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The *Life* of Saint Douceline BEGUINE OF PROVENCE

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The Life of Saint Douceline, a Beguine of Provence

Translated from the Occitan with Introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay

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This mystic collaboration has been a great joy for us both. It has deepened our already close friendship and has led, in ever-widening circles, to a television series on women mystics (with another in preparation) and an interactive web-site on medieval women (http://www.mw.mcmaster.ca). We are delighted that the text, which started it all, is now ready for its readers.

Contents

Introduction

The object of this historical overview is to provide a context for the life of Douceline de Digne and for the vita which is presented here for the first time in English. In this introduction we will attempt to summarize the origins and development of the beguinal way of life, outline the process by which Douceline introduced this way of life to Provence, examine the manuscript of her vita and discuss its authorship. In the essay which follows this introduction we will proceed to address the unique aspects of the vita and present an analysis of this important and compelling text.

The Beguines in Medieval Europe

The life of Douceline (ca. 1215–74), founder of the Beguines of Marseilles, was written within the context of a Christendom-wide revival of popular religiosity, sparked by the Gregorian reform movement of the eleventh century. The resulting impulse towards a renewed spirituality, which found its most notable expression in new or reformed religious orders and a heightening of spiritual intensity among the laity, had particular significance for women. Saintly women like Hildegard of Bingen[1] and Elisabeth of Schönau in Germany found spiritual fulfillment and developed their visionary mysticism inside the traditional cloister. Hildegard undoubtedly contributed to the growing Cistercian interest in pious lay women[2] and she was particularly venerated by Philippe of Alsace, count of Flanders. Her visions and prophecies became a part of the spiritual heritage in Belgium. Although some new religious orders were established,[3] more and more women were to strive better to serve God without abandoning the world. During the twelfth century lay piety was encouraged and heightened by itinerant preachers whose main themes were the corruption in the Church and the need for

1 McDonnell, 281.
2 McDonnell, 286.
3 The Premonstratensian Order, for example.

reform. Throughout Europe they were followed by crowds of people, among them many women.[4]

Emblematic of this new devotional intensity within which women would strive to find their place, was the development of the cult of St. Mary Magdalene.[5] After its development at Vezelay, her cult spread in Provence at the end of the twelfth and beginning of thirteenth century, promoted by wandering preachers. In 1225 the Congregation of the Penitents of St. Magdalene was established for female penitents[6] and one of the cult's most persuasive supporters was Robert of Arbrissel, founder of a convent at Fontevrault.[7] Salimbene describes the shrine at Sainte-Baume after his visit in 1248 and Joinville recounts the visit of the saintly king, Louis IX, in July 1254.[8] The Magdalene's popularity seems to have stemmed from the fact that she represented the common sinner – a fallible everyman and everywoman – not an inaccessible ideal of perfection like the Virgin Mary. As a model of repentance, she embodied the possibility of forgiveness and redemption, and a number of female mystics were profoundly influenced by her.[9]

*

Despite considerable scholarly attention, the early history of the development of the beguine way of life for women, like that of their male counterparts, the beghards, remains largely obscure. It is likely that, as Ernest McDonnell has suggested,[10] it was a spontaneous movement which recognized no single founder. However, its ideological roots are clear enough; they can be traced from the widespread attempt to address the question of "whether each and every Christian might not be called by the command of the gospels and the example

4 Robert of Arbrissel, for example, who founded a convent at Fontevrault and Norbert of Xanten who established his order at Prémontré: Murk-Jansen 1998, 19–20; Bolton 1976, 142.

5 Brunel-Lobrichon 1988a, 42; Ludwig-Jansen mentions that the resurgence of her cult in the twelfth century lasted for 500 years (1998, 67) and that late medieval preachers accepted her role in the redemption drama. Also Muessig (in Kienzle and Walker, 146) argues that the legend of Mary Magdalene provides an example of a woman preaching, as does the legend of Catherine of Alexandria.

6 Saxer, 221–23.

7 Saxer, 107–25.

8 Joinville, 330–31.

9 Haskins, 177–79, Ludwig-Jansen 2000. Examples include mystic women as different as Elisabeth of Schönau (Clark, 53) and Margery Kempe.

