

## The shrine of Santa Maria a Cigoli : female visionaries and clerical promoters

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### Résumé

Daniel Bornstein, The shrine of Santa Maria a Cigoli : female visionaries and clerical promoters, p. 219-228.

In the climate of religious excitement surrounding the Bianchi movement of 1399, the keepers of the Tuscan shrine of Santa Maria a Cigoli tried to attract a regional following for their shrine by manipulating a young visionary, a shepherd girl. Close examination of their efforts sheds new light on the means by which local cults were promoted, the role of female visionaries in late medieval religion, and the relationship between such visionaries and representatives of the clergy. That relationship could be exploitative, as this case confirms. But as this case also makes clear, occasional instances of exploitation do not imply hostility or disjunction between clergy and laity. Rather, it suggests that many religious attitudes were widely shared among rich and poor, learned and illiterate, clerics and laymen, dwellers in town and countryside at the end of the Middle Ages.

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DANIEL BORNSTEIN

## THE SHRINE OF SANTA MARIA A CIGOLI : FEMALE VISIONARIES AND CLERICAL PROMOTERS

Several recent studies have called attention to the importance of local devotions in late medieval religious life. Parallel to the official cult of the Church Universal there existed a local religion, based on “particular sacred places, images, and relics, locally chosen patron saints, idiosyncratic ceremonies, and a unique calendar built up from the settlement’s own sacred history.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, there was no absolute separation between these two levels, and no neat distinction is possible between “learned” and “popular,” “clerical” and “lay” religion: all Christians participated, to varying degrees, in both universal and local devotions, and the most official and clerical of cults contained a popular element. Indeed, as André Vauchez has pointed out, *all* saints’ cults began as popular devotions, for even when the papacy arrogated to itself the exclusive right to pronounce on the virtues of a putative saint, it could do no more than certify the sainthood of someone already acclaimed as such by the *vox populi*.<sup>2</sup> Few cults, however, enjoyed the support of backers with the time, money, and determination required by the quest for papal approv-

<sup>1</sup> William A. CHRISTIAN, Jr., *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, Princeton, p. 3. For an attempt to explain the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation in terms of “regionally distinct sequential mutations in patterns of collective intercourse with departed souls,” see Lionel ROTHKRUG, *Religious Practices and Collective Perceptions: Hidden Homologies in the Renaissance and Reformation, Historical Reflections*, vol. 7, number 1, Waterloo, 1980, where the passage quoted is found on p. xi, and ROTHKRUG, *Popular Religion and Holy Shrines: Their Influence on the Origins of the German Reformation and Their Role in German Cultural Development*, in *Religion and the People, 800-1700*, ed. James Obelkevich, Chapel Hill, 1979, p. 20-86.

<sup>2</sup> André VAUCHEZ, *La Sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge d’après les procès de canonisation et les documents hagiographiques (BEFAR 241)*, Rome, 1981, p. 44.

al; the vast majority, out of choice or necessity, remained content with a local or regional following.

The origins of this myriad of local cults, the means by which they were promoted, and the following they attracted remain generally obscure. In part, this reflects a deliberate methodological choice on the part of students of "popular religion" and "folkloric culture," who have tended to favor structure and permanence over event and development, the faceless collectivity over individual actors. In the most elaborate and sophisticated study to date of one of these local cults, Jean-Claude Schmitt explicitly rejects as vain speculation any attempt to trace the origins of the cult of Guinefort the holy greyhound.<sup>3</sup> What matters is not the more or less ancient origins of the various elements of this cult, but the fact that they constituted a coherent whole at the moment of their discovery by the inquisitor Étienne de Bourbon – a whole which remained virtually unchanged, according to Schmitt, between the thirteenth century and the twentieth. The wealth of circumstantial detail he offers on Fanchette Gadin, the last keeper of the cult, is presented on the assumption that she hardly differed from the *vetula*, the old woman who, in Étienne de Bourbon's account, instructed ignorant women in the rites of the cult.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Étienne de Bourbon, Schmitt scrupulously refrains from characterizing Fanchette Gadin and her predecessors as foolish; nonetheless, for the modern scholar as for the medieval inquisitor, cults such as that of Guinefort remain self-evidently the province of old women, who enjoy a special rapport with death, illness, the devil, herbal healing, and all the other things of unofficial religion.<sup>5</sup>

