas Cajetan, *Opuscula omnia* (Lugdunum: 1588), vol. 2, Tract. II, 101.

53 "Pectus tuum plenum fuit omni virtutum suavitate in tantum, quod non est bonum in me, quod non sit in te, [...] deitati mee placuit intrare ad te et humanitati mee habitare tecum et bibere lac mamillarum tuarum." Rev. v: 4.16. On the tie between humanity and divinity in Mary, see also Rev. iv: 92.5: "in her was found my divinity along with my humanity" (in ipsa fuit deitas mea cum humanitate).

54 "Le celesti poppe, per le quali non meno manderai dentro della tua divinità, che trarrai fuori del latte della sua umanità." LS II, parte prima, 12.

55 "Tra il figliol suo, e noi mediatrice." LS, XII, parte prima, 148.

56 Extrav. 50.19.

Madonna, “a girl who was small on earth but great in heaven, small in body, but great in spirit.”<sup>57</sup> In her sex “there are virile spirits, not unlike in many others of our sex, who have been a mirror of force and constancy for the world.”<sup>58</sup> Mary is the loftiest example, but by no means an exception.

Negri not only shows that a virile spirit is not men’s prerogative but, in describing women as a mirror of force and constancy, associates them with two of the virtues which would prove essential in the formation of the new norms of social intercourse designed to halt religious conflicts.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, as the Queen of Queens, Mary is not only the supreme model of force and constancy, but embodies all the virtues:

every beauty, splendor, and glory are confounded when faced with her beauty; the humble become confounded when faced with her humility; when compared to hers, every other clarity, light, and cleanliness appear opaque, obscure, and not properly clean; every patience, chastity, virginity, modesty, prudence, charity, and splendor lose their shine [...] she is that woman clothed with the sun, in which God principally and most abundantly infused his gifts and graces.<sup>60</sup>

Negri employs the apocalyptic language of the Book of Revelation, and in particular the striking apparition of the “woman clothed with the sun,” to support her claim that Mary epitomizes all possible perfections, including prudence, which, as we shall see, constitutes one of the essential attributes of those in

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57 “Una fanciulla, dico, picciola in terra, ma grande in cielo; picciola di corpo, ma grande di spirito.” LS XII, parte seconda, 396.

58 “Nel sesso vostro gilè mostrate animi uirili, non meno di tante altre dil sesso nostro, che sono state un specchio di fortezza, e costanza al mondo.” Ibid., 401–2.

59 On Neostoicism and constancy, which, in *De constantia* (1584), Justus Lipsius explored as a paradigm of the new relationship between individual and collective life in modern Europe, see Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Modern State* (Cambridge, Eng.: 2008).

60 “Nell’ cospetto della cui bellezza resta confusa ogni bellezza, ogni splendore, & ogni gloria, nel cospetto della cui humiltà restano confusi gli humil, al paragone della cui chiarezza, e lume, e mondezza, ogni altra ne resta turbida, oscura, e non ben monda, ogni pazienza, ogni castità, ogni virginità, ogni modestia, ogni prudenza, ogni carità, ogni splendore perde l’uso della sua risplendenza [...] ella è quella Donna vestita di Sole, & in chi principalmente e più copiosamente infuse Dio i doni, e grazie sue.” LS XX, parte terza, 459–460. See also the 1548 Letter on the Presentation, where Mary is described in this way: “a girl in the shape of woman has appeared in Heaven clothed with the sun, crowned with stars, standing on the moon” (fanciulla che in forma di donna è apparsa in Cielo vestita di Sole, coronata di stelle, poggiata sopra la Luna) (LS XII, parte seconda, 398). This recalls the Apoc. 12: “A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.”

power. Mary personifies *woman-as-fullness* rather than *woman-as-lack*. In this representation, Negri implicitly refers to Birgitta, who, in *Book of Questions*, attributes all the cardinal and theological virtues to Mary:

The walls of your womb, that is, of your faith, were like gleaming gold, and on them the strength of your virtues was recorded, your prudence and justice and temperance along with perfect perseverance, for all your virtues were perfected with divine charity.<sup>61</sup>

Faith, prudence, justice, temperance, perseverance, and charity: Mary is endowed with the entire spectrum of virtues. Birgitta also employs this *topos* in *Angel's Speech* ("her sacred body was then adorned with the rewards of all the virtues"),<sup>62</sup> and specifies that virtues were given "in return for her holy obedience."<sup>63</sup> If obedience is the precondition for virtues, what is the precondition for obedience, or, in other words, the necessary quality of those who should be obeyed? Having identified some signs of Negri's debt to Birgittine Mariology, I will now discuss the way in which Negri thematizes prudence as an internal constraint of obedience, thus reviving another part of Birgitta's legacy.

