CHAPTER TWO

RECIPROCATED DEVOTION AND VISITATIONS OF THE SAINTS

Closely related to the dynamic of Transactions of Satisfaction was a second dynamic of medieval spirituality, that of Reciprocated Devotion. Whereas the first dynamic dealt primarily with guilt and punishment, the latter focused primarily on loving service and aid in distress. What the two had in common was the element of exchange, of quid pro quo. The dynamic of Reciprocated Devotion exhibited itself primarily in the cults of the saints and in the cult of the Passion. In the former, the devotion usually began with the believer and was reciprocated by the saint. In the latter, the devotion in most cases started with reminders of Christ’s actions on the cross and was reciprocated by the believer’s worship. In both cults, visions affirmed the dynamic of Reciprocated Devotion. In this chapter we will look at how the didactic visions of saints—and their core dynamic of Reciprocated Devotion—shaped two late medieval cults, one an emerging cult of a king-saint and the other the auto-hagiography of a would-be saint.


2 In chapter 4, we will examine how, in the cult of the Passion, didactic visions modeled the centrality of spiritual sight in the Reciprocated Devotion related to the crucified Christ.
Accounts of visions of saints were ubiquitous in late medieval England, with more than half of the didactic visions involving saints. This is not surprising, of course, since more than one-third of the 630 visions are taken from the collections of saints’ legends. Almost half of the visions in sermon collections and religious manuals, however, also involved saints, so the high proportion was not restricted to saints’ lives. This was mostly due to the high frequency of sermons celebrating saints’ feasts and thus drawing illustrations from the saints’ legends.3

The didactic visions of saints included saints from all eras of the history of the Church. Earlier saints, those featured in sermons and in collections of saints’ legends, had more of an impact on the model of Reciprocated Devotion than the later ones, who were usually in the vita or mystical writings of the contemporary mystic-saints. The more recent saints had a greater impact on mysticism than on lay spirituality. According to André Vauchez, ideals of saints changed throughout the patristic and medieval periods, proceeding through at least six phases with different types of holy people being designated as saints in each of the eras: martyrs, ascetics, bishops, king-saints, mendicants, mystics.4

All of these groups were part of the cult of saints in late medieval England. Virgin martyrs such as St. Katherine of Alexandria (fictional from fourth century), St. Juliana (fourth century), and St. Margaret of Antioch (date unknown) were very popular in late medieval England.5 Stories abounded of ascetics such as St. Mary of Egypt (fifth century?) and St. Anthony of Egypt (d. 356); and of bishops such as St. Gregory the Great (d. 604), St. Thomas of Canterbury (d. 1170), and St. Edmund.

---

3 For the role that sermons played in the development of saints’ cults, see George Ferzoco, “Sermon Literatures Concerning Late Medieval Saints,” in Kienzle, ed., Models of Holiness, pp. 103–125.
