Chapter 2

The Observance’s Women: New Models of Sanctity and Religious Discipline for the Female Dominican Observant Movement during the Fifteenth Century

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Introduction

The reforming movement of the Observance is a complex phenomenon. Here we will deal with Dominican observance, and particularly with the female reform movement. Within Italy this reform began in Pisa in 1385, when the young Chiara Gambacorta founded, with four other nuns and their confessor Domenico of Peccioli, the new monastery of San Domenico in Pisa.1 This monastery gave birth to the female Dominican Observant movement in Italy facilitated by a new regulation of strict enclosure, issued by Pope Urban IV in 1387. This modified the prescriptions about strict enclosure already present in the nuns’ constitutions, written by Humbert of Romans in 1259. The Statuta monasterii Sancti Dominici2 obliged the nuns to put a big curtain in front of their parlors (as in Clarissan monasteries), and punished all those who would dare to remove this curtain or who would enter the strict enclosure without permission with a papal excommunication ipso facto. This regulation aimed to bring greater protection and isolation to the nuns. First issued for San Domenico in Pisa, these statuta were subsequently given to other Italian monasteries.3


2 These Statuta consisted of two bulls: the first dated July 25, 1387 and the second dated April 9, 1426. These bulls were also issued to the Venetian monastery of the Corpus Christi. (See Bullarium Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum, ed. Thomas Ripoll, (Rome: Mainardi, 1729–1740), ii, 665; iii 34–40; vii, 65).

3 The Pisan observance was granted by papal bulls to these monasteries: San Pier Martire (Florence), in Bullarium, 11, 578; San Iacopo a Ripoli (Florence), in Bullarium, 111, 400. Two nuns coming from San Domenico founded also the Corpus Christi monastery in Genoa (see Bullarium, 111, 278).
Chiara Gambacorta and her community were closely connected to the leaders of the order, particularly with Giovanni Dominici and Raimondo of Capua, as demonstrated by their letters. The first nuns of the community had all met Caterina of Siena, who came to Pisa in 1375. They also maintained relations with Alfonso of Jaén, St Birgitta of Sweden’s last confessor. All these connections put the Pisan community at the center of the Italian Observant network since the end of the fourteenth century.

Here we will analyse the reforming process through its textual ‘propaganda’, that is, mainly through its hagiographical production. In particular we will analyse three texts, two vitae and a necrology, all of them written within the Pisan monastery of San Domenico during the fifteenth century. These texts are particularly relevant for the understanding of the new models the Dominican reform proposed to religious women. What is an ‘Observant saint’, or better, ‘a perfectly Observant woman’? We will see that Observant Dominican reformers tried to build different models, which included on the one hand their ‘spiritual mother’ Caterina, and on the other hand the ‘normal women’.

Caterina

Caterina of Siena is one of the greatest ‘spiritual mothers’ of the Occident. Surrounded by a group of disciples, the brigata, she was called la mamma by her closest friends. Among the caterinati, disciples and admirers of Caterina, we find almost all of those who became, after her death, the first promoters of the reform of the Dominican order in Italy: Raimondo of Capua, Giovanni Dominici, Tommaso ‘Caffarini’ of Siena, and Chiara Gambacorta.

A  Caterina, ‘Mother’ of the Observance in Italy

Here I will not talk about the controversy concerning the exact role played by Caterina in the genesis of ‘her’ texts. Let us just remember, however, that Caterina’s secretaries were very educated persons: Raimondo of Capua, for

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5 I am currently preparing the critical edition of these three texts.
7 The essential studies about Caterina of Siena as an author are: Robert Fawtier, Catherine de Sienne. Essai de critique des sources, 2 Vols. (Paris: Bocard, 1930); Eugenio Duprè-Theseider, ‘Il problema critico delle lettere di Santa Caterina da Siena’, Bullettin dell’Istituto Storico Italiano e Archivio muratoriano, 49 (1933), 117–238, and more recently: John W. Coakley,