

Riccoboni, Sister Bartolomea. *The Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436*. Edited and translated by Daniel Bornstein. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.



A SMALL WORLD:  
THE VENETIAN CONVENT  
OF CORPUS DOMINI

THE OTHER VOICE

An age-old and enduring tradition sees convents as dumping grounds for girls who were ugly, sickly, or otherwise unsuited for marriage. This tradition was very much alive in fifteenth-century Italy, among clergy and laity alike. "The man who has a misshapen or mutilated daughter gives her to Christ," the Florentine layman Franco Sacchetti commented sardonically, and he was echoed from the pulpit by the great Franciscan preacher Bernardino of Siena, who chastised his audience for this practice: "I have heard that if you have [a daughter] who is blind or lame or crippled, you at once place her in God's service; you put her in a convent."<sup>1</sup> But it was not just physical deformities that led to forced enclosure of young women: economic pressures too could lead parents to place their daughters in convents. No respectable marriage could be contracted without a dowry, and dowries rose sharply and steadily throughout the late Middle Ages, leading patrician men like Dante Alighieri to long for the good old days when the birth of a daughter didn't stir fear in her father.<sup>2</sup> A family cursed with too many daughters faced hardship or even ruin, and the financial interests of the lineage sometimes dictated that one or more of the girls enter a nunnery as brides of Christ (who, oddly, com-

1. Iris Origo, *The World of San Bernardino* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), 64 and 270. This line of interpretation has its modern exponents, such as the historical demographer David Herlihy, "Some Psychological and Social Roots of Violence in the Tuscan Cities," in *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200-1500*, ed. Lauro Martines (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 146; "Girls who lacked a sufficiently large dowry or physical beauty, and who had slight hope of finding a husband, were placed in the convents with equal haste."
2. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 15, 103-5. On dowries and the marriage market in Renaissance Italy, see Julius Kirshner and Anthony Molho, "The Dowry Fund and the Marriage Market in Early Quattrocento Florence," *Journal of Modern History* 50 (1978): 403-38; Anthony Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Trevor Dean and K. J. P. Lowe, eds., *Marriage in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

manded a far smaller dowry than a mortal husband). Fathers saved money and kept the family patrimony intact, convents were filled and the regular round of prayer and worship was guaranteed, and the excess female population was ensured a decent livelihood and decorous life—albeit one that these poor women had not chosen, and generally would not have chosen, for themselves. Bernardino was alert to the resentment harbored by reluctant nuns and bemoaned its consequences for the religious life: "When they are grown-up, they curse their fathers and mothers, saying: They have put me here so that I should have no children, but I will have some, to spite them!"<sup>3</sup> By the seventeenth century, the imagined rebelliousness of these vocationless nuns had matured into the fierce diatribes of the Venetian Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–52), which laid bare the confluence of social, economic, political, and religious interests that sustained the institution of female monasticism and bitterly denounced the paternal tyranny that had condemned her and thousands like her to a monastic hell.<sup>4</sup>

Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni came from the same city and social class as Arcangela Tarabotti, but her chronicle and necrology of the Venetian convent of Corpus Domini tell an entirely different story, a story of female dedication and self-determination. According to Sister Bartolomea, Corpus Domini was an exemplary convent, filled with women who definitely wanted to be there and cited by papal bulls as a model for similar religious institutions as far away as Pisa and Rome. The nuns had chosen the religious life for themselves, often over the opposition of their families. Some had entered the convent as girls, others as young women facing an unwanted marriage or as widows; but all were deeply committed to their collective enterprise, a community of work and worship. Members of this female community gathered their energies and organized their lives while each found scope for her particular talents and inclinations. And the community gave them a privileged vantage point from which to observe and comment on events in the outside world, the tempests that shook the Catholic Church and the most serene republic of Venice—not to mention their own cloistered world.

The chronicle and necrology of Corpus Domini constitute a precious source for the history of female piety, a history that for too long has been writ-

3. Origo, *World of San Bernardino*, 64.

4. I am echoing the titles of two of Tarabotti's works: *Tramita patria* and *Inferno monacale*. The former was published under the pseudonym Galerana Baratotti and with the title altered into the less polemical *La simplicità ingannata* (Leiden, 1654); an English translation by Letizia Panizza is in preparation for this series. The latter was edited by Francesca Mediolì as *L'Inferno monacale*, *di Arcangela Tarabotti* (Turin: Rosenberg e Sellier, 1990). On the problems of forced cloistering and convent discipline, see Romano Canosa, *Il velo e il cappuccio. Monacazioni forzate e sessualità nei conventi femminili in Italia tra Quattrocento e Settecento* (Rome, 1991).

ten from sources either crafted by male authors or recorded and transmitted by male scribes. Inevitably such sources offer a cloudy lens on the past, one that reveals "not so much what women did as what men admired or abhorred. . . . It is therefore especially important for future historians to turn to detailed study of those works in which women wrote about their own visions and mystical experiences and about life among the sisters in their households, beguinages, and convents."<sup>5</sup> The convent chronicle and necrology of Corpus Domini speak directly to this need: they are early unmediated examples of women's writing, and they describe the lives and deaths of unexceptional women engaged in a common religious enterprise. Moreover, these texts present the lives of this cloistered religious community and its inhabitants at a particularly dramatic moment in the long history of the Catholic Church, when the Great Schism divided western Europe between two competing popes. Far from being closed in upon themselves and interested exclusively in their own spiritual lives, the sisters of Corpus Domini were deeply engaged in the world beyond their walls. And that outside world was equally interested in (and involved in) the affairs of Corpus Domini: friends and relatives came to visit the sisters in the convent's parlor, where they could exchange information and opinions, and to attend mass in the convent's church, where they could hear the sisters take their stand on the issues that divided the church. The religious literature of the late Middle Ages is rich in texts in which male clerics record and comment on the words and deeds of female mystics and holy women. But Sister Bartolomea's ample biography of Giovanni Dominici (the convent's founder and spiritual director) and the many pages of the chronicle devoted to Gregory XII and the events of the schism represent a rarity for that time and place: a female writer commenting on public events and their male protagonists. And it is worth noting that Sister Bartolomea's occasional laments about her limited abilities and inadequacy to the task of writing are purely formulaic expressions of humility. The evidence of the text itself shows her to be fully capable of treating, with clarity of perception and vigor of expression, the events of both the small world of Corpus Domini and the larger world of which it was so thoroughly a part.