### Prudence as the Condition for Obedience

The question of ensuring obedience to the Catholic Church in the aftermath of the Lutheran Reformation lay at the heart of the Tridentine debates. Catholic ministers faced the challenge of striking the correct balance between two conflicting tasks: enforcing religious discipline and revitalizing popular religion.<sup>64</sup> When the Inquisitions approved the publication of Negri's revised letters, they most likely thought that they could contribute to these dual objectives. Negri's devotees in turn made sure that the revised letters conformed to the Tridentine spirit.<sup>65</sup>

61 "Huius itaque ventris, idest fidei tue, parietes fuerunt quasi aurum fulgentissimum, in quibus notatur fortitudo virtutum tuarum et prudencia tua et iusticia et temperancia cum perfecta perseuerancia, quia ipse omnes virtutes tue perfecte fuerunt diuina caritate." Rev. v: 4.19.

62 "Cuius sacratissimum corpus postea omnium virtutum premiis decorabatur." SA 21.9.

63 "Pro sua divina obediencia." SA 21.8.

64 Kleinberg maintains that authorities could not totally reject charismatic people, because in doing so they would risk "drying up" the emotional sources of religion. Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word. Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2008), 5.

65 Pietro Giulio Riga, "La lettera spirituale. Per una storia dell'epistolografia religiosa," *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* xxxi (2018), 165.

In her letters, Negri raises the issue of obedience as an essential virtue of Christ himself, who did not descend to earth only to “command and dominate” (comandare et dominare) but was “obedient until he died on the cross” (obbediente fino alla morte, e morte di croce). Even though “Christ made the law,” he did not come to earth in order to “undo the law, and not to be subject to it,” but he came “to fulfill the law, observe the law, and die for man in compliance with the law.”<sup>66</sup> Drawing on St. Paul (2 Cor. 3:17), Negri states that the new law made by Christ is freedom.<sup>67</sup> This idea of Christ’s law as *lex libertatis* was found in Birgitta too. While she revealed that: “after the law of Moses was given, then it pleased God more that men should live under the law and in accordance with the law rather than according to their own human judgment and understanding,”<sup>68</sup> she also reported a vision of God who replaces the old law with the new one: “when the clothing of the Old Law was ready to be put aside, I put on the new clothing, that is, the New Law, and gave it to everyone who wanted to have me and my clothing.”<sup>69</sup> For her, this new law was not a constraint but an avenue for freedom:

This clothing is neither too tight fitting nor difficult to wear but is well adjusted on all sides. It does not command people to fast or work too much nor to kill themselves or to do anything beyond the limits of possibility, but is beneficial for the soul and conducive to the moderation and chastisement of the body.<sup>70</sup>

Like Birgitta, Negri calls on us to respect a law that coincides with the freedom of our souls. Christ himself obeyed the law by dying on the cross. *Imitatio Christi* thus requires that God’s servants obey his law too.

Obeing that highest law, namely the revealed word, that for the prophet includes personal communication with God, is the utmost form of obedience. But even direct revelation must be disciplined. In Birgitta’s *Revelations*,

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66 “Forse che sia venuto per isciogliere la legge, e per non esser suddito alla legge, havendo egli fatto la legge? anzi per adempier la legge, osservar la legge, e morir per l’uomo in soddisfazione della legge.” LS III, parte prima, 22–23.

67 “Quella libertà, qual ti ha donata Christo.” LS IX, parte seconda, 362.

68 “Postquam autem data fuit lex Moysi, tunc magis placuit Deo, quod homines viuerent sub lege et secundum legem quam secundum suum proprium arbitrium humanum et intellectum.” *Rev.* VII: 10.7.

