Nuns as 'Sponsae Christi': The Legal Status of the Medieval Oblates of Tor de' Specchi

by MAYA MASKARINEC
University of Southern California
E-mail: maskarin@usc.edu

This article examines the unusual history and legal status of the Tor de' Specchi community, founded by Francesca Romana (d. 1440) in Rome, in the face of shifting expectations for religious women in Counter-Reformation Catholicism. It is argued that Francesca Romana had sought to carve out a religious path for women distinct from that of nuns as brides of Christ ('sponsae Christi'). The article demonstrates the community's difficulties in maintaining this way of life in the face of Pope Pius V's 1566 bull Circa Pastoralis, *which extended the Council of Trent's 1563 decrees on enclosure* (clausura) *to all nuns of every order.*

I n 1566 Pope Pius v issued a bull, *Circa Pastoralis*, that extended the Council of Trent's 1563 decrees on enclosure (*clausura*) to all nuns (*moniales*) of every order, whether they lived in monasteries or private houses, whether they had made their professions openly or silently, even if they belonged to a foundation where the rules of enclosure had never before been instituted.[1] In response, the un-cloistered oblates of Tor de' Specchi in Rome, founded by the Roman noblewoman Francesca Romana in the early 1430s, commissioned the Spanish canon lawyer, Martín de Azpilcueta (d. 1586), Il Navarro, to defend them. His defence, a *consilium* (a formal legal opinion), argued that the oblates of Tor de' Specchi were not 'true nuns' ('vere monache') and thus were not bound by the regulations of *Circa Pastoralis* on *clausura*.[2] This article

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[1] Pius V, *Circa Pastoralis* (1566), in *Codicis iuris canonici fontes*, ed. P. Gasparri, i, Rome 1947, 201–3, no. 112.

[2] Martín de Azpilcueta, *Consiliorum sive responsorum libri quinque iuxta ordinem decretalium dispositi*, Rome 1590, 751–9, *consilium* 81. The most detailed discussion of the text, to my knowledge, is M. Sensi's 'Tor de' Specchi e il movimento religioso femminile nel Quattrocento', in A. Bartolomei Romagnoli (ed.), *La canonizzazione di Santa Francesca*

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investigates the peculiar and unique history of the medieval oblates of Tor de' Specchi that made possible Navarro's line of argument. It shows how the early modern construct of the 'true nun', which ever more emphatically insisted on a literalising application of the medieval idea of nuns as 'brides of Christ' ('sponsae Christi'), fitted uneasily with the idea and ideal of the Tor de' Specchi community as set forth by its founder, Francesca Romana.

In the past decades there has been flourishing scholarship on women's communities in medieval and early modern Europe, including that of so-called 'quasi-religious' women, such as the oblates of Tor de' Specchi, whose way of life placed them somewhere in the spectrum between fully-fledged religious orders and laywomen.[3] The history of *clausura* and its implications for women's communities has also come under closer scrutiny.[4] Recently, scholars have cautioned against exaggerating the novelty of sixteenth-century decrees: *clausura* had long been a defining feature of many communities' religious identity, and a long medieval history of legislation and legal commentary preceded the decrees of the Council of Trent and *Circa Pastoralis*.[5] Nor should the results of Pius' *Circa Pastoralis* be exaggerated; even where *clausura* was newly enforced many communities continued to maintain contacts with the outside world. Nevertheless, recent work has demonstrated the degree to which the mid-sixteenth

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Romana: santità, cultura e istituzioni a Roma tra medioevo ed età moderna, Florence 2013, 259–302 at pp. 286–300.

[3] The bibliography on Francesca Romana is extensive. A good starting point is A. Bartolomei Romagnoli (ed.), *Francesca Romana: la santa, il monastero e la città alla fine del Medioevo*, Florence 2009. Regarding 'quasi-religious' women in late medieval/early modern Rome see Q. Mazzonis, 'Women's semi-religious life in Rome (15th–17th century)', in P. Prebys (ed.), *Early modern Rome, 1341–1667*, Ferrara 2011, 488–98; J. Pennings, 'Semi-religious women in 15th century Rome', *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Historisch Instituut te Rome/Papers of the Dutch Institute in Rome* xlvii (1987), 115–45; and, for Tor de' Specchi especially, Sensi, 'Tor de' Specchi'. For the diversity of women's religious communities in late medieval Italy more generally see especially C. M. Mooney, 'Nuns, tertiaries, and quasi-religious: the religious identities of late medieval Italian holy women', *Medieval Feminist Forum* xlii (2006), 68–92.

[4] For a general introduction see F. Medioli, 'An unequal law: the enforcement of "clausura" before and after the Council of Trent', in C. Meek (ed.), *Women in Renaissance and early modern Europe*, Dublin 2000, 136–52, and T. Schulenburg, 'Strict active enclosure and its effects on the female monastic experience (*ca.* 500–1100)', in J. A. Nichols and L. T. Shank (eds), *Distant echoes: medieval religious women*, Kalamazoo 1984, 51–86. Older but still useful is J. R. Cain, 'Cloister and the apostolate of religious women', *Review for Religious* xxvii/2 (1968), 243–80.

[5] See especially the introduction to G. Pomata and G. Zarri, *I monasteri femminili come centri di cultura fra Rinascimento e Barocco*, Rome 2005, pp. xxxvii–xliv, and E. M. Makowski, *'A pernicious sort of woman': quasi-religious women and canon lawyers in the later Middle Ages*, Washington, DC 2005. See also E. M. Makowski, *Canon law and cloistered women: Periculoso and its commentators, 1298–1545*, Washington, DC 1997.

century was a turning point in the personal and communal lives of many religious and quasi-religious women.