### CORPUS DOMINI OF VENICE

Corpus Domini was built by the combined efforts of an elderly abbees, a wealthy donor, two orphaned girls and their guardians, and a Dominican

5. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages," in *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 2, *High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt with Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 121–39; the quotation comes from 136.

preacher.<sup>6</sup> The abbess, Lucia Tiepolo, had grown up in the Benedictine convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli on the island of Murano, which she entered when she was only eleven. After more than three decades in that convent, she was named abbess of the convent of Sant' Apostolo, one of several Benedictine monasteries and convents on the island of Ammiano in the Venetian lagoon. This was an unattractive post, for these isolated convents had been hit particularly hard by the population decline that followed the Black Death of 1348 and were slowly being abandoned, and Tiepolo accepted it with the greatest reluctance. After three miserable years spent imploring divine guidance and seeking a way out, her prayers were finally answered with a vision of Jesus as the Man of Sorrows, bound to a column all bloody and crowned with thorns, who commanded her to go to Venice and found a convent in his name. She leaped at the task, though it took six years for her to secure the necessary permissions, locate and acquire a suitable site, and set about constructing a small church dedicated to Corpus Domini, the Body of the Lord.

Lucia Tiepolo built the church of Corpus Domini on a spit of land at the extreme northwest edge of the city, a spot so out of the way that few Venetians even knew of its existence. Fortunately, one of those who did was a pious patrician named Francesco Rabia, who generously supported Tiepolo and her church. He financed the construction of a stone church to replace the original wooden structure, provided for its maintenance, and helped Tiepolo build a dormitory to house her nascent community. The seven cells of the wooden dormitory seemed more than adequate for a group that consisted of just the abbess, one other nun, and two lay sisters, and Francesco Rabia remained good-naturedly skeptical of Tiepolo's prediction that someday her convent would house more than sixty women. For over twenty-five years this prophecy showed no signs of coming true; but Tiepolo persevered in her resolve, much to the puzzlement of those who could not fathom why she would want to live in such a deserted place.

The transformation of Corpus Domini from a struggling Benedictine nunnery into a thriving Dominican convent came about at the initiative of two resolute young orphans and their guardians. The girls, Isabetta and Andreola Tommasini, longed to dedicate themselves to the religious life. Their guardian, Margarita Paruta, sought the advice of her confessor, Giovanni Do-

6. The fundamental sources for the early history of Corpus Domini are the texts presented here. The most thorough study of the convent is a *tesi di laurea* prepared at the Università degli Studi di Padova under the direction of Prof. Antonio Rigoni: Maria Ricci, "Il monastero del Corpus Christi di Venezia fra Tre-Quattrocento (con una silloge di trentadue documenti inediti)," academic year 1982-83.

minici (1355-1419), a fiery Dominican preacher and one of the most influential religious figures in Venice.<sup>7</sup> At first Giovanni suggested the girls enter the Augustinian convent of Sant' Andrea. But then he, Isabetta and Andreola Tommasini, and another devout woman received a series of visions directing them to build a convent where the church of Corpus Domini stood. Giovanni obtained the consent of Lucia Tiepolo, who agreed to resign her title as abbess of a Benedictine nunnery and become prioress of the new Dominican community. He traveled to the papal court to win the pope's approval and used his connections among the Venetian patriciate to secure political and financial support for the project.<sup>8</sup> The most important contribution, however, came from the Tommasini girls themselves, who used their dowries to construct the convent, and from Margarita Paruta's husband, Marco.

During the year it took to build the convent, the community that was to inhabit it took shape. Giovanni Dominici vested a handful of women (including Lucia Tiepolo and Isabetta and Andreola Tommasini) with the Dominican habit in preparation for the day when their new home would be ready, and he persuaded a score of others to join them. In effect, they formed a large and well-organized community even before they entered the convent. The new convent of Corpus Domini was consecrated on June 29, 1394, in a ceremony in which members of Doge Antonio Venier's family participated, and on that day twenty-seven women—a mix of adolescent girls, young unmarried women, and widows—took their vows.

From this substantial base, Corpus Domini rapidly grew to become one of the largest and most eminent houses in Venice: as Sister Bartolomea noted proudly, "in nine days we numbered forty; by the end of the year we were fifty; and within two years there were seventy-two of us." Most of these women sprang from the Venetian patriciate. Thanks to their family connections and the convent's good reputation, their influence reached far beyond the convent walls. Within a few years of its founding, the convent of Corpus Domini had created a lay confraternity of the same name, which bore the consecrated Eucharist through the city in annual processions; by the middle of the fifteenth century these processions had evolved into one of the major festivals of the

7. For biographical information on Giovanni Dominici, see Stefano Orlandi, *Necrologio di S. Maria Novella* (Florence: Olschki, 1955), 2:77-126; Giorgio Cracco, "Giovanni di Domenico Banchini," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 5 (Rome, 1963), 657-64. On his influence in Venice, see Daniel Bornstein, "Giovanni Dominici, the Bianchi, and Venice: Symbolic Action and Interpretive Grids," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 23 (1993): 143-71.

8. Giovanni described his journey to the papal court in a letter known as the "Iter peninsinum," published in Giovanni Dominici, *Lettere spirituali*, ed. Maria-Teresa Casella and Giovanni Pozzi, *Spicilegium Friburgense* 13 (Freiburg: Edizioni Universitarie, 1969), 186-93.

liturgical year, sponsored by the Venetian government and involving all the major confraternities.<sup>9</sup> Corpus Domini attracted donations and bequests not only from women who joined the community and their kin, but also from wealthy patricians and prominent churchmen who were impressed by the piety of the sisters and sought the benefit of their prayers. Between 1440 and 1444, with the financial backing of Fantin Dandolo (a Venetian nobleman who became bishop of Padua in 1448) and of Tommaso Tommasini (bishop of Feltre—and brother of Isabetta and Andreola), the sisters completely rebuilt the church of Corpus Domini.<sup>10</sup> In those same years, and thanks again to the intervention of Bishop Tommaso Tommasini, Corpus Domini also assumed control of the nearby parish church of Santa Lucia, beginning an involvement of these cloistered women in the care of souls that would last for better than thirty years. When their control of Santa Lucia was challenged by another community of female religious, the sisters of Corpus Domini defended their patronage rights over the church and their possession of the precious relics it contained—going so far as to steal the sacred body of Saint Lucy and conceal it under their stairs, thereby provoking the wrath of the patriarch of Venice (who excommunicated them) and the civic authorities (who dispatched messengers to brick up all entrances to the convent).

