

Monastic Women and Religious Orders in Late Medieval Bologna, by Sherri Franks Johnson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. 262. ISBN: 9781107060852 (hardcover).

This original and informative study of monastic women in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Bologna is distinguished by a focus on how questions of affiliation to order, be it Benedictine, Augustinian, Camaldolese, Cistercian, Dominican, or other, influenced ways that nuns experienced their religious life. However, the study eschews examination of spiritual and liturgical practices, concentrating instead on the practicalities of institutional life—hence, the emphasis is more on the experience of communities than on individual nuns. As Johnson informs the reader, Bologna is a rich city for such an analysis, expanding from five to thirty-five convents during this period. In addition, Bologna's proximity to Rome meant that it was influenced by papal reform programs. As Johnson further demonstrates in her chapters on civic influences on institutional life, fluctuations between clerical and civic control in Bologna during this period provide insight into how nunneries were connected to their urban environment.

Johnson's book takes explicit aim at the thesis that medieval women struggled to receive adequate pastoral care from fellow monastics and that the male reluctance to embrace the *cura monialium* represents a sign of the declining status of nuns. By situating her study in this time period, Johnson considers how the rise of centralizing orders, such as the Dominicans and Cistercians, influenced ways that women monastics negotiated and received pastoral care. She suggests that expectations of pastoral care were a product of such centralization and that in fact many nuns preferred the experience of "the diverse and localized monasticism of the earlier Middle Ages," which included different provisions for pastoral services (18). Through case studies of individual institutions in Bologna, showing how some sought affiliation with centralized orders while others resisted such affiliation, Johnson argues that "these convents demonstrate that communities of religious women could have ambiguous relationships with orders not only because of the difficulty of gaining acceptance from monastic men, but also because of their own alternative ways of understanding their place in the church" (96). She suggests that, although some convents embraced new reforms or rules, other convents might cultivate an "institutional limbo," not being clearly affiliated with one order or another. She offers the insight that sisters might be more strongly aligned with their community than with an order *per se*. A study of liturgical books might add interesting information

to supplement Johnson's analysis here, providing another perspective on how women monastics occupied or semi-occupied a particular order.

In her chapters on the importance of civic life in Bologna to conventual experience, Johnson carefully analyzes municipal records to demonstrate how the city supported monastic institutions. She finds that there was extensive provision for women's monastic life, though such support seemed to exclude the oldest and most well-established Benedictine convents (perhaps because they were less in need or because civic officials wanted to support the institutions of their own daughters, she conjectures). Usefully, Johnson compares Bologna's civic support with that of other cities in Italy, suggesting that an important part of Italian civic governance included "supporting the growth and preservation of religious houses" (155).

Because Bologna experienced a period in which the pope (and his representative Cardinal) exerted control over the city, Johnson explores how, in contrast to previous civic priorities, the Cardinal suppressed women's institutions, appropriating their resources for papal advancement. Johnson traces the movement of the nuns among different institutions as convents were suppressed and then restored after the end of papal rule. Helpfully argued with detailed maps and tables, Johnson also documents how many convents moved from suburban environments into the city center, largely as a response to the unstable political climate of Italian city-states in the thirteenth century. She analyzes how such relocations often involved intricate negotiations over jurisdiction, as proximity to the local Bishop provided an opportunity for him to attempt to exercise oversight over formerly exempt houses. This chapter also provides material on how space and location functioned in various monastic arrangements, though there is little engagement with the extensive scholarship on nuns' spatial identifications. However, Johnson does discuss various ways that the 1298 papal bull *Periculoso* affected practices of enclosure in the city.

Johnson's focus on the issue of affiliation to order is perhaps most interestingly expressed in her chapter on "peaceful unions and hostile takeovers," which documents how women's monastic communities might merge with or, in some cases, take over another house. Some moves could indeed be hostile, as one community might deploy misogynist rhetoric to paint a portrait of dissolute nuns in order to justify and advance their appropriation of another house's resources. Such material is quite fascinating and demonstrates how fierce competition existed among both houses and orders in the world of women's monasticism, as scholars have shown to be the case in other cities.

Johnson's book represents a well-argued and documented study of Italian

monasticism, largely based on thorough and skillful scrutiny of archival evidence. Although she concentrates on the years between 1190 and 1290, her analysis often takes the reader into later centuries and even to the period of sixteenth century reforms, following some issues as they unfold in time and marking some important changes in monastic life. Throughout her study, Johnson provides comparisons to convents in other cities and occasionally, other countries. However, the concentration on female monastic institutions in a single city offers a surprising perspective on how many obstacles medieval nuns were forced to negotiate to secure the future of their community. The reader is left with a sense of admiration for the multiple and clever strategies women monastics deployed to maintain their livelihood. While Johnson provides some discussion of male monastic institutions, often the reader wonders what particular role gender played in a variety of these strategies and issues. Johnson's book, clearly written with a good bibliography and adequate index, provides much information of interest to scholars of female monasticism. In particular, the focus on religious orders addresses a gap in current scholarship and suggests new ways that scholars might frame questions of profession, discipline, and attachment to community and place.

Margaret Aziza Pappano
Queen's University