CHAPTER THREE

BEYOND CLARE: A FRANCISCAN CENTERED ORDER

The idea that the Franciscan Second Order had formed around Clare of Assisi was well established by the middle of the fourteenth century. The great Franciscan chronicles of that period—the Chronicle of the XXIV Generals (dating from mid-century) and Bartolomeo of Pisa’s Book of Confirmities (1385)—both incorporate entries on noted Clarisses who were presumably inspired by her example. The earlier chronicle included a vita for Agnes of Assisi, as well as briefer accounts of Clare and Sancia of Mallorca (who is discussed below).¹ The Book of Confirmities had a concise section, De Ordine S. Clarae, which began with Clare and her community of San Damiano, and included short notices on other holy sisters.² There were many others about whom he could have written, Bartolomeo commented, but it would take too long to do so. It is enough to understand that these sisters added to the holiness of the Order.³

It should now be clear from the previous chapters that this popular idea of a female order founded by Francis and shaped around Clare reflected a later devotional understanding of the sisters’ institutional formation rather than a historical one. However, this conviction raises an important question. Who or what were the sisters’ models for their spiritual identity? If they did not look to Clare or San Damiano for inspiration, how did they respond to the efforts to promote her as a model for female Franciscan life? Did they understand themselves to be a part of a Franciscan tradition or something else? These are

¹ For the Chronica XXIV Generalium see AF III. The entries on the sisters begin with Agnes of Assisi (pp. 173–181), Clare (182–184), and Sancia of Mallora (539–540). This is the earliest independent vita surviving for Agnes.
² The Latin title of Bartolomeo of Pisa’s work is De Conformitate vitae beati Francisci ad vitam Domini Iesu. It is printed in AF IV–V, IV, pp. 351–360 (the entire treatise runs to over 1100 pages in this octavo edition). Obviously, the brevity of the entries in both chronicles indicates a perception that the women’s order was segregated from and subordinate to the main Order’s (i.e. the friars’) concerns.
questions that seek to return historical agency to the cloistered women and to understand how they understood their identity as Franciscans.

In recognizing the importance of papal efforts to monasticize the women’s penitential movement, a sense perhaps has emerged that the sisters’ identity was imposed from outside by the Roman curia without much consideration for their devotional affinities. The Clarisses seem almost generically monastic with their enclosed communities and property. In contrast, lay penitents who drew inspiration from Francis and who received spiritual guidance from the Friars Minor seem more conspicuously “Franciscan.” Their numbers—both individuals and small communities, in both cases predominantly female—proliferated throughout Italy during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The best known examples are Umiliana Cerchi (d. 1246) and Margaret of Cortona (d. 1297), whose biographers sought to demonstrate how each woman’s penitential practices and charity to the poor while living in the world made them models of Franciscan life. The number of cloistered

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4 A representative example of this view is C.H. Lawrence, *The Friars*, pp. 41–42. This idea has been expressed even by scholars who focus on the Clarisses, for example, Marie Richards, “Community and Poverty in the Reformed Order of St Clare in the Fifteenth Century,” *Journal of Religious History* 19 (1985): 10. Some scholars also have argued that since monastic women in the later Middle Ages had more in common with each other than with the male branches of their orders, the question of institutional identity mattered little for women. For a sense of this debate see Jo Ann McNamara’s review of *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* by Nancy Bradley Warren in *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 269.

5 The literature on the penitential movement (which certainly included laymen as well as women) is vast. Mario Sensi recently surveyed the field and noted that we have only begun to understand its vastness, especially for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. See “La scelta topotetica delle penitenti fra due e trecento nell’Italia centrale,” *CF* 68 (1998): 245–275. See also the overview provided by Giovanna Casagrande, “Un Ordine per i laici. Penitenza e Penitenti nel Duecento,” in *Francesco d’Assisi e il primo secolo di storia francese* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997).

6 See, for example, Bernard Schlager, “Foundresses of the Franciscan Life: Umiliana Cerchi and Margaret of Cortona,” *Viator* 29 (1998): 141–166. Other lay women associated with the Friars Minor (limiting examples to the Italian peninsula for the sake of brevity) included Rose of Viterbo (d. 1251), Giovanna of Signa (d. 1307), Angela of Foligno (d. 1309), Clare of Montefalco (d. 1318), Delphine of Sabran (d. 1360), and Micheline of Pesaro (d. 1356). The degree to which each woman was presented as a model of Franciscan life or even associated with the friars varied—e.g both the Augustinians and Franciscans claimed Clare of Montefalco. Good orientations to these women may be found in Anna Benvenuti Papi, “Mendicant Friars and Female Pinzochere in Tuscan: For Social Marginality to Models of Sanctity,” in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, eds. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 84–103 and André Vauchez, “Female Sanc-