CHAPTER 6

Bernardino da Siena and Observant Preaching as a Vehicle for Religious Transformation

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The Observant preaching movement in fifteenth-century Italy represents a moment when many believed that a sermon could shape attitudes and behavior, while also instilling faith.  The perceived power of the sermon and the respected authority of the person who delivered it made preaching one of the main avenues to ecclesiastical as well as to personal reform in the late middle ages. One man in particular made the pulpit the perceived panacea for society’s moral, devotional, and political shortcomings: the Franciscan Observant friar Bernardino da Siena (1380–1444).  During his career, thousands of medieval men and women flocked to hear his riveting sermons.  Dozens of aspiring preachers, stirred by his persuasive theatrics, endeavored to follow in the footsteps of his trailblazing performances.  Indeed, Bernardino’s ability to

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1 For a discussion of Franciscan Observant preaching in fifteenth-century Italy, see Alberto Ghinato, “La predicazione Francescana nella vita religiosa e sociale del Quattrocento,” Picenum Seraphicum 10 (1973): 50–59. See also Pietro Delcorno’s article ‘Observant Efforts on Education and Moral Formation’ in this volume for a detailed consideration of the Observant approach to education.


3 Polecritti, Preaching peace in Renaissance Italy, 19–83.

4 Roberto Caracciolo (1425–1495) lists several Franciscans who aspired to be like their role model Bernardino da Siena. These included: Giacomo della Marca, Silvester de Senis, Herculanus de Perugia, and Andreas de Sancto Gemino. Roberto never saw Bernardino da
attract large crowds eager to hear and to see his remarkable preaching placed him in high demand. The cities of Florence, Padua, and Siena, among others, invited Bernardino to sermonize for several weeks at a time on a particular topic or theme. His performance techniques, which included mimicry, joke telling, play-acting, and general liveliness, were a strong pull to the piazzas where his preaching often took place because most churches could not house the numbers in attendance.

But Bernardino’s enthusiastic belief that he could lead his audience to salvation through preaching must have also enticed throngs of people looking for reassurance in an insecure world. Rarely do we find detailed and explicit evidence in medieval sermons of a preacher so respondent to the immediate needs of his listeners. In the thirteenth-century, with preachers such as Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240), Humbert of Romans, and Guibert of Tournai, we do come across innovative model sermon collections, the *sermones ad status*, that aimed to provide moralistic sermons for particular groups. But even in these

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7 For example, Bernardino assured his audience that he would intercede for them on the day of judgment, at which time he would inform Christ directly about those who abided by his preaching. *Bernardino da Siena Prediche Volgari sul Campo di Siena, 1427*, vol. 2, Predica III, 171–72.