CHAPTER 7

Selections in a World of Multiple Options: The Witness of Thomas Swalwell, OSB

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Introduction

In 2008, John van Engen delivered his presidential address, ‘Multiple Options: The World of the Fifteenth-Century Church,’ to the American Society of Church History. He argued that while the forces of centralization so characteristic of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries did not disappear, in the fifteenth century ‘energy shifted decisively to local forces’.1 As Van Engen noted, even a universal standard like annual confession ‘proliferated into a range of options animated by a spectrum of personal attitudes’. This was not a symptom of dysfunction, he argued, but rather ‘a new form of functioning,’ ‘a world of multiple options’.2

The proliferation of popular resources for pastors in the late medieval period was integral to this world of multiple options. The model sermon collections and pastoral manuals, which assisted clergy in their efforts to cultivate Christian identity in their flocks, functioned on several levels. At a Europe-wide level, they claimed to simply offer the teachings of the Church, setting forth universal understandings and expectations for Christians. Regionally, variations in theology and spiritual tone may be discerned in the distinctive emphases of popular works and in the growing use of vernaculars in print. And, as such resources were used by readers, personal appropriations were made, which in turn were offered to others in preaching and confession, both reflecting and contributing to more localized spiritual characters. Such individualized usage, selected from multiple options, was intended by the authors and publishers of pastoral resources, and evidence of it may be found in the marginal notes left by readers. This essay will present facets of two important aspects of Christian identity, affirmation of faith and forgiveness of sins, at each of these three levels, as witnessed by model sermon collections, pastoral manuals, and the marginal annotations in such books by Thomas Swalwell, a

2 Ibidem, 263, 269, 264.
representative from the last generation of Benedictine monks at the Durham Priory in northeastern England (See Fig. 7.1).

Model sermon collections were the works of seasoned preachers designed to help others with the task of preaching, a key vehicle for inculcating and explicating Christian identity. They were generally prepared with the liturgical year in mind: *de tempore* collections offered sermons for the Sundays and major festivals of the liturgical year, *de sanctis* collections resourced the feast days of the saints, while *quadragesimale* collections focused on preaching for Lent. Published by the thousands, model sermons are often considered ‘typical’ medieval sermons; although they do not tell us what was preached by any particular preacher in any particular place at any particular time, because of their widespread and routine use, they reveal what many European parishioners heard from the pulpit in both style and content. Some had widespread printing histories, others were more regionally popular.\(^3\) Most were printed in Latin although intended to support preaching in the vernacular. A preacher could use these sermons whole or mine them for outlines, authorities, or *exempla*. Encouragement for individual appropriation is readily observable in the finding aids which were printed with many of these collections. A model sermon collection heavily annotated by Thomas Swalwell, our monk, was the *Rosarium sermonum predicabilium*, or ‘Rose Garden of preachable words’.\(^4\) The author, Bernardino Busti (Bernardinus de Busti), an Italian Observant Franciscan, claims that he has created this garden by selecting ‘choice flowers’

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\(^4\) Bernardino Busti, *Rosarium sermonum predicabilium*, Pars prima (Lyon: Johannes Clein, 1502), Ushaw College XVII.B.4.24. Part I goes from Septuagesima through the fourth week of Lent.