

On the Path to Sanctity:

The Spirituality of Colette of Corbie (1381-1447) and
Her Reform of the Order of Saint Clare

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Introduction

*The Sovereign Master needs no one to accomplish his destiny for him; even less so does he need a creature as useless and as miserable as me. The Reform is the work of the Almighty, know this well. It will only continue to grow more rapidly than it has thus far... believe also, my beloved sisters, that He will consummate the work of your sanctification; but there is one condition: that you respond faithfully to everything He demands of you in your vocation.*¹

These are the opening lines of the *Final Recommendations of Saint Colette*, a text traditionally attributed to Colette of Corbie, a fifteenth-century monastic reformer of the Order of Saint Clare – a group of contemplative Franciscan nuns within the Catholic Church.² Believed to have been composed as Colette lay on her deathbed, she wrote these *Final Recommendations* to reflect on the nature of her three-decades-long monastic reform and offer predictions for the future of the Franciscan way of life. In her reflections, Colette professes that her reform was mandated by Christ himself and therefore, that disobeying the tenets of the reform would be contradictory to God’s will. Colette’s uncompromising opinion on the legitimacy of her reform raises two important questions: why did Colette feel called to reform the Franciscans, and what did she contribute to the Franciscan theological tradition?

This thesis will explore these questions through the lens of Colette’s spirituality, which can be defined as the set of actions and beliefs that informed the ways in which Colette practiced and preached her Christian faith. Given the inherently religious nature of the reform, a study of her spirituality provides a useful starting point for an investigation into these questions. The reform itself, which is more popularly called the “Colettine Reform,” began in 1415 and lasted

¹ Colette of Corbie. “Les derniers avis de Sainte Colette,” c. 1447, Ronchamp, Monastery of Saint Clare, uncatalogued manuscript, transc. in modern French by the sisters of the Monastery of Saint Clare, 1. “Le Souverain Maître n’a besoin de personne pour l’accomplissement de ses desseins ; encore moins aurait-il besoin d’une créature aussi pauvre, aussi misérable que moi. La Réforme est l’œuvre du Tout-Puissant, croyez-le bien. Elle continuera à s’étendre plus rapidement encore après qu’elle ne s’est propagée jusqu’ici... croyez en même temps, mes bien-aimées soeurs, qu’il consommera l’oeuvre de votre sanctification ; mais c’est à une condition : c’est que vous répondiez fidèlement à toute l’étendue de votre vocation.” My translation.

² The Order of Saint Clare is also commonly referred to as the “Second Order of Saint Francis,” the “Poor Clares,” or the “Clarisses.”

until Colette's death in 1447. At its heart, the reform aimed to restore the Order of Saint Clare, known today as the Poor Clares, to a state of absolute adherence to the original *Form of Life* written by Clare of Assisi, the order's co-founder.³ The core of this *Form of Life*, which received papal approval in 1253, required the sisters to live "in obedience, without anything of one's own, and in chastity."⁴ The second of these vows, the vow of "holy poverty," distinguishes Franciscans from all other orders within the Catholic Church, as Franciscans were forbidden from owning any property and required to renounce all earthly possessions – both individually and communally.⁵ This message of radical poverty was immensely popular during the thirteenth century, a period when the wealth of the institutional Church was rapidly increasing. The number of Franciscan nuns in Europe multiplied exponentially following the papal approval of Clare's *Form of Life*, also called the *Rule of Saint Clare*, with tens of thousands of women across Europe having joined the order by the time that Colette made her monastic profession almost two centuries later in 1406.⁶

Yet by Colette's time, the Poor Clares were experiencing a period of decline and disunity, which called into question the future of the entire monastic order. Turning away from the radical poverty preached by their Franciscan predecessors, the fourteenth-century generation indulged in high degrees of decadence. For many communities, the foundational *Rule* was considered only as a template for Franciscan life, and some formed their own customs and legislations that contradicted the precepts put forth by Clare. For example, the Poor Clares in Ghent – whom

³ Joan Mueller, "Colette of Corbie and the Privilege of Poverty," in *A Companion to Colette of Corbie*, ed. Joan Mueller and Nancy Bradley Warren (Boston: Brill, 2016), 101. Clare of Assisi founded the Poor Clares with the support of Francis of Assisi, whose *Rule of 1223* she adapted as the inspiration for the *Rule of Saint Clare*.

⁴ Clare of Assisi, "The Form of Life of Saint Clare," in *Clare of Assisi, the Lady: Early Documents*, ed. and trans. Regis Armstrong, OFM (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2006), 109.