10 McDonnell, 5.

of the apostles to model his or her life on the gospels and apostolic standards".[11] This movement, promoting a return to evangelical authenticity,[12] was supported and disseminated by the vernacular preaching which was at the heart of the general movement towards the popularization of religion. Such popular preachers as Lambert le Bègue who, in the late 1170s, promoted clerical reform in the diocese of Liège and translated portions of the Bible for the edification of laymen, were apostles of the new popular religious movement.[13] This burgeoning lay spirituality was closely related to the rise of urbanization and its most well-developed effects can be seen in areas where urban development was most pronounced.

In some areas monastic houses, unable or unwilling to accommodate more women, began to turn away new recruits, just at the time when women of the new urban classes were seeking some form of communal spirituality. The proliferation of new foundations of nunneries was insufficient for the ever-increasing number of pious women, intent on adopting lives of devotion and poverty, especially in the diocese of Liège.[14] But this practical difficulty was compounded by the ambiguous attitude of the male orders: the Premonstratensians and Cistercians were reluctant to assume either pastoral or economic responsibility for the women and were anxious to exclude them from their abbeys,[15] while women continued to be disadvantaged by not being allowed to regulate their own forms of religious life and to found their own independent orders.[16]

There is evidence that pious women in the north were first attracted to the Premonstratensian order. When the order refused to accept more recruits they joined the Cistercians; when they too refused to take any more "these women formed communities belonging to no order at all, following no specific rule, but binding themselves in all strictness to commandments of female piety in chastity and poverty, prayer and fasting".[17] By the early thirteenth century the emergence of the Franciscan and Dominican orders in

[11] Grundmann, 7.
[12] Brunel-Lobrichon 1997, 163.
[13] McDonnell, 71–72.
[14] McDonnell, 116–19; Murk-Jansen 1998, 21.
[15] The general chapter of the Cistercians in 1213 limited the number of nunneries, and then, in 1228, forbade further attachment of nunneries to the order: Bolton 1976, 143.
[16] Bolton 1976, 143, 154.
[17] McDonnell, 78.

Southern Europe provided new spiritual opportunities for men, but for their female would-be followers the mendicant lifestyle was not a practical possibility. Moreover, both of the male mendicant orders strenuously resisted the women's claims on their ministry and their resources.[18]

Yet while some women may have been thwarted in their efforts to join established orders, others may well have found the life of a beguine, one who lived a spiritual life while continuing to live and work in the world, a more satisfying way of emulating the apostolic life.[19] It is clear that many of the communities of *humiliati* in Italy, as well as groups of *mulieres religiosae* in southern Flanders, predate the establishment of the Franciscan order. This new form of religious practice was to spread beyond Italy and Flanders and was develop a vigorous identity and momentum of its own.

The beguine's way of life can be seen as "semi-religious", situated liminally between the formal religious life of a nun and the life of a lay woman. The beguinage was a retreat, especially well adapted to an urban society, where women living in common could pursue a spiritual life. Rather than being tied for life to a formal vow of poverty, chastity and obedience, the beguine's obligation to observe chastity and obedience was considered temporary in nature, conditioned by personal desire and contingent on residence in the beguinage. Simple vows, often made without witnesses, distinguished the induction of a beguine from the public profession made by a nun.[20] As we shall see in Douceline's vita, the question of poverty was a complex one but, in general, beguines could retain their property or even acquire property while living in the community.[21]

Members of the beguinage might engage in weaving, carding,

18 See Grundmann's discussion of the response to Clare and her followers, 64; also Bolton 1976, 151–53.

19 Clare's struggles to win acceptance for her own Rule make clear how problematic for the Church establishment was the concept of women who were not firmly enclosed. For example, Grundmann cites the papal bull of 1241, ordering all archbishops and bishops "to act against women moving about barefoot, belted with rope, dressed in the habit of the Order of St. Damian". These women, described as *religio simulata*, were clearly not genuine, since the real order was bound by rules of strict enclosure (Grundmann, 115).

