

The influence of Marian devotion on church reform in the late Middle Ages, with reference to Catherine of Siena, Nicholas of Cusa and Bernardino of Siena.

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The late medieval period was marked by both rising Marian devotion and an awareness of grave problems within the Church. The “Babylonian Captivity” of the Avignon Papacy (1309-1376) was followed shortly after by the Western Schism, involving two (and at one point three) men claiming the papal tiara from 1378-1417. “The old Christendom was crumbling away, the medieval theocracy had decayed”¹ and crisis in the Church leadership was matched with a growing awareness of simony and moral laxity among clergy and religious resulting in calls for a thorough reform of both the Church and individual Christians. This essay will focus on the Marian devotion and reforming efforts of three figures from this period: Nicholas of Cusa, Bernardino of Siena, and Catherine of Siena, looking at their different approaches to the question of personal and institutional reform.

During this time of crisis, veneration of the Virgin Mary expanded “in a way unprecedented in previous Christian centuries”². She was seen as the ‘type’ of the Church and the exemplar of the individual Christian³, a powerful intercessor, an always-merciful Mother⁴, and one of whom it could be said that there was “nothing equal to Mary and nothing but God greater than Mary”⁵. Ever-increasing devotion was matched with increased theological attention to the Mother of God in debates surrounding the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Meanwhile, “charismatic preachers and activist churchmen criss-crossed Europe with the message of reform: they preached to thousands with fiery oratory and with a great awareness of spectacle and imagery. They were Marian devotees to a man.”⁶

In the first part of this essay, I shall look at the Immaculate Conception, and the differing Mariological emphases of the Dominican and Franciscan orders that resulted from debate over the doctrine. I shall focus on the works of Catherine of Siena and Bernardino of Siena as examples of the slightly different Marian emphases of their Orders and explore the way in which this informed their visions of personal and Church reform. In the second part of the essay, I shall focus on

¹ Leclercq, Jean, Francois. Vandenbroucke, and Louis Bouyer. *The Spirituality of the Middle Ages*. History of Christian Spirituality ; v. 2. London: Burnes & Oates, 1968 p483

² Johnson, Elizabeth A. “Marian Devotion in the Western Church” in Raitt, Jill, Bernard McGinn, and John Meyendorff. *Christian Spirituality*. [2], High Middle Ages and Reformation ; Edited by Jill Raitt in Collaboration with Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff. World Spirituality ; 17. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987 p392

³ Ellington, Donna Spivey. “Impassioned Mother or Passive Icon: The Virgin's Role in Late Medieval and Early Modern Passion Sermons.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1995): 227-61, p247

⁴ Johnson, Elizabeth A., p402

⁵ Pelikan, Jaroslav (1996), p134

⁶ Rubin, Miri. *Mother of God : A History of the Virgin Mary*. London: Penguin, 2010 p298

Nicholas of Cusa's teaching of *Christiformitas* as a vision of Church reform inflected with Marian devotion that starts with the individual as a means to transform the Church.

While it was a commonplace by the medieval period that Mary was free from sins both mortal and venial during her lifetime, the question of whether she was free from the taint of original sin that adheres to all mankind at conception remained open. The doctrine was first formally expressed in the 11th century⁷, though, as Takahashi notes, by the 13th century, it was not widely held⁸, in part due to opposition from the great Dominican, Thomas Aquinas. He argued that it would not be possible to say that all have sinned, and that Christ is the universal redeemer, if his Mother had not required that redemption. This seemed an intractable problem, until the Franciscan scholastic, John Duns Scotus, writing in the early 14th century, came up with a solution. He argued that Mary “had been *preserved* from sin from the moment of her conception”⁹ saying that, “it is a more excellent benefit to preserve one from evil than to permit one to fall into it and then free such”¹⁰. She still needed Christ's redemption, and indeed, needed it more than others, otherwise she would have fallen into original sin¹¹. Debates about the Immaculate Conception would continue throughout the late medieval period, often split between Immaculist Franciscans and anti-Immaculist Dominicans¹² and, although the Council of Basel endorsed the doctrine in 1439, it was by then a rump council, and the doctrine was not officially promulgated until 1854.