69 “Sic ego, complete et deposita veste antique legis, assumpsi nouam vestem, id est legem nouam, et dedi omnibus, qui voluerunt habere vestes mecum.” *Rev.* I: 47.1–2. See also *Rev.* II: 12.

70 “Vestis autem ista non est stricta vel difficilis sed ubique moderata non enim precipit nimisi eiunare vel laborare vel se occidere vel aliquid ultra possibilitatem facere, sed proficua est ad animam et ad corpus moderandum et castigandum apta.” *Rev.* I: 47.



obedience to the law demands trust in the final say of one's superiors. When Christ speaks to Birgitta about the truth of the revealed word, he says that she should have faith in his words, because he never lies. But although the revelations Christ sends to Birgitta are always true, their meaning can vary: "At times I mean what I say in a spiritual sense, and at other times according to the letter of the word."<sup>71</sup> Yet, when she is unsure about the meaning of Christ's instructions, Birgitta must ultimately follow her superior's prescriptions. It is better "to give up your own will out of obedience, even if its object is good, and to follow the will of your director provided it does not go against the salvation of your soul or is otherwise irrational."<sup>72</sup> Here Birgitta's confessor, Mathias of Linköping, plays a significant role as the ultimate guarantor of the authentic prophetic inspiration of Birgitta and as the symbol of the duty of obedience.

Birgitta's relationship with her confessors, firstly Matthias of Linköping, and then Alfonso Pecha, returns in a vision of St. Francis, a pivotal figure in the *Heavenly Revelations* and prominent in inspiring Birgitta's religiosity. Francis invites Birgitta "to Eat and Drink with Him" and states: "My room is the true obedience [...] I constantly had a priest with me whose every direction I humbly obeyed, and that was my room. You should do likewise, because it pleases God."<sup>73</sup> The supervision of a spiritual director guarantees the visions' authenticity because it implies God's approval ("it pleases God"). Consequently, obedience to the spiritual father is consubstantial to every truthful prophetic experience. But the fact that she called her confessors "sons" and assumes the role of a new Moses<sup>74</sup> make her discourse ambivalent on the relationship between superiors and inferiors. Birgitta's prophetic speech thus questions a univocal idea of spiritual authority while stressing the need for obedience.

In the political, religious, and social turmoil of the 16th century, Negri's stress on obedience to the governors betrays the same ambivalence with respect to obedience that was present in Birgitta's voice. In a 1546 letter, Negri incites her spiritual children to "be obedient; bring your heart to those whom the Lord gave you as governors, without estimating them as men or women."<sup>75</sup>

71 "Quandoque spiritualiter intelligo, que loquor, quandoque sicut tunc ipsa littera sonat." *Rev.* I: 20.8.

72 "Est enim melius propter obedienciam relinquere voluntatem tuam, licet bonam, et sequi voluntatem precipientis, sinon est contra salutem anime vel alias irrationabilis." *Rev.* I: 20.9.

73 "Habui enim mecum continue presbiterum, cui in omnibus preceptis humiliter obediui, et hec fuit camera mea. Tu igitur similiter facias, quia sic placet Deo." *Rev.* VII: 3.4.

74 On Birgitta's association with Moses see Falkeid's chapter in this volume and Claire Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge: 2001), 74–77.

75 Siate "obbedienti; portate il cuor in mano a chi vi ha dato il Signore per governo, stimandoli non come huomini, o donne." *LS IX*, parte terza, 551.

By saying that they should obey those in government without thinking about them as men or women, Negri combines Hebrews 13:17 (“Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority”) with Gal. 3:28 (“nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”). In this way she introduces a novel element: she takes for granted that the leaders who should be obeyed as God’s representatives on earth could also be women. Unlike Peter, who refers to women only in the role of obedient wives (1 Peter 3), Negri states that women are also among those who must be obeyed, including herself, recognized as the true head of the Barnabites.