It is also amply clear that these changes were often contested. Resistance took varied forms for varied reasons. Some nuns fled and committed suicide rather than be cloistered.[6] In some places local authorities stepped in to protest. In Tuscany Cosimo I de' Medici, though he had himself previously approved provisions for the reform of convents, expressed his misgivings about the Tridentine decrees of enclosure, arguing that they would be a source of economic difficulty for religious communities, would discourage women from entering monasteries and, above all, that they were unnecessary.[7] In Bavaria Albrecht V adduced both the long-standing traditions and high status of the women (and their visitors) in certain convents in Munich as reasons against strict enclosure.[8] Communities, as examples from Tuscany and Naples reveal, petitioned for the relaxing of rules on economic grounds (many convents relied on the sales of their products as a major source of income), and individual nuns petitioned for special exemptions based on health or age.[9] Most common, probably more so than any surviving documentation can reveal, must have been passive defiance, such as nuns failing to carry out the architectural renovations required for *clausura.*

Tor de' Specchi was a community that actively resisted enclosure in the late sixteenth century. The community's approach is historically illuminating. Rather than petition for an exemption from the rules of *clausura,* the nuns hired a lawyer to demonstrate that *Circa Pastoralis* was, by definition, not applicable to them. This defence goes to the heart of the unusual history and legal status of the Tor de' Specchi community and the shifting definitions of and expectations for women, religious and lay, in Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Francesca Romana's life, visions and the community that she founded carved out a possible path for women who wished to dedicate themselves, as Christians, to performing charity in the world. Navarro's *consilium* ostensibly affirmed the continued validity of this way of life – yet it also reinforced the definition of nuns as chaste virgins whose only proper place could be in the cloister, and soon thereafter, of their own accord, the oblates of Tor de' Specchi accepted a more cloistered way of life and a reframing of their foundress as a nun.

[6] R. Creytens, 'La riforma dei monasteri femminili dopo i Decreti Tridentini', in *Il Concilio di Trento e la riforma tridentina*, Rome 1965, 45–83 at p. 67.

[7] S. Evangelisti, '"We do not have it, and we do not want it": women, power, and convent reform in Florence', *Sixteenth Century Journal* xxxiv/3 (2003), 677–700 at pp. 680–6.

[8] U. Strasser, *State of virginity: gender, religion and politics in an early modern Catholic state*, Ann Arbor, MI 2004, 79.

[9] C. Russo, *I monasteri femminili di clausura a Napoli nel secolo XVII*, Naples 1970, 46; Evangelisti, '"We do not have it"', 688–9.

Navarro's Consilium

Precisely when and under what circumstances Navarro produced his *consilium* in defence of the Tor de' Specchi community is unclear. The text was published posthumously together with some of Navarro's other *consilia.* Early modern religious communities commonly employed lawers to assist them in their dealings with the outside world.[10] For their defence the wealthy and well-connected community of Tor de' Specchi turned to one of the leading lawyers of the time. Navarro had established himself in Rome in 1567, a year after Pius V promulgated the *Circa Pastoralis.*[11] He was held in high esteem by Pius V (r. 1566–72) and his successor, Gregory XIII (r. 1572–85), who accepted Navarro's reasoning that *Circa Pastoralis* was not applicable to Tor de' Specchi's oblates and thus that the community need not be subject to *clausura.*[12]

Navarro's *consilium* sets out to answer 'whether the *monachae* or *oblatae* of the Tor de' Specchi of Rome should be held to *clausura* just like other *moniales*'. The members of Tor de' Specchi were, by their own definition, oblates (*oblatae*), the medieval term for those who had dedicated themselves (or been dedicated by their parents or guardians) to God. This usually took the form of service to a monastery or other religious institution (such as a hospital), but the specific terms and conditions of oblates varied significantly from community to community. The oblates of Tor de' Specchi were unusual in the degree to which they functioned as an independent community. Navarro's *consilium* posits that Tor de' Specchi is not a community of *moniales*, the medieval term for nuns used by *Circa Pastoralis* (as well as in Boniface VIII's 1298 bull *Periculoso* that had first introduced *clausura* as a general rule for monastic communities). Accordingly, since they are not nuns, the women are not subject to the decrees of *Circa Pastoralis* and need not observe *clausura.*

To argue that the oblates are not true nuns, Navarro's *consilium* focuses on the nature and content of the community's vows. Navarro begins by considering (following the logic of *Circa Pastoralis*) whether the oblates have made professions openly or silently, allowing that if they have made professions then they should be held to the observance of *clausura.*[13] Navarro defends the logic of this line of reasoning with a series of more general arguments, such as that no law or other ordinance should apply to that to which the words are not fitting, meaning that *Periculoso*, the decrees of

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[10] This is indicated by the evidence from Naples: Russo, *I monasteri femminili*, 34.

[11] G. Castellani, 'Azpilcueta, Martín de', in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, Rome 1930, v. 719.

[12] Navarro references this outcome in his *Consilium* 81, at de Azpilcueta, *Consiliorum*, 760, which is likewise on behalf of the Tor de' Specchi community, and argues for the community's right to elect its 'president' for life (rather than for a term of three years like other nuns).   [13] De Azpilcueta, *Consiliorum*, 752, no. 81.1.

the Council of Trent and the *Circa Pastoralis* are not applicable to women who were offered (*oblatis*) to monasteries, and that no-one should be forced to live a more austere life than that to which they have consented, meaning that if the oblates of Tor de' Specchi did not choose to live under *clausura* they should not be forced to observe it (unless they can be shown to be true nuns).[14]

The wording of the Tridentine decree on *clausura* had left open much ambiguity as to its scope, as is revealed by queries to the congregation tasked with executing the Council of Trent's decrees.[15] However, as Navarro was well aware, *Circa Pastoralis* had emphatically spelled out that its decrees were to be applicable to communities of religious women who had not entered their communities committing themselves to *clausura*. Navarro tackles this obstacle, firstly, by specifying that oblates are seculars not regulars (and thus not truly religious women). Then, in the second part of his *consilium*, Navarro confronts the many similarities between the life of the Tor de' Specchi oblates and that of nuns that might suggest, based on outward appearances, that the oblates were indeed nuns in everything but name. Again, Navarro takes the tack of arguing that, despite these similarities, the fact that the members of Tor de' Specchi have not professed vows sets them apart.[16]

Moreover, Navarro draws attention to the bull that the nuns received from Eugenius IV in 1433 in which the women are called oblates.[17] If the women had been Benedictine nuns (which one might assume from their relationship with the Benedictine monastery of S. Maria Nova), so Navarro reasons, there would have been no reason for the women to obtain this bull granting them permission for their way of life. Moreover, this papal bull allows Navarro to distinguish the oblates of Tor de' Specchi from communities of Beguines, laywomen who had devoted themselves to performing charity but had taken no permanent religious vows and whose way of life, even where tolerated, was never approved by the papacy. Eugenius' bull, according to Navarro, sanctioned the oblates' way of life – as seculars. (As a side note we may observe that an appeal to earlier papal sanction of her community proved to be of no avail for Ippolita Arrighetti, the prioress of the Florentine convent of St Catherine of Siena, who, as Evangelisti has documented, defiantly protested to an apostolic visitor that 'We do not have it [*clausura*] and we do not want it', on the grounds that her community's constitution, involving solemn vows but not *clausura*, had been approved by Paul III in 1542.)[18]

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[14] Ibid. 752–3, no. 81.2–3.
[15] R. Creytens, 'La giurisprudenza della Sacra Congregazione del Concilio nella questione della clausura delle monache (1564–1576)', *Apollinaris* xxxvii (1964), 251–85.   [16] De Azpilcueta, *Consiliorum*, 755, no. 81.10.   [17] Ibid. 757, no. 81.17.
[18] Evangelisti, '"We do not have it"', 693–9 at p. 695.