Mariologies differed somewhat between those who believed in the Immaculate Conception and those who did not. Marina Warner has identified the promotion of *Maria Lactans*, the nursing Virgin, as a product of Dominican anti-Immaculist views. She writes that lactation was seen as a product of original sin, and that “the image of the Virgin suckling Christ represented women's humility in accepting the full human condition...if Mary was free from all stain of original sin, then lactation might not be her inheritance”¹³ whereas, for the Immaculist Franciscans, Mary “became too exalted to suckle her child”¹⁴. The twin emphases of medieval Mariology – Mary, exalted and powerful, and Mary the Mother nursing her child can be found in the works of two of the people that I have chosen to focus on in this essay.

⁷ Takahashi, Mariko. *The Immaculate Conception: Devotion and Doctrine in High and Late Medieval Europe*, 2003, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, p12

⁸ Takahashi, Mariko., p77

⁹ Warner, Marina. *Alone of All Her Sex : The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Second ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013., p247

¹⁰ Scotus, quoted in Van Nieuwenhove, Rik. *An Introduction to Medieval Theology*. Cambridge University Press, 2012., p245

¹¹ Takahashi, Mariko. *The Immaculate Conception: Devotion and Doctrine in High and Late Medieval Europe*, 2003, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses., p81

¹² As Takahashi notes, there were many exceptions, particularly in the earlier periods of the debate (pp82ff)

¹³ Warner, Marina., p207

¹⁴ Ibid.

Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) was a Dominican tertiary, mystic, and campaigner for church reform and for the Pope's return from Avignon. According to her biographer and spiritual director, Raymond of Capua, Catherine displayed conspicuous devotion to Mary from the age of five¹⁵, it was the Virgin who helped her discern her vocation¹⁶, who gave her Christ in a mystical marriage¹⁷, and clothed her with him in order that she might more closely conform to his teachings¹⁸.

Catherine's Mary is determinedly maternal; she is a Mother to Christ, but also to Catherine, nursing her at her breast¹⁹. Catherine advises a prostitute to "have recourse to that dear Mary, mother of mercy and compassion. She will lead you into her Son's presence, showing him for your sake the breast by which she nursed him, and so persuade him to be merciful to you"²⁰. She describes her in a letter to her own mother, as first and foremost, the "sweet Mother, who for God's honor and our salvation gave us her Son, dead on the wood of the most holy cross"²¹. Mary's maternal care drives her support for Christians, as she "consoles, encourages, nourishes and defends her children in the process of salvation"²². Catherine's most common appellation for Mary is "gentle", and she habitually opens her letters with the line, "In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and gentle Mary"²³.

Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444) was a member of the Observant Franciscans, following a strict rule of poverty. He was "the most famous and coruscating preacher of his day"²⁴ travelling throughout Italy preaching "his goal of total moral reform"²⁵. Born on the day of the Virgin's Nativity, Bernardino would become known for his Marian devotion (and was extensively quoted in Alphonsus Liguori's *The Glories of Mary*) and for his promotion of the Holy Name of Jesus. Bernardino's Virgin is highly exalted, queen of the world and everything in it²⁶ and it is purely for love of her that God did not destroy mankind after the Fall²⁷. She has been given "immense

¹⁵ Quoted in Wiseman, Denis. "Al Nome Di Gesù Cristo Crocifisso E Di Maria Dolce." *Salvation and Mary in the Life and Writings of Catherine of Siena*, 2001, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses., p228

¹⁶ Ibid., p235

¹⁷ Wiseman, Denis, p242

¹⁸ Ibid., p246

¹⁹ Capua, Raymond of. *Life of Saint Catherine of Siena: by the blessed Raymond of Capua, her confessor*. New York: P J Kennedy and Sons., p138

²⁰ Noffke, Suzanne. *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*. Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies (Series) ; v. 202-203. Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000., p292

