CHAPTER TEN

“IN ORDER TO KEEP THE MEMORY”: MIRACLE CULTS AS SOURCES OF AUTHORITY IN THE CROWN OF ARAGON

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The first public paper I heard Professor Jordan give was on Louis IX’s anti-corruption campaigns.¹ Before he began, I did not know that tax documents could be interesting. Drawn in by Professor Jordan’s research and, more significantly, by his incredible ability to evoke life in the Middle Ages, I left the hall fascinated by ideas of authority and the usefulness of administrative documents. Though my fascination with tax rolls passed, questions surrounding authority—what it was, who claimed it, how it was asserted and enforced—have guided my studies and my research since. Miracle stories, with their complicated constructions and rich details, enable historians to explore multiple dimensions of medieval life, including issues of authority. The cults of the Catalans Bernat Calbó and Ramón de Penyafort, with their rich surviving records, reveal how three different groups—clerics, Dominicans, and secular leaders—used miracle cults to assert their own authority in a defined area and within roughly the same time period.

In the spring of 1244 the clerics of the Vic cathedral commissioned two of their own to record the miracle stories reported by pilgrims at the tomb of their recently deceased bishop, the Cistercian Bernat Calbó. Three decades later a group of religious hired a public notary to record the miracles recounted at the Barcelona tomb of the Dominican Ramón de Penyafort (d. 1275). Both groups began these records as a means not only to promote the memories of their deceased confreres, but also to claim, and demonstrate, their own authority. This paper examines how the living promoted the two men’s miracle cults in order to determine how they conceptualized the deceased holy men and their own places in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Catalonia. In Vic, Bernat was the physical caretaker of his people, a portrayal particularly emphasized at the very moment

Bernat Calbó and Ramón de Penyafort

Bernat Calbó and Ramón de Penyafort embodied major religious trends of the thirteenth century. Bernat entered the well-established Cistercian order, joining the renowned monastery of Santes Creus. Ramón, on the other hand, joined the newly established Dominican Order, whose mission dictated that its members travel the world preaching the Gospel. Despite their different beginnings, the men quickly rose within their communities, spending most of their lives in the Crown of Aragon. Both were confessors and advisors to the powerful count-king James I and helped to shape his long reign.

When he fell ill in September of 1243, Bernat Calbó was well-known and respected in Catalonia and Rome. During his final illness, many people, including the abbot of Santes Creus, the abbot and prior of Poblet, and an ambassador from the king, came to be with him. The bishop died on 26 October 1243. For eight days his body lay uncorrupted in the cathedral and was visited by countless Christians before being laid to rest in a tomb near the baptismal fonts and the main doors of the church.3 When the