Navarro's *consilium* thus argues against the necessity of *clausura* for the Tor de' Specchi community by framing it as a community of seculars, similar to other female religious communities in outward appearances but not in essence, that is, as defined by the nature of their religious commitment. This, together with the exceptional papal approval that they had received, according to Navarro, rendered the existence and un-cloistered condition of their unusual community permissible.

'True nuns' as sponsae Christi

Navarro's *consilium* makes use of legal finesse in arguing for the distinction between oblates and true nuns. But *Circa Pastoralis* had sought to avoid such legal tricks by extending the reach of the decree to all nuns (*moniales*) 'by whatsoever other name they should be called'.[19] In his *consilium* Navarro acknowledges and responds to this expansive definition by broaching the rationale of *clausura* as it pertained to 'true' nuns:

Moreover, nuns ['moniales'] are more specifically called brides of Christ ['sponsae Christi'], such that through marriages they are said to commit a certain form of bigamy… and thus it is right that the Pope should ordain for them greater protection of their continence and chastity insomuch as they are brides of Christ, whose vicar he is, than of that of other women, who, since they are not yet married to Christ with a solemn vow, have as much free will with respect to things to which they have not committed themselves as other free Christians.[20]

Here Navarro acknowledges and accepts Pius' decision to enforce *clausura* for all nuns. Because nuns are brides of Christ, *sponsae Christi*, they must remain chaste if they are not to commit adultery, and the pope, as Christ's vicar, has a personal responsibility for ensuring this chastity.

In introducing this definition of nuns as brides of Christ, Navarro drew on a long-standing image and idea, which from early Christian roots had become increasingly concrete in Christian thought, and in Counter-Reformation Catholicism was hardening into a firm and fixed definition. Yet Francesca Romana was unusual among her contemporaries in not framing herself and her community in these terms.

The image of Christian consecrated virgins as brides of Christ ('sponsae Christi') dates back at least as far as the second/third century to the Church Father Tertullian in his efforts to impose discipline on the

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[19] 'aut quocumque alio nomine appellentur': Pius v, *Circa Pastoralis* (1566), *Codicis iuris canonici fontes*, i. 201–3, no. 112.1.
[20] De Azpilcueta, *Consiliorum*, 753, no. 81.6.

virgins of Carthage.[21] In a letter to the noblewoman Eustochium, Jerome (d. 420), drawing on the Song of Songs, wove the *sponsa Christi* into an extended metaphor that glorified the state of virginity and provided a guide for the behaviour of consecrated virgins.[22] As a bride of Christ, Eustochium was invited to feel superior to those who had married on earth; yet Christ is concurrently framed as a jealous bridegroom who does not want others to see his bride's face. For this reason, Eustochium is to avoid public places as much as possible and be attentive to whom she allows into her home.

In the course of the Middle Ages, in the hands of Christian thinkers and practitioners, the metaphor of nuns as *sponsae Christi* became an increasingly concrete lived reality.[23] The nun was the spouse of Christ, entering into a loving union with God. Hagiographers were now prone to frame female saints, old and new, as brides, rather than soldiers, of Christ.[24] Rites for the consecration of virgins took on more pronounced similarities to marriage ceremonies, including the bestowal of rings and crowns, symbolising the bond with Christ.[25] At the forefront of these developments were female German mystics from north of the Alps, yet two of the women who had the most pronounced and publicised experiences as brides of Christ were women who spent considerable portions of their later lives in Rome.

As presented in the *Life* written by her confessor, Raymond of Capua, Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) resisted her parents' attempts to find her a husband. Meanwhile her inner life was characterised by her ever more insistent longing for perfection in faith. Christ responds to her, 'I will marry you to me in faith' ('desponsabo te mihi in fide'), but Catherine persists in her quest for perfection.[26] Taking her cue from a medieval legend of the mystical marriage of the virgin martyr Catherine of Alexandria with

[21] D. Elliott, *The bride of Christ goes to hell: metaphor and embodiment in the lives of pious women, 200–1500*, Philadelphia, PA 2012, 30–62.

[22] *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae* 22, ed. I. Hilberg, New York, 1970, repr. CSEL, 1910–18; translation and annotation by F. A. Wright, in *Select letters of St Jerome*, Cambridge, MA 1933, repr. 1980, 52–159.

[23] E. B. Archibald, 'Bride of Christ/Brautmystik', in K. M. Wilson and N. Margolis (eds), *Women in the Middle Ages: an encyclopedia*, Westport, CN 2004, i. 122–6; J. Bugge, *Virginitas: an essay in the history of a medieval ideal*, The Hague 1975.

[24] Diane L. Mockridge, 'Marital imagery in six late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century *vitae* of female saints', in L. L. Coon and others (ed.), *That gentle strength: historical perspectives on women in Christianity*, Charlottesville, VA 1990, 60–78.

[25] Gabriella Zarri, *Recinti: donne, clausura e matrimonio nella prima età moderna*, Bologna 2000, esp. pp. 267–82.

[26] Raymond of Capua, *Life of Catherine of Siena* 1.12, AASS, April iii, 853–959 (BHL 1702), here 881E–82D, trans. C. Kearns, in *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, Wilmington, DE 1994, 106–9.

Christ, Catherine of Siena too came to wed Christ.[27] On the day before the start of the Lenten fast, while everyone else was feasting and Catherine fasted alone in her cell, God appeared to reward her by taking her as his bride. With the prophet David accompanying the ceremony on his harp, Mary takes hold of Catherine's right hand and asks Christ to marry Catherine. And so Christ does, placing a golden ring with four pearls and a diamond on her ring-finger, pronouncing her his bride. Raymond adds that though Catherine was reluctant to speak of it, the ring remained on her finger, visible to her though not to others.

