

Divine Intervention: Visionary Imagery and Authority in the Convent of San
Domenico of Pisa

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Art History 493

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on
this paper.

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Acknowledgements

At the end of this year, Professor George Bent reminded me that writing an academic paper, especially one of this magnitude, must be a process. Therefore, when I thank Professor Bent for all of the help, advice, inspiration and support he provided in order to help me complete this project, I cannot help but also express my gratitude for the guidance that he gave me throughout the entirety of the writing process. He urged me to make a trip to New York City and do research at the Frick Collection. With his encouragement, I contacted and subsequently had the pleasure of meeting the scholar who had influenced my senior thesis topic. Then, his assistance enabled me to meet yet another inspiring academic at a conference where I presented a portion of my thesis. This year, and for all of the years that I have known him, Professor Bent has shown me what it takes to achieve my goals. By interacting with him and watching him teach, I have learned that passion is essential to pursuing my life's path. Through seeing him work on his own projects and observing him as he edited my own, I began to understand the type of diligence someone needs to survive in academia. Professor Bent has been so many things in my life: a teacher, mentor, supporter and more. Above all, however, he has been an example.

I would also like to thank Professor Andrea Lepage and Professor Pamela Simpson for all of the helpful comments they gave me. Their assistance provided me with two entirely new perspectives, two viewpoints that became integral to my final project. With a paper of this size, I could not help but become absorbed into the topic and into my own arguments. Professor Lepage's and Professor Simpson's comments challenged my ideas and forced me to approach the paper with original thoughts and conclusions.

Introduction

The convent of San Domenico of Pisa housed a modest collection of artworks. A number of these paintings feature customary depictions of familiar scenes. At the same time, the nuns of San Domenico commissioned images that defied the visual traditions of late medieval Italy. One particular piece ostensibly appears to be a conventional rendition of a mystical event. A woman, dressed as a Dominican nun, kneels in the lower left-hand register of the composition. She extends her hand to receive a ring from a man who emerges from a cloud. Four other figures occupy this cloud. They gaze down at this woman as she accepts the small token. The entire scene seems to take place in a conventual garden.¹ Walls surround the figures and the woman kneels under a building resembling an oratory. A lily and grasses define the garden setting. The image has been identified as a work illustrating a scene from the Catherine legend: *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*. However, I believe that this painting, like many others in San Domenico, raises some questions that the title alone cannot answer. For example, why does this event take place in a convent? Since the work dates to 1400, over sixty years prior to Catherine's canonization, why does she appear nimbed? What significance, if any, does the garden have?

Such inquiries represent a trend regarding depictions of female mystics at San Domenico during the late medieval period. Paintings of Catherine of Alexandria and Bridget of Sweden appeared alongside those of Catherine of Siena. Each work includes components that also generate further inquiries regarding not only the picture itself, but also how the sisters used it. My thesis forces viewers to reconsider the purpose of images in the convent of San Domenico of Pisa. While scholars such as Ann Roberts argue that the founder of the convent, Chiara Gambacorta, commissioned images of visionaries served as examples of feminine piety for their

¹ Ann Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art: the Convent of San Domenico of Pisa, Women and Gender in the Early Modern World* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 75.

convent audience, I suggest that these pieces depicted more than a paradigm of feminine devoutness.² Indeed, my project investigates how these images provided female monastics with a way to reclaim their power from the surrounding male figures and establish their authority by triggering visions. As a personal encounter with the divine, these visionary episodes had a notable degree of authenticity. Thus, these mystical experiences placed the nuns of San Domenico in a position comparable or even equivalent to that of a priest.

Chiara Gambacorta founded the Dominican convent of San Domenico in 1382.³ Her influence extended far beyond the establishment of this monastic community. She played an integral role in selecting the images that decorated the interior of the building itself. For generations after her death, the women of this cloister expressed deference to Chiara's legacy through their adherence to the visual tradition that their founder had devised. It was not until Chiara time as prioress, 1395-1419, that the convent started to commission works of art.⁴ Paintings of the aforementioned female visionaries filled the walls of San Domenico. These depictions, especially those of the two Catherines, not only confirm Chiara's predilection for Dominican imagery, but also reveal a particular interest in mystical experiences.⁵

As with most renunciants, specific events in Chiara's life compelled her to take her vows as a member of the regular clergy. Yet, my paper is not intended to be a work of either hagiography or biography. In the same way that certain incidents during her lifetime shaped her

² Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴ Sister Mary Evelyn Murphy O.P., *Blessed Clara Gambacorta* (Fribourg: Imprimerie De L'oeuvre De Saint-Paul, 1928), 71.

⁵ Both Catherine of Alexandria and Catherine of Siena were of great importance to the Dominicans. During the late fourteenth century, several paintings in Dominican houses depicted Catherine of Siena nimmed, although she had not yet received sainthood. Many scholars believe that this type of representation was a part of a campaign for Catherine's canonization soon after her death in 1380.

as a female religious, I surmise that certain incidents and circumstances influenced the types of images she chose for San Domenico. Throughout her life, Chiara came into contact with several individuals who encouraged her vocation. These people introduced her to the three aforementioned female mystics. Indeed, Chiara herself maintained a correspondence with Catherine of Siena beginning in 1375.⁶ Upon further examination of Chiara's background, we begin to observe a definitive pattern: those who advocated her retreat to a cloistered life also provided her with information pertaining to feminine visionary experiences. I argue that these people as well as the spiritual guidance that they dispensed acted as the impetus for a series of changes in Chiara's life. In order for her to evolve from Tora, the daughter of a Pisan nobleman, to *Beata* Chiara, a number of Ovidian metamorphoses had to take place. The inspiration provided by the holy women catalyzed and perhaps supplied a model for Chiara's transformations.

Chapter I: Religious background

⁶ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12.

I. Introduction

Women's mystical experiences arose as a specific response to their religious and social circumstances of the time period. Observant female monastics of this time found themselves forced to follow not only the commandments of the Lord, but to adhere to the stringent laws of their order. Ecclesiastical policies limited the privileges they could enjoy even as members of a cloistered community. In short, the masculine presence of the Church restricted the manner in which these women could create a personal relationship with God. However, my thesis shows that these paintings represented agency for female monastics. By stimulating holy visions, they allowed the nuns to circumvent ecclesiastical authority and commune with the Divine, on their own terms. The intimate nature of the encounter negated the need for the friar or confessor while the mystical experience provided these nuns with an escape from the walls of San Domenico.

The social milieu of the later Middle Ages contributed to the development of female mysticism.⁷ These paintings represented more than the woman that they depicted. To the sisters of San Domenico, they illustrated the opportunity to commune with the Divine in a way that had been forbidden. However, these works also expressed the ideas behind an alternative religiosity, one based on the concept of an intimate relationship with Christ. These images alluded to the Song of Songs, Bernardine thought and number of other traditions. At the same time, the women of San Domenico may not have known about these works directly; mystics such as Catherine of Siena made the language the erotic language and revolutionary thought of the twelfth-century exegetes accessible to female monastics.⁸ These paintings must therefore be considered as more

⁷ Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), xi.

⁸ Karen Scott, "Catherine of Siena and Lay Sanctity in Fourteenth-Century Italy," ed. Ann W. Astell, in *Lay Sanctity, Medieval and Modern: a Search for Models* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 82.

than devotional objects, but also as artifacts of historical record. Thus, in order to fully understand the significance of the images at San Domenico, as well as the visions that they stimulated, we must first consider the ecclesiastical and coenobitic practices of this era.

II. Eucharistic practices

The role of the priest exhibited the nature and demonstrated the extent of the medieval Church's influence. As the canonical representative to the laity, the office of the priesthood had to be designed very carefully.⁹ Sacerdotal duty came to be viewed as having two parts that rendered the officiating priest indispensable to his congregation. He acted as both a doctrinal teacher and a link to God for the laity. Priests could instruct their parish through preaching. According to medieval theories of authorship, they could claim that their authority came from ecclesiastical approbation or *ex officio*.¹⁰ This sanction was to be treated as indisputable. Thus, the theological views of the priest became those of his congregation as well. In this way, he functioned as a support for the medieval Church's claim to absolute power and control over the deliverance of its followers.¹¹ Furthermore, the priest formed a heavenly association through the execution of sacramental acts.¹² The performance of these sacred rituals aggrandized the clerical office. That is to say, the ordained celebrant came to be perceived as Christ's earthly voice. Yet,

⁹Caroline Walker. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 55.

¹⁰"The Fourth Lateran Council," ed. Harry Rothwell, in *Readings in Medieval History*, comp. Patrick J. Geary, Third ed. (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2003), 443.

¹¹Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 252.

¹² Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 148.

he was not only viewed as a representative for the Divine; the priest soon became a holy figure himself. At many points during the Mass, sacerdotal authority was equated with celestial mandate. For example, Jesus' words at the Last Supper transformed into the priest's at the moment of consecration.¹³ The First Canon of the Fourth Lateran Council, which met in 1215, drew attention to the connections amongst the unity of the Catholic Church, Christ's genuine presence in the Eucharist and the priest as a part of the apostolic tradition.¹⁴ Moreover, rituals and ceremonies surrounding the administration of the Host elevated the priestly occupation. These reiterated observances contributed to the increasing differentiation between the clergy and the laity; only ordained members of the clergy had the authority to perform these sacred acts. Upon examination of this relationship, it becomes evident that it was through the particular sacrament of Holy Communion, and specifically its administration by clerics, the Church sustained its temporal authority.

By the thirteenth century, the Eucharist had been established as the most important of these sacraments as a physical reminder of Christ's Passion.¹⁵ In order to regulate the standards for worthy reception, the Church chose to restrict access to the Eucharistic species. Women, even those in monastic or mendicant orders, could only receive Holy Communion on certain feast days or with limited frequency. Likewise, the physical reception of the Host came to represent exclusion rather than commensality. Members of the regular clergy were presented with the Eucharist at the high altar while members of the laity were forced to process to side altars, and

¹³Rubin, 55-6.

¹⁴"The Fourth Lateran Council", 443

¹⁵Rubin, 99.

women were ostensibly prohibited from being given either the body or the blood.¹⁶ Furthermore, the doctrine of concomitance dictated that both sacramental elements, the body and the blood, were contained within each species, the bread and wine.¹⁷ Therefore, since doctrinally the host contained both the body and the blood of Christ, the Church was justified in withholding the contents of the chalice from the laity and from female members of the congregation. These limitations caused desire for Communion to only increase.¹⁸ This resulted in devotional practices that challenged the sacramentality of the Eucharist and the powers of the priest.

The import of the devotional movement in regards to Eucharistic practices can scarcely be exaggerated. It not only enabled the laity to circumvent sacerdotal authority to a significant degree, but also transformed the ceremony of the mass into a more private and accessible sphere.¹⁹ The Feast of *Corpus Christi* was instituted in 1264. Subsequently, cults dedicated to the veneration of the Host began to emerge.²⁰ These factions provided those whom the church's policies restricted, specifically women, with a plausible way of partaking in the restricted ecclesiastical sacraments.²¹ This movement relied upon developing a physical, rather than spiritual, relationship with the Divine. Its rituals and procedures focused on the emotions potentially elicited by a somatic connection to sacred materials. Relics, pilgrimage and affective veneration of Christ's lacerated body originated in this vernacular interest in and need for

¹⁶ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 56.

¹⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 3 (London: Burnes, Oates and Washburne, 1920-42), q. 76 articles 1 and 2.