This storm soon blew over, but the concern for property rights did not. By the end of the fifteenth century, records of rents and revenues dominated the convent's archives, as the sisters acquired ever greater wealth and an increasingly sophisticated mastery of accounting methods and administrative techniques.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the fervor that accompanied the convent's founding gradually gave way to daily routine and conventional devotions. But the religious commitment and spiritual ideals that had inspired Corpus Domini at its inception survived—survived even the legal suppression of the con-

9. Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 223–30.

10. Fantin Dandolo (1379–1459) was named archbishop of Candia in 1444 and bishop of Padua in 1448; he was buried at Corpus Domini. Giuseppe Gullino, "Fantin Dandolo," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 32 (Rome, 1986), 460–64. In addition to being the addressee of Giovanni Dominici's *Iter perusinum*, Tommaso Tommasini was bishop, in succession, of several cities in the Venetian sphere of influence: Cittanova, in Istria (1409–20); Pola (1420–23); Urbino (1423–24); Traù, in Dalmatia (1424–35); Recanati and Macerata (1435–40); and Belluno and Feltre (1440–47). Giovanni degli Agostini, *Notizie storico-critiche intorno la vita e le opere degli scrittori veniziani*, vol. 1 (Venice: Simone Occhi, 1752; reprinted Bologna: Forni, 1975), 450–86.

11. The surviving documents consist of thirty bundles (*basti*) of manuscripts on paper and six bundles of parchments, in the Archivio di Stato, Venice [henceforth ASV]. By 1718 those documents had been organized systematically and provided with an alphabetical inventory, which gives at least a vague indication of what has since been lost. ASV, Corpus Domini, busta 1: Catalogo di tutte le scritture del monastero per alfabetto.



MAP 3. Plan of the convent of Corpus Domini, 1595. The church of Corpus Domini, in the center of the plan, is flanked to the right by the lodgings of the nuns. Behind the church are shown the bell tower, cemetery, vegetable garden, well, oven, and sheds for washing and drying the laundry. Beyond them lie the waters of the Venetian lagoon. The other buildings of the complex are not shown, their place being occupied by the plans legend. Venice: Ground plan of the Monastery of Corpus Domini, anno 1595. Corporazioni religiose soppresse, Corpus Domini, b. 1, N. 1. Photoreproductions were prepared by the Sezione fotoreproduzione of the Archivio di Stato in Venice. By permission of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali (permission no. 41, dated 25 August 1999).

vent in 1810 and its physical destruction soon thereafter—in the chronicle and necrology kept by Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni.

#### THE CHRONICLE OF CORPUS DOMINI

We know almost nothing about Sister Bartolomea. She tells us that she was a twenty-five-year-old virgin when she entered Corpus Domini on the day the convent was founded. But that is all she has to say about herself, her background, or her role in the convent. She says nothing about her family, perhaps because, unlike those of so many of her sisters in religion, it did not figure among the Venetian nobility. She does not even mention that those sisters in religion soon included her biological sister, Chiara Riccoboni, who had joined the convent of Corpus Domini by July 1397.<sup>12</sup> She keeps her gaze turned resolutely away from herself and toward the sisters among whom she lived and the collective life of their community.

She recorded the life of that community in her native Venetian dialect, the language spoken by the sisters of Corpus Domini, though her prose is also sprinkled with words and phrases from the Latin liturgy they sang and recited. She told their story under two guises, in paired literary forms: a chronicle and a necrology. The necrology provides brief biographies of nearly fifty women who died in the convent between 1395 and 1436. The chronicle, in contrast, recounts the history of their collective enterprise, starting with the foundation of Corpus Domini in the late fourteenth century. It offers a vivid picture of life in this cloistered community, a small world bounded physically by the convent wall and organized temporally by the rhythms of work and worship.

The first half of the chronicle deals with the foundation of the convent, its growth, and the communal life of the nuns. Corpus Domini was a convent of strict cloister, closed off from the outside world by a protective wall and sealed by a triple-locked gate, with the keys held by three different women. The world within this wall was arranged into functional spaces: the church where the sisters worshipped and the cells where they slept; the refectory where they ate and the chapter room where they assembled to deliberate and to confess their faults to the community; the infirmary where they cared for the sick and dying; the sheds where they washed their habits and hung them to dry; the parlor where they spoke with visitors and heard about the events of the day. Time, too, was ordered, with the year governed by the liturgical seasons of penance and celebration and the day structured around the collective prayers of the community. The monastic office was a demanding round of daily wor-

ship, requiring the sisters to get up in the middle of the night to recite the night office, matins, rise again before dawn for lauds, and then assemble for worship at prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline (at sunrise, midmorning, noon, midafternoon, sundown, and before bed). Such a schedule might seem burdensome, and it is no surprise to find that every so often one of the sisters might doze off after lauds; but in general they found singing the office as sweet as candy and saw devils waiting to pounce on any syllable they let drop out of their prayers.

Because of the strict cloister, the sisters of Corpus Domini shared certain concerns that do not figure quite so prominently in the lives of individual holy women. More than their personal spiritual perfection, they sought to foster the convent community. No one wanted to seem any better than the rest, so they performed their penances in secret and, when enjoined to obtain permission to pursue them, renounced them rather than ask permission. They dedicated themselves to observing the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Nothing they had was their own; everything was the property of the community, and even their clothing was shared. The young women so prized their virginity that they could be suspected of spiritual pride, but even the ancient prioress, Sister Lucia Tiepolo, so feared for her virginity that she hid whenever a doctor visited the convent. Above all, they honored the virtue of obedience, that renunciation of self and will that made it possible for them to live peaceably together year after year. This emphasis on the values of unity and community gives poignant urgency to their efforts to maintain harmony during the later years of the Great Western Schism (1378–1415).

The Catholic Church had been divided for as long as Sister Bartolomea could remember. Ever since a disputed papal election in 1378, the ecclesiastical hierarchy had been split between two competing popes, one based in Rome and the other in Avignon.<sup>13</sup> Europe promptly divided along political lines: France and its allies Scotland, Navarre, Castile, and Aragon supported the Avignon papacy, while England, Flanders, Portugal, Hungary, Bohemia, and most of Germany accepted the Roman pope. Neither side could impose its candidate on the other, neither candidate would step down, and all attempts to negotiate a solution failed. For nearly three decades, the schism dragged on with no end in sight.