⁵ It should be noted that there is one exception: members of the Third Order Secular do not live in monastic communities and are therefore permitted to own property as a means of survival. However, they are required to live in total simplicity and are forbidden from owning more than what is required to live.

⁶ Elizabeth Lopez, *Colette of Corbie: Learning and Holiness*, ed. Elise Sauggau, OSC, trans. Joanna Waller (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2011), 57.

Colette would later reform between 1441 and 1444 – became popularly known in the late Middle Ages as the “Rich Clares” due to their relatively indulgent lifestyles and their ownership of joint property.⁷

Decline and crisis among the Poor Clares was particularly visible in France, whose population was adversely affected by a combination of the Plague and the devastation wrought by the Hundred Years’ War. Poor Clare populations dwindled, and due to the Plague’s high infection and mortality rates, there were no longer enough women entering into religious life to offset these losses. In the Monastery of Saint Clare in Toulouse, for example, their community was reduced from eighty sisters in 1330 to only four sisters by 1370.⁸ Dozens of other monasteries were permanently closed as a result of the Plague, while other communities were pillaged or completely destroyed by warfare.⁹ Surviving and reconstructed communities were forced to adapt their way of life to very different circumstances; economic hardship often necessitated the acceptance of goods and monetary benefits, and the decrease in religious vocations resulted in communities recruiting women who were ill-equipped to follow Saint Clare’s pristine way of life.

It was into this tumultuous world that Colette of Corbie was born in 1381. The daughter of a simple carpenter, Colette was orphaned by the age of eighteen – an event which freed and inspired her to pursue a religious vocation.¹⁰ Although she would go on to live as a Poor Clare for most of her adult life, Colette first lived as a Beguine, then as a lay Benedictine sister, before finally entering the Franciscan family in 1402 under the spiritual direction of Father Jean Pinet. However, she did not immediately become a Poor Clare, choosing instead to don the tertiary

⁷ Els de Paermentier, “Experiencing Space Through Women’s Convent Rules: The Rich Clares in Medieval Ghent (Thirteenth to Fourteenth Centuries),” *Medieval Feminist Form* 44, no.1 (2008): 52-53.

⁸ Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder: The Poor Clares Between Foundation and Reform* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 165.

⁹ Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 166.

¹⁰ Perrine de Baume, “The Life of Saint Colette,” in *Two Lives of Saint Colette: With a Selection of Letters to, by and about Colette*, ed. and trans. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: Eter Press, 2022), 179.

habit and take a personal vow to perpetual enclosure as a recluse. Given Colette's humble background, she likely chose to pursue lay service, rather than monastic life, due to the financial handicap the monastic dowries presented.¹¹

During her time as a recluse, Colette lived in a cell in the middle of town, where she was frequently consulted by townspeople seeking spiritual counsel and personal advice.¹² She quickly developed a reputation for piety and penance, which coincided with the growth of her own personal interest in asceticism – a form of spirituality that centers upon suffering and self-denial with the goal of forming a more intimate relationship with the divine. According to her hagiographers, Colette engaged in severe acts of penance; as an example, she would lock herself “in a cell... where she could only hear the holy masses and receive the holy sacrament of the altar” for food.¹³ Her life of fasting, penance, and prayer culminated in a series of mystical visions in which Saint Francis instructed her to reform his three orders, with special attention to be given to the Order of Saint Clare.¹⁴

To enact the reform of the Poor Clares, it was necessary that Colette first be relieved of her vows as a recluse. Accompanied by a cohort of noble patrons and spiritual counselors dedicated to her reform ambitions, including her confessor and future co-reformer Henri de Baume, Colette traveled to Nice in 1405 to seek an audience with the reform-minded Avignon Pope Benedict XIII.¹⁵ The pope released her from her Third Order vows and subsequently

¹¹ Pauline L'Hermite-LeClercq, “Reclus dans le Sud-Ouest de la France,” in *La femme dans la vie religieuse du Languedoc (XIIIe - XIVe siècles)* (Toulouse: Editions Privat, 1988), 286. Monastic dowries were a common practice in women's religious communities, but they were forbidden in the Franciscan Order.

¹² Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 12-13.

¹³ Pierre de Vaux, “The Life of Saint Colette,” in *Two Lives of Saint Colette: With a Selection of Letters to, by and about Colette*, ed. and trans. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: Eter Press, 2022), 20.

¹⁴ Pierre de Vaux, “The Life of Saint Colette,” 58.