¹⁸ Catherine Pickstock, "Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist," *Modern Theology*, April 1999, 169-70.

¹⁹ Richard Kieckhefer, "Convention and Conversion: Patterns in Late Medieval Piety," *Church History* 67, no. 1 (March 1998): 37.

²⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 55.

²¹ Rubin, 314

²² *Ibid.*

physicality. The popular religiosity of the later Middle Ages was one increasingly preoccupied with that which was corporeal and tangible.²² Devotionalism marked a departure from the clerical emphasis on introspection in favor of developing external demonstrations of faith. At times, these outward exhibitions of piety neglected the sacramentality of canonical ceremonies. The notion of spiritual or ocular communion proved to be one of the most notable of these alternative practices.

Beginning in Paris in 1200, the Catholic Church sanctioned ocular communion.²³ It started with the simple practice of elevating the Host. This elevation denoted the gravity of the consecration as a specific liturgical moment.²⁴ The sight of the Eucharistic elements became imbued with a sense of spiritual value.²⁵ As an ecclesiastical practice, spiritual communion stressed mental concentration as the mechanism of stimulating a unitive state with the Divine.²⁶ This acknowledged the sacramental value of Holy Communion while permitting the laity to participate in the ritual in a vicarious fashion. It quickly became established as the only acceptable form of daily communion. Yet, the underlying devotional tendencies of conventional piety contributed to what the Church considered the corruption of ocular communion. Rather than using meditation to understand the nature of Christ's sacrifice, the laity began to worship or venerate the Host. By emphasizing the consecration of the Host, the congregation neglected other parts of the Mass. The laity's disregard for portions of the service brought to light a

²³ Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," *Church History* 71, no. 04 (December 2002): 688-9.

²⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Rubin, 150.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

potential danger: members of the congregation may use ocular communion as a means of obviating parochial and clerical authority.²⁷

III. Monastic and mendicant piety: carnal love in religious context

The new monastic and mendicant orders formed in the Twelfth and Thirteenth centuries reevaluated the value of concupiscence in religious life. Subsequently image of the nun underwent a number of changes. Previously characterized as young virginal ladies of the aristocracy, the female monastics of the later middle ages came from various social classes. What is more, nunneries had to partition the cells in order to separate the virgins, widows and repentant prostitutes who had found themselves attracted to the spiritual life.²⁸ Their vows, a spiritual answer to a secular marriage ceremony, took on a deeper significance. These women took on the role of Brides of Christ by professing their love for God and Christ. Yet, in contrast to the rituals of the early Church, they did so fully cognizant of the temptations and rewards of earthly affections. The female religious of this era therefore did not only love Christ on a spiritual level, but knew him as her earthly husband as well; her devotion to Christ originated in her understanding of secular passion. Indeed, many could have had sexual experiences from within or without the marital state. In either case, the chivalric and romantic literature that gained popularity throughout the twelfth century exposed literate women to the allure of carnal relationships.

With this new brand of recruitment, the Cistercians cultivated an entirely different type of religiosity. Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs influenced Cistercian piety; thus, I shall now refer to it as Bernardine piety. His comments on the Canticles attempted not only to reconcile the work as a part of the biblical canon, but also tried to explain his idea of

²⁸ Ibid., 12-13.

monastic love. He maintained that individuals need not repress concupiscence.²⁹ Instead, ardor could be channeled into religious fervor.³⁰ In his eighty-six sermons on the first two chapters and the first verse of the third chapter of the Song of Songs, Bernard compared the acts of carnal love described in the Song of Solomon to the process of salvation and reconciliation.³¹ In doing so, he used the vocabulary of human and earthly love to delineate the nuances of monastic love.³² According to Bernard, the Kiss of the mouth that opens the Canticles symbolizes the oneness of divinity and humanity. In the same way, the mutual love of the unnamed couple is analogous to individual communication with the Holy Spirit. He also attempted to justify the phrase "...breasts are better than wine."³³ In Bernard's opinion, this excerpt voiced Jesus' patient and steadfast love for those he saved; it pertained to the mystery and reward of His incarnation.³⁴

Despite the three hundred years between Bernard's exegetical commentary on the Song of Songs and the founding of San Domenico, evidence of his influence can be found throughout many texts and devotional imagery of the later Middle Ages. Catherine of Alexandria's mystical marriage derives its nuptial imagery from the Song of Songs. In fact, the nun's role as the Bride of Christ finds its linguistic origins in Bernardine thought. The ceremony of profession, in which novices took their vows to become full-fledged sisters, mimicked a secular marriage. Here, the erotic and matrimonial language of Bernard's biblical treatise can be seen in the way that the female religious related to Christ. He revolutionized the way in which his readers viewed Jesus. While the Early Church forced believers to see Him as solely Divine, Bernard emphasized His

²⁹ Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1996), 51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

³¹ Leclercq, *Monks and Love*, 51.

³² *Ibid.* 23.

³³ Canticles 1:1.

³⁴ Leclercq, *Monks and Love*, 51.

role as man. Nuns, as His bride, capitalized on this by marrying him in their ritual. In *The Dialogue*, Catherine stressed the importance of love when forging a relationship with God. According to Catherine, God wants us to, "love me in the same way that I have loved you. You cannot do this for me because, I have loved you without being loved...I love you from graciousness and not from duty."³⁵ while Bridget, in the same way, viewed herself a maternal figure comparable to the Virgin as well as Christ's Spouse. In her *Revelations*, Christ refers to Bridget as his spouse, telling her, "I take you as my bride and for my own proper delight."³⁶ Therefore, readers must keep Bernardine theories in mind when viewing the images at San Domenico.

IV. Visions and Spiritual authority

The majority of women's visionary encounters accentuated Christ's human nature. Accounts of these experiences employed the same erotic and nuptial language as the Song of Songs and Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons regarding these Canticles. The female mystics saw themselves as Jesus' mother, wife, or a part of Christ himself. Indeed, nuns and visionaries viewed Christ as more of a spiritual model than any of the female saints.³⁷ Christ's body, in both its fleshly and Eucharistic form, became an integral part of female devotional piety. In a mystical communion, the female religious receives the wafer or portion of the holy flesh directly from Christ. However, she did not assume the role of the priest.³⁸ In this way, mystics never ventured

³⁵ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 121.

³⁶ Bridget of Sweden, Bridget Morris, and Denis Michael Searby, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 44.

³⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 122.

³⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 227-8.

outside of the magisterium and successfully refrained from heterodox teachings.³⁹ At the same time, this type of immediate association with Christ granted her a type of authority that the priest or male monastic did not have. While these holy men could preach the gospel and church doctrine with ecclesiastical approval, the female mystic had the advantage of transcending earthly boundaries. Her vision allowed her to coexist with biblical figures and take part in the sacred scenes that she imagined. Women like Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena attested to witnessing Nativity and Crucifixion scenes as if they had taken place before their very eyes. This lent an authenticity to their words that a male celebrant could not claim.

Interestingly enough, men were not known to have as many visionary experiences as women.⁴⁰ When monks or friars did have such encounters, they expressed a different type of relationship with the Divine. Female visions were defined by their intimacy with the divine. They not only witnessed biblical scenes, but participated in them as Christ's mother, spouse or sibling. In contrast, male visionaries tended to restrict themselves to this role as a witness⁴¹. Unlike their female counterparts, they simply inserted themselves into the sacred narrative. However, this alone enabled them to assert agency because the vision was evidence of divine inspiration⁴². Ecclesiastical policies did not inhibit the male religious or ecclesiastic as they did the nun. Thus, they did not need visions as an alternative medium of communing with the divine.

V. Female Dominican piety

The Dominican Order, one of the two large mendicant orders of the later Middle Ages, followed the Augustinian Rule. Although the order for men had been established in the first half

³⁹ Bernard McGinn, "The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism," *Church History* 65, no. 2 (June 1996): 212.

⁴⁰ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 123.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 123-4.

of the thirteenth century, the rule for Dominican nuns was not written until 1259.⁴³ Similar to the Poor Clares, the female Dominicans valued chastity, poverty and charity.⁴⁴ However, this female branch did not enjoy the same widespread popularity as their Franciscan counterparts.⁴⁵ Most Dominican convents founded before the fourteenth century were located in the province Teutonia, a region that included southern Germany, Alsace and Northern Switzerland.⁴⁶ Yet, the black death and political upheaval that had begun to define the fourteenth century compelled both the penniless and wealthy of the urban population to turn to their Lord for guidance.⁴⁷ Many individuals chose to join religious orders as a symbol of their spiritual fidelity. Moreover, they sought to prove their earnestness through the stringency of their devotional practices. This ushered in a period of monastic and mendicant reform.

Chiara Gambacorta, the founder of San Domenico of Pisa, played an integral role in the formation of the Observant movement.⁴⁸ Because of her renowned piety, influential figures such as Giovanni Dominici chose to use the nunnery she had established as a model for much larger houses such as Corpus Domini in Venice. Indeed, by Pope Innocent VII's approval of the formal Dominican Penitent rule in 1405, the sisters of San Domenico had already been following the standards the pontiff had specified since the inception of their religious community.⁴⁹ Chiara

⁴³ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Susan Marti, and Petra Marx, "The Time of the Orders, 1200-1500: An Introduction," in *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Susan Marti, trans. Dietlinde Hamburger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 42-3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁷ Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, ed., *Dominican Penitent Women*, trans. Daniel Ethan Bornstein and E. Ann. Matter, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 46-7.

made sure to restrict the sisters' public movements as well as their diets and personal time.⁵⁰

Their lives, demonstrative and exemplary of spiritual devotion and humility, were entirely dedicated to Christ, their spouse.

⁵⁰ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 13.

Chapter II: Chiara Gambacorta

In 1362 Pietro di Andrea Gambacorta and his first wife, Raniera da Gualandi welcomed their fourth child and only daughter into the world.⁵¹ Pisan archives tell us that they named her Tora, a diminutive of either Theodora or Victoria.⁵² Unfortunately, not much is known about the specifics of Tora's birth; she had been born during a time of great turmoil for the Gambacorti. Indeed, late medieval Pisa had proven to be an area characterized by bloody struggles for power and volatility. As a consequence of her father's support of the Florentine regime, the Gambacorti had been banished from Pisa, and because Tora had been born during this period of exile, the circumstances surrounding her birth remain nebulous. Pietro Gambacorta did not return to Pisa until February of 1369, seven years after his daughter's birth.⁵³ In September of that same year, the Pisan people restored Pietro to his previous place as their governmental head.⁵⁴ Tora, as the only daughter, could only be used as a pawn in their diplomatic schemes, and at the age of seven the family betrothed her to Simone da Massa, a member of another influential bureaucratic family in Pisa. The two married five years later, when Tora reached maturity.⁵⁵

Interestingly enough, according to her biography in the *Acta Sanctorum*, she displayed a vehement dedication to chastity before and perhaps even during her marriage.⁵⁶ This delicate sensibility incited a compulsion to retreat to a cloistered community. Unfortunately, her

⁵¹ Murphy, 37. Roberts states that the name of Pietro Gambacorta's first wife and Chiara's mother remains ambiguous-see Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 10.

⁵² Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 10.

⁵³ Murphy, 38.

⁵⁴ N. Rubenstein, "Florence and the Despots: Some Aspects of Florentine Diplomacy in the Fourteenth Century," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth, 2 (1952): 32.