Extensive marital imagery is also to be found in the visions of Bridget of Sweden (d. 1373), the mother of eight children. After the death of her husband, Bridget received a call, from Christ himself, to become his bride. In her earliest documented visions Christ reminds her that he has chosen her as his bride and instructs Bridget in her duties so that she be ready whenever her bridegroom chooses a day for their wedding ('nupcias'), promising that 'If you do this, then your heart will be with my heart', and 'you will rest in my divine arms'.[28] Mary also appears to Bridget, advising her on her spiritual wardrobe – including a crown, a sign of her future chastity.[29] The benefits of spiritual marriage ('coniugium spirituale') are contrasted explicitly with the sinful motivations that inspire so many couples of this world ('coniuges temporales').[30] Most astonishingly, Bridget's spiritual union with God was to bear fruit.[31] In a vision she received one Christmas, Bridget felt 'a wonderful sensible movement in her heart like that of a living child ("puer vivus") turning and turning around'.[32] Mary appears to Bridget to assure her that this is a sign of Christ coming into her heart: 'As my son has called you his new bride, so I now call you my daughter-in-law [*nurum*] who belongs to my son.'[33]

Dyan Elliott has argued that in the later Middle Ages female mystics' appropriation of the language of spiritual marriage elicited suspicion.[34] Hostile clerics expressed concerns about such marriages gone wrong, that is, contracted with the devil rather than with Christ, raising fears that women who claimed the title of bride of Christ were in fact witches.

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[27] For this legend, with further bibliography, see Zarri, *Recinti*, 288–311.

[28] Sancta Birgitta, *Revelaciones,* published by Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm 1956–2002, <https://riksarkivet.se/crb>; trans. D. Searby, with introduction and notes by B. Morris in *The revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, New York 2006–15, here especially bk I.2 at vol. i. 54.

[29] Sancta Birgitta, *Revelaciones*, bk I.7; see also I.20.   [30] Ibid. bk I.26.

[31] Gabor Klaniczay, 'The mystical pregnancy of Birgitta and the invisible stigmata of Catherine: bodily signs of supernatural communication in the lives of two mystics', in M. H. Oen and U. Falkeid (eds), *Sanctity and female authorship: Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena*, New York–London 2020, 159–78 at pp. 168–70.

[32] Sancta Birgitta, *Revelaciones*, bk. VI.88 at vol. iii. 155–6 at p. 155.   [33] Ibid.

[34] Elliott, *Bride of Christ.*

If this was indeed the case, we might posit that the same trajectory may have also fed into the increasingly literalising application, in Counter-Reformation thought, of nuns' obligations as brides of Christ.

For medieval canonists, nuns' obligation to preserve their chastity 'took on an almost mythical significance and importance'.[35] And in his authoritative catechism, the sixteenth-century Jesuit Petrus Canisius answered the question whether earthly marriage is permitted to everyone with a forceful no, explaining that anyone who dedicates ('spospondit') herself to God and accepts the holy veil is now married ('nupsit') and 'were she to marry according to the common law of wedlock (*communi lege coniugii*), she would commit adultery (*adulterium*)'.[36] The concern with nuns' obligations as *sponsae Christi* is also reflected in an educational treatise for nuns published by the bishop of Verona, Agostino Valier, in 1575.[37] This text presents convents as fortresses. Yet nuns are nevertheless threatened by the devil who seeks to dampen their love of Christ, their bridegroom, and alienate them from their union with him.[38] As presented by Valier, monasteries and *clausura* were instituted to provide for and preserve nuns' ardent love of God.[39] The perfect nun is the 'true bride (*vera sposa*) of Christ', 'dead to the world but united with Christ'.[40] She makes her cell Christ's chamber (*stanza*).[41] Most importantly, a spectre of punishment looms over nuns who do not prove themselves to be worthy brides of Christ. Valier conjures up how at the Last Judgement testimony will be given against faulty nuns, not least by Christ their bridegroom, who will reprimand them as faulty wives.[42]

Francesca Romana and the oblates of Tor de' Specchi

In the face of this increasing identification of nuns as brides of Christ, the oblates of Tor de' Specchi stood out as anomalous. In her visions, Francesca had forged a more maternal relationship to Christ, and the

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[35] Makowski, *Canon law*, 126. See also p. 109.

[36] P. Canisio, *Summa doctrinae christianae*, Salamanca 1570, fo. 7ov, trans. and cited in G. Zarri, 'Gender, religious institutions and social discipline: the reform of the regulars', in J. C. Brown and R. C. Davis (eds), *Gender and society in Renaissance Italy*, London 1998, 193–212 at p. 208.

[37] A. Valier, *Ricordi di monsignor Agost. Valerio, vesc. di Verona lasciati alle monache nella sua visitatione fatta l'anno del santiss. giubileo, 1575*, Venice 1575. This edition was not available to me so here I follow the later edition (Verona 1737) reprinted by order of Giovanni Bragadino. The text is discussed by Elisabetta Patrizi, 'Tridentine renewal and spiritual education of women in the experience of female monasticism: the case of Verona in the sixteenth century', *Historia y memoria de la educación* iv (2016), 19–48 at pp. 33–45.   [38] Valier, *Ricordi*, ch. ii at pp. 17–19.

[39] Ibid. ch. iv at p. 21.   [40] Ibid. ch. vii at pp. 31, 33.   [41] Ibid. ch. xiv at p. 56.

[42] Ibid. ch. xii at pp. 50–1.

ascetic model that she proposed and which was continued by her followers at Tor de' Specchi was not that of the consecrated virgin. It was a life focused on charity and obedience more than chastity, a life that envisioned Christ as the incarnate word and divine saviour, who had revealed to his disciples a model to be imitated, more so than a heavenly spouse.

Bridget of Sweden died in Rome in 1373. Though her sanctity was contested she was canonised by Pope Boniface IX in 1391, a decision that was reaffirmed by councils in the early fifteenth century. Catherine of Siena died in Rome in 1380 and though she was not canonised until 1461 she was well known and highly venerated by her followers after her death. Shortly after her death her confessor and biographer, Raymond of Capua, transported her head from Rome to Siena, and her right arm was placed in a silver reliquary at the Roman church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva.[43] These women, then, offered models of sanctity that were familiar to Francesca Romana – indeed, Bridget even appeared in one of Francesca's visions to encourage her.[44] Yet despite similarities between these three noblewomen, Francesca was not to follow the spiritual path of these brides of Christ.