New hopes were stirred when the pious Angelo Correr of Venice was elected pope of the Roman obedience in 1406, taking the name Gregory XII.

13. Walter Ullmann, *The Origins of the Great Schism: A Study in Fourteenth-Century Ecclesiastical History*, 2d ed. (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1972); Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).

12. Dominici, *Letters spirituali*, 347.

Before the election he (like all the cardinals) promised to meet with his rival, the Avignon pope Benedict XII, to negotiate an end to the schism. When he failed to fulfill this promise, seven of Gregory's cardinals abandoned him and together with most of Benedict's cardinals, assembled in Pisa. There political and religious leaders tried to put into practice the conciliar theory—that is, the idea that supreme authority within the church resided in a general council.<sup>14</sup> In 1409 the Council of Pisa attempted to exercise that authority by deposing both Gregory and Benedict and electing a new pope, Alexander V.<sup>15</sup> Although much of Europe, including Venice, recognized Alexander as pope, both Gregory and Benedict refused to resign. The result was rapidly shifting ecclesiastical-political alignments that divided the great international religious orders, such as the Dominicans, and brought pressure to bear on local religious institutions like the convent of Corpus Domini, which were asked to declare their support for the pope recognized by the local political authorities. But Pisa did point the way to a workable solution, and in 1417 the Council of Constance finally succeeded in putting an end to the schism by removing all three contending popes—Roman, Pisan, and Avignonese—and electing Martin V.

In the second half of her chronicle, Sister Bartolomea follows the career of Pope Gregory XII from his election in 1406 to his resignation in 1415 and death two years later, showing us what the women of Corpus Domini knew of papal politics and how they viewed events such as the schism and the Council of Constance. Her account is highly partisan, for Gregory was intimately and inseparably linked with Corpus Domini's founder and spiritual guide. He had been a close friend of Giovanni Dominici ever since their days in Venice, and he associated Giovanni with him in the leadership of the church. Gregory named Giovanni archbishop of Ragusa in 1407 and cardinal of San Sisto in 1408, and he entrusted Giovanni with delicate diplomatic missions to the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund of Hungary and to the Council of Constance. Sister Bartolomea describes Gregory and Giovanni as a new Moses and Aaron, leading the church through the desert of sin and schism to the promised land of unity and reform. She follows Giovanni in viewing Gregory as a saint, a man blessed with every virtue and free of even venial sin: patient, humble, abstemious, self-sacrificing, pure. She harbored not the slightest doubt that Gregory was the true pope and a true follower of Christ.

Not everyone in Corpus Domini agreed with her. One of the most fasci-

14. Brian Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).

15. Aldo Landi, *Il papa depresso (Pisa 1409). L'idea conciliare nel grande scisma* (Turin: Claudiana, 1985).

nating and dramatic passages of the chronicle describes how the rift in the ecclesiastical hierarchy was replicated within the small world of the cloister. This chapter forms a bridge between the first and second halves of the chronicle, linking the life of this community of women with the schism that divided the church at large—or more precisely, that split the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In its early stages, the schism seems to have concerned mostly prelates and theologians, though as it persisted some troubled people began to see this institutional crisis in apocalyptic terms and turn nervously to the obscure promises and threats of prophets, seers, and visionaries.<sup>16</sup> But as soon as we move outside the small circle of those who had a pressing professional interest in ecclesiology (or an idiosyncratic personal one), concern about the rift in the church falls off sharply. Only when the governing authorities, for essentially political reasons, suddenly dumped one pope and declared for another—that is, after the Council of Pisa met with widespread but not universal success—did people worry seriously about which pope was legitimate: the one they had acknowledged yesterday or the one they were supposed to acknowledge today.

That is precisely what happened in Venice in 1409, when the Venetian government and Venetian church accepted the legitimacy of the pope elected by the Council of Pisa.<sup>17</sup> It was at this point that the schism that divided the church at large split the Venetian convent of Corpus Domini. Two-thirds of the sisters followed Giovanni Dominici's lead in recognizing the Roman pope, Gregory XII; one-third accepted the choice of their city and of the master general of the Dominican order, Leonardo Dati of Florence, and recognized the Pisan pope. Their private differences of conscience became public in the liturgy, which contained a veritable touchstone, a proof text for papal allegiance: a prayer for the pope's well-being.<sup>18</sup> The sisters sought to paper over their differences and preserve unity by simply praying for "the pope," but this did not satisfy the watchful authorities, who ordered them to pray for the pope by name—and menaced them with excommunication and exile if they named

16. Roberto Rusconi, *Lattina della fine. Crisi della società, profetia ed apocalisse in Italia al tempo del grande scisma d'Occidente (1378-1417)* (Rome: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1979).

17. On Venice's relations with Gregory, see Dieter Girsensohn, *Venezia e il primo pontefice sulla cattedra di S. Pietro: Gregorio XII (Angelo Correr), 1406-1415*, Quaderni 30 (Venice: Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, 1985); Dieter Girsensohn, *Kirche, Politik und adlige Regierung in der Republik Venedig zu Beginn des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Cöttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996).

18. Earlier in the schism, divisions among the clergy of Orvieto similarly became open in the liturgy, when some prayed for Boniface IX of Rome and some for Clement VII of Avignon; peace was restored when each priest was allowed to say his prayers in his own fashion. Luca di Domenico Manenti, *Cronaca*, ed. Luigi Fumi, in *Reum Italicarum Scriptores*, new ed. (Città di Castello: S. Lapi, 1903), vol. 15, part 5, 401.

the wrong one. To escape this sentence, whenever the task of leading the sisters in prayer fell to one of Gregory's partisans, she "voluntarily" ceded her place to one of the Pisan party. This fended off the threat of exile but brought great hardship to the convent: its supporters were generally in Gregory's camp, and they angrily stalked out of Corpus Domini—and cut off their financial support—when they heard the Pisan pope John XXIII named in the sisters' prayers. Here indeed we have a dramatic (and rare) instance in which the identity of the true pope mattered desperately.