In addition to the inclusion of women among the godly appointed governors, Negri makes an indirect intervention in the semantics of obedience by defining the necessary virtues of those in power. In a 1548 letter she asks:

How many get upset as a result of the vivacity of their will because they do not have what they want, and wear a long face when they receive reproach? They ruin their faces in another way, not without some damage: the same holds for the suspicious, for those who have given in to a foolish and proud prudence and pedantry, being light and presumptuous. Aren’t those who pay little reverence to and show little respect for their superiors, equals and inferiors, ruining the face, the beauty, and the decorum of that life to which they tend?<sup>76</sup>

For Negri, true virtuous and Christian life requires authentic prudence and reverence towards your inferiors. Denoting something greater than mere respect, her use of the word “reverence” in relation to one’s inferiors appears to implicitly challenge those very hierarchies that reverence sanctions. Even those who are in power are not exempt from being required to practice these virtues if they want to pursue a Christian life and thus – Negri implicitly argues – to be worthy of obedience. For Birgitta and most late medieval thinkers,<sup>77</sup> this idea of reverence for one’s inferiors, which coincides with humility, was the main Christian virtue and duty. Negri appropriates this reversal of hierarchies, which

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76 “Quanti poi per la vivacità della lor volontà si attristano, perché non hanno quel che vogliono, e fanno il volto lungo nelle riprensioni? questi in altro modo esterminano le lor facce con detrimento non poco: così i sospettosi, e quelli che son dati ad vna stolta, e superba prudenza, e sacceteria, leggieri, e prosuntuosi. Quelli che poca riverenzia, e rispetto portano a superiori, a gl’eguali, et inferiori, non esterminano quelli la faccia la bellezza, il decoro di quella vita, alla qual tendono?” LS XII, parte prima, 133.

77 Kent Dunnington, *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory* (Oxford: 2019). For a discussion of the term “*servus*” in Birgitta, Dante and Petrarch, see Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy*.

is already embedded in Christian political theology, and uses it to polemicize with the spiritual authorities of her time, whose neglect of their duties she saw as responsible for the division of Christianity.

If reverence for one's inferiors is a necessary condition of prudence, so too is disregard for mundane interests. Quoting Matthew 13:24–43, Negri rejoices in seeing “the weeds of human respects, carnal prudence, and honors of the world, sensualities, and comforts, worldly events, and pleasures burning in fire.”<sup>78</sup> Prudence, then, can also be “carnal” and, as Negri specifies in another letter, “the prudence of the flesh is inimical to God.”<sup>79</sup> Thus prudence in opposition to divine commandments is necessarily false.

Birgitta of Sweden had listed “feigned prudence” among the sins of the rulers. In a vision on the rights of succession in the Swedish kingdom, God indicates to Birgitta “three incongruities in the electors as well as a fourth that they had in plenty: inordinate love, feigned prudence, the flattery of fools, and lack of confidence in God, and in the common people.”<sup>80</sup> There is significant continuity between Birgitta of Sweden and Paola Antonia Negri in their juxtaposition of false prudence, the misplacement of love – that “*inordinatus amor*” which Augustine pits against “*ordinata dilectio*,” i.e. the love of God which coincides with love for one's neighbor and oneself<sup>81</sup> – and a ruler's disrespect for their own subjects.

It is no coincidence that both Birgitta's and Negri's list of spoiled virtues and defects give a significant place to prudence. By linking its degeneration (prudence that is “proud” or “carnal” or “feigned”) to a lack of reverence for one's superiors, inferiors, and equals, or to concupiscence for the “honors of the world,” both women indicate what those in power should and should not do in order to comply with the rules of God rather than the rules of man.

Prudence is a virtue with deep political connotations: it was classically attributed to rulers and is a recurring term in the genre of the *specula principum*.<sup>82</sup> For Aquinas, “regnative prudence” is the most perfect type of

78 “Bruciare con quello fuoco le paglie delli rispetti humani, delle prudenze carnali, e honori del mondo, delle sensualità e commodità, degli intervenimenti, e piaceri mondani.” LS XIII, parte seconda, 406.

79 “La prudenza della carne è nemica a Dio.” LS IX, parte seconda, 351.

80 “In electoribus eorum tria erant inconueniencia et quartum superexcellit: inordinatus amor, prudencia simulata, adulacio stultorum.” *Rev.* IV: 3.25.

