CHAPTER FIVE

READING CLARE’S LETTERS IN CONTEXT

The four letters attributed to Clare of Assisi and addressed to Agnes of Prague are documents of primary importance for the study of the early Franciscan movement and, in particular, for the history of early Franciscan women. Through Clare’s letters, one can ponder the thoughts, issues, evolution, and spirituality of the early Poor Ladies. Written between 1234–1253, Clare’s letters, although spiritual texts, are also historical documents, and one can discern their spirituality more correctly and deeply if one appreciates their historical setting.

The Legend of Agnes of Prague attests to the correspondence between Clare and Agnes: “By her frequent and gracious letters, Clare consoled her [Agnes] maternally, reverently, and most affectionately, and enthusiastically encouraged her in her holy purpose.” Of this mutual correspondence, only the letters of Clare are preserved. The content of Agnes’s letters is known only insofar as Clare addresses this content in her letters.

Important discoveries of manuscripts that include Clare’s letters have eased doubts regarding their authenticity. In 1896, Dr. Achille Ratti, who was archivist of the Ambrosian library and later became Pope Pius XI, discovered a manuscript in the archives of the Basilica of

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1 This essay is adapted from my text, Clare’s Letters to Agnes: Texts and Sources (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2001), 1–103.

2 LegAg 4:3. The Legend of Agnes of Prague, like other medieval legends, was written to promote and inspire the Agnes cult, not as a modern historical account. This being recognized, it is also true that the author of this Legend was concerned with the veracity of his project. He was a friar of the Bohemian province living in Prague, probably in the friary attached to Agnes’s own monastery, who relied on eyewitnesses that he referred to by name in his Legend. He wrote the Legend shortly after the death of Agnes, and many of the details found in the Legend are substantiated by other historical sources. In the prologue to the Legend, the author promises to write only about those things that he learned from credible witnesses. For a critical evaluation of the historical value of the Legend of Agnes of Prague see Jan Kapistrán Vyskočil, Legenda Blahoslavené Anežky a čtyri listy Sv. Kláry, trans. Vitus Buřesh (Prague: Nakladatelství Universum, 1932), 90–93. All Latin references to the Legend of Agnes of Prague in this essay rely on Vyskočil’s critical edition. Divisions of the legend follow the Canonizationis Beatae Agnetis de Bohemia (Rome: Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis Sanctorum, 1987), 214–46.
S. Ambrogio in Milan that contained the four letters of Clare to Agnes in Latin, as well as a Latin version of the *Legend of Agnes of Prague*. Ratti reported that he uncovered the Milan manuscript through investigating a faithful seventeenth-century transcript of it in the Ambrosian library. Upon examination of the writing and ornamentation of the older manuscript, he decided that it could not have been written later than the beginning of the fourteenth century. He hypothesized that the Milan manuscript contained a version of Clare’s letters that was much earlier and more reliable than the manuscripts known at that time.³

Although Clare’s four letters were first published by the Bollandists in 1668,⁴ and were therefore known before Ratti’s discovery, the Milanese manuscript represented their earliest and most complete form. Clare’s first letter was known before Ratti’s discovery through its inclusion in the Hall manuscript of the *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals*, which was written by Nicholas Glassberger, dated 1491, and published in 1897.⁵

In 1915, Walter Seton, unaware of Ratti’s work, published an edition of Clare’s letters in his thesis *Some New Sources for the Life of Blessed Agnes of Bohemia*.⁶ Seton based his research primarily on a late fourteenth-century manuscript housed in the Royal Library of Bamberg, which contained a German text of Clare’s letters. He also consulted a second German language Bamberg manuscript containing Clare’s letters from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth-century, a German language edition of Clare’s four letters in a fifteenth-century Wolfenbüttel manuscript, a fifteenth-century Dresden manuscript written in German, and a German fifteenth-century Berlin manuscript.⁷

From a note on the last folio of the first Bamberg manuscript, Seton postulated that this manuscript had been written in Nuremberg before 1380. About 1600, when the Nuremberg convent was dissolved, the manuscript was given to the Convent of Banz near Langheim in the Diocese of Bamberg. In 1802, the convent libraries in the diocese of

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⁵ *AF* 3 (1897): 184–86.