Paradoxically, it was inside this cloistered world that the schism was most inescapably present. For most people the schism was no more than a distant rumbling that could easily be closed out and ignored. Each parish, each town, each bishopric had its pope, whom it recognized as legitimate without caring whether some faraway people recognized some other pope. The sisters of Corpus Domini, in contrast, were locked in with one another, observing their common ideal of strict cloister with other people whom they knew thoroughly and respected just as thoroughly. They could not deny or ignore their religious differences, nor could they demonize those who held opposing views. And because they prized so highly the values of unity and harmony, the schism that divided their community tore at their hearts and souls. For five long years the sisters of Corpus Domini strove to preserve the unity of their community while respecting individual convictions. In the end they succeeded in this delicate task, allowing Sister Bartolomea to conclude (with a hint of justifiable pride): "Our consciences remained unblemished and untroubled by any vexing pricks, because both of the parties acted with good intentions."

#### THE NECROLOGY OF CORPUS DOMINI

In the very first year after the convent was enclosed, death took one of the sisters: a thirteen-year-old novice named Paola Zorzi. On that occasion, and at each subsequent death, Sister Bartolomea recorded the event and added a few words about the person who had just passed to her heavenly reward. Necrologies like that of Corpus Domini had their distant origins in lists of the names of people to be commemorated day by day throughout the year on the anniversaries of their deaths.<sup>19</sup> But they evolved into something closer to the obituary

19. For an example of such a traditional necrology, see Annamaria Facchiano, *Monasteri femminili e nobilità a Napoli tra medioevo ed età moderna. Il necrologio di S. Patrizia* (secc. XII–XIV). Fonti per la Storia del Mezzogiorno Medievale 11 (Altavilla Silentina [Salerno]: Edizioni Studi Storici Mendoniali, 1992).

notices found in modern newspapers: brief descriptions of the life and achievements of the deceased.<sup>20</sup> Like the authors of modern obituaries, Sister Bartolomea sometimes resorts to standard phrases and clichéd expressions of appropriate sentiments. But what is most striking about her brief biographies is how highly individualized they are. She describes the characters and longings of her sisters in religion, their cultural formation and intellectual accomplishments, their devotional attitudes and their fortitude in illness. She traces the life events and spiritual paths that led both adolescent girls and elderly widows to the convent, pinpointing the personal meaning their faith held for these women. Since the necrology also includes a lengthy biography of Giovanni Dominici, the convent's spiritual father and a key adviser to Gregory XII, it (like the chronicle) confirms the nuns' informed interest in the "male" business of ecclesiastical politics while keeping the life and concerns of this female community very much to the fore.

The women of Corpus Domini came from a variety of social backgrounds and display a range of spiritual preferences. The community included lay sisters, young novices, and professed nuns, virgins and widows—and several of these widows were startlingly young, hardly more than children themselves. Some had come to Corpus Domini after years spent in other convents, either Benedictine or Augustinian; and these women, accustomed as they were to collective worship, showed a particular fondness for choral prayer. Even when she needed a cane to get about, the aged Sister Maruzza Contarini hobbled off as fast as she could every time the bell summoned her to choir. But the cheerful performance of chores and service to others could also be a form of worship. In particular, those who entered as widows carried into the convent their habits of household management and busied themselves looking after the complex and tending the other sisters. Sister Piera of Città di Castello "tended all the sick women and washed all their filth, and she did not abandon them until she saw that they were either dead or out of danger." Like Jesus of Nazareth or Saint Francis of Assisi, she embraced her leprous companion and kissed her sores, and died blessedly as a result of her charity.

Such heroic self-sacrifice gets singled out for praise. So too does the learning of sisters like Diamante, who "always studied the Holy Scriptures and had an excellent intellect for reading and singing and writing," and Isabella Tommasini, who seemed like a theologian when she preached in chapter. Sister Bartolomea shares none of the misgivings about learning that so

20. One well-known example comes from the friary to which Giovanni Dominici belonged in Florence: Orlandi, *Necrologio di S. Maria Novella*.

troubled her spiritual father, Giovanni Dominici.<sup>21</sup> For all his formidable erudition, this lecturer in theology looked upon books and learning with profound suspicion, viewing them as perilous temptations that could deflect people from the high road to God. Sister Bartolomea, in contrast, mentions the medical skills of Lucia Tiepolo almost in passing, as a useful source of income when she was trying to gather the funds needed to build Corpus Domini, and celebrates the wisdom of Isabetta Tommasini, whose advice was sought by men and women alike, without the slightest hint that this might be a source of spiritual pride.

Visions could hardly be claimed as a special gift, since so many of the sisters of Corpus Domini received them. Visions confirmed the presence of the Christ in the consecrated Eucharist. They disclosed the devils that swarmed about the sisters and tried to trip them up and the angels that attended and assisted them. They reminded the sisters of the long lines of saints—especially virgin saints and Dominican saints—who had preceded them on the thorny path they had chosen for themselves, and they strengthened their resolve to persevere. They reassured the bereft community that a departed sister had received her heavenly reward, as when Sister Diamante appeared clad in glorious garments or Maruzza Contarini was seen in the celestial convent reserved for those who love God perfectly. And they proclaimed that their convent was divinely ordained, that it was God's will that Lucia Tiepolo leave her former convent and found this new one dedicated to the body of Christ. In this instance, of course, God's expressed will conveniently matched Tiepolo's own wishes, and one might wonder how often the sisters of Corpus Domini were bending God to their will rather than conforming themselves to his.

Worldly pride was another obvious temptation, for many of the sisters came from aristocratic backgrounds. Their family names read like a roll call of Venice's ruling elite, resonant with wealth and glory: Panuta, Dandolo, Tiepolo, Contarini, Rosso, Pisani, Valaresso, Marin, Zorzi, Corner, Da Canal, Moro, Venier—patrician surnames of doges, admirals, and senators as well as of Bartolomea Riccoboni's sisters in religion.<sup>22</sup> Sister Bartolomea makes little

21. Giovanni may be best known today for his attack on humanistic education, the *Lucula Noctis*, ed. Edmund Hunt (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1940). Coluccio Salutati's reply to Giovanni's polemic is found in his *Epistolario*, ed. Francesco Novati, *Fonti per la Storia d'Italia* 15–18 (Rome: Istituto Storico Italiano, 1891–1911), vol. 4, part 1, 205–40. For further discussion of Giovanni's attitude toward learning, see Daniel Bornstein, "Dominican Friar, Lay Saint: The Case of Marcolino of Forlì," *Church History* 66 (1997): 259–61.