¹⁵ At this time, the Western Schism (1378-1417) divided the Church into two opposing papacies in Rome and Avignon. The Council of Constance (1414-1418) ended the Schism by electing Pope Martin V of Rome and deposing all remaining papal claimants. Benedict XIII was subsequently declared a schismatic and excommunicated. For a more detailed overview of the Schism, see Renate Blumfeld-Kosinski, *Popes, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2012), 2-11.

cloaked her in the Second Order habit in 1406. Colette was finally a Poor Clare, a vocation which enabled her to embark on a reform journey. Beginning with cautionary permission from Benedict XIII to reform one community, her reform would come to expand across France and Belgium, as Colette founded fifteen Franciscan communities and reformed two others.¹⁶

Despite her papal backing, Colette faced difficulty in the early stages of her reform. As an unconnected and uneducated woman assuming a position of religious authority, Colette was thrust into a position of unwanted political and ecclesiastical maneuvering to secure support and financial backing for her reform ambitions. The study of her remarkable and surprising success as the first woman to reform an entire order has formed the basis of most historiography concerning the Colettine Reform. Particularly within the last decade, medieval historians have taken unprecedented interest in Colette's political connections, economic practicality, and cultivation of support networks. Most recently, Clara Romani's *The Reform of Colette of Corbie (1381-1447): Methods and Mechanisms*, published in 2023, explores strategies and methods that Colette used to achieve her goals.¹⁷ Relying on Colette's correspondence with her contemporaries and the foundational documents of her reform, Romani examines the internal structures of the Colettine movement in relation to the external networks which supported it. The underlying political nature of the reform is further explored in Bert Roest's 2013 book *Order and Disorder: The Poor Clares Between Foundation and Reform*, which constitutes one of the most definitive and thorough accounts of the Colettine reform.¹⁸ In this work, Roest argues that the divisive landscape of fifteenth-century France, combined with divided and weakened ecclesiastical power, necessitated Colette's role as a political actor.

¹⁶ Marie-Colette Roussey, *Histoire des Clarisses: Premier tome* (Paris: Salvator, 2020), 141-144.

¹⁷ Clara Romani, *La Réforme de Colette de Corbie (1381-1447) : Méthodes et mécanismes* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2023).

¹⁸ Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder: The Poor Clares Between Foundation and Reform* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

On the other hand, much less scholarship has been devoted to Colette's spiritual life. The most encompassing examination of Colette's spirituality can be found in Elizabeth Lopez's 2011 book *Colette of Corbie: Learning and Holiness*.¹⁹ Beyond providing the most detailed biography of Colette to date, her book attempts to trace the development of Colette's spirituality in the context of her socio-cultural environment. Lopez applies a biographical lens to the study of Colette's spirituality, emphasizing the role of her life experiences, historical context, and contemporary collaborators in its formation. While Lopez's account has been formative to the modern understanding of Colette's spirituality, current historiography lacks a consideration of Colette's spirituality in the context of the Colettine reform and broader Franciscan theological tradition. There have been no in-depth studies that consider how Colette's spirituality informed the implementation and principles of the reform, or her unique contributions to the existing Franciscan theological tradition.

This thesis hopes to enrich current historiography on the Colettine Reform by considering how Colette's spirituality informed the reform's foundational principles and regulated their implementation. Building upon the biographical work put forth by Elizabeth Lopez, this thesis will contribute to the study of Colette's spirituality by studying it as a driving force behind the Colettine Reform, equal to the political and economic necessities that have been well-studied. Additionally, this thesis will consider Colette's spirituality in the context of Franciscanism, discussing the extent to which Colette's thoughts diverged from those of Francis and Clare. Ultimately, it will conclude that the disordered state of the Franciscan Order inspired Colette to adopt a pragmatic spirituality – one that despised laxity and valued legal unity, obedience, and authority. As a result, Colette departed from the spirituality of many of her Franciscan

¹⁹ Elizabeth Lopez, *Colette of Corbie: Learning and Holiness*, ed. Elise Sauggau, OSC, trans. Joanna Waller (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2011).

predecessors, as she subordinated the practice of “holy poverty” to her vision of a unified and secure Order.

