CHAPTER EIGHT

IN DEFENSE OF CORPORATE HONOR

We can properly count the medieval Dominicans among the public relations specialists of their day. It was one of the friars’ principal tasks to enhance the reputation of the universal church, especially by diminishing the allure of heterodoxy.¹ Their specialized didactic texts and careful training in the use of those texts as preachers helped them achieve their goal. However, despite the unquestioned early accomplishments of its masters of rhetoric and persuasion, the Order of Preachers before the end of its first century began to suffer from what PR specialists today call a “legitimacy gap,” so that by the middle of the fourteenth century the need to regain, strengthen, and defend the Order’s corporate honor had become a concern of paramount importance.² In the Province of Aragon, rectifying the crisis of honor meant above all limiting the access of preachers to their activities beyond convent walls. This came to apply not just to troublesome friars but to all friars.

Putting restrictions on discursions beyond convent walls served many purposes, becoming for the province’s leaders a means of strengthening the Order’s weak institutions, firming up their command procedures, and restoring corporate dignity. Changes in the conception and practice of friars’ outside work and travel evidently took hold very

¹ Personal and family honor in pre-modern Europe has gained scholarly attention. Donald Weinstein, The Captain’s Concubine: Love, Honor, and Violence in Renaissance Tuscany (Baltimore, MD, 2000) and Elaine Wertheimer, Honor, Love and Religion in the theatre before Lope de Vega (Newark, DE, 2003) supply useful bibliographies. The relationship between personal reputation, public memory, and the law is explored in Thelma Fenster and Dan Smail, ed., Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe (Ithaca, NY, 2003). However, the study of reputation management in medieval organizations is still in its infancy. Corporate honor is left mostly as an implicit reality.

slowly, with many setbacks for those in the vanguard of reform. In truth the evidence does not permit an accurate measure of immediate success. Over a longer frame of reference, however, it is clearer that tighter rules of enclosure shifted the balance between active and contemplative elements of in Dominican conventual life, between the active work of preachers outside convents and the prayer, study, and work performed on the inside. By the first decades of the fifteenth century, this shift in the balance of external and interior functions played an important part in reorienting at least a few Dominican friars “back” to monastic observance.

**Reputation Management**

A witness at Dominic’s canonization proceedings testified that he had never seen anyone as humble as Dominic, nor anyone who so hated the glory of the world and all the things that brought worldly honor. Such sentiments have led many readers to imagine that saints lacked interest in their own reputations. But this oversimplifies. Late medieval social conventions permitted the display of virtuous disposition and behavior as a measure of one’s *fama*; virtue was in this sense a social tool. It is well understood that some saints, Dominic’s contemporary Francis of Assisi among them, applied these conventions to the presentation of their own activities in the public sphere. Certainly, reputation management was not the preserve of saints, but since good works and good intentions mattered when people talked about others, even saints took an interest in managing their own reputations with performances

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