⁵⁵ Ann M. Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta of Pisa as Patroness of the Arts," in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: a Religious and Artistic Renaissance*, by E. Ann Matter and John Wayland Coakley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 120.

⁵⁶ Murphy 42

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

obedience and sense of filial obligation required that she consent to the political union, despite her personal mortifications of the flesh. Yet, even during her first year of matrimony, she was rumored to have said: "O Lord, I desire no other spouse but Thee."⁵⁷ Tora, in the same fashion that these brides of Christ would address Jesus, referred to Him as a "spouse." Thus, we can observe that this confession employs the nuptial vocabulary reminiscent of the nun's Ceremony of Profession, the ritual in which the female monastic would be metaphorically wed to Christ. Indeed, a nun even received a wedding ring to symbolize the celestial marriage.⁵⁸ By utilizing matrimonial language to allude to the Godhead, Tora not only expressed her earnest desire for convent life, but also divulged a profound distaste for her secular union.

Tora's attraction to the monastic lifestyle continued throughout her entire marriage. In the course of the second year, she became associated with a society of women who conferred only to pray and give alms to the poor.⁵⁹ She quickly rose to the forefront of this group. Local Pisan legend has it that a man, Stefano Lapi, sought this organization's aid for a cancer that partially consumed his face.⁶⁰ While the rest of the women quickly withdrew due to their disgust, Tora claimed Lapi as her personal charge. Without any medical training, she did not know how to relieve his physical suffering. Instead, she kissed his face as if she could remove his pain with her lips, and Lapi soon became Tora's disciple.⁶¹

⁵⁸Ibid., 44.

⁵⁹Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta of Pisa as Patroness of the Arts", 129.

⁶⁰Murphy, 44.

⁶¹Ibid.

Soon after this incident, Tora's husband returned to Pisa from a short journey. He promptly fell ill with what many scholars believe to be the plague, a recurrence of the epidemic of 1348.⁶² Fearing his own daughter's life, Pietro had Tora transferred to her childhood home where she probably escaped her husband's fate; he died in 1377, after only three years of marriage to Tora.⁶³ Anticipating her family's desire for her to remarry, the fifteen year old Tora cut her hair and dressed herself as a nun. She donned a simple and modest veil, clothed herself with poor garments and donated her own luxurious dresses to the poor.⁶⁴ After seeing Tora attired in such indigent garb, Raniera, Tora's mother, exhibited a degree of disdain that forced the entire household to treat Tora as a servant.⁶⁵ Her mother's treatment compelled Tora to look for guidance and aid from other sources. Tora's newfound freedom in her widowed state, her mother's mistreatment and her continuing fascination with the monastic lifestyle prompted one of her first metamorphoses.

Tora met Catherine of Siena in February of 1375. The revered visionary had come to Pisa at the behest of Pope Gregory XI, who sent the mystic as his ambassador during a conflict between the Papal court of Avignon and Florence. As a representative of the Supreme Pontiff, Catherine was welcomed by the Gambacorti. Wishing to retain a modest residence, Catherine insisted on lodging with another family, the Buonconti, near the church of Santa Cristina.⁶⁶ Despite this, she maintained a steady association with the Gambacorta family. One of her letters to the Pope makes explicit mention of Pietro Gambacorta:

⁶² Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12. Murphy is the one who attributes Tora's husband's death to a recurrence of the 1348 plague.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Murphy, 45.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 45-6.

⁶⁶ Murphy, 46.

Help them as much as you can,
and encourage them to stand firm
and faithful...I earnestly beg of you
to write Master Peter zealously and
without delay.⁶⁷

Considering both the dating and context of this correspondence, “Master Peter” most logically refers to Pietro Gambacorta who acted ostensibly as Catherine's host in Pisa. Moreover, she appears to have formed a friendship of a most amiable nature with the young Tora, then only a teenager, during her time in the city. Prior to her husband's untimely death, the obedient Tora found it necessary to restrain her vehement piety in order to accommodate her politically-minded family's aspirations and to garner the approval of her contemptuous mother. Catherine's religious fervor excited a spiritual intensity in the young girl that she had previously been forced to repress. It can therefore come as no surprise that Tora became a devoted disciple of Catherine's.⁶⁸

The Mystic wrote to Tora soon after learning of the death of Simone da Massa, perhaps foreseeing the vulnerable widow's complicated position between filial duties and her incessant vocational compulsions. In her letter, she exhorted Tora to renounce the world and settle into a religious house.⁶⁹ What is more, Catherine's language empowered the conflicted young woman and assured Tora that her life as a monastic would liberate her from the virtual prison of her secular home. Catherine wrote,

I, Catherine...write to you in His
precious blood with desire to see
you a true servant and spouse of
Christ crucified...To serve Him does
not mean becoming a servant, for he

⁶⁷ St. Catherine of Siena, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (Tempe AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 244

⁶⁸ Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta of Pisa as a Patroness of the Arts," 122.

⁶⁹ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12.

makes us rule; indeed He makes us
all rulers in the eternal life...⁷⁰

The visionary's phrasing concentrated on creating a contrast between Tora's current domestic situation and the liberation that a cloistered life could potentially offer. She repeatedly used the word servant, a term that accurately described Tora's status in her childhood home due to her mother's disdain. This effectively reminded Catherine's reader of the ill treatment she continued to receive outside of a convent. At the same time, Catherine redefined servant within a monastic context; it was no longer a subservient position. Instead, the Lord empowers those who perform His works on earth and reward them in the next life. It appears that Catherine continuously used this trope of redefinition. Specifically, she cleverly reappropriated the vocabulary of Tora's lifestyle as a member of the Pisan aristocracy and altered it to the advantage of her religious cause. In the earthly realm, only Pietro or his sons could act as the ruler of the city-state, which relegated Tora to yet another secondary position. Yet, in a monastic existence, servants, such as Tora could become, as Catherine wrote, "rulers", for all eternity. Life as a nun would elevate her standing and would even allow her to surpass her father's in a spiritual sense; her reign, in contrast to his Pisan incumbency, would transcend temporal boundaries. This passage reveals that Catherine not only promised her youthful friend freedom through cloistered confinement, but empowerment as well.

Tora decided to end her mourning for Simone and her vacillation between the earthly and spiritual realms after the receipt of Catherine's letter. With the aid of a trusted and devout servant, she secretly entered into the Franciscan house of the Poor Clares: the Convent of San

⁷⁰ Catherine of Siena, *Letters*, 63.

Martino in Kinzica.⁷¹ The Poor Clares eagerly welcomed the noble daughter of the ruling family of Pisa. Ceremonially dressed in the habit of Saint Francis, they bestowed upon her the name of their own order's founder: Chiara.⁷² Tora would keep this name throughout the remainder of her life.⁷³

Tora's metamorphosis was completed not only by her renaming, but also by the ritual of Chiara donning the monastic habit. A change in attire marked the conversion of many male and female religious figures.⁷⁴ Following the death of her spouse, Chiara commenced her series of transformations by cutting her hair, finding a veil, and replacing her luxurious dresses with simpler clothing. An alteration in her appearance and costume would work to denote a change in Chiara's life as well, one that often brings her closer to the divine. This emphasis on clothing and modest dress thus becomes especially important because, in Chiara's experience, these concepts generally correspond to a heightened spirituality. I assert that we may view this parallel as one of the origins of Chiara's predisposition towards an observant way of life.

Having welcomed Chiara to the convent, two Franciscan friars took upon themselves the responsibility of informing Pietro Gambacorta that his daughter had been taken into their care.⁷⁵ Predictably, Gambacorta and his family were not pleased to hear that their Tora had retreated to the cloistered life. In their opinion, she was lost to them as she had acted against her father's express wishes to remarry.⁷⁶ In an effort to forcibly remove Tora from the Franciscan cloister,

⁷¹ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 13.

⁷² Murphy, 48.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Medieval Europe had numerous examples of redressing as an indication of conversion. Richard Rolle insisted on wearing his sister's dresses as a set of makeshift hermit's robes. In the same way, St. Francis of Assisi stripped himself of his opulent clothing as a symbolic renunciation of his patrimony.

⁷⁵ Murphy, 48.

⁷⁶ Murphy, 49.

the Gambacorti threatened the entire convent of San Martino.⁷⁷ Observing the malevolent brand of leverage to which her family resorted, Chiara surrendered and returned to her family's home in Pisa. She subsequently endured five months of what could only be considered house arrest, during which time her father constantly pestered her to take another husband to advance the family's diplomatic agenda.⁷⁸ Even under such close supervision, she managed to distribute what meager wealth remained in her control to the poor with the help of her only disciple, Stefano Lapi.⁷⁹

In the Fall of 1378, Pietro Gambacorta introduced his daughter to Alfonso Pecha da Vadaterra.⁸⁰ The two men had completed the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and had forged a bond during the course of their sojourn. Pietro hoped that the Archbishop of Jaen could speak to the stubborn Chiara about the merits of a second political marriage.⁸¹ Yet, it appears that he misconstrued the nature of their relationship. Although the Spanish cleric acknowledged his obligations to his host and fellow traveler, Alfonso could not help but perceive Chiara's earnest devotion and resolute piety.⁸² To Pietro's dismay, rather than discourage the young woman's monastic aspirations in accordance with her father's wishes, he promoted her renunciation of society and worldly goods to Pietro's dismay. More importantly, Alfonso introduced Chiara to the writings of Bridget of Sweden, who he had come to know as the mystic's confessor.⁸³ He

⁷⁷ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12.

⁷⁸ During the late medieval period, widows enjoyed an increased amount of independence. Their contemporaries viewed them as marginal figures. As such, they did not fall under the authority of their fathers or the family of their deceased husband. For this reason, Chiara's father could not force the second marriage on his daughter as he could the first.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Murphy, 52.

⁸² Ibid., 53.

⁸³ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12.

edited and distributed her *Revelations* throughout Europe.⁸⁴ Although the primary records remain unclear, he most likely gave this along with more of Bridget's writings to Chiara.⁸⁵ Her growing familiarity with Bridget's texts, works and history prompted Chiara to make an effort to emulate the female visionary.

Bridget became a model of recaptured virginity and piety for Chiara. Even prior to Bridget's official canonization in 1391, Chiara adopted her as one of her personal patron saints.⁸⁶ Like Chiara, Bridget had been born into a family of high standing. By the age of thirteen, Bridget's family had found a profitable match for her. Between 1316, the year that Bridget and her husband Ulf Gudmaarson married, and 1344, the year Gudmaarson died, she bore him eight children. After her spouse's demise at a Cistercian monastery, Bridget elected to devote her life to God and religious worship. She formed the Briggitine order later that year.⁸⁷ As a widow who successfully undertook a devotional vocation, Chiara found hope in Bridget's hagiography. She voiced her resistance towards a second marriage, and this time, her father accepted his defeat. Pietro gave his daughter the freedom to answer God's call without consequence or familial hostility. Moreover, his second wife, Orietta Doria encouraged him to build a new convent for Chiara in order to watch over her.⁸⁸

Surprisingly, Chiara did not return to the Franciscan convent of San Martino. She instead chose to enter the Dominican Convent of Santa Croce in Fossabanda on November 30, 1378.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Nirit BA Debby, "The Images of Saint Birgitta of Sweden in Santa Maria Novella in Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 18, no. 4 (December 2004): 509

⁸⁵ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2001), 14-16.

⁸⁸ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12.

⁸⁹ It was not customary to switch from a Franciscan house to a Dominican one. Unfortunately, none of Chiara's biographers explain the reason behind the decision to change her affiliation.