In the life of Francesca written by Giovanni Mattiotti (her confessor), Francesca is most often described as the 'handmaiden' ('ancilla') of Christ; in that of Fra Ippolito (the prior of S. Maria Nova, a close follower) she is characterised as 'the servant of God' ('serva di Dio').[45] As these terms indicate, the profile of Francesca in these lives is one most concerned with service to God. Like Bridget, Francesca had married at a young age, and like Bridget she had children. Though chastity is an important recurring theme in her life and visions, obedience plays an even greater role, including obedience to the demands of her family. According to both lives, as a young child Francesca had desired to remain a virgin but, against her will, was given by her parents in marriage to a wealthy nobleman.[46] Immediately thereafter she became gravely ill, and it was only

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[43] J. Barclay Lloyd, 'Saint Catherine of Siena's tomb and its place in Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Rome: narration, translation and veneration', *Papers of the British School at Rome* lxxxiii (2015), 111–48 at pp. 123–4.

[44] Visio XLI, ed. A. Bartolomei Romagnoli, in *Santa Francesca Romana: edizione critica dei trattati latini di Giovanni Mattiotti*, Vatican 1994, 573–5; R. Incarbone Giornetti, '*Tractati della vita et delli visioni' di Santa Francesca Romana*, Rome 2014, 134–6.

[45] Fra Ippolito, 'Beata Francisca illustris: la vita di Santa Francesca Romana scritta da fra Ippolito, 1453 circa', ed. G. Lunardi with an introduction in *1384–1984: Ieri e oggi. Francesca Romana segno dei tempi*, Rome 1984, 41–54, <http://www.gliscritti.it/blog/entry/682> (I have not been able to consult the printed version of this text). Once, at her deathbed, Fra Ippolito refers to her as the bride of Christ.

[46] *Vita* 1, ed. Bartolomei Romagnoli, *Santa Francesca Romana*, 329–30; ed. Incarbone Giornetti, 'Tractati', 1–2; Fra Ippolito, *Beata Francisca illustris*; referenced by S. Nanni, 'Sant'Alessio e Roma', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome: Italie et Méditerranée modernes*

when St Alexius appeared to her in a dream, touching her with his cloak, that she was restored to full health – to live as a married woman.

The vision takes on even greater significance when St Alexius' profile of sanctity is taken into account. St Alexius was a saint renowned for the resolute and unswerving preservation of his own virginity. As recounted by his *Life*, Alexius was a late antique nobleman who fled from Rome immediately after his wedding so as not to consummate the marriage that had been arranged for him, returning to Rome only as a beggar unbeknownst to his family.[47] Thereupon he lived, undetected, as a servant in his family's household. Yet by curing Francesca, Alexius' divine intervention made clear that his own stark insistence on preserving his chastity was not appropriate to her. Only after twenty years of marriage and bearing three children would Francesca convince her husband to adopt a chaste marriage. Indeed, as reported in the vernacular life of Mattiotti (which predates the Latin translation, but did not circulate widely), Francesca became so sick whenever her husbanded demanded of her his marriage debt (*lo debito matrimoniale*) that out of compassion he finally ceased asking for it, allowing her to live in chastity.[48] This is a narrative that esteems the discharge of familial obligations and frames obedience as Francesca's supreme virtue.

In 1425, in front of the icon of Mary at S. Maria Nova by the ancient Forum Romanum, Francesca presented herself as an oblate of the monks of Monte Oliveto based at S. Maria Nova. The document drawn up for the purpose survives as edited from a transcription made of it by the Benedictine scholar Constantino Caetani in the early seventeenth century.[49] In it, Francesca offers herself ('offero me') and is received, as an oblate of that monastery ('pro oblate eiusdem monasterii'). She promises ('promitto') to perpetually maintain her oblation, the conversion of her ways and obedience. There is no mention of chastity in this contract.

At first, Francesca and the followers that she had gathered around herself continued to live in their own houses, but in 1432, on the feast of the monastic founder St Benedict, Francesca, in ecstasy, received a vision from Gregory the Great, accompanied by two angels.[50] Gregory urged her to follow the path that Jesus Christ had revealed to his disciples and to be humble and patient ('humilis et patiens'), furthermore directing

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et contemporaines cxxiv/2 (2012), <https://journals.openedition.org/mefrim/916>, ¶21.

[47] For an introduction to the cult of St Alexius in Rome see Nanni, 'Sant'Alessio e Roma'. [48] Giornetti edn, 7.

[49] 'Nel segno dell'oblazione: Francesca Romana e la Regola di Tor de' Specchi', ed. A. Bartolomei Romagnoli, in Romagnoli, *Francesca Romana: la santa*, 87–160, 155–6, no. 1; 'L'istituzione delle oblate di Tor de' Specchi secondo i documenti', ed. Placido Lugano, *Rivista storica benedettina* xiv (1923), 272–308 at pp. 274–5, no. 1.

[50] Visio xxiv (20 Mar. 1432) (Romagnoli edn), 495–8; (Giornetti edn), 77–80.

her to take the example of bees, who find a location for their family to gather and produce honey and wax. The image is one of industrious productivity, not one of reserved self-restraint. In subsequent months Francesca's vision of a fixed abode for her followers became more concrete. She, however, continued to live at home with her ailing husband, and Agnese di Paolo Lelli assumed the formal leadership of the community.

In early March 1433 a group of women asked to be admitted to the new congregation, promising in front of the altar of S. Maria Nova, to its new president (*gubernatrix*) Agnese, to observe, in perpetuity, poverty, chastity and obedience.[51] Here the women came closest to what may be regarded as a formal vow. Navarro was familiar with this document and in his *consilium* was keen to stress a distinction between speaking/uttering (*emittere*) and professing (*profiteor*).[52] This, according to him, distinguished the oblates' 'promise' from a nun's 'profession'.

The women received permission from Pope Eugenius IV to live together in a house (*casa*) adapted for their use and habitation, in a convenient and honest location in Rome – though, as has often been remarked, Eugenius nevertheless withheld approval of their way of life ('lo stato delle dette donne').[53] As Navarro, who was likewise familiar with this document, emphasises, in it the women are designated as oblates, not nuns.[54] According to the bull, the women had requested that they might serve God in a spirit of humility and imitate the apostolic life by living together and in charity, obedient to one of their own whom they judged suitable for this responsibility and whom they themselves would elect. Charity and obedience, but not chastity, are mentioned as the guiding principles of the community.