20 McDonnell, 130–31.

21 McDonnell, 146–49.

sewing or educating children[22] as well as charitable work.[23] "Following the principle of economic and practical self-maintenance, Beguines worked for and supported one another by the income of personal dowries, carding wool, or washing laundry locally."[24] The urban environment was an essential component of this new model of female piety. It both justified and made possible their lives of community service and it marked the evolution from the earlier era in which women's religious experience was primarily identified with powerful aristocratic abbesses and canonesses in enclosed environments. Anticipating Francis's instruction to be "in the world but not of the world", beguine communities attracted women from the newly emerging patriciate[25] but in some areas they also included poorer women, looking for material sustenance as well as a life of devotion.[26] While the material possessions of its members helped to sustain the community, such wealth often brought with it a sense of anxiety because of its potential to undermine the ideal of poverty.[27]

Phillipen's studies of the beguines in southern Flanders[28] have suggested that there were four stages in the evolution to the large *begijnhof* or beguine parish: holy women living separately or under the parental roof, without abandoning either their trade or the possibility of marriage; women living in communities under a leader, often emulating convent life in their organization and daily practices; enclosed communities, the *beguinae clausae*, and, finally, the beguinage large enough to form an autonomous parish. The last two stages seem only to have been achieved in significant numbers in Flanders and Walloon Belgium. In her work on the same area in the thirteenth century, Ziegler observes only two main forms: the convent beguinage in which women "lived together in small, isolated communities scattered about the town or under the parental roof, usually numbering but a handful of women, at most, in any given

22 Beatrice of Nazareth was sent at the age of seven to live with a group of beguines in a nearby town "that she might make progress in virtue." (De Gank, 25).

23 McDonnell, 146.

24 Ziegler, 1992, 73.

25 McDonnell, 82.

26 Ziegler, 1992, 71. According to Schmitt, there is was sociological evolution from beguinages which consisted largely of the urban patriciate in the thirteenth century to houses which functioned as refuges for poor women in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (19).

27 McDonnell, 97–97.

28 The work of L.J.M. Phillipen, cited by McDonnell, 5.

house" and, existing at precisely the same time, "large, all-female housing settlements, known as *curtis* beguinages".[29] Beguines in Germany, with its multiplicity of small convents, seem to have lived primarily according to the convent model or Phillipen's first and second stages. While the structural aspects of the beguine phenomenon in France await further study, the movement's development appears closer to the German than to the Flemish model, and Douceline's houses in Hyères and Marseilles can be confidently placed at the second level of development.

The reaction of the church establishment to these beguine communities was cautious at best. While Innocent III's Fourth Lateran Council forbade the establishment of new religious orders in 1215, he did not move specifically against the beguines, indeed Grundmann suggests that he "opened the way for the religious movement to join the Church and work within the limits of the Catholic hierarchy".[30] The day after Innocent's death, on 16 July 1216, Jacques de Vitry,[31] the supporter and biographer of the holy women of Liège, appeared at the curia. He won oral approval from Honorius III for the pious women of Liège and all of Belgium, France and Germany, to live together in communal houses and to form female cloistered communities without accepting any approved rule. Douceline's two communities were to initially flourish within the context of this approval. Further bulls assuring the recognition of groups of beguines followed[32] and this ecclesiastical support was complemented by the protection of local rulers or royal patronage.[33]

Jacques de Vitry, an Augustinian canon, born into a noble family at Vitry-sur-Seine, was lured from his studies in Paris by accounts of the sanctity of Marie of Oignies, the woman who was at the centre of the new religious movement in the diocese of Liège. Vitry became her confessor and wrote her life, presenting Marie as the prototype of the beguine life.[34] After Marie's death in 1213, Vitry preached the crusade against the Albigensian heretics of southern France, and he

29 Ziegler, 1992, 70.

30 Grundmann, 78.

31 Circa 1170–1240.

32 For example, on 30 May 1233 the bull *Gloriam virginalem* of Pope Gregory IX recognized the Belgian beguines, and those of the diocese of Cologne had their privileges secured by papal legates in 1228–31: McDonnell, 157–65; and for the succession of privileges granted to different beguinages, see McDonnell, 176–85.