81 Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, ed. Joseph Martin (Turnhout: 1962), 1.28. See on the topic Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: 1996) and Remo Bodei, *Ordo Amoris. Conflitti terreni e felicità celeste* (Bologna: 2005).

82 Leopoldo-Eulogio Palacios, *La prudencia política* (Madrid: 1978). Remo Bodei, “Prudenza,” in *Le virtù cardinali. Prudenza, temperanza, fortezza, giustizia*, ed. Remo Bodei, Giulio Giorello, Michela Marzano and Salvatore Veca (Bari: 2017), 3–24. See also Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca: 1985) and Albert Russell

prudence.<sup>83</sup> Birgitta followed in Aquinas's footsteps in describing the virtues that a king should have,<sup>84</sup> but added that a queen should have them too. Referring to Biblical women such as Hester and Jezebel and relating them to the Virgin Mary, Birgitta maintains that "a queen should possess humility of spirit, modesty in her work, prudence in her action, compassion for those who suffer. David was softened by a woman's prudence and did not sin."<sup>85</sup> Prudence, which prevented David from sinning, is presented as a typical womanly and queenly merit and, what's more, as an antidote to sin. As a practical virtue grounded in experience rather than in moral and formal training, prudence is also available to subjects such as women who are traditionally banned from schooling and theological knowledge.

The association between woman and prudence that Birgitta made was not merely allegorical, as in many medieval representations, but alluded to women's actual political capacity. This association would later have a central role in what Karen Green describes as the "ideological campaign waged in the 15th and 16th century to support women's capacity for political authority,"<sup>86</sup> and, we should add, for spiritual authority. Birgitta was thus an illustrious initiator of a "prudential" tradition which would then be taken up in the political thought of Christine de Pizan, who, quoting Prov. 31:10 on the prudent wife, upended the Aristotelian idea that women were lacking in all qualities that pertained to rulers, including prudence.

Building upon the Birgittine tradition, Negri continued the battle to assert women's capacity for political and spiritual authority by stressing that true Christian prudence was alien to the lure of worldly things. When addressing the authorities that she wished to advise on behalf of God, she emphasized the need to distance oneself from earthly business. In her letter to Pope Julius III, she encourages him "not to want or seek anything but the honor of Jesus Christ and the benefit of his Church."<sup>87</sup>

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Ascoli, "Machiavelli's gift of Counsel," in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca: 1993), 219–57.

83 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 50, ad. 1.

84 For example, see Rev. VIII: 2.5; VIII: 16–17.

85 "Propterea ad reginam pertinet humilitas animi, modestia operum, prudentia agendorum, compassio miserorum. Nam prudentia mulieris mitigatus est Dauid, ne faceret peccatum, humilitate peruenit Hester ad regnum et perseuerauit, set superbia et cupiditate deiecta est Iezabel." Rev. VIII: 5,5–6.

86 See Karen Green, "Phronesis Feminised: Prudence from Christine de Pizan to Elizabeth I," in *Virtue, Liberty and Toleration. Political Ideas of European Women, 1400–1800*, ed. Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green (Dordrecht: 2007), 23–38.

87 "Altro non vogliate, né cerchiate che l'honore di Giesù Christo & l'utilità della Chiesa sua." LS XII, parte terza, 564.

In the same vein, she reminds her eminent devotee Alfonso Del Vasto, commander of the imperial army of Charles v, that “he must love God and true good more than men and transient and vain goods.”<sup>88</sup> In counseling the prince and the pope, Negri reminds them of their Christian duties and calls their power into question, arguing that being worthy of obedience depends upon compliance with God’s rules. Negri’s emphasis on the constraints on secular power resonated with Birgitta’s prophetic model, in which even a woman could be a channel of God and a critic of the powerful, and in which the latter must above all act as good Christians.<sup>89</sup>

Reactivating the Birgittine model, Negri cast new light on prudence as a necessary limit of power, and thus as a complement to obedience. She also stressed the importance of prudence as a Christian virtue, attributing it to the Virgin Mary, the queen of queens. She demanded that everyone, including those in power, respect and revere their inferiors, and also included women among the superiors. All of this led to her resignification of the question of obedience as conditional upon the Christian use of prudence by princes and popes. Taking Birgitta’s lead, Negri overturned widespread ideas about natural female lasciviousness, weakness, and imprudence, maintaining that prudence was one of the highest feminine virtues – most clearly embodied in the figure of the Virgin Mary – and a tenet of the authority of God’s representatives on earth, both in the Church and in the principedoms.