The women, with the exception of Francesca, moved into a site adapted for their purposes, near the foot of the Capitoline, Tor de' Specchi. The site in question was an older medieval tower and agglomeration of small dwellings surrounded by a wall; architecturally, Tor de' Specchi was a 'house' – not a convent.[55] This is particularly apparent if Tor de' Specchi

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[51] 'Nel segno' (Romagnoli edn), 146–7, no. 2.
[52] De Azpilcueta, *Consiliorum*, 758, no. 81.22.
[53] The papal bull dates from 1433 and was directed to Archbishop Gaspare, the vicar of Rome, who was to verify the situation and see to its execution: Latin ed. Bartolomei Romagnoli, 'Nel segno', 147–8, no. 3; Italian ed. Lugano, 'L'istituzione', 279–81, no. 2; it was succeeded by a bull issued by Gaspare to the oblates: ed. Bartolomei Romagnoli, 'Nel segno', 149–51, no. 4; ed. Lugano, 281–4, no. 3.
[54] De Azpilcueta, *Consiliorum*, 756, no. 81.14.
[55] P. Marchetti, 'Architettura a Tor de' Specchi', in Romagnoli, *Francesca Romana: la santa*, 161–86, 175–85. In the years after Francesca's death these buildings were combined under one roof. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for advising consideration of this spatial perspective.

is compared with the Roman convent of S. Sisto Vecchio, intended by Innocent III (r.1198–1216) to be a model monastic community for women.[56] S. Sisto (which received its first nuns in 1221 under St Dominic's direction) was located in a rural district of Rome. The convent, complete with cloister, strong walls and barred windows, was built to maximise the nuns' isolation from the outside world. It initially met with resistance from nuns (and their families), who did not want to be cut off from society, but after a rocky start the site continued to house nuns until 1575 when the community moved to SS. Domenico e Sisto on the Quirinal. In contrast to S. Sisto, Tor de' Specchi was located in a densely populated part of Rome, and all that separated the women from the bustling streets of Rome was their front door (which they frequently exited).

From 1433 onward the oblation made by women joining the community was both to the monks of Monte Oliveto at S. Maria Nova and to the community of Tor de' Specchi. The women promised to remain part of their community, to change their way of life, and to be obedient to the statutes of the community.[57] Three years later, in 1436, after the death of her husband, Francesca joined the community at Tor de' Specchi, assuming formal leadership for the last few years of her life.

Throughout her life, Francesca Romana had frequent visions. These were recorded by her confessor, Giovanni Mattiotti, and published by him in different versions after her death.[58] They reveal her (and her confessor's) perception of her relationship with Christ and the spiritual world that she occupied. Francesca was preoccupied by the problem of salvation as brought about by Christ, and in her visions Christ appeared above all in two guises: as celestial king and as the Word made flesh.[59] It is in the latter guise that Francesca had her most personal and direct interactions with Christ. These are not with the adult Christ but rather with Christ as an infant and with his mother, Mary.

In her visions, Francesca was a frequent spectator of and participant in events related to Christ as the 'infant incarnate Word' ('lo Verbo incarnato piccolecto'; 'Verbum incarnatum in infantile etate').[60] These include

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[56] Brenda Bolton, 'Daughters of Rome: all one in Christ Jesus', in W. J. Sheils and D. S. Wood (eds), *Women in the Church* (Studies in Church History xxvii, 1990), 101–15 at pp. 109–15; 'S. Domenico e S. Sisto', in *Monastic Matrix, A scholarly resource for the study of women's religious communities from 400 to 1600 CE,* <https://monasticmatrix.osu.edu/monasticon/s-domenico-e-s-sisto>. For the architecture and archaeology of female monastic space more generally see Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and material culture: the archaeology of religious women,* New York 1994.   [57] Lugano, 'L'istituzione', 275–6.
[58] Romagnoli, *Santa Francesca Romana,* introduction at pp. 29–55.
[59] Ibid. 221–3.
[60] As in Visio LXX (Mary presents Christ at the temple), (Romagnoli edn), 675–6 at p. 675; (Giornetti edn), 206–7 at p. 206.

Christ's birth, his adoration by the Magi and his presentation at the temple. In her most intimate moments, Francesca was even permitted to hold the infant Christ.[61] In these scenes Christ playfully acts and interacts with her as a childish infant, displaying his human nature, even as he, as the incarnate Word, speaks words of wisdom.

In a vision that took place in the church of S. Cecilia in early September 1431, Francesca encountered Mary, Queen of Heaven ('celorum Regina'), affectionately cradling an approximately eight-month-old (by Francesca's estimate) infant Christ. From his mother's lap, the baby made sweet noises and gestures at Francesca, who, enflamed by love, asks Mary if she might hold the babe for a while. Mary spoke to her about the transformative power of love (*amor*), giving Francesca to understand that she will soon be given permission to hold the babe.[62] On the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin (8 September), in a vision that took place in S. Maria in Trastevere, Francesca's wish was fulfilled. According to Mattiotti's account, for almost an hour Francesca was in ecstasy, with a radiant face, behaving like a woman carefully cradling a young child in her arms and exchanging affectionate glances with it. When Francesca returned to her natural senses, Mattiotti questioned her about the experience, and Francesca revealed how she had held Christ for a time.[63] In later visions Francesca was again permitted to hold Christ and even to carry him from the Lateran to the church of S. Maria Nova in the Forum Romanum where she presented the child to a monk, fra Ippolito, and received the latter as her spiritual son.[64]

These visions frame Francesca Romana's relationship to Christ in maternal terms, a mother in love with her charming and perfect child. This is further emphasised by Francesca's interactions with Mary. In one vision Mary does not want to give Francesca the baby, warning her that he will be too heavy for her.[65] In another Francesca resists when Mary attempts to take back Christ from her.[66] This hint of maternal competition is held in check by Francesca's awe and reverence for Mary as Queen of Heaven. Throughout, Francesca strives to obtain Mary's approval, as is

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[61] Cf. the visions from Dominican convents in fourteenth-century Southern Germany: Rosemary Hale, '*Imitatio Mariae*: motherhood motifs in devotional memoirs', *Mystics Quarterly* xvi (1990), 193–203.

[62] Visio XII (Romagnoli edn), 435–8; (Giornetti edn), 38–9.

[63] Visio XIII (Romagnoli edn), 438–42; (Giornetti edn), 39–42.

[64] Visio LXXXI (St Stephen's day, 26 Dec. 1439), (Romagnoli edn), 700–3; (Giornetti edn), 225–6.

[65] Visio LXVI (Christmas 1433) (Romagnoli edn), 666–7 at p. 667; (Giornetti edn), 201–2.