²¹ Ibid., p249

²² Wiseman, Denis, p307

²³ Ibid., p234

²⁴ Warner, Marina. *Alone of All Her Sex : The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Second ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p187

²⁵ Polecristi, Cynthia L. "Preaching Peace in Renaissance Italy: Bernardino of Siena and His Audience." *Speculum* 78, no. 4 (2003): 1376-377., p181

²⁶ Liguori, Alphonsus. *The Glories of Mary*. New York: P J Kenedy & Sons, 1888. p25

²⁷ Ibid., p81

grace...superior to the grace of all other men and angels”²⁸ and is “the dispenser of all graces, the glory of the holy Church...the example of the just, the consolation of the saints...the source of our salvation”²⁹. She is more exalted than any other creature³⁰, “all the graces which we receive from God are dispensed by the hand of Mary, and are dispensed to whom Mary will, when she will, and as she will”³¹ and no grace may be received except via Mary³². All graces, and the Holy Spirit flow from Christ, via Mary, into the body of Christ, the Church³³ and he calls her “the neck that joins Christ, the head of the Church, to the body of the faithful”³⁴. At times, it seems, in Hilda Graef’s words, that “Bernardine attempts to prove nothing less than that the blessed Virgin is in some respects superior to God himself”³⁵, stating that God needed Mary to do what he could not do himself³⁶, and saying that Mary was “exalted to a certain equality with the divine Persons, by a certain infinity of graces.”³⁷

Catherine and Bernardino shared a passion for Church reform, and both preached the necessity for each individual to reform their life and more closely imitate Christ. Bernardino held open-air rallies across Italy³⁸, preaching against gambling, usury, sodomy, vanity, witchcraft and factionalism³⁹ and performed regular ‘bonfires of the vanities’ as a method of public purification of cities⁴⁰.

Catherine wrote numerous letters to people from every walk of life⁴¹ urging them both to greater devotion and to support the Church and her ministers.

For both Catherine and Bernardino, the Church and her ministers are worthy of greatest reverence. For Catherine, the Church is both Christ⁴² and “a mother who feeds her children at her breast with sweetest life-giving milk”⁴³, the keeper and sole distributor of his blood⁴⁴, whom every Christian is obliged to serve⁴⁵ and there is no salvation outside it⁴⁶. In God’s words in

²⁸ Ibid., p374

²⁹ Ibid., p678

³⁰ Ibid., p597

³¹ Ibid., p730

³² Ibid., p742

³³ Ibid., p178

³⁴ Warner, Marina, p292

³⁵ Graef, Hilda. *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*. Combined ed. London: Sheed & Ward, 1985. p316

³⁶ Ibid., p317-8

³⁷ Liguori, Alphonsus. *The Glories of Mary*. New York: P J Kenedy & Sons, 1888, p425

³⁸ Polecritti, Cynthia L. "Preaching Peace in Renaissance Italy: Bernardino of Siena and His Audience." *Speculum* 78, no. 4 (2003): 1376-377., p7

³⁹ A persistent problem in medieval Italy, often remedied for a time by Bernardino and others by way of formal, ritualised “peacemakings” between partisans (Polecritti, Cynthia L., p91ff)

⁴⁰ Polecritti, Cynthia L., p78

⁴¹ She wrote 382 letters between 1370-80 to everyone from Popes, military leaders, royalty, civic officials, clergy, religious, laypeople and even prostitutes, as recorded by Noffke (quoted in Wiseman, Denis. "Al Nome Di Gesù Cristo Crocifisso E Di Maria Dolce." *Salvation and Mary in the Life and Writings of Catherine of Siena*, 2001, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses., p30)

⁴² Ibid., p25

⁴³ Noffke, Suzanne. *The Dialogue*. Classics of Western Spirituality. London: SPCK, 1980 p102