More important than the effects of any such preconceptions, however, are the limits imposed by the lack of documentation. The promoters of these cults did not seek papal approval or a wide following, and so did not produce the rich and detailed documentation which has allowed Antonio Rigon to analyze the mixture of lay piety and civic patriotism in the cult of Antonio Pellegrino in Padua and Anna Benvenuti Papi to discern in the origins of the cult of Umiliana dei Cerchi the cooperation of Florentine Guelfs and Franciscan friars, and in her eventual beatification the outcome of a campaign of self-assertion deliberately waged by a

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Claude SCHMITT, *Le saint lévrier : Guinefort, guérisseur d'enfants depuis le XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1979, p. 109, 227. "Culture folklorique" is the term Schmitt prefers.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193-194.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

noble lineage with long-standing ties to the Franciscan order and to the papacy.<sup>6</sup> The tangle of elements involved in the propagation of those cults which never sought official approval was no less complex, but in seeking to understand it we are forced to rely on far more fragmentary and recalcitrant evidence: iconography, archeological remains, chance references in testaments, letters, and chronicles.

It is thanks to the work of a curious and careful chronicler, Luca Dominici of Pistoia, that we are unusually well informed about the Tuscan shrine of Santa Maria a Cigoli at a crucial moment in its history: the very end of the fourteenth century, when a concerted and temporarily successful effort was made to make this shrine the center of a regional cult.<sup>7</sup> This effort took place in the autumn of 1399, and was closely linked with the spread through northern and central Italy of the movement of the Bianchi.<sup>8</sup> Participants in this devotional movement wore the white robes of penitents, from which they took their name of Bianchi, and undertook nine days of pious processions. Their processions generally took the Bianchi on a circuit of the neighboring towns, but occasionally other processions within the city walls or in the immediate environs of the city enabled those who were unable or unwilling to leave home to participate in the devotions. During their nine days of processions, the Bianchi engaged in a variety of traditional devotional practices. They listened to sermons, recited prayers, and sang pious songs, both vernacular *laude* and Latin hymns such as the *Stabat Mater*. They observed a Lenten diet, and on each of the nine days of devotion they visited three churches and heard mass in one of them. The choice of churches was occasional-

<sup>6</sup> Antonio RIGON, *Dévotion et patriotisme communal dans la genèse et la diffusion d'un culte: le bienheureux Antoine de Padoue surnommé le «Pellegrino»* († 1267), in *Faire Croire. Modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XII<sup>e</sup> au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Collection de l'École française de Rome, 51), Rome, 1981, p. 259-278; Anna BENVENUTI PAPI, *Umiliana dei Cerchi: nascita di un culto nella Firenze del Duecento*, in *Studi Francescani*, 77, 1980, p. 87-117; and BENVENUTI PAPI, entry *Umiliana dei Cerchi*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 23, Rome, 1979, p. 692-696. For a masterly survey of popular and local sanctity, see VAUCHEZ, *La Sainteté en Occident*, p. 173-287.

<sup>7</sup> Luca DOMINICI, *Cronaca della venuta dei Bianchi e della moria, 1399-1400*, ed. Giovan Carlo Gigliotti (*Pubblicazioni della Società pistoiese di storia patria*, 1), Pistoia, 1933.

<sup>8</sup> On the Bianchi, see Giampaolo TOGNETTI, *Sul moto dei Bianchi nel 1399*, *Bullettino dell'Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo e Archivio muratoriano*, 78, 1967, p. 205-343; and Daniel BORNSTEIN, *The Bianchi of 1399: Popular Devotion and Orthodoxy in Late Medieval Italy*, Ithaca, 1987.

ly dictated by the ecclesiastical calendar – the Bianchi of Padua visited a Franciscan friary on October 4, the feast of St. Francis, and the church of Santa Giustina on October 7, the feast day of that saint – but it was also shaped by the local drawing power of particular churches.<sup>9</sup> The fact that one of the first parties of Bianchi to enter Tuscany made a special point of visiting the church of Santa Maria a Cigoli is a sure sign that this shrine already enjoyed a certain reputation.<sup>10</sup>