22. For an identification of the leading families within the Venetian patriciate, see Stanley Chojmacki, "In Search of the Venetian Patriciate: Families and Factions in the Fourteenth Century," in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. J. R. Hale (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 47–90.

of their social status, perhaps because to any Venetian reader it would have been too obvious to mention. She certainly was not indifferent to such concerns, since she notes that several of the women who came to Corpus Domini from distant cities sprang from noble lineages. Geronima dei Cancellieri was the daughter of the count of Pistoia and the widow of a knight. Onesta dei Marchesi was "from a great lineage, very elegant and notoriously worldly," and her brothers were "all great lords who held castles"; she brought with her to Corpus Domini a little entourage, Piera and Tommasa of Città di Castello, who accompanied her in life and in death. These aristocratic foreigners heard of Corpus Domini from Giovanni Dominici, who recruited them for his convent while on preaching campaigns in Tuscany. They answered his call despite the objections of their families, which sought to dissuade them with mockery or detain them by force. In Sister Bartolomea's necrology, they figure as object lessons in renunciation of the world: though born to social eminence and material comfort, they fled such vanities and chose instead to serve God and their sisters in religion with charity and humility. In the world outside the convent walls, they would have been Sister Bartolomea's social betters; but here they cooked her meals and nursed her when she fell sick.

Despite their careful elimination of markers of status, the sisters of Corpus Domini were not blind to the distinction brought by learning or lineage, or by office. Sister Bartolomea distinguishes between the professed sisters who had made their monastic vows, the novices who had not yet professed, and the lay sisters who did not have the right to sit in chapter. She records the deaths of only three lay sisters, and she does so with notable brevity; Sister Maria Palazzi's thirty-six years in the convent earned her only the barest and blandest of death notices, while Sister Ambrosina is remembered mainly as a quiet and hardworking servant who did the dirtiest chores with never a complaint. The choir sisters shared in such chores and won the community's praise for doing so, but their principal duty was worship. Reciting the monastic hours required a certain level of literacy, which was sufficiently common in the convent that the task of leading the sisters in prayer (the office of hebdomadary) could rotate weekly. Other offices involved more elaborate duties and presumably were held for longer terms: the novice mistress reared the young novices and trained them in the monastic life; the sacristan looked after the church and its furnishings; the wardrobe mistresses cleaned the sisters' habits and distributed clothing as needed. The chief offices, on the other hand—that of the prioress who headed the convent and the vicarress who assisted her—were held for life, or until the holder proved physically unable to perform her duties. These tended to be occupied by women of outstanding learn-

ing or wealth or prestige: Lucia Tiepolo, Geronima dei Cancellieri, Isabetta Tommasini, Lucia Dandolo, and Margarita Paruta. It is these women (and the spiritual director of the convent, Giovanni Dominici) who receive the most extensive memorials in Sister Bartolomea's necrology.

#### THE SPIRITUALITY OF CORPUS DOMINI:

##### THEMES AND TENSIONS

Sickness and physical pain figure prominently in the necrology, which repeatedly praises patience in illness and fortitude in the face of death.<sup>23</sup> So many of the sisters suffered from debilitating diseases that kept them bedridden for years, and so many of them died while still relatively young, that one suspects there might be some truth to the idea that families tended to dedicate sickly girls to the religious life. On the other hand, this attention to illness might be the natural consequence of the circumstances under which the necrology was composed: since it was the death of each sister that furnished the occasion for her biography, the cause of her death was very fresh in Sister Bartolomea's mind. What distinguished the sisters of Corpus Domini was not so much the dreary facts of disease and death as their attitude toward them. Crippling injuries and catastrophic illness were all too common features of medieval life, afflictions their victims typically bore with loud laments or grim resignation. The sisters of Corpus Domini instead welcomed their sufferings as occasions for spiritual growth, for joyous conformity with the crucified Jesus. Such spiritualization of illness, like illness itself, appears to have marked female piety to an extraordinary extent: an analysis of the life histories of hundreds of medieval saints has shown that illness was "a prominent feature of female holiness, the one category of activity in which women were not merely statistically overrepresented but constituted an absolute majority."<sup>24</sup>

Other characteristic themes of female piety run through both chronicle and necrology: devotion to the Eucharist; intense affective engagement with the person of Jesus, as child and as spouse, a propensity for visions; and ascetic practices aimed at controlling and punishing the body through flagellation and renunciation of food and sleep and at turning the body to spiritual ends

23. The evidence from Corpus Domini can be compared with that from the great English monastery Westminster Abbey; Barbara Harvey, *Living and Dying in England, 1100–1540: The Monastic Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

24. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 234–35.

through eager identification with Christ's Passion.<sup>25</sup> The sisters of Corpus Domini received Communion far more often than the minimum obligation of once a year, at Easter, indeed, Giovanni Dominici was criticized for giving them Communion too frequently.<sup>26</sup> But they longed to have the body of Christ in them, even as they were in the body of Christ, Corpus Domini. They took in that body with their eyes as well as their mouths, adoring the consecrated Eucharist on display in its tabernacle; and when a sudden gust of wind knocked over the vessel and spilled the consecrated hosts, they were dismayed at this tragic desecration of their Lord's body. They saw Jesus in the host, as a lovely child, and in visions, as a heavenly spouse. They yearned to be with him and to be like him: when Sister Gerolama Mercanti was at the point of death, she "stretched out her arms like a cross, tilted her head to the right side, and rendered her soul to her spouse Jesus Christ, who chose for himself this pure virgin." They fasted and kept vigil and flagellated themselves, conforming themselves to the suffering Jesus. Their spiritual director, concerned that they were harming themselves, ordered them to take food and to turn in their whips and chains; they humbly obeyed, and he was dumbstruck at how many they heaped before him.

In this instance Giovanni delicately balanced encouragement of the sisters' heroic asceticism with reasonable restraint—and such measured sensitivity may seem surprising in someone known as a fierce polemicist, ever ready to stake out extreme positions and defend them resolutely. But profound tensions marked many of these themes in the spirituality of Corpus Domini. The sisters hungered for the Eucharist yet feared contact with an object so awe-

25. For surveys of late medieval devotional practices, see Richard Kieckhefer, "Major Currents in Late Medieval Devotion," in *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 2, *High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt with Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 75–108; R. N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215–c. 1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Daniel E. Bornstein, *The Branches of 1309: Popular Devotion in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 8–42. On female piety in late medieval Italy, see Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, eds., *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). On the spirituality of Corpus Domini in particular, see Lia Sbrizolo, "Note su Giovanni Dominici. I. La spiritualità del Dominici nelle lettere alle suore veneziane del Corpus Christi," *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 24 (1970): 4–30, and Paweł Dobrowolski, "Piety and Death in Venice: A Reading of the Fifteenth-Century Chronicle and the Necrology of Corpus Domini," *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo* 92 (1985–86): 295–324.