### Critique of the Vain Sciences

If prudence was the most fundamental princely virtue, obedience was the most important virtue of subjects. Following Aquinas, Negri claimed that obedience did not allow for ambiguity. In the Letter on Septuagesima, she states that, in the race for salvation – metaphorically described through the *palio* contest – those who were imperfectly obedient would not be winners: “[A true Christian] is not one who partly obeys and partly does what they will.”<sup>90</sup>

Calling for obedience, however, did not mean that everyone deserved to be obeyed. Power is often corrupted – not least by misplaced prudence – so that the daily battle that every Christian wages against temptations and sin is also a battle against, among other things, depraved worldly princes, i.e. those

88 “Si deve più amar Iddio, & il vero bene, che gl’huomini, & i beni transitori, e vani.” *Ibid.*, 598.

89 Falkeid, “The Political Discourse,” 96, 98.

90 “Uno non è chi in parte obbedisce, e in parte fa il suo volere.” LS x, parte prima, 119.

“princes of darkness” that St. Paul condemns in Eph. 6:12. Negri writes: “A truly magnanimous person is neither defeated by themselves, by others, flesh, blood, principedoms, powers, nor by the rulers of this darkness.”<sup>91</sup>

For Negri, the threat to Christendom does not come only from oneself, carnal temptations, and temporal powers, but also from other non-institutionalized powers which are equally harmful: the theologians and philosophers whose conflicting stances led to the breakup of Christianity. In the lead-up to the Council of Trent, Negri wrote a series of epistles to her devotee and future Barnabite, the Venetian lawyer Angelo Michiel, which were completely left out of the printed collection. In a 1544 letter she expressed concern about the recent conduct of their mutual friend Baldassarre Stampa, who was the brother of the poet Gaspara Stampa (another important follower of Negri) and a poet himself. She urged Michiel to encourage his friend Stampa to keep the company of the Paulines, in order to renounce “secular commerce and the vain sciences” (*comerci seculareschi, dalle vane scientie*) and to dedicate himself to “spiritual things” (*cose dil spirito*).<sup>92</sup> She argued that it was not only secular business but also the vain sciences that constituted the main obstacles to his dedication to spiritual matters. As suggested by Elena Bonora, the vain sciences to which Negri referred were contained in the anonymous treaty *Beneficio di Cristo*,<sup>93</sup> which was printed in Venice in 1543 and was distributed throughout the country. *Beneficio* primarily presented the doctrine of *sola fide*, or justification by faith, which was a common object of discussion in the 16th century among *indocti doctique*,<sup>94</sup> and which was one of the most divisive issues between Catholics and Protestants.<sup>95</sup> According to Negri, the effects of this doctrine were potentially heretical, and noxious to Christian conduct, as what she called “petty opinions” (*opinioncelle*) on grace could give the false impression that Christ died on the cross to save everyone, even those who did not love God but earthly things, which for Negri was the extreme consequence of *sola fide*.

In a later letter to Michiel, Negri returned to the negative impact of the vain sciences and false doctrines of the theologians, which she argued risked becoming a case of erudite play with the outward appearance of the Sacred

91 “Un vero magnanimo non si lascia vincere ne da se stesso, ne da altri, ne da carne ne da sangue, ne da Principati, ne potestate, ne dalli rethori di queste tenebre.” ASBR, L.b.1.primo, 1, fol. iv.

92 ASBR, L.b.1.primo, 3, fol. ix.

93 Bonora, *I conflitti della Controriforma*, 457–59.

94 Carlo Dionisotti, *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin: 1976), 251.

95 Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi, *Giochi di pazienza. Un seminario sul “Beneficio di Cristo”* (Turin: 1975).