In the wake of the great urban processions, in which columns of Bianchi numbering in the thousands marched from city to city, pullulated a multitude of smaller processions formed by the inhabitants of villages and hamlets or by groups of friends and neighbors who wished to perform an act of special devotion. Far more than the main Bianchi processions, these private devotions were attuned to offers of specific spiritual rewards, and so were directed towards the sacred *loci* of the region. For instance, some pilgrims from Florence made a ten-day trek into the Apennines to collect the indulgences available to pilgrims at Vallombrosa and La Verna.<sup>11</sup> But it was the less isolated shrines which drew the largest crowds and brought the apparently haphazard passage of small groups of Bianchi into an ordered pattern. September 6 and 7, 1399, were unusually busy days in Pistoia; Luca Dominici recorded the passage of dozens of groups, generally from the lower Arno: Pisa and its *contado*, Lucca, Pescia, Camaiore, the Garfagnana, and so on. “And in addition to this, on that day there came many more Bianchi from various places, without a crucifix, and all of these and more were going to Prato.<sup>12</sup>” These small groups of Bianchi were not making just any circuit:

<sup>9</sup> Giovanni CONVERSINI, *La processione dei Bianchi nella città di Padova (1399)*, ed. and trans. Libia and Dino Cortese, Padua, 1978, p. 81, 89. Santa Giustina, of course, was a local Paduan saint, as well as one with a place in the liturgical calendar of the Roman church.

<sup>10</sup> Giovanni SERCAMBI, *Croniche*, ed. Salvatore Bongi (*Fonti per la storia d'Italia*, 19-21), vol. II, Rome, 1892, p. 317-318; Domenico da PECCIOLI, *Chronica antiqua conventus Sanctae Catharinae de Pisis*, ed. Francesco Bonaini, in *Archivio storico italiano*, 6, part. 2, 1845, p. 578.

<sup>11</sup> Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Corporazioni religiose soppresse, Badia di Firenze*, 78, filza 315, letter 212: Rosso di Andreozzo degli Orlandi to Piero di Bernardo Chiarini; September 28, 1399. After referring to the Bianchi devotions in Florence, messer Rosso says: “Et di poi parte de signori et collegi vecchi, cioè usciti d'ufficio, chon certa brighata tra quali fu io andarono a la detta o simile processione a Valenbrosa et a La Vernia ove era perdono di cholpa et di pena.” He thus recognizes that this pilgrimage, while inspired by the Bianchi devotions, was distinct from them.

<sup>12</sup> «E oltre a questo ne vennero detto di moltissimi ancora di diversi luoghi,

they were gathering at Prato for the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin, when the Holy Girdle preserved there is displayed. Luca Dominici himself went there to see the Holy Girdle, and found the whole road from Pistoia to Prato jammed with pilgrims.

And we entered Prato. Prato was so full that you could not walk through the streets; the whole piazza was full. There were certainly more than fifty crucifixes and crosses there, of the Bianchi from various places; and the church, too, was filled with many other people. The Holy Girdle was then shown in the usual fashion that first time, after which many people left; we did so, after we had looked around Prato and eaten. And then it was shown many more times that day. The whole way back we found the road full of great numbers of people, going and coming, and the vast majority were Bianchi.<sup>13</sup>

A few days later, the groups of pilgrims were drifting in the other direction, towards the west. Parties from Prato, Castello Fiorentino, Santa Croce di Valdarno, San Casciano, and Magnone in the Florentine *contado* passed through Pistoia. "And likewise many more groups are going now, with very many citizens, men, women, and others, and the aforesaid groups are going to Lucca to the feast of the Holy Cross."<sup>14</sup> On September 14, when these groups massed in Lucca to see the Volto Santo, the portrait of Christ supposedly carved by Nicodemus, they formed an imposing assemblage.

Today at Lucca there was such a crowd of Bianchi that no one would believe it or think it possible, all making orderly procession with a crucifix and singing steadily the usual song. There wasn't a person who did not weep and cry out of piety and tenderness, and it is certain that in more than fifty years there have not been so many people in Lucca on a single day.<sup>15</sup>

Bianchi senza crocifisso e andavano tutti questi e altri a Prato.» Luca DOMINICI, *Cronaca*, p. 124; see also p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> «E entramo in Prato : in Prato era pieno per modo non si poteva ire per via, su la piazza era pieno : cio chè vi era che di certo vi erano più di cinquanta fra crocifissi e croci di Bianchi di diversi paesi e moltissimamente altra gente è piena anco la pieve. Mostrossi allora la Cintola al modo usato la prima volta, poi molti si partirono; e simile noi veduto che avemo per Prato e desinato avemo; e poi il di si mostrò moltissime volte : venendone noi tuttavolta la strada troviamo piena di gente andava e veniva in gran numero e tutti i più Bianchi." *Ibid.*, p. 132. Luca Dominici measured large crowds in terms of "cucifixes"—parties of Bianchi carrying a wooden crucifix at their head.