Like most cloisters of the period, Santa Croce could be found just outside the city walls. Chiara exemplified a stricter adherence to the Benedictine rule than the majority of the sisters at Santa Croce, and somehow secured special privileges that enabled her to exercise her stringent piety.⁹⁰ For example, she obtained permission to pray in a private cell and even lived apart from the other nuns.⁹¹ Four years after she joined the community at Fossabanda, Pietro completed the construction of the new convent at his wife's behest. In June of 1382, Chiara and five other women moved into this new edifice in order to follow a more rigorous observance of Dominican life. Chiara's companions included several of the daughters of the Gambacorti's political allies: Fillippa Albizzi, Maria Mancini, Andrea Porcellini, Agnese Bonconti, and Giovanna Del Ferro. Perhaps in an effort to watch over his daughter or even in an attempt to establish diplomatic ties to her companions, Pietro acted as both the rector and patron of the convent.

The community, known as San Domenico of Pisa, received official sanction by Pope Urban VI in September of 1385. Chiara became prioress ten years later, despite being only thirty-three, an age traditionally considered too young for this office.⁹² As the spiritual mother of her house, she led by example. In addition to her active ministry, she performed numerous acts of charity and maintained a steady correspondence with both religious and secular figures who proved to be extremely influential. She secured charitable donations to the convent by writing to persons such as the Master General of the Dominican Order, Francesco di Marco Datini who was the leader of the city of Lucca, and Giovanni Dominici who became an important part of the Dominican observant movement. With her guidance, the house of San Domenico grew in size and influence.

⁹⁰ Murphy, 61.

⁹¹ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12.

⁹² Dominican constitutions recommend that the prioress be at least forty years old.

Chapter III: The Convent of San Domenico

I. Location: political motivations and religious patronage

Pietro Gambacorta built the convent of San Domenico in the Kinzica district, just South of the Arno. The region had been controlled by his family for generations. Indeed, their ancestral palace was just a short walk up the street from the cloisters.⁹³ At such a close proximity, the Gambacorti could execute their responsibilities as the principal benefactors of the convent with relative ease while asserting their authority as the premier family of the neighborhood. The location proved to be especially advantageous as it was home to several prominent members of the Pisan nobility. Names such as Cinquini, Bonconti, d'Appiano, and Doria appear on the *catasto*, the system of taxation based on an assessment of property and wealth, as well as in the records of choir nuns and list of those who had professed at San Domenico.⁹⁴ In fact, Andrea Porcellini, one of its six founding members, was the daughter of a Gambacorta supporter.⁹⁵

As the religious community expanded, several of the women from Kinzica elected to profess at San Domenico. Archival records specify five sisters, one of whom became a prioress of the convent, who may have originally been from the Pisan district.⁹⁶ Even decades after Chiara's death and nearly a century after the assassination of her father, women from the most powerful families in Pisa and the entirety of Tuscany continued to flock to San Domenico. Chiara welcomed women from the families of her father's friends and enemies. Giovanna di Benati Cinquini, a member of the noble family allied to the Gambacorti, professed in 1426. Magdalena Lancilottia de Appiano, a nun of San Domenico by 1494, entered the nunnery despite her ties to

⁹³ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 43.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Appendix 4, pp. 320-8.

the man who had been responsible for the downfall and murder of the founder' family.

⁹⁷Although all joined San Domenico after 1425, their respective familial affiliations ensure an awareness of the Gambacorta name and influence.

Interestingly enough, San Domenico was situated within the city walls of Pisa (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Most patrons of medieval religious communities, especially those that contained women, situated the conventual structures outside of an urban setting.⁹⁸ Nunneries such as the Dominican house of Santa Croce in Fossabanda, Chiara's former residence prior to the establishment of San Domenico, built the convent just outside of Pisa's fortifications for two reasons. Like many other cloistered communities, the nuns of Santa Croce feared risking the increasing urbanization that such a close proximity to the main town could potentially produce.⁹⁹ Since most novices were sent to the convent at an age prior to adolescence, it was felt that the city presented too many temptations for them. Their inexperience endangered both their lives as well as their virtue. The peripheral location also asserted these women's status as members of the regular clergy, isolated from the outside world by the walls of their cloister.¹⁰⁰ In this way, the space that separated the conventual structures from the town became imbued with a deeper significance; this division illustrated the profound contrast between the reprehensible perils of an urban setting with the commendable piety of the cloistered life. Despite these traditional apprehensions, Pietro Gambacorta elected to construct his daughter's convent close to Pisa's city walls. While the Dominican house at Fossabanda did not serve as a spiritual model for Pietro, he appears to have taken the fate of Santa Croce to heart. Due to escalating fears of a Florentine,

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Katherine Gill, "Open Monasteries for Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy: Two Roman Examples," in *The Crannied Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early Modern Europe*, by Craig Monson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 33.

⁹⁹ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 44.

¹⁰⁰ Gill, 35.

Milanese or Papal invasion, the women of Santa Croce were relocated to a more protected area.¹⁰¹ As a politician himself, Pietro would have been well informed of the potential dangers from surrounding city-states and kingdoms. His decision to erect the buildings of his daughter's convent in Kinzica may have been an effort to protect Chiara as well as his own diplomatic interests. San Domenico, even generations after Pietro's death, attracted the daughters, nieces, and widows of the most prominent families in Pisa and, later, the whole region of Tuscany. However, I would argue that this type of esteem could not have been possible without Chiara's father and his choice of locale.

II. The beginnings of San Domenico

When Chiara and the five other sisters began the convent in 1382, two main structures dating back to the thirteenth century constituted the community (Figure 3).¹⁰² Although little of this arcade survives, a cloister walk formed a juncture between these two buildings.¹⁰³ An edifice along the west side of the present-day structure had two stories. While the second floor consisted of the nuns' cells and dormitories, the ground floor had rooms that served a variety of purposes.¹⁰⁴ In the 1380s, the first floor of the west building included the small church that the nuns used upon the establishment of San Domenico. The east building also held a second-story dormitory, but also held a refectory below.¹⁰⁵

The construction and foundation of the convent began with the women's effort to renovate the existing property in order to make it consistent with the Benedictine Rule and the Dominican

¹⁰¹ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 44.

¹⁰² Ann M. Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta of Pisa as Patroness", 125.

¹⁰³ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 45.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Constitutions.¹⁰⁶ Although Chiara had successfully broken from Santa Croce at Fossabanda with the support of five likeminded nuns, she had yet to gain institutional approval from the Pope. Authorization from Rome came three years after Chiara left her previous convent on September 17, 1385, with a papal bull issued by Urban IV.¹⁰⁷ In the document, the Pope limited the size of the community to twenty women.¹⁰⁸ San Domenico satisfied the financial and physical requisites for establishment specified by the pontiff by May of the following year.¹⁰⁹

By 1395, the nuns of the convent elected Chiara as their prioress. With the death of Pietro Gambacorta in 1392 and the downfall of the Gambacorta family in the consequent civic turmoil, the new prioress found the yet fledgling convent already short of funds. She sought help from her secular connections to begin a new project to refurbish an extant church that did not conform to Dominican ideals. In a letter dated to February 23, 1396 she entreated Francesco Datini of Prato, a prominent merchant who had dealings all over Tuscany, to finance the renovation.

We are poor, and being poor we recommend ourselves to you for the love of Christ, that in our present need you will remember to give us whatever assistance God will inspire you to give. Alms is a good thing and this devout convent prays and will continue to pray for you, and you will participate in the fervent prayers that will be said in that church: therein will be said the Divine office day and night.¹¹⁰

Later that year, when Chiara did not find Datini's donation sufficient, she wrote another message to her patron.¹¹¹ This note reminded him of the growing size of the undertaking and how the capital must correspond to the expanding size of the project. At the same time, Chiara promised to pray for his ailing wife because of his *continued* generosity to her house. She thanked him for

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta as Patroness", 123.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 44.

¹¹⁰ Murphy, 115.

¹¹¹ Murphy, 119.

his unparalleled charity in 1397: "You have given us generous alms for the church, and you would rejoice if you could see this act of yours in the world, but in paradise you will rejoice much more."¹¹² Chiara maintained a relationship with Datini throughout the remainder of her time as prioress. During the next decade, he made several sizeable contributions to San Domenico that allowed the sisters to expand their grounds, to acquire texts for the library and to commission numerous works of art.

The new church building had been mostly constructed by 1408.¹¹³ Yet, work seems to have continued at a constant pace well into the 1430s with indications of a portico being constructed in 1436.¹¹⁴ Nearly a decade later in 1445, the sisters appeared to have performed an, as yet, unidentified task. In 1452-3, still five years prior to its consecration, conventual records reflect the windows being glazed for the first time. With all of this construction taking place, the parish priest could not celebrate the church's consecration until 1457.¹¹⁵

The reason for this long period of sporadic labor appears to lie in Pisan history. Florentine rule of Pisa from 1406 until 1494 caused yet another period of political instability and unrest.¹¹⁶ This not only resulted in the intensified regulation of religious houses, but also caused economic difficulties that most likely strained the resources of the renovations' patrons, which in turn, slowed the overall progression of the project.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Ibid., 127.

¹¹³ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 49.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Anthony Molho, "The State and Public Finance: A Hypothesis Based on the History of Late Medieval Florence," *The Journal of Modern History* 67, no. S1 (December 1995): S114.

¹¹⁷ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 49.

Following its completion in 1457, manifestations of the Observant Dominican aesthetic can be seen several of its architectural features (Figure 4).¹¹⁸ Its simplicity remains a stark contrast to even the contemporary Dominican monastery churches from the fourteenth century such as Santa Caterina in Pisa. This priory church adhered more closely to the Romanesque style, an aesthetic that had become popular in that region (Figure 5).¹¹⁹ While the facade of San Domenico's church looked decidedly unembellished, the Pisan friars ornamented the exterior of their structure with both black and white marble. The facade's division into sections and tiers, along with the use of colonnettes to support the double arcade, created the illusion of fenestration that had become characteristic of the Romanesque. Three portals, fashioned out of rounded arches, foster an imposing and dramatic image.

In contrast, at San Domenico, only a modest wooden trussed roof shelters the entire building. Reminiscent of the order's emphasis on poverty, it sets the tone for the entire structure. Marble arcading, suggestive of fenestration, does not appear on the facade.¹²⁰ Only a door and one, double-paned window adorn the facade of the church of San Domenico. In the mid-fifteenth century, a fresco of the Annunciation decorated the lunette above the door. However, we have no record of any such embellishment following the initial conclusion of construction in 1408, during Chiara's lifetime.

A simple brick structure with a single nave, a common wall divides this building into two distinct parts.¹²¹ One section served as the public church, catering to the needs of the laity while the other, ostensibly invisible, provided the nuns with a space for worship and devotion (Figure 6). The public church contained a high altar where a priest would celebrate the mass and two

¹¹⁸ Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta as Patroness", 123.

¹¹⁹ Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta as Patroness", 123.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid. 123-4.

lower altars. The north wall of the church did not contain windows, as it remained attached to the convent. Thus, light entered from the southern end of the structure and a second-story gallery filtered any natural illumination.¹²² Seventeenth-century and eighteenth century refurbishments have transformed the space into something nearly unrecognizable.¹²³ However, it retains its architectural simplicity. The original fifteenth-century church would have been much more austere. This aesthetic restraint was intended to draw the congregation's attention to the altars and, thus, to the words of the priest. This focus would have been particularly appropriate for a Dominican church, a structure that housed those who embraced the value of preaching.

