CHAPTER 4

Domestic Devotion in Florentine “Ricordanze” (13th–16th Century)

The normal dimension of religious experience (religious normality as an historical factor) is certainly an important and significant factor for understanding past realities. And within this “domestic” devotion lies a basic element which gives us the measure of the external forms with which religiosity was lived by various individuals in the privacy of home and family and can perhaps also tell us something of the way in which these forms were felt. If this is so, could one then imagine a better source for discovering this aspect than the early medieval Florentine ricordi. Almost like diaries in make-up, and attentive to the little details of the individual and the family and home, these can only be a “mine of information” also about domestic religious practice.

In truth, after a closer look at an “average” sample of the family books rather than at the “exceptions” represented by the more well-known critical editions, this affirmation could be at risk. The Florentine libri di ricordi are, as is well-known, very numerous compared to analogous documents from other parts of Italy. Of these the most well-known are those whose authors dwelt mostly on their own or their family’s events. But the large majority consists of bare-bone annotations of economic interest to the author or his family, which only occasionally dealt with questions closer to the private religious sphere. An attempt to examine this genre, then, must from the beginning state its distance from any global recognition of the theme in this genre. We will instead look at a sampling of some dozens of this kind of source, published and not, and attempt to draw significant indications, from a synchronic and diachronic comparison, about everyday religion at this time, and possible changes over the ages.

A primary relation with God is present in this type of source from the very start. In the invocation, a ritual element of the fixed structure of the Florentine

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2 Florentine libri di ricordi are a well-known source, about which much has been written and discussed even recently. This is not the place to recall a definition, or to resume the discussion which connects a part of them to the larger genre of family books. For all this see above, chap. 1, and below, passim; G. Ciappelli, “I libri di famiglia a Firenze. Stato delle ricerche e iniziative in corso,” in Mordenti, I libri di famiglia in Italia, II, pp. 131–139.
libro di ricordi over a long period of time (as well as in similar family books produced in other parts), which is often accompanied by a religious symbol, the authors try to establish a direct connection between the celestial forces and their own writing activities. As Cicchetti and Mordenti correctly mentioned in a pioneering essay, this symbol is already a kind of consecration of the text, and is followed by the dedication to God and the saints, and (not always) by a request-prayer for heavenly help for the writer himself.\(^3\)

Within the relative fixity of the formula, it is perhaps possible to see a slight evolution from the first manifestations of this kind of source (end 13th, beginning 14th century) in which the heavily mercantile origin is evident in the request for help in obtaining “gain,” “good fortune,” “the enrichment of persons and goods and everything,”\(^4\) and those in the middle or towards the end of the period in hand, some of whom insist more on intercession to receive grace or salvation for the writer and his relatives both living and dead,\(^5\) or to respect the commandments, reach “salvation,” write “things useful to body and soul.”\(^6\)

If we look at the chronological evolution, we may say that the earliest of these books contain annotations connected to the relationship of the writer to religion or religious institutions from an economic-patrimonial point of view. Often there are economic transactions with clerics in which the ecclesiastic, actively or passively, is no different from other interlocutors of the writer, often a merchant or merchant-banker. Bene Bencivenni for example, writes between 1286 and 1292 of his relation with priests of whom he is creditor, or debtor,\(^7\) perhaps with a touch of resentment when these have recourse, just like laypersons, to legal means to recoup their money (“when Bene the priest had me put in prison because of the guarantee I had given”).\(^8\) From the entries on clients come references to larger episodes in Church history, as in the case of the loan in 1284 from Lapo Riccomanni to “brother Salamone, Minorite, delegate of the Pope on the heretics.”\(^9\)

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5 Morelli, Ricordi, p. 82.
7 “Prete Rinieri da Petriuolo”; see NTF, pp. 391, 432.
9 “Libro del dare e dell’avere e di varie ricordanze di Lapo Riccomanni,” in NTF, pp. 516–555, esp. p. 523. The friar is fra Salomone da Lucca, Franciscan, inquisitor “dell’eretica pravità” in