<sup>14</sup> «E così più altre brigate vanno testeso moltissimi cittadini, uomini, donne e altri e le soprascritte brigate vanno a Lucca alla festa di S. Croce». *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> «Oggi a Lucca è stata tanta gente di Bianchi che non si potrebbe credere, nè

The Lucchese chronicler Giovanni Sercambi estimated that in all they numbered 25,000.<sup>16</sup>

The small groups of Bianchi, whether rural parties or those engaged in supererogatory devotions, formed great waves of pilgrims which sloshed back and forth in the lower Arno basin between Prato and Lucca. In Prato, the Holy Girdle was displayed every Sunday to crowds which only gradually dwindled. Forty "crucifixes" of Bianchi were there to see it on September 21; 3000 Florentines and many others from Lucca and the Valdinievole were there on September 28; thirty crucifixes from various places on October 5; and "a great many people" on October 19.<sup>17</sup> In keeping with the primarily Marian orientation of the Bianchi devotion, the shrine of the Virgin at Prato was apparently more popular with the Bianchi than the image of Christ at Lucca. Still, Luca Dominici does mention groups of Bianchi returning from Lucca, and Giovanni Sercambi reports that the Volto Santo was the first thing sought by the Bianchi, immediately upon their arrival.<sup>18</sup>

It was in this climate of general religious excitement that the keepers of the shrine of Santa Maria a Cigoli decided to promote their shrine by manipulating a young visionary.

The visionary in question was a girl just ten or eleven years old, a shepherdess in the Valdelsa.<sup>19</sup> One day she saw the Virgin Mary, who commanded her to go sweep out the local church, sound the bell, and tell everyone "that whoever had not joined the Bianchi should do so, and everyone should perform the greatest penance, abstinence, fasts, charity, and other good deeds in order to placate God, and that everyone should go to Santa Maria a Cigoli holding a candle."<sup>20</sup> When the shepherdess was not believed, the Virgin appeared to her once more and told her to order the cross on the altar to spin three times as an authenticating sign.

pensare, tutti facendo processione con crocifisso ordinatamente e cantando sempre la lalda usata: non era persona che non piangesse e non lagrimasse di pietà e di tenerezza che di certo più di cinquanta anni è che per un dì non fu in Lucca tanta gente». *Ibid.*, p. 160. The "usual song" was the *Stabat Mater*, which the movement of the Bianchi did much to popularize.

<sup>16</sup> Giovanni SERCAMBI, *Croniche*, vol. II, p. 368.

<sup>17</sup> Luca DOMINICI, *Cronaca*, p. 173, 177, 181, and 199.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180; Giovanni SERCAMBI, *Croniche*, vol. II, p. 317, 319.

<sup>19</sup> Luca DOMINICI, *Cronaca*, p. 182-184.

<sup>20</sup> «Che chi non era fatto de' Bianchi si facesse e ciascuno facesse grandissima penitenza, astinenza, digiuni, limosine, e altri beni per placare Dio e che ogni persona vada a S. Maria a Cievoli con un lume in mano.» *Ibid.*, p. 182.

The cross obeyed her command, and the people began to believe this child. Not only that, but she herself was transformed: "all at once this girl, who was rough, crude, and filthy, became delicate, beautiful, and angelic."<sup>21</sup> Luca Dominici, who was skeptical about miracles he had not witnessed himself, was perfectly ready to accept this one even though he had to take it pretty much on faith, since she always kept her face covered.<sup>22</sup>

This child was taken to Cigoli in a formal procession. First came some Bianchi carrying a crucifix, followed by the cross which had spun around as a sign. Then came the girl, dressed in white, veiled, and protected from the crowds by a square formed by four rods; inside the square with her were her mother and another girl to keep her company. She was surrounded by many friars, priests, and prelates, one of whom served as her mouthpiece: "and when she wants to say something or ask for silence, she says it to a preacher who accompanies them and he repeats it and preaches."<sup>23</sup> She was able to uncover the hidden sins of those she met; of course, many of these revelations were delivered by her priestly mouthpiece, since the girl herself "speaks very little and eats almost nothing and is very abstinent."<sup>24</sup> Luca Dominici, impressed by all this, exclaimed "Blessed is he who can touch and see her!"<sup>25</sup> But it was very difficult to do either, as she was kept veiled and sheltered from the crowd, and when she stayed in Florence she was cloistered in a monastery. Unable to approach her, people touched her from a distance with olive branches.