⁴⁴ Ibid., p134

⁴⁵ Ibid., p229

Catherine's *Dialogue*, priests are called 'christs'⁴⁷ and, while God demands that they "be clean in heart and soul and mind" with "bodies...in perfect purity"⁴⁸ he does not permit disrespect or secular judgement on them, even if they are evil. He says, "it is my will that the sins of the clergy should not lessen your reverence for them" and "no one is to touch my christs. It is my right to punish them, and no one else's"⁴⁹. It is the duty of the Pope, and only the Pope, as Christ on earth, to punish the sins of the clergy⁵⁰. Bernardino shared Catherine's view of the respect owed to all clergy, good or bad, "out of reverence for God"⁵¹, and described the Pope as "our God on earth"⁵². He, too, recognised clerical sin⁵³ while advocating for a strict separation of clerical and secular affairs⁵⁴.

For both Bernardino and Catherine, the road to Church reform lay in the efforts of individuals to reform their own lives and, in Catherine's case, by personal petition to the Pope and reparative suffering. She wrote that ordinary people might effect Church reform by their sufferings⁵⁵, compassion⁵⁶ and bringing priests to God in prayer⁵⁷ resting assured that even if the Pope does not punish them, God will⁵⁸. Catherine herself practised fasting in a bid to atone for the Western Schism, something which may have contributed to her early death⁵⁹. Catherine also campaigned for Church reform in letters to the Popes, sometimes encouraging them, and at other times strongly exhorting them, including implying to Gregory XI that he would be a coward if he failed to return the papacy to Rome⁶⁰.

The Marian devotion that both Catherine and Bernardino shared provided an impetus to Church reform. Bernardino's exalted Virgin, giver of all graces and virtues⁶¹ should be petitioned for support to lead a Christian life, and her great humility, the cause of her exalted status⁶², should be

⁴⁶ Ibid., p140

⁴⁷ Ibid., p212

⁴⁸ Ibid., p213

⁴⁹ Ibid., p216

⁵⁰ Ibid., p249

⁵¹ Siena, Bernardine of, Nazareno Orlandi and Helen Josephine Robins. *Saint Bernardine of Siena: Sermons* Siena: Tipografia Sociale: 1920, p242

⁵² Ibid., p242

⁵³ Describing it as more grievous even than the sin of a highwayman, because priestly sin "make[s] away with body soul and body of the man whom he doth scandalize" (Siena, Bernardine, Nazareno Orlandi and Helen Josephine Burns, p15)

⁵⁴ Ibid., p194

⁵⁵ Noffke, Suzanne. *The Dialogue*. Classics of Western Spirituality. London: SPCK, 1980, p362

⁵⁶ Ibid., p195

⁵⁷ Ibid., p230, 272

⁵⁸ Noffke, Suzanne. *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*. Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies (Series) ; v. 202-203. Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000 p136

⁵⁹ Muessig, Carolyn., George. Ferzoco, and Beverly. Kienzle. *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*. First.. ed. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition. Leiden: BRILL, 2011, p8

⁶⁰ Ibid., p63

⁶¹ Luguori, Alphonsus. *The Glories of Mary*. New York: P J Kenedy & Sons, 1888, p179

⁶² Ibid., p597

imitated. Through her, God “pardons sinners the offences committed against him, and establishes peace with them”⁶³, and she even has the power to free souls from purgatory⁶⁴.

While Bernardino’s Virgin receives petitions from her exalted position in heaven, Catherine’s Mary takes an active role in assisting the believer. Catherine petitions Mary for the reform of the Church⁶⁵ and gives her credit “for restoring Castel Sant’Angelo to Urban VI”⁶⁶. Her vision of Mary clothing her with Christ shows the Virgin actively assisting the believer in personal reformation, and Mary helps Christians “as they attempt to live virtuously and so cooperate with the power of the blood in their lives”⁶⁷.

While their emphases may differ, both Bernardino and Catherine see Mary as a vital support and catalyst for their visions of Church reform. The third figure I shall look at both taught Church via personal reform, and on an institutional level.