It seems possible that sisters of the convent gained entrance to the public church through this aforementioned gallery.¹²⁴ Perhaps those nuns who did not participate in the choir utilized this somewhat hidden space. The nuns' choir could be found behind the dividing wall of the church, directly on the other side of the high altar (Figure 7). Here, the sisters would gather to provide a musical accompaniment for the canonical hours, the celebrated Masses and the prayers of the congregation and San Domenico. Frescoes and paintings gradually covered the space. Because the women could not see the priest, they used these images as a guide. Yet, they could still hear the words of the sermon and liturgy through a grate. This opening also allowed them to see the elevated Host.¹²⁵

I. **The expansion of San Domenico**

At its founding, the community at San Domenico had only been approved for twenty women.¹²⁶ By 1409, not even fifteen years after receiving papal sanction, the number of sisters

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 55.

¹²⁴ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 55-6.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 56.

¹²⁶ Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta as Patroness", 123.

residing at San Domenico had nearly doubled. According to archival records, the convent boasted a total of thirty-nine professed nuns and a total of fifty members of their community.¹²⁷ Chiara recognized the burgeoning size of her establishment and, in 1406, decided to begin a campaign to build a new dormitory.¹²⁸ Once again she turned to Datini, and this time to Simone Doria of Genoa, a relative of her stepmother's, for financial assistance.¹²⁹ Archived correspondence between Chiara and Datini reveals the amount of her patron's loan: 30 florins, an amount that Chiara pledged to repay when the community gained the financial resources.¹³⁰ By January of 1410, the sisters had enough money to begin construction.¹³¹

Situated just north of the new church and perpendicular to the renovated thirteenth-century structures, the addition had two rectangular stories.¹³² Individual cells made up the top story while work and common rooms comprised the bottom floor. Like Dominican friars, nuns slept in individual cells. In contrast to their male counterparts who could study and write in their rooms, these private quarters could only be used for slumber and private prayer.¹³³ The function of the majority of the common rooms on the ground floor remains relatively unclear. One of these spaces must have been reserved for the *parlatorio*, an area set aside for conversations between nuns and secular persons.¹³⁴ Different from the majority of late medieval monastic communities,

¹²⁷ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 56.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Murphy, 143.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹³² Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 56.

¹³³ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Susan Marti, and Petra Marx, "The Time of the Orders, 1200-1500: An Introduction," in *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Susan Marti, trans. Dietlinde Hamburger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 69.

¹³⁴ Gabriela Signori, "Wanderers between Worlds: Visitors, Letters, Wills and Gifts as Means of Communication in Exchanges between Cloister and the World," in *Crown and Veil: Female*

the sisters of San Domenico did not receive visitors with any degree of frequency.¹³⁵ Indeed, Chiara had turned her own brother away during her family's downfall for fear of the community's corruption and endangerment. Her resolution and observant piety resulted in his death.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, in the rare circumstance that a female religious would have to conduct business with a lay person or entertain visitors from the secular realm, she would have used the *parlatorio*. In a way similar to the earlier convents' separation from the main city, this space both physically and symbolically divided the sacred from the profane. Another one of these common rooms must have functioned as a chapter house, another area devoted to communal living. Female monastics would often make administrative announcements, perform group readings of spiritual texts or of their respective Rule in these spaces.¹³⁷

Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Susan Marti, trans. Dietlinde Hamburger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 262-3.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹³⁶ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12-13.

¹³⁷ Hamburger, et. al., 61-4.

Chapter IV: Depictions of Bridget of Sweden and the Dilemma of Visionary

Authorship

I. Introduction

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath began her contribution with a vitriolic diatribe against male readers. Although in fact mimicking the language of the very same patriarchal authors she claimed to take issue with, Alyson, the Wife, used this prologue to voice her indignation towards the glosses that scholarly men tend to impose upon texts.¹³⁸ These glosses forced an interpretation on both the work itself as well as its reader by drawing attention to certain sections while occluding others. Later, the glossators, a term used by Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*, suppressed the voice of the piece and its original author. In this way, textual additions reverse the intended roles of the commentator and the writer, thereby allowing the male annotator to take possession of the work. While a fictive creation of a man, the Wife of Bath raises an important issue concerning late medieval authorship and gender, a matter Carolyn Dinshaw refers to as sexualized hermeneutics.¹³⁹ Dinshaw ties the conceptualization of the text to Pauline notions of femininity and carnality. Thus, the body of the text can be construed as a female entity while the appended glosses must be viewed as inherently male.¹⁴⁰

In this section of my thesis, I undertake an interdisciplinary analysis of Bridget of Sweden's *Revelations* in an effort to fully comprehend its significance within the discourse of medieval gender construction. I will first seek to investigate the interactions between sexuality and authorship by applying the ideas surrounding sexualized hermeneutics. Through this literary consideration, I will explain how the Northern mystic's confessors used glossing to suppress

¹³⁸ Carolyn Dinshaw, "'Glose/bele Chose': The Wife of Bath and Her Glossators," in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, by Carolyn Dinshaw (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 116.

¹³⁹ Dinshaw, 116.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 113-4.

Bridget's textual voice. These patriarchal interpretations disseminated into the artistic realm and consequently inspired images that, once again, divested the saint of her authorial power.

Although paintings depicting Bridget's visions became common, many artists chose to exclude her from their representations.¹⁴¹ However, the founder of the convent of San Domenico of Pisa commissioned an image of Bridget's revelation that failed to adhere to the contemporary visual traditions: the artist includes her within the biblical scene. By exploring the history of this work, the background of its patrons, its adherence to religious conventions as well as its style and iconography, I will prove that this panel painting denotes the nuns' effort to recover Bridget's voice as the author of the vision and *The Revelations*.

II. Glossing: Defining the male and the female in a text

I submit that this concept of sexualized hermeneutics provides a constructive line of inquiry for examining the writings of Bridget of Sweden. Narrative record of her visions can be found in *The Revelations*. Scholars agree that the text does in fact embody the mystic's spirited and headstrong temperament. Unfortunately, the convoluted history of this work precludes academics from regarding any extant version of *The Revelations* as an accurate documentation of Bridget's exact words.¹⁴² Dinshaw's theory of sexual hermeneutics applies to the female visionary's example when we further scrutinize the editorial background of this text. Although based on primary reports, Bridget's descriptions of her divine encounters underwent several translations and revisions prior to its publication soon after her death in 1373.¹⁴³ The saint employed the abilities of four male confessors to transcribe and translate her experiences. They frequently supplemented their translations of Bridget's original writings with their own

¹⁴¹ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 91-3.

¹⁴² Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2001), 25-6.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 26.

interpretations and directions for the reader. While her confessors often consulted with her before finalizing these modifications, philologists have concluded that many of these changes took place after Bridget's demise.¹⁴⁴ These previously marginal emendations began to assimilate with the body of the text and eventually came to take precedence over Bridget's words.

Shortly before her death, Bridget had a vision regarding the process of the virgin birth. Essentially, Mary delivered Christ through her belly rather than through the birth canal. This allowed her virginity, particularly her hymen, to remain intact. According to her legend, Saint Bridget took it upon herself to record her own visionary experiences in her native tongue, Old Swedish. Despite her noble lineage and activities in her nation's court, Bridget had little knowledge of Latin.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, she had to rely on the expertise of her confessors to produce an adequate translation of the messages that God had relayed to her. At different points in Bridget's life, Prior Petrus Olavi of Alvastra and to a lesser extent Masters Mathias of Linkoping and Petrus of Skanninge served as her scribes and translators.¹⁴⁶ These renditions always required her final approval. Still, the majority of her original writing appears to have been either lost or discarded.¹⁴⁷ Nearing the end of her life, Bridget demonstrated an increasing reliance on her confessors. In addition to his duty to translate the mystic's visions, Bridget charged her final confessor, Alfonso Pecha da Vadaterra, who had formerly been the Bishop of Jaen, with the task

¹⁴⁴ Claire L. Sahlin, "Gender and Prophetic Authority in Birgitta of Sweden's Revelations," in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, by Jane Chance (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 72.

¹⁴⁵ Barbara Newman, "Intimate Pieties: Holy Trinity and Holy Family in the Late Middle Ages," *Religion and Literature* 31, no. 1 (1999): 88.

¹⁴⁶ Joan I. Friedman, *Prophets Abroad: the Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-medieval England*, by Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 91.

¹⁴⁷ Sahlin, "Gender and Prophetic Authority in Birgitta of Sweden's Revelations," 71.

of examining the orthodoxy of her visions and revising them as he deemed necessary.¹⁴⁸ This enabled him to prepare *The Revelations* for widespread circulation.¹⁴⁹

Alfonso first published the Bridget's revelations under the name *Liber Alfonsi* in 1377.¹⁵⁰ This first edition would later be subsumed by later productions of Bridget's work and become Book VIII of *The Revelations*.¹⁵¹ Two years later, the prelate started to circulate the *Liber celestis imperatoris ad reges*. To compile these texts, the Spanish Bishop began an extensive editorial process after Bridget's death. He attempted to arrange the revelations thematically and then logically divide them into books and chapters complete with headings of his own creation.¹⁵² Alfonso supposedly revised the mystic's visions in accordance with efforts to promote her canonization.¹⁵³ In order to do so, he eliminated certain revelations that he perceived to be unsuitable for a candidate for sainthood. Alfonso intentionally excluded any vision that could be regarded as controversial, easily misunderstood or unflattering to Bridget.¹⁵⁴ The 1379 volume of Bridget's visions also incorporated Alfonso's own *Epistola solitarii ad reges*.¹⁵⁵ He used this letter to defend the divine inspiration behind Bridget's experiences.¹⁵⁶

Alfonso Pecha, exemplified the patriarchal 'requisition', that I have just explained.

Bridget reportedly entrusted him with the task of revising her mystical encounters and the charge

¹⁴⁸ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12.

¹⁴⁹ Nirit BA Debby, "The Images of Saint Birgitta of Sweden in Santa Maria Novella in Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 18, no. 4 (December 2004): 509

¹⁵⁰ Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2001), 29.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* 29.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

to publish her chronicles. Yet, the Spanish hermit seemed to overstep his bounds. The 1377 edition of the saint's revelations did not acknowledge Bridget's authorship or involvement. Instead, the title took the commentator's name: *Liber Alfonsi* or *The Book of Alfonso*. What is more, the 1379 text included a supplemental text written by Alfonso himself. The work prefaced Bridget's visions and assures the reader that the mystic truly did receive messages from the Divine. Such a maneuver does not demonstrate mere hubris or conceit. Here, we see how a male glossator uses patriarchal ideologies to exclude a female author. Bridget's words have been incessantly filtered through the Alfonso's interpretative lenses. The final product can only be characterized as an aberration, an unwelcome departure from the initial expectation. Although these versions do have scholarly merit, they fail to relay Bridget of Sweden's revelations. The *Liber Alfonsi* and the later *Liber Celestis* only communicate a tainted or even corrupted understanding of the original experience. By reversing the roles of the author and commentator, Alfonso Pecha transforms the text from an explanation of spiritual revelation to a tawdry interpretation of the sensation of divine communion.