33 McDonnell, 205–18; 226–40.

34 McDonnell, 7.

recounts that he wrote her biography, in part, to provide a model "contemporary saint" to serve as an example for the southern French heretics.[35] McNamara has demonstrated how the growth of heresy was paralleled by this "women's movement" in Flanders, Italy and southern France, dedicated to the defence of orthodoxy. There was an alliance between the men engaged in extirpating heresy, particularly the Dominicans,[36] and those women whose mystical revelations validated their teachings.[37] The Dominican Thomas de Cantimpré, an admirer and disciple of Vitry, was also to heed the call to "gather up the fragments lest they be lost".[38] As well as a supplement to the life of Marie (written ca. 1230), Cantimpré wrote the vitae of Christine of Saint-Trond (1224), Margaret of Ypres (1240) and Lutgard of Aywières (ca. 1248).[39] Cantimpré's vitae were all composed during the life of Douceline de Digne.

Douceline was born shortly after the death of Marie d'Oignies, in 1215 or 1216, to a wealthy family, likely in the town of Digne in Provence, in the south of France. Her father, a wealthy merchant called Bérenguier (or Bérenger), was from Digne, and her mother, Hugue, was from Barjols where the family lived when Douceline was a child. When her mother died around 1230, Douceline moved to Hyères with her father, probably to be closer to her brother Hugh who was a member of the town's Franciscan monastery. Hugh was to become a well-known Franciscan theologian and preacher and was to have a significant role in assisting Douceline with her life's mission. A second brother died young leaving two daughters, Douceline and Marie, who later followed their aunt's way of life.[40]

Just as communities of devout women gathered around Marie at Oignies and Nivelles and around Lutgard at Aywières in the diocese of Liège, so they were to gather around Douceline at Hyères and Marseilles. After a very pious childhood and teenage years which were devoted to the care of the poor and sick in her father's house, she experienced a "conversion" at the age of 20 and, several years afterwards, took vows before her brother Hugh and established her first beguine community near the Roubaud River on the edge of the

35 Jacques de Vitry, 48; Vauchez 1987b.
36 But also the Franciscans, especially in the south.
37 McNamara 1993 in Wiethaus, 9.
38 Jacques de Vitry, 39.
39 See the introduction to the *Supplement to the Life of Marie D'Oignies*, Thomas de Cantimpré 1999a, 204.
40 Albanés, xl–xliii.

town of Hyères (ca. 1241). She subsequently founded a second house in the town of Hyères itself, closer to the Franciscans, whose church she and her ladies attended.[41] Then, around 1250, she established another community on the outskirts of Marseilles. Douceline lived in the Marseilles house and continued as leader of the communities in both towns until her death in 1274.

At the time she settled there, Marseilles was a thriving port city, formerly under the titular control of Raymond-Berengar IV, the count of Provence, but in fact dominated by an oligarchy of wealthy merchants who continued vigorously to defend their privileges from a growing population of workers, sailors and artisans.[42] In 1246 Charles of Anjou, youngest brother of King Louis IX, obtained the County of Provence through his marriage to Count Raymond's heiress, Beatrice, and he lost no time in claiming his rights over the city. The city repulsed his first attack in August 1251 but sued for peace the following year; there was unrest and resistance to the new regime until 1256 when a treaty was signed which allowed Marseilles to keep its judicial and fiscal autonomy but which surrendered all political power to the Count. Both the city's wide class divisions and its state of political unrest made it an ideal place for Douceline's new foundation: the large numbers of poor and marginalized provided the clientele for nursing care and the dispensing of charity, while the contentious urban patriciate provided an ideal audience for Franciscan preaching as well as a potential source of support, both political and financial.[43]

Douceline's uncompromising adoption of the term "beguine" for herself and the women of her community, as described in the vita, indicates her awareness of some of the troubled history of the word: "she would say that the name of Beguine pleased her greatly and that she held it in great esteem because it was humble and scorned by the world's pride" (4:2). The word – and hence the movement – had acquired an association with heresy.[44] According to Grundmann, the

41 Albanés, xlv. The first house at Roubaud seems to have been closed at about this time; by the time of the fall of Antioch in 1260 there was clearly only one house in Hyères.

42 Baratier 1973b, 84–88, Runciman, 88–91.

43 The political support of Charles of Anjou and his wife Beatrice is evident throughout Douceline's Life, and at the end of the vita we find a reference to the generous financial support of the citizens, when her body was translated to the sumptuous new church of the Franciscans and placed in a rich marble tomb, 14:36.