[66] Visio XLIX (Christmas 1432; the vision in which Francesca receives communion from St Peter) (Romagnoli edn), 610–16 at pp. 611–12; (Giornetti edn), 160–4 at p. 161.

made clear in a powerful vision from 1 March 1433, at a time when her followers were preparing to move into Tor de' Specchi. In this vision, Mary covers Francesca with her golden mantle and allows Francesca to rest her head on her chest, welcoming Francesca as chosen (*electa*) by her (Mary) and the oblate of her son (Christ).[67]

Francesca has a much less direct relationship with the adult Christ, and even in their most explicit scene of contact, the adult Christ appears to Francesca more as a friend than a bridegroom, notwithstanding the language used by Mattiotti to describe the scene. When Francesca was gravely ill and, so Mattiotti tells us, filled with great desire for her soul to depart from her body, she had a vision in which Christ, here called her divine spouse ('divinus Sponsus'), appeared to her in all of his corporeal glory, stretched out his hand and received that of his beloved handmaiden ('recepit sue dilecte ancille manum') and held it ('tenuit') for a certain space of time.[68] The scene is an intimate moment of close friendship rather than a portrait of a bride and her lover, yet in this vision Mattiotti, very unusually, twice uses the language of Christ as Francesca's bridegroom.[69] This language is very rarely used in the vernacular version of Francesca's visions and in the Latin version is unique to this vision.[70] Moreover, the disconnect between the scene and Mattiotti's language gives the impression that he has imposed this image onto Francesca's vision in a way that did not necessarily correspond to her description of the experience.

Francesca died in 1440, but her community preserved her memory and persisted in her ideals. During her lifetime Francesca guided her followers in word and deed; after her death a list of seventy-three brief rules were drawn up that were said to record her teachings.[71] These statutes make clear the priorities and concerns of the community. First and foremost is that 'they are to assiduously love God above all creatures and be united together in charity in one heart and in one will, corresponding to the

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[67] Visio LII (1 Mar. 1433) (Romagnoli edn), 623–6 at p. 624; (Giornetti edn), 169–71.

[68] Visio XLV.4 (Romagnoli edn), 586.

[69] Visio XLV (23 Sept. 1432) (Romagnoli edn), 585–90; (Giornetti edn), 144–8. In another instance where the vernacular text refers to Christ as Francesca's spouse ('la beata vedeva lo suo divino sposo'), the Latin text has changed this to 'Dei humilis ancilla suum spetiosissimum Dominum et dilectum preclare speculabatur': Visio XII (Romagnoli edn), 436; (Giornetti edn), 38.

[70] This conclusion is based on the entry for 'Gesù Cristo' as 'Sposo', in Romagnoli's index (p. 973).

[71] 'Ordinationi Statuiti per la Beata Francesca', ed. G. Lunardi, in 'L'istituzione di Tor de'Specchi', in G. Picasso (ed.), *Una santa tutta romana: Saggi e ricerche nel VI centenario della nascita di Francesca Bussa dei Ponziani (1383–1984)*, Siena 1984, 71–93 at pp. 87–93 (Appendix). These are translated by S. M. Scanlan in 'Doorways to the demonic and divine: visions of santa Francesca Romana and the frescoes of Tor de' Specchi', unpubl. PhD diss. Brown 2010, 176–83, appendix A.

will of obedience'.[72] Reverence between oblates and obedience toward their superior are most emphasised in the rule. Chastity does not feature *per se* though it is implied throughout in rules that establish a well-ordered and respectable community.

As outlined by statutes, Tor de' Specchi was a community with carefully regulated contact with the outside world. The women are to be outside only when carrying out their works of charity; at midnight everyone must be back in the house (*casa*), and no one is to open the doors of the house or go out before sunrise.[73] When outside, the oblates are to be 'prudent and circumspect according to the time and place so as not to provoke scandal'.[74] Oblates are not to touch the hands of men, even if they are close relatives, nor are they to eat or drink where men are present; the only men (above the age of five) who are to be permitted to enter the living quarters of the oblates are their confessor and, when necessary, physicians and workmen (in which case the doors are to be left open).[75] The statutes enshrine a model of a community devoted to charity but careful to avoid any suspicion of impropriety.

The community, as oblates, continued to be closely associated with the Benedictine monks of Monte Oliveto, yet in the early years of the community's life, the women were concerned to limit interference by the monks in their internal affairs and obtained concessions from the monks to that effect.[76] Moreover, in 1444 the nuns received a bull from Eugenius IV that reiterated and expanded the privileges of the community.[77] These included the right to choose their own confessor and the right to celebrate mass with open doors ('apertis ianuis') in the oratory located within Tor de' Specchi. This rendered Tor de' Specchi's oratory a semi-public space. The pope thereby acknowledged the fluidity between the community and the outside world. In the same bull Eugenius authorised the women, in case of illness, to return to their own homes.

Three small panel paintings, probably painted for devotional use not long after Francesca's death, provide insight into how her community wished to remember her legacy.[78] These focus on Francesca's close relationship with the Virgin Mary and, through her, with the Christ child. One depicts Francesca Romana holding a baby Jesus in her arms while Mary observes the scene from heaven (*see* Figure 1). It is an intimate scene with the infant Christ stretching out his hand to her. In another,

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[72] 'Ordinationi Statuiti', 2 (Lunardi edn), 87.
[73] Ibid. 38, 40 (Lunardi edn), 87–8.   [74] Ibid. 43 (Lunardi edn), 88.
[75] Ibid. 36, 49, 67 (Lunardi edn), 89, 90, 92.
[76] See the documents in Romagnoli, 'Nel segno', and Lugano, 'L'istituzione'.
[77] Ed. Bartolomei Romagnoli, 'Nel segno,' 157–8, no. 8; ed. Lugano, 'L'istituzione', 300–3, no. 8.
[78] G. Kaftal, 'Three scenes from the legend of Santa Francesca Romana', *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* xi (1948), 51–61; Scanlan, 'Doorways', 17–61.

Figure 1. Antonio del Massaro da Viterbo, 'Santa Francesca Romana holding the Christ Child', *c.* 1445, Metroplitan Musuem of Art, New York, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975, Accession Number: 1975.1.101. Public domain.

Mary, holding the Christ child, covers Francesca Romana with her mantle. The third depicts Francesca being consecrated and receiving communion from St Peter while Mary, with Christ in her lap, looks on from above.

Not long after her death, in 1468 the community's chapel (today known as the *Chiesa Vecchia*) was also decorated with an elaborate fresco cycle showing the life, visions and miracles of Francesca.[79] In these frescoes Francesca is depicted as active throughout Rome: attending mass in various churches, working in the vineyards with her fellow sisters and healing the sick on the streets of Rome. Francesca's vision of her heavenly encounter with Mary is again depicted, as are the scenes of her holding the Christ child and of her heavenly communion and consecration – as well as that of Christ taking Francesca's hand. This constellation of images continued to guide the community's memory of their foundress and the way of life that she had promoted for them.