The extent of clerical control over this child was evident in her visit to Pistoia, on October 22.<sup>26</sup> She was paraded through the streets, accompanied by her mother and surrounded by friars, priests, and prelates.

<sup>21</sup> «Allora subito questa fanciulla che era grossolana rozza e sozza, si diventò delicata belle e angelica.» *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>22</sup> «Porta coperto il volto e non si scuopre.» *Ibid.* See also p. 201 («portava turato il volto») and 203 («ella quasi mai non si scuopre, si scuopre poco del viso: e è fatta una bellissima fanciulla che prima era molto rustica»).

<sup>23</sup> «E quando vuole dire o che si dica nulla, il dice a uno predicatore che va con loro e elli lo ridice e predica.» *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>24</sup> «Parla molto poco e mangia quasi niente e fa grande astinenza.» *Ibid.*, p. 203. This brief reference is too scant to permit the sort of clinical analysis of eating disorders offered by Rudolph M. BELL, *Holy Anorexia*, Chicago, 1985.

<sup>25</sup> «Beato chi la può toccare e vedere.» *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201-203; here she is referred to as «la soprascritta fanciulla di Firenze» (p. 201), apparently because she had just come from her stay there.



This escort deposited the girl and her mother in a convent and bolted the doors against the crowd. Once the child was hidden away, the crowd was allowed to enter the church, "and there the men who were with her spoke and said many things about her and the miracles she had said and done and predicted."<sup>27</sup> These men also told of the horrible fates suffered by those who had mocked this girl—how one young man was struck dead, and a priest fell ill, and so on. And they announced that after the nine days of the Bianchi devotions, new devotions of varying lengths were required: eleven days for the eleven apostles left after the crucifixion, and five days for the five wounds of Christ. These devotions could not be performed just anywhere; people were asked to go to such places as Santa Maria Impruneta, Fiesole, and—first on their list—Cigoli.<sup>28</sup>

This visionary child was seconded by another seer, a woman of 36 from the Valdesa di Pisa.<sup>29</sup> She was warned by the Virgin that the divine sentence of doom had been revoked only in part as a result of the Bianchi processions, and that a great epidemic threatened—something which by then was evident to anyone who looked at what was happening to the north of the Apennines.<sup>30</sup> To ward off this doom, everyone was to fast and go with candles to Santa Maria a Cigoli. Luca Dominici was more reserved in his account of this woman, referring what he reported to

<sup>27</sup> «E ivi li uomini, che erano con lei dissono e dicevano di lei moltissime cose e miracoli aveva detti e fatti e predetti.» *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>28</sup> Note the emphasis on Christocentric devotions at this shrine to the Virgin, in contrast to the Marian orientation of the Bianchi movement in general, and the absence of any reference to the competing lower Arno shrines of Lucca and Prato.

<sup>29</sup> Luca DOMINICI, *Cronaca*, p. 184-185. On the phenomenon of female visionaries in the late Middle Ages, see André VAUCHEZ, *Jeanne d'Arc et le prophétisme féminin des XIV<sup>e</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles*, in *Jeanne d'Arc: une époque, un rayonnement. Colloque d'histoire médiévale, Orléans, octobre 1979*, Paris, 1982, p. 159-168, and, more generally, the working hypotheses put forward by VAUCHEZ, in *Les pouvoirs informels dans l'Église aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge: visionnaires, prophètes et mystiques*, *MEFRM*, 96, 1984, p. 281-293.

