



Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner ed. and trans., with Daniel E. Bornstein and E. Ann Matter, *Dominican Penitent Women*. New York, Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press 2005. xv + 316 pages.

This is a welcome addition to the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series. Gabriella Zarri says in her preface to the collection that it could have been called *Catherine of Siena in her context* and this would more accurately reflect the content, which is exclusively north Italian, though it ranges chronologically from the late thirteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. The texts are a mixture of letters and visionary material by the women themselves and biographical and hagiographical material by clerics, usually themselves Dominican friars who were close to their subjects. The Dominican penitent women were laywomen who took simple vows and wore a habit. Lehmijoki-Gardner makes a convincing case that the formal penitent rule was a later development than has generally been thought, not least because its author Thomas of Siena, sometimes known as Thomas Caffarini, did his best to attribute it to an earlier master general of the order in a not uncommon attempt to authorise a recent text as the work of an earlier authority. It is therefore likely that the formal penitent rule did not come into existence until the beginning of the fifteenth century, rather than the late thirteenth century. It is however, given the similarity of the texts, more than likely based on the informal and local ordinances written by Munio of Zamora, for the women of Orvieto, in 1286. One of the significant differences between the texts is the much more limited access to the Eucharist in the latter text. This argument, that the penitent rule was not formalised until a late date, indicates something of the ambivalent attitude

held by the friars towards the ambiguous status of the women who depended on them.

The texts themselves vary considerably and illustrate both attempts by hagiographers in the case of Maria of Venice to create a model of 'imitable sanctity' from the short and rather tragic life of a 'malmaritata', a young woman, abandoned after a brief, and possibly unconsummated marriage, by her husband, who returned to her parents and to provide a structure and meaning to her life adopted the life of the penitent, dying soon after of plague, having been an assiduous nurse of others sick with the disease; to a portrait of Catherine of Siena as a miracle worker; from letters by Osanna of Mantua, which in this selection seem more concerned with seeking patronage for various friends and relations than with matters devotional; from the physical devotion of Stefana Quinzani who re enacted Christ's passion to the attempt to provide a formally structured and interpreted set of *Revelations* by Lucia Brocadelli, a text interesting in part for the incoherence of at least some of her account, and her difficulty, as an uneducated woman, in sustaining an extended metaphor. As such these texts illustrate the range of practise and interests among these devout laywomen.

Having established so thoroughly a picture of these north Italian penitents, what is needed next is a comparative study of the Dominican nuns and penitent women of Europe.

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