26. Raymond of Capua also had to defend and justify his practice of giving Catherine of Siena frequent—even daily—Communion; Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Conleth Kearns (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1980), 288–91. On eucharistic piety, see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," in her *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 119–50; Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

somely holy. They prized humility and valued the common life yet wondered which ones among them were especially beloved of God. They invoked the emotionally charged language of kinship to describe their relationship with God and with their spiritual director yet displayed a cool aloofness toward their own families.

This tug and fraying of family ties can be felt throughout the chronicle and necrology of Corpus Domini. Entering the convent did not necessarily mean leaving one's family behind. In a number of cases pairs of sisters or a mother and daughter joined the convent together. The younger girls in particular often entered along with a sibling, so that they would not feel totally deprived of family. The convent could also accommodate kin at the other end of life's journey: Corpus Domini provided the final resting place for one ill and elderly Franciscan tertiary, who was taken in to pass her last few weeks with her daughter, granddaughters, and great-niece, all of them members of this Dominican community. But inevitably, feelings for their sisters in religion often supplanted fading (and not necessarily fond) memories of their natal families. And when Giovanni Dominici deliberately set about reorienting the affections of his spiritual daughters to focus on himself as both father and mother, he provoked the anger of the parents he replaced.<sup>27</sup>

It was not merely that his transfiguration of familial bonds into a new spiritual kinship called into question the traditional ordering of the patrician household—though that was surely an issue in a city that made the well-managed household one of the key analogies for the well-ordered state.<sup>28</sup> Venice was governed by a hereditary aristocracy of noble families whose names were inscribed in the Book of Gold. These patricians, and they alone, enjoyed the right to propose legislation, appoint officials, and hold political office. Too successful an advocacy of chastity could threaten the existence of the patrician family. To be sure, a tension between the religious ideal of celibacy and the social imperative of reproduction has marked Christianity from the very start. But this tension assumed particular force and urgency in the late fourteenth century, when recurrent epidemics of bubonic plague threatened entire populations with extinction and imperiled the survival of families as never before. No more cogent example could be found than Giovanni Dominici himself: when this sole surviving child of a widowed mother decided to enter a religious order, he doomed his lineage to extinction.

27. Daniel Bornstein, "Spiritual Kinship and Domestic Devotions," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 173–92.

28. Margaret L. King, "Caldiera and the Barbaros on Marriage and the Family: Humanist Reflections of Venetian Realities," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 6 (1976): 19–50.

Venice was far from impervious to the spirit of religious reform. On the contrary, the maritime city was a great center of spiritual fervor in the years around 1400, and the Venetian patriciate participated fully in these movements of religious renewal.<sup>29</sup> If Giovanni posed a threat to the patrician family, it was precisely because so many men and women were responding to his call, leaving their relatives and their children to become friars and nuns. The convent of Corpus Domini housed women from the leading families of Venice and depended on their kin for support. In return, the convent (like other convents throughout Europe) sustained the social fabric by offering a place of refuge for the bereft, sheltering widows and orphans, the elderly and infirm. It also invoked divine blessings on Venice in moments of political crisis, sending to heaven prayers for peace and prosperity. The cloister and the world both sustained and challenged one another, and it would be hard to say which gazed upon the other with more profound ambivalence.

#### TEXT AND TRANSLATION

Corpus Domini was a small world of its own; but even if the door was triple locked, the wall that separated the nuns from the world and protected them from its threats was a permeable membrane. The sisters eagerly awaited news from the world outside, especially the doings of their beloved father Giovanni Dominici; and their friends and supporters on the outside came to Corpus Domini to hear mass and to seek the spiritual counsel of the prioress, who was revered for her learning and her knowledge of the Scriptures. Texts, too, circulated through the parlor and in the convent: lives of the virgin martyrs, sermons, histories, devotional songs, and letters of spiritual counsel and consolation. And to these texts the women of Corpus Domini responded with texts of their own production: informative letters to Giovanni Dominici, enlightening sermons by Sister Isabetta Tommasini, and the record of their institutional memory, the chronicle and necrology of Bartolomea Riccoboni.

The chronicle is not a daily record of events. Sister Bartolomea says that modesty held her back from writing for nearly twenty years, so that when she finally took up her pen she produced what had to be a retrospective account, with all the compression and lapses that result from the selective operation of memory. But though she frequently invokes memories—her own and those of

29. On spiritual currents in Italy around 1400 with special reference to Venice, see Giorgio Cracco, "La spiritualità italiana del Tre-Quattrocento: Linee interpretative," *Studia Patavina* 18 (1971): 74–116.

the women around her—she did not rely on memory alone. Like all institutions, the convent of Corpus Domini kept administrative records, and examination of the surviving records of the convent confirms that Sister Bartolomea consulted them as she drafted her chronicle. In addition, she drew on more literary works, such as the letters of spiritual counsel that Giovanni Dominici addressed to the sisters of Corpus Domini and, in all likelihood, a history of the schism and of the Council of Constance.

Compiling such chronicles and necrologies was a common practice in monastic institutions, both male and female. Beginning in the fifteenth century, a number of Italian convents—especially those associated with the Observant movements—began to keep convent chronicles. The one kept by the Poor Clares of Monteluce, in Perugia, blended the two genres: the first chronicler, Sister Eufrosia, began writing in 1488 but started with a retrospective glance back to the institution of the regular observance in 1448; death notices are included in sequence in the course of the chronicle as sisters passed away.<sup>30</sup> In Venice, Chiara Riccoboni continued her sister's task of chronicling the history of Corpus Domini; and the convent's 1718 inventory lists *Croniche del monistero* and *Libri delle morte*—using the plural for both convent chronicles and books of the dead.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, many of these texts—and not merely those that once resided in Corpus Domini—have been lost to the ravages of time, exacerbated by the suppression of convents and dispersal of monastic libraries, and few of the surviving manuscripts have been published.<sup>32</sup> There are a handful of *Nonnenbücher* from fourteenth-century German convents such as Unterlinden, which give Latin *vitae sororum* comparable to the vernacular biographies of the necrology of Corpus Christi. Those "sister-books" have recently been the object of a fine study by Gertrude Jaron Lewis, and a brief excerpt from the *Lives of the Sisters of Unterlinden* has been translated into English.<sup>33</sup> But to the best of my knowledge this translation of the convent chronicle and necrology of Corpus Domini is the first attempt to make some of these

30. *Memoriale di Monteluce. Cronaca del monastero delle Clarisse di Perugia dal 1448 al 1838*, ed. Chiara Augusta Lanziati, intro. Ugo Lino Nicolini (Assisi, 1982).