All of Bridget's annotators also acted as confessors for the woman whose writings they revised. Due in part to their connections to the Catholic Church, they may have felt compelled to subdue the often heterodox voices of their charges.¹⁵⁷ To wit, Alfonso modified several sections of Bridget's original account in order to promote her canonization. Using the vocabulary of sexualized hermeneutics, these exclusions and alterations result in the censorship of the female voice. By directing the reader's experience, suppression of Bridget's authorial voice enables her confessors, particularly the Spanish bishop, to propagate only the ideas that they, rather than the writer, consider to be valuable or appropriate.

¹⁵⁷ Julia Mortimer, "Reflections in the Myroure of Oure Ladye: The Translations of a Desiring Body," *Mystics Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (June 2001): 58-9.

Dinshaw's gendered reading becomes especially problematic when considering texts written by women. Bridget's male confessors produced the glosses appended to *The Revelations*. However, we must also recall that sexualized hermeneutics forces us to recognize any notation as an intrinsically male entity in and of itself. In the same way, the main portion, or body, of the text is associated with the feminine. That is to say, when examining *The Revelations*, we must also consider the fact that the author is female. Therefore, editors not only imposed an unintended meaning upon the work, but also performed an innately masculine act on a female body. By forcing a male interpretation on a feminine textual entity, glossators enact a type of sexual defilement.¹⁵⁸ In fact, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* reveals a close ideological association between patriarchal commentary and the act of rape by drawing the narrative focus to rapists in both Alyson's prologue and her tale.¹⁵⁹

However, this sexual debasement has deeper implications for the medieval definition of authorship. Bridget's confessors have rendered her and her text powerless through this textual rape. The annotations have muted Bridget's voice while the annotators, those who wrote these notations, have stolen the authorship of *The Revelations* from her. These men, originally meant to be simple translators, have taken ownership of both Bridget and her work. Inevitably, they control the type of information becomes proliferated throughout the rest of the world. This results in yet another instance of female exclusion via the promotion of patriarchal ideologies.

¹⁵⁸ Dinshaw, 115.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: She first specifically mentions the lascivious acts of friars then goes on to relay a story about an Arthurian knight who rapes a maiden. Chaucer appears to have modified *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* to include this detail.

III. Public and private: Space in the fourteenth-century convent

Medieval conventual architecture was predicated on the organization of gendered space. As has been previously demonstrated, the idea of space alone had become integral to the understanding of fourteenth-century religiosity. However, within the realm of a female religious community, the dynamic between the nun and her confessor dictated the characterization and definition of each area. The nature of this relationship becomes augmented in Observant or Penitent houses such as San Domenico in that women are forbidden from entering the public realm. Thus, the division of the cloister does not only depend on the functions of the rooms themselves, but the simple dichotomy of public and private.

Chiara Gambacorta commissioned two pieces containing the image of Bridget of Sweden during her time as prioress of San Domenico (Figure 1). Scholars believe one to be an altarpiece for the public church associated with the convent while the other to be a panel painting intended for the nuns' choir directly behind the high altar of this same structure. While both images supposedly share a program, one meant to promote the cult of one of Chiara's patron saints, the two works portray Bridget in entirely opposite ways. I believe that the basis for the differences in the mode of Bridget's representation lies in the gendered nature of the space. The public church required a painting that conformed to a masculine interpretation of Bridget's vision. In contrast, the piece meant for the nuns' choir could promote Bridget's revelation as she originally saw it, uncorrupted by her male glossators.

IV. The impact on the visual tradition

We can see examples of the artistic ramifications of this masculine gloss in the paintings of San Domenico of Pisa. As previously discussed, Chiara Gambacorta embraced the teachings of Saint Bridget of Sweden early in her religious life. It can therefore come as no surprise that

she commissioned two paintings illustrating Bridget's most famous visions of Christ's Nativity: one for public viewing and one intended for private contemplation.

The *Madonna Enthroned Polyptych* (Figure 2) complies with masculine interpretations of the mystic's revelations. Bridget of Sweden appeared in multiple scenes along the predella of this altarpiece. According to archival materials, this polyptych was originally meant for the high altar of the public church of San Domenico (Figure 3).¹⁶⁰ The choice to depict St. Bridget over other saints such as St. Dominic, is an interesting one. We can treat this decision as part of Chiara's effort to promote the cult of one of her own personal saints. What is more, these images show how integral a role Bridget and women in general play in religion.¹⁶¹ At the same time, these paintings gloss Bridget's voice with male interpretations (Figure 4). In both panels, although the artist shows her writing, Bridget can only compose with the aid of an angel, the Virgin and Christ. In short, her words cannot be her own—they must be a celestial gift.

We may naturally question Chiara's decision to portray one of her patron saints in such a submissive position. We further complicate the inquiry when we consider paintings of other female mystics such as Bridget's younger contemporary, Catherine of Siena. This image of Catherine's *Mystic Marriage* incorporates several deviations from the traditional textual source and customary representations of this mystical experience (Figure 5).¹⁶² In a later chapter, I will address how these narrative divergences portray Catherine as the recipient of the Eucharist, a privilege denied most women of this time period.¹⁶³ Moreover, the compositional irregularities imply that the artist intended for the convent audience to imagine themselves within the scene

¹⁶⁰ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 81.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁶² Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta of Pisa as Patroness of the Arts," 130.

¹⁶³ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. 56.

not only with Catherine, but also as the mystic herself. Thus, Catherine's and the sister's position goes from one of subservience to one of dominance over oppressive ecclesiastical practices.

In contrast to this image is a panel painting of Christ's Nativity, an image most likely housed in the nuns' choir (Figure 6 and Figure 7). This depiction represents a traditional nativity scene. The Virgin, the newborn Christ and Joseph kneel within a mountainous grotto, somewhat consistent with the older Byzantine painterly conventions. A collection of angels celebrate the miraculous birth above the holy family and directly below God the father. The heavenly father occupies the highest position of the picture plane while standing in a mandorla being supported by four more angels. Consistent with the biblical narrative, the event looks to be taking place at night, as the moon in the background indicates. A castle appears in the background of the picture. Most importantly, Bridget can be seen in the left foreground of the image. Kneeling and in profile, she looks separated from the Virgin and Christ child. Yet, her scale gives her more prominence than Joseph.

The painting, although supposedly a standard depiction of this biblical scene, illustrated a meaningful departure from the scriptural narrative by choosing to include the visionary within the picture plane.¹⁶⁴ Contemporary representations of Bridget's visions often did not include her within the scene.¹⁶⁵ They usually only incorporated iconographic elements of her vision such as light emanating from the body of the Christ Child or the deformed hand of the midwife who dares to question Mary's virginity with an inspection.¹⁶⁶ Thus, to include the mystic and to portray her with such hierarchical prominence was not only a substantial departure from the textual source, but also from the visual tradition. Bridget's anachronistic presence within the

¹⁶⁴ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 93.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Debby, 518.

work designated her as the author of the scene we see before us. With an authorial voice and presence no longer suppressed by male commentators, she asserts her power by dictating what the viewer sees: this image is an illustration of Bridget's vision. Without her, it would not exist.

Modern audiences may regard Chiara's concession to the masculine rendition of Bridget's text as a manifestation of "feminine" weakness or timidity. In their eyes, she should have used her authority as the prioress and founder of San Domenico to, in present-day parlance, "take a stand" and begin a "sexual revolution." Yet, these viewers fail to see that the "revolutions" and "stands" of the medieval period did not occur in the same way as those in our contemporary understanding. Women could only assert their power and gain agency by operating within the very establishment that oppressed them. To do otherwise assured ostracism and even tempted death. We must detect the rebellion within the subtle deviation from visual tradition, catch a glimpse of the uprising in the ingenious anachronistic inclusion of a mystic or cleverly discern the mutiny by the significance of a figure's scale in comparison to her context.

Chapter V: Images of the Two Catherines and Christological Devotion

I. Introduction

Scholars of medieval women's religiosity may be inclined to assert that these individuals looked to other female saints for their inspiration, and when examining the visual evidence such a contention holds true.¹⁶⁷ San Domenico's catalogs reveal that the convent had more depictions of virgin saints and martyrs than portrayals of Christ or God the father. Yet, upon further examination of the convent's artistic program, specifically during Chiara's time as prioress, a more nuanced understanding of feminine devotion begins to emerge.

Although the founder's three main paragons are, women, their visions make them equivalent to male figures. Moreover, the two Catherines' mystical experiences enable them to encounter Christ in an entirely new way. They both forge different relationships with him through their worship. The two begin as his spouse, a role imbued with deep significance for Dominican nuns, and subsequently foster a love that undergoes a series of transformations. Catherine of Alexandria loves Christ not only as a wife, but as a mother as well. Like her namesake, Catherine of Siena loves Jesus as a bride, a maternal figure and through this love eventually becomes a Christ figure herself.

II. Mysticism and the visual tradition

The establishment of new monastic orders such as the Dominicans, in the later Middle Ages ushered in a new attitude towards images.¹⁶⁸ Prior to the thirteenth century, theologians and ecclesiastical authorities had encouraged imageless devotion for fear of violating the second

¹⁶⁷ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 152-3.

¹⁶⁸ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 121.

commandment.¹⁶⁹ However, the newer orders viewed paintings as the only means of making the invisible visible.¹⁷⁰ This notion became especially important with the rise of Christian mysticism. Visionaries described encounters with the sublime that, without artworks, only existed in their minds. Yet, as mysticism and devotionism began to become incorporated into both popular and monastic piety, the Church required a medium to capture these religious experiences visually.¹⁷¹ These pictorial representations demonstrated the reward of contemplation and devotion to forging a deeper relationship with the Divine: man's communion with the divine.¹⁷²

The increasing significance of corporeal imagery in spiritual life was especially evident in visual depictions of mystical unions.¹⁷³ Chiara Gambacorta appears to have commissioned two illustrations of this scene: one of St. Catherine of Alexandria's betrothal to Christ and one of St. Catherine of Siena's espousal.¹⁷⁴ This painting, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, was authorized just before the completion of the new wing of the convent; the artist finished it one year after the addition was finished (Figure 1).¹⁷⁵ Giovanni di Pietro di Napoli seems to have given his audience a relatively orthodox depiction of the story in which Catherine of Alexandria accepts a ring from Christ.¹⁷⁶ Against a gold ground, Catherine, appears in profile with her wheel beneath her floor-length mantle, kneels before the Virgin Mary and Christ enthroned. The two divine figures look considerably larger in scale although all three individuals are nimbed. The Christ child places a ring on Catherine's finger. The main figures of our scene

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 120.

¹⁷⁰ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 164-5.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 167.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Hamburger, *Visual and Visionary*, 121.

¹⁷⁴ Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta of Pisa as Patroness of the Arts", 129.

¹⁷⁵ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 73.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 72.

tower over a still smaller donor figure at the lower foreground of the picture plane. Beneath him, an inscription dates the picture to April of 1403 and identifies him as the benefactor of the house. However, the donor himself remains nameless. These words acted as an exhortation to the nuns, urging the sisters to pray for their patron, which permits scholars to place the painting somewhere within the nuns' own precincts rather than in a more public region of the convent.

III. Catherine's relationship with Christ: love and the Song of Songs

The work draws from the nuptial and erotic imagery of the Song of Songs in order to portray the marriage of Christ and his Bride. Mystic marriages derived their emotive power by drawing imagery from the Song of Songs.¹⁷⁷ The Canticle emphasizes Christ's humanity and casts him in the role of the Bridegroom. In turn, the medieval reader became His Bride.¹⁷⁸ Specific details of the painting indicate that this work was intended to speak directly to an audience of Dominican nuns. This type of nuptial language held especially meaningful connotations for female monastics. In the ceremony of profession, a novice became a nun by marrying Christ. The friars and the prioress marked a young lady's new role by placing a ring on her finger.¹⁷⁹

This painting empowered the nun as the viewer by allowing her to have a mystical experience and thus reclaim agency from her male counterparts. The process of stimulating a mystical vision occurred through a process of what Jeffrey Hamburger refers to as affective identification.¹⁸⁰ In short, these images had to inspire the same emotions, thoughts and

¹⁷⁷ Hamburger, *Visual and Visionary*, 123.