44 Grundmann, 80.

entire women's spiritual movement in the district of Liège had been under a cloud of suspicion until Jacques de Vitry won them recognition from the papal curia and suspicious officials had called them "beguines", the same name they used for the Cathar heretics of southern France.[45] Like the universal church itself, religious women of the period often had international connections.[46] Douceline had the additional advantage of access to official channels through her brother Hugh. It is therefore probable that she knew exactly what she was doing in adopting the name of beguine for her ladies.

While attitudes to the term "beguine" and the movement it connoted seem to have been gradually changing following Vitry's successful intervention,[47] the ecclesiastical authorities continued to be concerned about the multiplication of extra-regular communities and particularly what was considered the unstable and potentially troubling form of life of women who took the vow of chastity and adopted a particular habit without entering a convent.[48] Although they were not the main target, beguines were involved in a mid-thirteenth-century dispute[49] between the leaders of the University of Paris, including William of St. Amour, and the mendicant orders, over the increasing role played by the mendicants in academic life. In their efforts to discredit the friars, the secular masters also aimed at the beguines because of the women's association with the mendicants and their shared choice of a life of evangelical poverty while being in the world. In the works of important authors such as Jean de Meun and Rutebeuf, beguines became a symbol of hypocrisy.[50] Once the Cathar heresy had been eradicated, the formation of groups of semi-religious women and their involvement in the pastoral care of the faithful became less and less accepted. The history of the beguine movement for the next two centuries sees it regularly falling under

45 Grundmann, 80. The etymology of the word itself is contested, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1907) suggests a derivation from the old Flemish word *beghen* meaning "to pray" (see Beguines and Beghards, Vol. II, 389–90).

46 Hadewich of Brabant, for example, who probably lived among the beguines of Nivelles in Flanders, was in contact with a female hermit in Saxony, and she knew of like-minded women in Thuringia, Bohemia, England and Paris (Grundmann, 80).

47 The records of the city of Cologne apply the term simply to lay religious women as early as 1223, and Grundmann suggests that, at least according to the German evidence, by 1245 the word had lost all hint of heresy (80).

48 McDonnell, 95.

49 1253–58.

50 Moorman 125–31; Congar.

suspicion and being linked with heresy.[51] The beguine Marguerite Porete was burned in Paris in 1310[52] and religious women were burned in the Rhineland and southern France in 1318 and 1328 by Dominican inquisitors, among them Bernard Gui.[53] The movement was then caught in the struggle against the "heresy of the Free Spirit", also known as the "Beguine heresy". The fifteenth century was a time during which the ecclesiastical authorities increased their control over all forms of lay piety, with figures like Jean Gerson criticizing religious women, and Dominican inquisitors brandishing the threat of witchcraft.

However, during the thirteenth century, before the development of this ecclesiastical "backlash", pious women managed to find a space and to have their contribution recognized by the church authorities. Apart from the support the movement had won from the pope and influential church officials, and the saintly reputations of the northern beguines, the movement seems to have gradually gained wider acceptance by narrowing its focus to strict adherence to the ideals of poverty and chastity, distinguishing itself from heretical movements by abandoning apostolic activity and avoiding any public demands that the clergy and Church conform more closely to the apostolic model.[54] Using Saint Francis as her model – he died in 1226 when she was about ten years old – Douceline emulated his life, espousing not only his lack of possessions but his determined flight from wealth, refusing to call anything her own.[55] Her community was to consist primarily of educated women from upper-class or even noble families, but Douceline did not expect the same rigorous poverty of them; instead they were allowed to dedicate their wealth to the sustenance and stability of the community (5:11).

As will be further discussed below, Douceline was well connected and her social stature, as well as her saintly reputation and spiritual powers, not only assisted in ensuring the survival of her own founda-

51 Pope John XXII issued bulls condemning "women who call themselves beguines" (Grundmann, 185).

52 Grundmann, 183.

53 McNamara 1993 in Wiethaus 1993, 22.

54 Marguerite Porete's proselytizing and her book *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, with its clear criticism of the clergy and the Church, violated these constraints and hence she was burned in Paris in 1310.

55 Compare Douceline with the northern "model" beguine, Marie d'Oignies. Marie was the daughter of wealthy parents, who was compelled to marry at the age of 14 and who soon persuaded her husband to live chastely and give away their wealth to poor.