31. ASV, Corpus Domini, busta 1: Lanichità ravivata, and Catastico di tutte le scritture del monastero per allabetto.

32. In addition to the *Memoriale di Monteluce* and the texts translated here, see the *Ricordanze del monastero di S. Lucia o.s.c. in Foligno (cronache 1424–1786)*, ed. Angela Emmanuela Scandella with an appendix by Giovanni Boccali (Assisi, 1987). Like the chronicle of Monteluce, this starts from a later date than that of Corpus Domini and provides much fuller information for the modern period.

33. Gertrude Jaron Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth Century Germany* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996), which includes on microfiche the texts of eight of the nine surviving sister-books; Simon Tugwell, ed. and trans., *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 417–24.

works by women, for women, and about women available in their entirety to an English-speaking audience.

The chronicle and necrology of Corpus Domini were originally kept in the convent, but the autograph copies disappeared when the convent was demolished in 1810. Fortunately the texts survive in a number of later copies. Basing themselves on two eighteenth-century manuscripts in Venetian libraries—MS lat. IX 89 (3228) in the Biblioteca Marciana and MS Gradenigo 62 in the Biblioteca del Museo Correr—Maria Teresa Casella and Giovanni Pozzi prepared a critical edition of Sister Bartolomea's chronicle and necrology, which they published as appendices to their edition of the *Lettere spirituali* of Giovanni Dominici.<sup>34</sup> Just two years later, Casella and Pozzi announced (with some chagrin) the discovery of a number of manuscripts that had been unknown to them when they prepared their edition. Of these, by far the most important was MS Correr 484 (C.I.3), in the Biblioteca del Museo Correr. This collection of texts pertaining to Giovanni Dominici and the convent of Corpus Domini was prepared by Giovanni Domenico Armano, O.P., an active (if not particularly talented or original) participant in the learned circles of eighteenth-century Venice. The value of Correr 484 is that it was "fedelmente copiato dai suoi originali"—faithfully copied from its originals—as Armano declares in the prolix title to his manuscript. In fact, Correr 484 contains some details that were missing from the other copies and clarifies a number of passages that they had obviously garbled. As a result, Casella and Pozzi were able to publish a number of corrections and additions to the text, some of them quite significant.<sup>35</sup> My translation is based essentially on the Casella-Pozzi edition, taking into account their subsequent modifications, though I have also consulted MS Correr 484 directly.

I have sought to produce a translation that is faithful to Sister Bartolomea's Venetian Italian and that also reads smoothly and naturally in English. Those two goals are not entirely compatible: Sister Bartolomea's sentences often sprawl to a length not easily tolerated in English, so I have divided and repunctuated them to clarify, but not alter, her meaning. Rather than replicate her pervasive use of the superlative, I have tried to use terms that convey the sense of "very" or "extremely" or "most" that is rendered in Italian by the ending *-issimo*. I have standardized the spelling of names, preferring (for instance) the more familiar Giovanni Dominici to the Venetian dialect form, Zuan

34. Bartolomea Riccoboni, *Cronaca del Corpus Domini and Necrologio del Corpus Domini*, in Giovanni Dominici, *Lettere spirituali*, ed. Maria-Teresa Casella and Giovanni Pozzi, Spicilegium Friburgense 13 (Freiburg: Editiones Universitatis, 1969), 257–94 and 295–330.

35. Maria Teresa Casella and Giovanni Pozzi, "Giunta al Dominici," *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica* 14 (1971): 131–91, the corrections and additions to the text of the chronicle and necrology are on 172–82.

Domenego. And on rare occasions I have added an explanatory word or two, set off by square brackets.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

On female religious life: Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, eds., *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); E. Ann Matter and John Coakley, eds., *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); Penelope D. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Gertrude Jaron Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth Century Germany* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996).

On late medieval religion: Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979); Denys Hay, *The Church in Italy in the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); R. N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215-c. 1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 2, *High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt with Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1987); Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Daniel Bornstein, *The Bianchi of 1399: Popular Devotion in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), esp. 8-42.

On women and the family: Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, ed., *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 2, *Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Charles de la Roncière, "Tuscan Notables on the Eve of the Renaissance," in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 2, *Revelations of the Medieval World*, ed. Georges Duby (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 157-309; Thomas Kuehn, *Law, Family, and Women: Toward a Legal Anthropology of Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, eds., *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998).

On the history of Venice: Frederic C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); J. R. Hale, ed., *Renaissance Venice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973); Dennis Romano, *Patricians and Popolani: The Social Foundation of the Venetian Renaissance State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).



#### THE CHRONICLE OF CORPUS DOMINI

"our lord" = Jesus  
but "our father" = Dominici!

In nomine Domini nostri Iesu Christi et Sanctissime Marie matris eius et beati Dominici patris nostri. Here begins the prologue to a brief chronicle of the most holy convent of Corpus Domini in Venice, of the sisters of the order of Saint Dominic, in the year 1359. "A book of marvels"

I, Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni, had the greatest desire to write of the wondrous marvels that our most clement Lord God has performed in this most blessed convent, built in reverence for his holy name some twenty years ago. However, I wrestled within myself at the thought of my inadequacy, since such an undertaking would require wise and learned persons. Rather than continue to resist the Holy Spirit, I have decided to write with this goal in mind: in order that those sisters who follow after us may be properly edified, and that they may have reason to praise the Lord for so many good things and be inspired to live well and follow through on this good beginning. I shall strive to do my best to recount the full truth of what I have seen and heard, and if I do not write as I ought to, I beg my readers to pardon me. If the Lord grants me the grace to praise and glorify his holy name, I will tell step by step, first, of the building of the convent; second, of the day when the women entered it and how it was enclosed; third, of the community and fervor of those women; and fourth, of the glorious deaths of many of them.