chapter 3

Female Monasticism in Italy: A Sociological Investigation

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Christian monasticism is both individualistic and pluralistic. Every monastic finds himself or herself in a complete state of being where “nothing is as important as the love of Christ” as postulated by St. Benedict in Chapter 72 of the Rule, when defining the criteria and fundamental starting point of monasticism. Monasticism also became a search for God that manifested itself in a multitude of different orders and congregations, particularly rooting itself in local communities, which over the centuries resulted in a popular monastic experience integral to the reality of that community and woven into the fabric of everyday life.

This was for centuries a strength of the monastic institution, ensuring its lasting through time. The monasteries attracted people called to a religious vocation from the local territory and its surrounding area. Cloistered life, which is currently regarded as peculiar because it affirms a condition of immobility and separation within an extremely mobile society, for many centuries meant that women led a religious life, despite the traditional constraints linked to being a woman. In terms of mobility and the chance of social relations, a cloistered nun experienced a condition not dissimilar to married life. In fact, in certain respects her life had more opportunities, especially if she was of humble origin, because she would learn to read the psalter as well as spiritual books and would be able to take on responsibilities within the monastic community as an abbess, prioress, administrator of the estate, or mentor. Moreover, not a secondary factor in a deeply chauvinist society, she would not have to serve and obey a husband. Of course, her existence would not have taken her beyond her place of birth or her valley of origin either, and socially her relationships would be marked, as for the majority of women, by family or neighborly relationships (Evangelisti 2007).

Cloistered Life as the Expression of the Monastic Space

We cannot look at cloistered life from the perspective of a globalized society or accept it unconditionally as described by cloistered nuns. Cloistered life stems
and develops from the choice of a life lived in chastity, *i.e.*, devoid of sexual relationships, in which the service of the divine (through individual and communal prayer, meditation on the Scriptures, and evangelization) takes priority. These two dimensions, service of the divine and chastity, envisaged and interpreted differently in the course of the centuries, are preserved by the cloister. Cloistered life is conceived and put into practice in relation to the exclusive dedication to God which according to both male and female Christian monastic traditions is the central point around which motivation drives toward the search of the “desert” as the archetypal place.1 It is in the desert that during the 40-year exile Israel meets God and achieves its purification from any tendency toward idolatry. Although in the initial Palestinian monasticism physical and symbolic space coincided, the “desert” became then the cave for Benedict2 or the brackish marshes for Romuald3 or the forest for John Gualbert.4

The Cistercian tradition applied a slightly different interpretation of “desert” to the wild space, the hostile place that had not yet been made hospitable by monastic work, whereby the environment is a metaphor for the ascetic commitment that transforms the monk hardened by sin into a person able to love God and his brothers.5 It was in those places outside civilization but not removed from it that the monks built their “place”: the monastery. It was set apart because the rules of social and political life did not apply: everybody was equally bound to the same work and liturgical commitments, regardless of their social origin;6 the monastic community rested on the teachings of the

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1 The Eastern Christian tradition follows Basil’s rule, whereas the Western one Benedict’s. From the ninth century, the latter sets the prescriptive and spiritual rules for the majority of male and female monasticics. In Chapter LVIII it establishes the criteria for admission, one of which reads *et sollicitudo sit, si revera Deum quaerit, si sollicitus est ad opus dei* (Benedicti Regula 1977).

2 “Sed Benedictus…pro Deo laboribus fatigari…deserti loci secessum petiit…Vir autem Dei…in arctissimo specu se tradidit” (Gregorius the Great 2000:138).

3 Romuald (950?–1027) left the Classe monastery in Ravenna due to the moral laxity of the monks and joined the hermit Marino who lived in the uninhabited brackish lands near Venice.

4 John Gualbert (1000?–1073) spent a short time in the San Miniato monastery in his native Florence but left following a disagreement with the abbot, accused of simony, and started a hermit’s life in an alpine area near Florence known today as Vallombrosa.

5 This prospect also partially belongs to Benedict’s rule, in particular in Chapter LXXII where it says that “est zelus bonus, qui separat a vitia et ducit ad Deum…Hunc ergo zelum ferventissimo amore exerceant monachi…caritatem fraternitatis caste impendant, amore Deum timeant.”

6 In Chapter XLVIII of his Rule Benedict establishes that for all monks the working day be divided into times devoted to manual work and times devoted to spiritual matters: “Otiositas inimica est animae, et ideo certis temporibus occupari debent fratres in labore manuum,