Scriptures, instead of an authentic engagement with the truth of science. Negri privileges a particular sort of spirituality which is “learnt through practice, not through literal science only [...] to be learned in the surface layer of letters is of little worth, because there are many who continuously learn and never arrive at the truth of science.”<sup>96</sup> It is hard to grasp the truth of science for those who cling to the mere letter, eschewing the question of practice and of truly imitating Christ in daily life, such as through charitable actions. Again the emphasis on practice hints at Negri’s criticism of the Lutherans who believed in the sufficiency of faith for salvation, but also of those Catholics who neglected the significance of good works.

Negri was so convinced of the importance of Christian practice and so hostile to theological knowledge, that she used her influence to prevent a priest from Bologna from becoming a member of the Barnabites due to his being “learned in letters” (*dotto in lettere*). As the Chapter Acts of the congregation reported, Negri did not admit such priests or monks into the order because of the “difficulty of bringing them back to the streets,”<sup>97</sup> that is, of their reluctance to commit to daily devotion to good works and *imitatio Christi* instead of spending all their time engaged in theological studies.

Negri thus polemicised against both the theological and philosophical doctrines that could be divisive for Christianity. Polemics such as hers, which addressed the “crisis of doubt,”<sup>98</sup> were widespread in the Renaissance, and had a prominent precedent in Birgitta’s *Book of Questions*, in which the Swedish prophet had also addressed doubts and unbelief. The protagonist of the book-long vision was a skeptic monk in dialogue with Christ. As Bridget Morris argues, the monk embodied “Birgitta’s dislike of mere intellectuals who do not accept the limitations of human knowledge,”<sup>99</sup> a dislike that Birgitta had again borrowed from Franciscan thinking.

For Birgitta, unlike divine intellect, human intellect could be misled, as Christ tells the monk: “Human intellect may be darkened, yet there is no shadow or change in me.”<sup>100</sup> Birgitta not only disapproves of theologians’ pedantry and failure to accept their limits, but also their self-appropriation of knowledge and very unchristian misuse of their reason. Their pride displeases

96 “Per pratica, e non per sola scienza litterale [...] poco valersi essere dotto della scorza delle lettera, perché si trovano pur assai che di continuo imparano e mai pervengono alla verità della scientia.” ASBR, L.b.l.primo, 1, fol. 1v.

97 “Dificoltà di reður tal persone in strada.” *Atti capitolari*, quoted in Bonora, *I Conflitti*, 248.

98 Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford: 1992), 239 ff.

99 Bridget Morris, *Introduction to Rev. v*: 263.

100 “Intellectus hominis obscuratus sit, in me tamen non est aliqua obumbratio nec transmutatio.” *Rev. v*: Int. 15.11.

Christ who gave knowledge not as the monopoly of a group of people, but as a gift to humanity:

it is in fact more useful to have less knowledge but a better way of life [...] It is not scholarship that is pleasing to me but a good way of life, it is necessary to correct those who abuse their reasoning faculty, for I, the God and Lord of all, give knowledge to humankind, and I correct both the wise and unwise.<sup>101</sup>

Nobody is exempt from God's scrutiny, not even the wise. Bad theologians are those who propagate doctrines that are not attuned to the ultimate truth of God, and exclude others – including women prophets like Birgitta – from the circle of the elected interpreters of God's will. As a woman who reinterpreted and gave new life to the Sacred Scriptures in motion by providing “surplus information” exceeding common knowledge,<sup>102</sup> Birgitta disobeyed the priestly monopoly on theological knowledge and stated that no obedience was due where it was contrary to God's providence. In one of Birgitta's visions in 1371, Christ talks to a Franciscan through her, commanding him to “obey his superior in everything he commands him, so long as it is not against God and the friar himself is able to carry it out.”<sup>103</sup>

Unlike Birgitta, Negri did not explicitly say that disobedience in response to faulty doctrines propagated by ministers could be sanctioned by God, but she did write that bad theology, or, in her words, “vain science,” was harmful to Christianity, thus it not only could, but *must* be disavowed, together with those who upheld it. By virtue of their prophetic inspiration that put them in direct communication with God – even though it was only Birgitta who explicitly claimed her charismatic authority – both women felt they were in a position to apply the Thomistic exception to the rule of obedience to superiors, which holds that “it is a greater duty to obey a higher than a lower authority, in sign of which the command of a lower authority is set aside if it be contrary to the

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101 “Item, cur aliqui habent maiorem intelligenciam, respondeo: Nichil prodest anime ad eternam salutem, quanta quis habundauerit sapiencia, nisi et fulgeat bona vita; ymmo utilius est habere minorem scienciam et meliorem vitam. [...] Quia litteratura non placet michi sine vita bona, ideo necesse est, vt, qui abutuntur racione, corrigantur, quia ego omnium Deus et Dominus do scienciam hominibus et ego corripo sapientes et insipientes.” *Rev.* v: Int. 13.30; 41.