¹⁷⁸ Astell, 146.

¹⁷⁹ Lehmijoki-Gardner, 49.

¹⁸⁰ Hamburger, *Visual and Visionary*, 123.

sentiments as texts did.¹⁸¹ The nuns of San Domenico could not simply stare at the image for a long period of time to encourage a mystical encounter. Instead, they had to identify or empathize with the figures in the scene. In this particular case, the painter chose to use the device of *imitatio sponsae* or imitation of the bride of Christ, specifically Catherine, to draw his viewer into the work.¹⁸² The ritual significance of the mystical marriage and her role as the Bride of Christ sanctions the sister's identification with Catherine of Alexandria. In this manner, they become empowered in the same ways she is. As she receives Christ's ring, the nuns become espoused to him in an identical fashion.

However, the artist began to blur the lines between Catherine and his audience. For this we must draw our attention to the exhortation, which directly addresses the sisters of the convent and compelled them to pray for their benefactor: an anachronistic inclusion in this mystical scene. Upon further examination of these components, we must realize that the artist broke spatial and temporal barriers in two ways: by allowing a contemporary figure to exist in Catherine's vision and through the engraved injunction. Both interfered with the overall message of the nuptial narrative and merge Catherine's voice with explicit the duties of the female religious: particularly, praying for the souls of their patrons. Thus, although this began as an exercise in *imitatio sponsae*, the nuns may slowly begin to envisage themselves as Christ's actual bride through the process of affective meditation.

Strangely enough, Catherine looks to be accepting the proposal of an infant. The Christ child sits upon his mother's knee as he hands Catherine the wedding ring. Still, such representations conform to the visual tradition of the medieval period as well as to accounts of the saint's experience. Regardless of its roots in painterly conventions, the somewhat

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

disconcerting image of a marriage between a teenager and an infant generates further inquiry. Indeed, Catherine resembles more of a maternal figure than spouse in these circumstances. I offer that the Song of Songs gives us further insight into the conflation of the roles of mother and spouse as well as the mutability of the relationships in a single piece.

The Song of Solomon presents a wide variety of relationships. At times, Christ's roles as a brother, lover, mother and husband become conflated.¹⁸³ This in turn forces the reader to blend his or her part as the sister, lover, child or spouse. Despite the Byzantine fluctuation of these associations, the overarching allegory of Christ as the lover subsumes them all.¹⁸⁴ In the end, the reader must understand that Jesus' love leads to a deeper comprehension of the Divine. Thus, irrespective of the capacity in which this love may be shared, the end is the same: communion with the Divine.¹⁸⁵

We are therefore correct in our interpretation of Catherine's role as Christ's spouse. She accepts his ring and they do indeed become betrothed. At the same time, His depiction as an infant places Catherine not only in the role of betrothed, but also in the role of mother. These two relationships, when considered in the context of affective meditation, become especially significant in a convent that recruited women from all walks of life. San Domenico housed virgins and widows, both childless and those who still had families outside of the cloister's walls.¹⁸⁶ Catherine of Alexandria's dual role as spouse and mother appealed to all of these sisters alike.

IV. Eating through Seeing: Depictions of Catherine of Siena

¹⁸³ Astell, 146.

¹⁸⁴ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*. (New York: Clarendon P., 1968), 191.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 123-6.

The Mystic Marriage of Catherine of Alexandria is not the only matrimonial image within the convent. Chiara Gambacorta appears to have commissioned two illustrations of this scene: one of St. Catherine of Alexandria's betrothal to Christ and one of St. Catherine of Siena's espousal (Figure 3). At first blush, this work depicts a mystical marriage. However, I would like to submit that it illustrates more than it appears. Indeed, I argue that this painting represents two types of spiritual union with Christ's humanity. Like the representation of Catherine of Alexandria, this work references the Song of Songs to establish an erotic relationship between Christ and his new spouse. Moreover, this piece also shows the reception of the Eucharist. This creates an association between the nun's role as a Bride of Christ and the sacrament of Holy Communion, a privilege women were denied at this time.¹⁸⁷ In this way, the *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine of Siena* empowers the female religious to assert their agency over those who had stripped them of their voice: their male counterparts and the Church.

The painting looks to be a traditional rendition of Catherine's betrothal to Christ. According to her hagiography in the *Legenda Maior* by Raymond de Capua, Catherine prayed to the Virgin to allow her to marry her son.¹⁸⁸ Overcome with a feeling of ecstasy, she looked up to see Christ being carried by his Mother. He espoused Catherine with a ring while John the Evangelist, King David, and the saints looked on as witnesses to the joyous event.¹⁸⁹ Here we see Catherine kneeling down in a devotional position in the foreground. She wore the habit of a Dominican tertiary. She gazed up and extended her hand to receive a ring from Christ. Her betrothed emerged from a cloud of light and appeared to be surrounded by saints. However,

¹⁸⁷ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 227.

¹⁸⁸ Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta as Patroness", 130.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

these seem to be the artist's only concessions to the textual source. Instead of the childhood home where Catherine's original vision was said to take place, this scene was set in an enclosed garden.¹⁹⁰ Catherine knelt before a single lily that grows amongst grasses and foliage.¹⁹¹ We can see a single wall in the middle of the picture plane. It looks to be a part of a larger monastic structure such as an oratory.¹⁹² Catherine looks to Christ from beneath the arch of this edifice.

In the same process of affective meditation, this painting permits the Dominican nun to identify with Catherine of Siena. The mystical marriage, as you will recall, alludes to the ceremony of profession, a specific Dominican ceremony. Furthermore, Dominican women perceived Catherine of Siena as an example of true piety.¹⁹³ The nuns of San Domenico, in particular, were especially influenced by Catherine and her teachings. Indeed, Chiara and Maria Mancini, one of the original members of the community, maintained a correspondence with the female mystic.¹⁹⁴ Thus, we must consider the woman's entry into religious life as an analogical reenactment of St. Catherine of Siena's betrothal. A number of compositional elements imply that the artist tailored his image to the conventual audience.

Raymond de Capua's *Legenda Maior* was the most likely textual source for the painting of Catherine's mystic marriage. Composed between 1385 and 1395, its circulation began in 1398.¹⁹⁵ However, as Catherine's correspondents, Chiara and Maria Mancini, another sister of San Domenico, were familiar with Catherine's biography and visions through their letters. It is possible that the artist used another source, *The Miracles of Catherine of Siena*, as his

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Lehmijokig-Gardner, 87.

¹⁹⁴ Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 12.

¹⁹⁵ Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta as Patroness", 130.

inspiration.¹⁹⁶ This text was published around 1374-80 and written in the vernacular which would have proven much more accessible.¹⁹⁷ In any case, neither work accounts for the problematic components of this painting.

Moreover, this image looks especially complicated when compared to what appears to be its companion piece: the depiction of Catherine of Alexandria. The artist has changed the setting from Catherine's home to the enclosed garden of a convent. The *Legenda* does not support this alteration. I surmise that the artist used this change to speak directly to the inhabitants of San Domenico. By setting the mystical encounter in a convent, the painter allows the nun not only to identify with Catherine, but to step into her place. The botanical imagery in the painting solidifies the union between Christ and the viewer by recalling the language of the Song of Songs. In the Second chapter of the Canticle, Christ professes himself as the flower of all mankind, the Lily of the Valley. As this flower emerges from the thorns of the garden, so does His love emerge above all others.¹⁹⁸ This also communicates the possibility of a comparable mystical encounter happening at San Domenico. Hence, Catherine of Siena not only becomes a model of piety, but an exemplum of the accomplished unitive state.

While this work explicitly illustrates the mystic marriage of Catherine of Siena, certain aspects of the painting lead me to conclude that it also depicts the reception of Holy Communion. Once again, I find that the artist's deviations from Raymond de Capua's narrative particularly meaningful. Catherine's hagiographer made a crucial modification to the account of her mystical union. According to the saint, Christ married her with a ring of foreskin. Raymond

¹⁹⁶ Lehmijokig-Gardner, 87.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87-8.

¹⁹⁸ Matter, 129.

changed this to a ring encrusted with jewels.¹⁹⁹ The painting in San Domenico does not include such an elaborate band. Instead, it appears to be a simple circle of flesh, perhaps chosen by Chiara as a sign of loyalty to the Cult of Catherine of Siena. As another sign of her allegiance, Catherine appears nimbed, or portrayed with a halo. Strangely enough, this painting dates to a time before her canonization.²⁰⁰ Thus, this painting must have been commissioned as support for Catherine's candidacy for sainthood. If we are to return to the ring of Christ's foreskin then, Chiara's inclusion not only reflects her loyalty to Catherine but also metaphorically recreates the ceremony of Communion. Through her espousal, Catherine accepts the flesh of Christ in the form of a ring. At the same time, this flesh also forces us to remember His circumcision. As the moment when he first shed blood, theologians connected Christ's circumcision to his bleeding at the Crucifixion.²⁰¹ Therefore, in one band of skin: Catherine receives both the body and blood of Christ.

Although the synthesis of these two scenes may appear strange, medieval religiosity traditionally associated mystical marriages with the reception of Holy Communion.²⁰² The two were both perceived as physical unions with Christ's humanity.²⁰³ The influence of the Song of Solomon can be seen in the connections between the nuptial dynamic elucidated in the Canticle and the presentation of the Eucharist. Case in point, Hildegard of Bingen dressed her nuns as brides when they went forward to receive communion.²⁰⁴ Several accounts from the era attest to

¹⁹⁹ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 168-9.

²⁰⁰ Roberts, "Chiara Gambacorta as Patroness," 130.

²⁰¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 53-4.

²⁰² Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 130-1.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

women seeing Christ as the bridegroom in the host and chalice.²⁰⁵ Mystics from this period also used the language of consumption to characterize both. That is to say, the ingestion of Christ's or God's body did not just describe experiences within a Eucharistic context. For example, Mechtild of Magdeburg spoke of her mystical union as "Eating God."²⁰⁶

The brides of Christ became his body through this mystical union.²⁰⁷ Mystical union symbolizes the flesh taken into flesh: the very words used to recount the ceremony of Holy Communion.²⁰⁸ The artist demonstrates this bodily connection by including the ring of foreskin that Catherine originally reported in her visions as a token of her betrothal. Furthermore, the subsumption of flesh into flesh mimics the act of eating.²⁰⁹ Ingestion had a distinct meaning for Catherine of Siena, who equated eating with craving the Divine. To Catherine, spiritual hunger or longing for Christ could never be satiated.²¹⁰ This produced a suffering that resembled Christ's torment.²¹¹ Thus, this metaphor of eating, which the artist links with the nuptial imagery of the scene, transforms into an exercise of *imitatio Christi* or imitation of Christ. In the same way as the process of *imitatio sponsae* promoted a transition from the imitation of Catherine to the transformation into the *sponsae*, the practice of *imitatio Christi* encouraged the bride's metamorphosis into her bridegroom. In this way, the nun may circumvent ecclesiastical authority by negating the need for a priest. She not only goes directly to Christ, but also becomes a part of him.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 130.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 144.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 143.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 140.