Oblate or nun? Francesca Romana reimagined

The life and visions of Francesca Romana and the community that she established, which continued to look to her as the model for their way of life, carved out a middle ground for the Tor de' Specchi oblates: women who had dedicated themselves to God but were not brides of Christ. This history is what Navarro exploited to argue against the necessity of *clausura* for the community despite all the ways in which the lifestyle of these women resembled that of 'truly' religious women. In doing so, however, Navarro simultaneously eradicated the fuzzy middle ground that the Tor de' Specchi community had hitherto inhabited. Since they were not brides of Christ, the oblates could not be nuns in any sense; they could live their lives as secular women, but they were not true religious. This predicament helps to explain the subsequent trajectory of the community. Although formally the Tor de' Specchi community retained their status as oblates, in her canonisation proceedings Francesca Romana was reframed as a nun, and architecturally Tor de' Specchi became a cloistered space.

In a petition to Pope Clement VIII (r. 1592–1605), the 'nuns' ('monache') of Tor de' Specchi requested that the nearby church of S. Maria de Curte be annexed to their 'monastery' ('monastero').[80] In a bull issued in 1594, addressed to the 'president and women' ('Praesidenti et Mulieribus') of the community, Clement VIII acquiesced

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[79] For an overview of the cycle see A. Rossi, 'Le opere del monastero di Tor de' Specchi in Roma', *Bollettino d'arte* i/8 (1907), 4–22. For discussion of these and the following frescoes see also Scanlan, 'Doorways', with reference to older bibliography.

[80] Marchetti, 'Architettura', 166.

to their request.[81] The church was subsequently shut off from public access, demolished and rebuilt as a private church that was incorporated into a much expanded complex that by 1607 included a cloister in baroque style.[82] From an architectural perspective the community had in effect embraced *clausura*.

Meanwhile, the growing community and their supporters, many of whom stemmed from aristocratic Roman families, had been at work promoting the canonisation of Francesca Romana. In 1604, under Clement VIII, testimony was collected for her cause (three prior investigations had already been carried out in the mid-fifteenth century). In 1608 Francesca was officially canonised by Paul V. Her profile of sanctity in the official bull of canonisation was strikingly different from the one presented by Mattiotti's *vita* and the earlier, mid fifteenth-century testimonies.[83] In the bull Francesca Romana is ostensibly presented as a model for married women in an inclusive vision of a Church that encompasses not just virgins, martyrs and priests, but also holy lay men and women. Yet, as Giulia Barone has amply demonstrated, Francesca's life and identity as a married woman receives little attention in the bull.[84] There is no mention of her children nor of her solicitude for the spiritual well-being of her household. Instead Francesca is framed an ascetic who dedicated herself to prayer in the secrecy of her bedroom and studiously avoided public gatherings. Most strikingly, Francesca's entrance into Tor de' Specchi is presented as a renunciation of the world, an entrance into a cloistered way of life ('sanctum claustralis vitae propositum'). Moreover, though the members of her new community are referred to as oblates and the community she established is described as a religious house ('domum religiosam'), not a monastery, the women are presented as following the Benedictine rule. The resulting impression is that Francesca was a 'truly' religious woman: a cloistered nun.

In 1608, with papal approval, a new *vita* of Francesa Romana was published in Rome, written by the Jesuit Giulio Orsino.[85] In it, she is presented explicitly as a *sponsa Christi*. Orsino recounts how Francesca accepted her husband with humility, 'although having already pledged her faith, if not with a vow, at least with firm resolution to the immortal spouse of her soul, Christ' ('allo sposo immortale dell'anima, Christo').[86]

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[81] Ibid. 167. [82] Ibid. 168–73 with plan at p. 167, Fig. 5.

[83] For the bull see P. Lugano, 'Santa Francesca Romana nella memoria dei contemporanei e dei posteri', *Rivista storica benedettina* iii (1908), 40–200 at pp. 166–76.

[84] G. Barone, 'La canonizzazione di Francesca Romana (1608): la riproposta di un modello agiografico medievale', in G. Zari (ed.), *Finzione e santità tra medioevo ed età moderna*, Torino 1991, 264–79, and 'Francesca Romana santa della riforma cattolica', in Romagnoli, *La canonizzazione*, 125–38.

[85] Giulio Orsino, *Vita della B. Francesca Romana Roma*, Rome 1608.

[86] Ibid. 1.2, p. 16.

When contemplating Christ on the cross, filled with great longing to unite herself entirely with her spouse ('di un vivo desiderio di totalmente unirsi col sposo suo Christo'), she is visited by a vision of the virgin martyr Catherine who instructs her as to how she may obtain the delightful fruits of the love of her spouse, Christ.[87] This is a scene based on a vision recounted by Mattiotti, but whereas Mattiotti only uses the spousal imagery for Catherine, Orsino uses it for both women.[88] And at her death-bed scene Christ appears to her and announces to her in no uncertain terms, 'I am your celestial spouse' ('io sono lo sposo celeste').[89]

Legally speaking, the community remained oblates, secular women not formally requiring *clausura*. And they did continue to make use of their distinctive status. According to a chronicle from Tor de' Specchi, in 1675, for the jubilee year, Clement x urged the women to visit the two churches located within their compound, but almost all of the women preferred to visit the four pontifical basilicas instead.[90] Yet so strong was the pressure that equated truly religious women with cloistered brides of Christ that the seventeeth-century community had become difficult to distinguish from a convent.

In her life, visions and the community that she established, Francesca Romana had sought to carve out a religious path for women distinct from that of nuns as brides of Christ. In the later sixteenth century, the community attempted to maintain this way of life. Yet what appeared on the face of it a success in doing so turned out to have made their original position less tenable. To be a truly religious woman was to be a *sponsa Christi*; no other path was possible. A metaphor had become a legal category. And so, though formally remaining secular oblates, the community took on the trappings of a convent and accepted the reframing of their foundress as a bride of Christ.

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[87] Ibid. 3.4, p. 182.
[88] Visio C (undated), (Romagnoli edn), 720–1; (Giornetti edn), 235.
[89] Orsino, *Vita* 5.27, p. 502.
[90] Lucetta Scaraffia, 'Il registro della memoria: per una storia delle oblate di Tor de' Specchi', in Romagnoli, *La canonizzazione*, 335–62 at p. 348.