102 Anders Piltz, “Birgitta and the Bible,” in *Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 59.

103 “Obediat quoque humiliter suo prelate in omnibus, que preceperit ei, que non sint contra Deum et que ipse frater perficere poterit.” *Rev.* VII: 7.12.



command of a higher authority.”<sup>104</sup> Yet, in an attempt to defend the pope, who was Christ’s representative on earth, Birgitta of Sweden frowned upon those who undermined his authority and that of the divinely ordained priests:

a pope who is without heresy, no matter how much he may be stained by other sins, is never so bad due to those sins and his other bad deeds that there would not be always in him full authority [...] all those priests who are not heretics are true ministers and do truly consecrate the body of Christ.<sup>105</sup>

Sinfulness is not a good reason to withdraw one’s obedience from authorities, even though spiritual powers always fall under the scrutiny of the prophet. While prophets must distrust theologians who count on their intellect more than God’s will, they can refuse to obey sinful ministers only if they engage in heresy. Birgitta believed that any disobedience that threatened the integrity of Christianity had to be disciplined. She foresaw what Negri later directly witnessed. Thus, reactivating Birgitta’s critique of popes, princes, priests, and theologians in the troubled years between the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, Negri drew on the Birgittine semantics of obedience as a remedy for the division of God’s people. Negri defended obedience but at the same time criticized any conduct that threatened the unity of Christendom, both from God-appointed authorities – namely the institutionalized authorities of the Church and the state – and from non-institutional authorities such as theologians. Yet she also opened up new spaces for disobedience by claiming the superiority of prophetic power and assuming pastoral power herself. Through the revival of the Birgittine Mary, the eulogy of true prudence and the critique of the vain sciences, Negri built a semantics of obedience with the aim of instructing good Christians on their duties during the tumultuous period of the Italian Wars and the Reformation. On the eve of the Counter-Reformation, Negri witnessed the failures of the popes, who were unable to heal the fractures of the Church, the corruption of the priests, who did not take care of their

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104 “Magis est debitum quod homo obediat superiori quam inferiori potestati. Cuius signum est quod praeceptum inferioris praetermittitur si sit praecepto superioris contrarium unde consequens est quod quanto superior est ille qui praecipit, tanto ei inobedientem esse sit gravius.” Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, a. 105, responsio.

105 “Papa, qui est sine heresi, quantumcumque aliis peccatis sit commaculatus, numquam tamen est ita malus ex illis peccatis et ex aliis suis malis operibus, quin semper sit in eo plena auctoritas et perfecta potestas [...] veri presbiteri sunt et vere conficiunt corpus Christi filii mei omnes illi sacerdotes, qui non sunt heretici.” *Rev.* VII: 7.15–17.

flock, and the collapse of the princes, who did not keep their populations safe from wars.

Amid what can be defined as a general crisis of masculine authority, her voice stood out as an attack on the speculative doctrines of philosophers and theologians; a claim to power in competition with that of established ministers; and a reproach of those governors prone to following worldly interests over being prudent, who were thus unworthy of obedience. By echoing the power of the Virgin Mary and the prophetic voice of Birgitta of Sweden, Negri's words resignified obedience by exerting authority in a practical way and by demonstrating how to be worthy of commanding obedience. On the one hand, the governors should prove worthy of their authority and the obedience of their subjects by demonstrating reverence for their inferiors, by sticking to God's ultimate will as revealed in the Scriptures rather than being guided by their intellect, and by cultivating orderly love rather than worldly passions. On the other hand, it is ultimately better to obey one's ecclesiastical and political superiors than to favor the division of the Christian people.