²¹⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 171.

²¹¹ Ibid.

V. Visions of the Eucharist at San Domenico

During Chiara's time as prioress, one of the sisters of San Domenico began having visions.²¹² Maria Mancini, a prominent nun within the convent who would assume Chiara's position as prioress after her death, claimed to have received the Eucharist from Christ himself on a number of occasions.²¹³ From her account, it is clear that Maria's mystical communion mirror's Catherine of Siena's in many respects²¹⁴. Maria referred to Christ as her "husband" and called herself His "bride" or "spouse." He offered her his flesh as a "token" of his affection.²¹⁵ Both nuptial and courtly language can be seen in how Maria described her encounter.

Mancini does not specify any devotional aids or props that she may have used to stimulate her mystical experience. Thus, I cannot prove that images such as the *Mystic Marriage of Catherine of Siena* acted as the impetus for her encounter with the Divine. However, studies such as William Hood's *Fra Angelico in San Marco* have demonstrated how male members of the Dominican order used images in a comparable manner. I believe that I can extrapolate from the evidence provided by these texts to assert that Mancini may have been using a painting such as the *Mystic Marriage* to produce her Eucharistic vision.

²¹² Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art*, 152.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 152-3.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

Chiara Gambacorta commissioned images of female mystics for the convent of San Domenico of Pisa. These paintings functioned as more than objects of decoration. However, contrary to scholars such as Ann Roberts, I believe that they represented more than just examples of female piety to the nuns who viewed them. These images acted as a channel to the divine; they stimulated visions for the nuns of San Domenico. Indeed, paintings played a key role in visionary encounters. They not only functioned as the devotional impetus for a vision, but also recorded the experience in an artistic medium. Only art could express the invisible nature of a divine encounter in a visible fashion. Moreover, images provided women, particularly those who had joined religious orders, with an alternative means of worship.

Yet, this does not mean that art offered women a way to simply respond to their circumstances. I believe that images helped to shape and change these social trends. Despite this, female religiosity of the late medieval period has often been characterized as reactionary. We can view the need for visions, their compulsion for starvation and the intense physicality of their devotionism as a way to circumvent sacerdotal authority. To a certain extent, this is a productive point of view. At the same time, I urge the reader to remember that these women often came to dictate the popular religious practices of the period. Regardless of their lack of clerical or ecclesiastical authority, they did not operate completely outside of the magisterium. Indeed, the women of San Domenico became an unstoppable force in establishing the observant Dominican identity and went on to reform several Dominican houses. Medieval women wrote poetry, prose, illuminated manuscripts and sometimes preached ideas that would impact lay sanctity for centuries. These figures are not entirely liminal or reactionary. Indeed, they could be counted amongst some of the most prominent and revolutionary individuals of their period.

Chapter III Image List

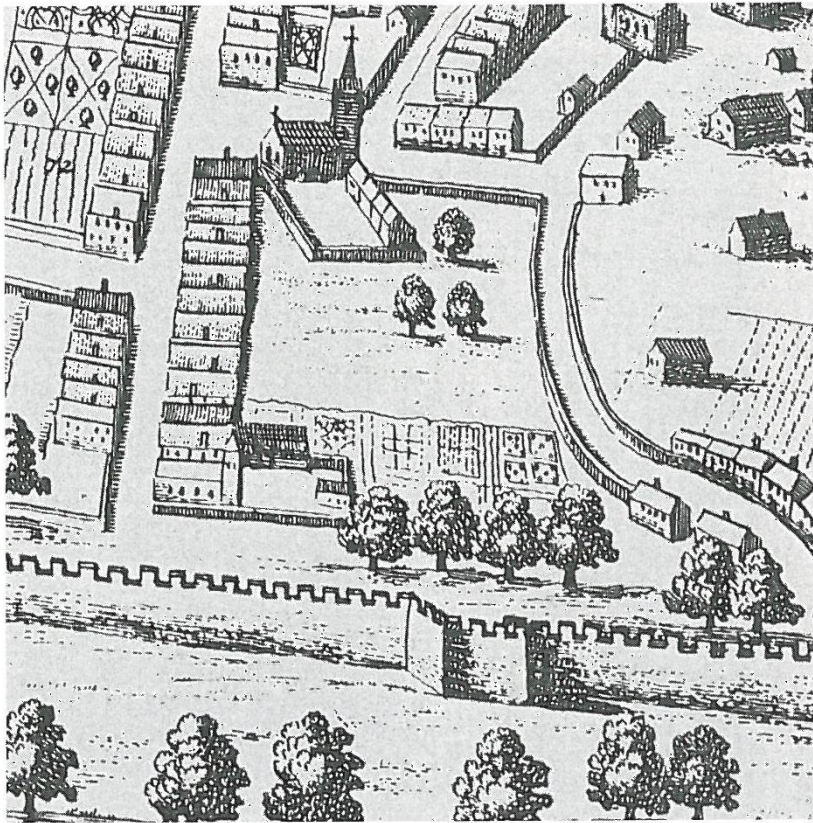


Figure 1. Johannes Blaeu, *Engraved Map of Pisa: Detail of San Domenico*, 1633



Figure 2. Cloister of San Domenico to the South, begun 1382, 1990's.

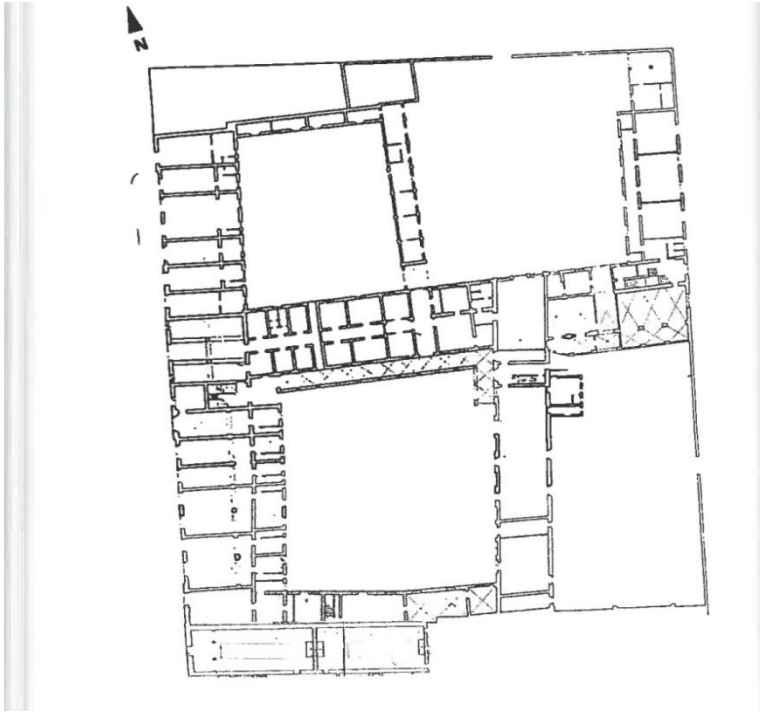


Figure 3. Plan of Convent of San Domenico, Pisa, based on nineteenth-century plans



Figure 4. Facade of the Church of San Domenico, 1430s.



Figure 5. Facade of the Church of Santa Caterina, Pisa, Fourteenth century.



Figure 6. Interior of Public Church of San Domenico, c. 1990's, to the East.



Figure 7. Interior of Nuns' Choir of San Domenico, c. 1990's, to the West.

Chapter IV Image List

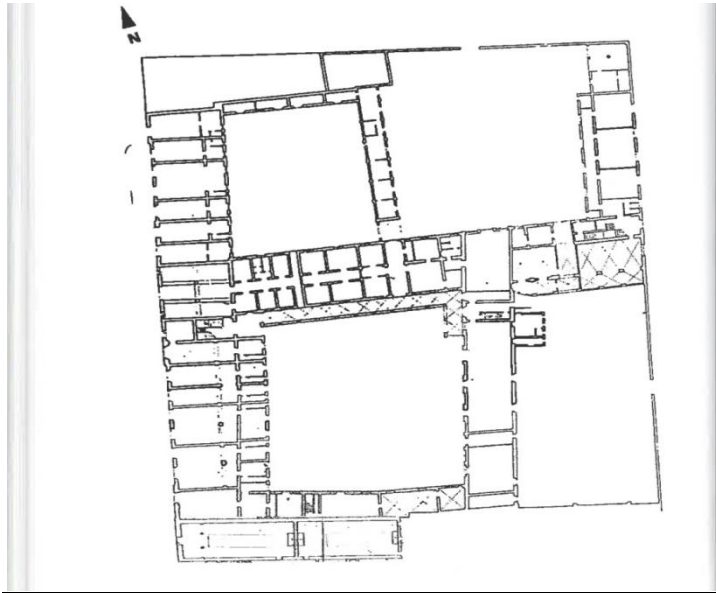


Figure 1. Plan of Convent of San Domenico, Pisa, based on nineteenth-century plans



Figure 2. Giovanni di Pietro di Napoli and Martino di Bartolomeo, *Polytych of the Madonna*



Figure 3. Interior of Public Church of San Domenico, c. 1990's, to the East.



Martino di
Bartolomeo,
Left Predella
Panel of
*Polytych of the
Madonna*

Martino di
Bartolomeo,
Left Predella
Panel of
*Polytych of the
Madonna*



Figure 4. Predella panels from *Madonna Polyptych*

*Birgitta
Writing Words
of the Angel,
1404.*



Figure 5. Tuscan artist, *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine of Siena*, c. 1400.



Figure 6. Pisan artist, *Nativity according to the Vision of Saint Birgitta*, c. 1400



Figure 7. Interior of Nuns' Choir of San Domenico, c. 1990's, to the West.

Chapter V Image List

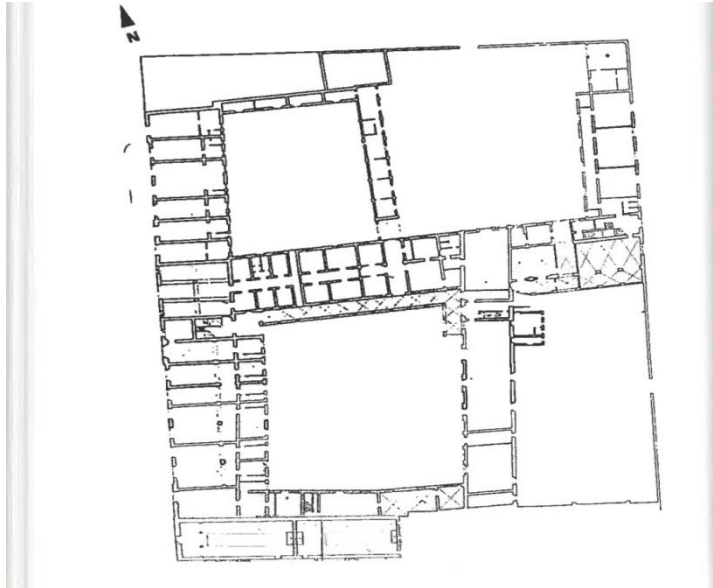


Figure 1. Plan of Convent of San Domenico, Pisa, based on nineteenth-century plans



Figure 2. Giovanni di Pietro di Napoli, *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1403



Figure 3. Tuscan artist, *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine of Siena*, c. 1400.

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