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) was a canon lawyer, theologian and philosopher who became a bishop and cardinal, and was both “an exponent of the conciliar theory and a defender of papal authority against the rump council at Basel”⁶⁸. The issue of Church and individual reform was a preoccupation throughout his career, although his vision of the structure and authority of the Church would change. In the earlier part of his career, Cusa had a vision of a hierarchical Church where “the priesthood is the soul of the church”⁶⁹ because the sacraments they administer are the means by which Christ descends to the faithful⁷⁰. What Serina calls Cusa’s “clerical conciliarism”⁷¹ entails reform of the Church by reformation of the clergy⁷². Cusa would change his allegiance to the papal cause in 1437⁷³ and his view of the Church, and of what was needed to reform it would change. Later, his vision of personal reformation through conformity to Christ (*Christiformitas*) would become more prominent, a vision which was “as much an ecclesiological...designated for the reform of the church in its corporate dimensions as...a personal reform term designated for the spiritual renewal of the individual”⁷⁴.

⁶³ Ibid., p231

⁶⁴ Ibid., p267

⁶⁵ “I turn to you, Mary, and to you I offer my petition for the sweet bride of Christ, your most gentle Son, and for His vicar on the earth. May he be given light so that with discernment he may take the necessary way for the reform of holy Church.” (Oratio XI, 130, quoted in Wiseman, Denis. “Al Nome Di Gesù Cristo Crocifisso E Di Maria Dolce.” *Salvation and Mary in the Life and Writings of Catherine of Siena*, 2001, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses., p297)

⁶⁶ Ibid., p297 n.247

⁶⁷ Ibid., p294

⁶⁸ Serina, Richard J. *Nicholas of Cusa’s Brixen Sermons and Late Medieval Church Reform*. Leiden: Brill, 2016, p1

⁶⁹ Cusa quoted in Brooks, Chandler McC., Gerald Christianson, Thomas M. Izbicki, and American Cusanus Society. *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church : Essays in Memory of Chandler McCuskey Brooks for the American Cusanus Society*. Studies in the History of Christian Thought ; v. 71. Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1996, p114

⁷⁰ Serina, Richard J., p57

⁷¹ Ibid., p114

⁷² Ibid., p118

⁷³ Ibid., p9

⁷⁴ Ibid., p117

By the time Cusa became Prince-Bishop of Brixen in 1452⁷⁵ he saw the Church as a hierarchy of ascent toward Christ, where members of the Church “are subordinated to Christ, not to one another”⁷⁶. Cusa wrote that “the goal of a hierarchy is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him”⁷⁷ Each person within the Church is called to personal reformation, to be formed into the likeness of Christ (*Christiformitas*) by imitating him in deed and action⁷⁸. The responsibility of each person in the hierarchy is to help those below them to ascend to Christ, and the particular responsibility of the clergy is to “illuminate rather than rule the faithful”⁷⁹ to those who hear their preaching, which must itself be Christiform⁸⁰. The illuminative function of hierarchy is the means “through which the word descends to the faithful, and the faithful ascend that mystical hierarchy toward perfection by imitating Christ”⁸¹ Each individual must seek to reform themselves by becoming Christiform, and the reformation of the Church “must begin by purifying the illuminative function of the priesthood first, which...will result in a church formed to the likeness of its mystical head, Jesus”⁸².

Cusa’s teaching of illumination descending in order to aid the faithful to ascend to Christ has a striking parallel in his Mariology. In a sermon for the Nativity of Mary⁸³, he preached that she is “the Ladder by which the Savior came down to man and by which man ascended unto the Savior”⁸⁴ and “the mediator established by God between Christ and the sinner”⁸⁵. He describes her as a priest who “offered up Christ for the human race’s salvation”⁸⁶, and “she illumines minds...she fosters virtues and burns away vices”⁸⁷. She is someone who should both be called upon for help, and he exhorts his listeners to imitate her life⁸⁸. In another sermon⁸⁹ he describes Mary as the New Jerusalem, describing Christ’s descent to her, and her subsequent ascent above the hierarchy of heaven to a throne at Christ’s side in heaven at her Assumption⁹⁰. He then goes