<sup>30</sup> One Tuscan employee of Francesco di Marco Datini remarked on the spread of the epidemic and the number of victims it was claiming in Bologna, and then said: «Acioche Idio ci faccia grazia, qui si sono tenuto le botteghe serate 9 di e tutta la città e'l chontado andato a prociessione, tutti vestiti di pannolino bianco.» Archivio Datini di Prato, no. 864, lett. Firenze-Barcellona, Associazione «ai veli» Francesco Datini e Domenico di Cambio, September 27, 1399. On the course of the plague of 1399-1400, see Alfonso CORRADI, *Del movimento de' Bianchi e della peste del 1399 e 1400*, in *Rendiconti del reale istituto lombardo di scienze e lettere*, ser. 2, 24, 1891, p. 1055-1058.

third parties and concluding: "When I know about this, I will tell you. May Christ help us all."<sup>31</sup> He showed no such hesitation in accepting the statements of the girl, who during her visit to Pistoia announced that the divine sentence had already been revoked and many other fine things which, alas, turned out to be untrue, as the long lists of plague victims in his chronicle attest.<sup>32</sup>

For the moment, at least, the vigorous promotion of Santa Maria a Cigoli through these visionaries, and especially the girl, had its desired effect. A steady flow of small parties visited the shrine at Cigoli, and at times large crowds of Bianchi were reported to have gathered there. On September 20, 2000 Bianchi from around Florence and Prato were on their way there, and another 2000 had just set out from Florence.<sup>33</sup> On October 18 and 19, a total of 4000 Bianchi were reported at Cigoli, made up of small groups such as the party of twenty or thirty Bianchi from Pistoia and 150 from the *contado* that went there on this occasion.<sup>34</sup> These great gatherings at Cigoli may have partially eclipsed the Volto Santo in Lucca, as this Marian shrine took its place as the opposite pole to the Holy Girdle in Prato.

The success of the shrine at Cigoli proved fleeting, however. It is now entirely forgotten, while the Holy Girdle at Prato and the Volto Santo at Lucca continue to attract throngs of devotees on their annual feast days. The girl and her mother disappeared, perhaps into one of the convents that had hosted them in their peregrinations. But their brief moment of glory allows us to see clearly the relations between laymen and clerics in the promotion of one local cult. The young visionary was clearly the puppet of those around her – perhaps of her mother, certainly of the clerical promoters of the shrine at Cigoli.<sup>35</sup> It was they who selected a child who was easy to dupe or otherwise control. It was they who doubtless turned the crank that turned the cross, and so created the mira-

<sup>31</sup> «Quando ne saperò tel dirò. Cristo ci aiuti tutti.» Luca DOMINICI, *Cronaca*, p. 185.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192. The lists of plague victims cover p. 238-285; the total given at the end is 2301 dead.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177-178.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198-199.

<sup>35</sup> Diana M. WEBB, *Penitence and Peacemaking in City and Contado: The Bianchi of 1399*, in *The Church in Town and Countryside*, ed. Derek Baker (*Studies in Church History*, 16), Oxford, 1979, p. 248-249, considers this episode an instance of «temporary social reversal in operation, with the humble inspired to take spiritual initiatives.» It is hard to see that any initiative was left to this child.

cle that validated her vision. It was they who kept the crowds from her, who covered her up and locked her away. And it was they who spoke for her in self-serving prophecies and pronouncements. The Bianchi devotion, in contrast, was lay in inspiration and direction. Priests and prelates and friars joined in, and were even welcomed to prominent roles, but they did not invent and control the movement. They could, and did, try to take advantage of this eruption of popular fervor, though no one tried to exploit it quite as crassly as the promoters of the shrine at Cigoli.

For all their crassness, these clerical promoters were extremely modest in their expectations: they may have hoped for offerings of money, but, as we have seen, all they demanded were wax candles. Their means of propaganda were equally limited. They did not write down the story of the girl's vision so that it could be copied and recopied; they did not dispatch preachers to proclaim the event far and wide. Rather than relying on the written or spoken word, they depended on the physical presence of the child-seer to bring home their message. A decorous child veiled in white, accompanied by her equally silent mother, surrounded by staves, preceded and followed by clerics and devout laymen, encased in layer upon layer of sacred authority: it was the direct encounter with this solemn scene that impressed and convinced those who, like Luca Dominici, beheld it. A cult promoted in this manner was inevitably limited to a restricted audience.

To reach even this limited audience, the promoters of the cult had to "speak" its non-verbal language, to use signs and symbols that would be readily understood by those they were addressing. Their decision to direct their message through female visionaries, and the response evoked by their use of the shepherd girl, suggest that we can add one more item to the growing list of religious assumptions widely shared among rich and poor, learned and illiterate, clerics and laymen, dwellers in town and countryside at the end of the Middle Ages: the conviction that the privileged conduit for divine revelation was young, poor, and female.

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