⁷⁵ Ibid., p2

⁷⁶ Ibid., p84

⁷⁷ Quoted in Serina, Richard J. *Nicholas of Cusa’s Brixen Sermons and Late Medieval Church Reform*. Leiden: Brill, 2016, p118

⁷⁸ Ibid., p105

⁷⁹ Ibid., p72

⁸⁰ Ibid., p113

⁸¹ Ibid., p119

⁸² Ibid., p119

⁸³ Sermon IX: *Complevitque Deus* (1431) in Hopkins, Jasper. *Nicholas of Cusa’s Early Sermons 1430-1441*. Loveland, Colorado: The Arthur J Banning Press, 2003 pp195-223

⁸⁴ Ibid., p195

⁸⁵ Ibid., p162

⁸⁶ Ibid., p202

⁸⁷ Ibid., p203

⁸⁸ Ibid., p205

⁸⁹ Sermon VIII: *Signum Magnum* (1431) in *Nicholas of Cusa’s Early Sermons 1430-1441*. Loveland, Colorado: The Arthur J Banning Press, 2003, pp162-194

⁹⁰ Ibid., p182

on to describe the Church in the same terms as Mary⁹¹, describing the ascent of the Church Militant toward Christ, who, with Mary, will lead them into the heavenly Jerusalem⁹².

Cusa presents Mary as someone who exemplifies *Christiformitas* through her great faith⁹³, humility⁹⁴, virtues and graces⁹⁵ lead to her place in heaven above all other creatures⁹⁶. Her ability to mediate, which is predicated on following her example⁹⁷, and great power⁹⁸ provide a means by which the faithful can conform themselves to Christ, in the same way that Cusa recommended that clergy imitate Paul in order to imitate Christ⁹⁹. Her high status, mediating and intercessory help for mankind and ability to illuminate make her an example of the hierarchy-of-illumination Cusa sees as the ideal of the Church.

The writings of Catherine of Siena, Nicholas of Cusa and Bernardino of Siena reveal the strong Marian devotion which had been part of medieval life since the 11th century. For all of them, the Mother of God is an exemplar of the Christian life, and someone whose intercession with God should be sought. All three figures had slightly different emphases both in their Mariology and reforming focus. Bernardino's focus was less on the reform of the institutional Church than the reform of the individuals he preached to. He viewed Mary as a high and powerful figure, someone whose intervention and intercession was needed for the individual to receive grace to reform their lives. Where his Mary sat enthroned in the heavens, Catherine saw Mary as an ideal Mother. Catherine's view of reform was both individual and institutional, involving change of lives and campaigning for Church reform. Mary's maternal figure directly intervenes in the lives of believers, nursing and clothing them, supporting believers and particularly those who minister, and directly intervening to assist the Pope. For Nicholas of Cusa, reform of both individual and Church comes by being conformed to Christ, and the greater one is conformed, the greater the responsibility to help illuminate others on their journey to Christ. Mary, for him, is a road to Christ and an exemplar of the Christiform individual, someone who provides illumination and help to the individual. Catherine, Nicholas and Bernardino acknowledged a need for change in the Church, and their varied efforts to produce that change were informed and inflected by their devotion to Mary.

⁹¹ Ibid., p183

⁹² Ibid., p189

⁹³ Ibid., p114

⁹⁴ Ibid., 117

⁹⁵ Ibid., p205

⁹⁶ Ibid., p182

⁹⁷ "And in order to obtain the aid of her prayer [to God], do not be at variance with the example of her behavior." (in *Nicholas of Cusa's Early Sermons 1430-1441*. Loveland, Colorado: The Arthur J Banning Press, 2003, p203)

⁹⁸ Cusa repeats the words of pseudo-Dionysius: "[Mary] was so great and was of such marvelous beauty that anyone who would have no knowledge of her Son would readily believe her to be God." (Ibid., p205)

⁹⁹ Serina, Richard J. *Nicholas of Cusa's Brixen Sermons and Late Medieval Church Reform*. Leiden: Brill, 2016, p114-5

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