This spiritual study will rely primarily on an examination of Colette’s writings, the majority of which have not been translated into English. Colette’s canon includes a collection of sixteen administrative letters, a short *Testament*, four personal exhortations to her sisters, and her monastic *Constitutions*. With the exception of Colette’s *Testament*, which has been translated into English by the Porziuncola Project, and six short letters translated in 2022 by Renate Blumfeld-Kosinski, her writings have historically been inaccessible to anglophone audiences.²⁰ Colette’s voice has consequently been understudied in English-language Franciscan scholarship, highlighting the necessity of introducing these texts into the current historiography. Apart from Colette’s *Constitutions*, which I accessed from a nineteenth-century modern French translation by Father Augustin Audouard, I retrieved the majority of Colette’s works from the archives of the Municipal Library in Besançon, France, the Monastery of Saint Clare in Ronchamp, France and the Monastery of Saint Clare in Poligny, France. My citations of Colette’s writings, along with many other fifteenth-century sources, will therefore rely on my own translations of middle and modern French.

Using these primary texts as its foundation, this thesis will conduct an in-depth investigation into Colette’s spirituality and its actualization during the Colettine reform. The first chapter will discuss the development of Colette’s spirituality by exploring her cultural and political context, childhood and young adulthood, and spiritual influences. The second chapter will examine Colette’s spirituality according to her own words, determining her core beliefs and the ways in which they shaped her reform. Finally, the third chapter will consider the uniqueness

²⁰ The translations of Colette’s letters can be found in Renate Blumfeld-Kosinski, *Two Lives of Saint Colette: With a Selection of Letters to, by and about Colette* (New York: Eter Press, 2022), 239-267.

of her spirituality within the existing Franciscan tradition, comparing Colette's values with foundational Franciscan texts. While this thesis deals with spirituality, it will not offer any commentary on Colette's "holiness" or "goodness." Rather, it will rely on Colette's writings to understand Colette's spiritual development and practices on her own terms.

**Chapter One – The Life of a Reformer: Colette’s Spiritual Development Prior to the
Colettine Reform**

I give thanks to the Most High who desired to give to the world of my time this little bee full of wonders who, through the admirable imitation of the seraphic Saint Francis and of the glorious virgin Saint Claire, has begun to illuminate the world by her sanctity.²¹

– Guillaume of Casale on Saint Colette of Corbie, 1434

This excerpt comes from a 1434 letter written by Guillaume of Casale, minister general of the Franciscan Order, to Jacques II, Count of La Marche. By this time, Colette had been enacting ecclesiastical reform for nearly twenty years. Moreover, she had achieved remarkable renown for her holiness and wisdom, given the attention and glowing praise she received from the head of the Order.

How exactly did this “little bee” become such a formidable spiritual powerhouse? To answer this question, it is first necessary to contextualize Colette’s spiritual background and development. Based on available primary material recounting Colette’s life and context, her spirituality did not originate from a single source or influence. Rather, it seems befitting of her time, characterized by Jacques Le Goff as “the autumn of the Middle Ages, full of fury and clamor, blood and tears,” that Colette’s spirituality developed somewhat chaotically – a melange of her personal experiences, relationships, and spiritual encounters.²²

This chapter will examine Colette’s spiritual origins, both personal and impersonal. The first half will rely primarily on hagiographical accounts to explore her upbringing, period of

²¹ “Lettre de Guillaume de Casale au roi Jacques II,” in “Lettres inédites de Guillaume de Casale à sainte Colette de Corbie et notes pour la biographie de cette sainte,” ed. and pub. Ubald D’Alençon. *Études Franciscaines*, vol. 19 (1908): 470. “Pour lequel saint et divin don ie rends graces au très haut qui a voulu donner au monde de mon temps cette abeille pleine de merveilles qui a l’imitation admirable du séraphique S. François et de la glorieuse vierge S. Claire a commencé d’illuminer le monde par sa sainteté.” My translation.

²² Jacques Le Goff, *La civilisation de l’Occident médiéval* (Paris: Arthaud, 1984), 446. “L’automne du Moyen Âge est plein de fureur et de bruit, de sang et de larmes.” My translation.

reclusion, and relationship with Henry de Baume, her confessor and co-reformer. The second section will consider more external forces, such as the state of the Franciscan Order and women's religious movements. Overall, this chapter will provide a more nuanced understanding of Colette's spiritual beliefs and motivations, providing necessary context for the in-depth spiritual analysis to follow.

Colette's Childhood and Early Spiritual Development

Colette's biographical information prior to the beginning of her reform is contained within two fifteenth-century *Vitae*, a form of hagiographical literature that sought to highlight its subject's sanctity and edify audiences. Essentially, Colette's *Vitae* made the case for her sainthood, making them valuable sources in understanding the construction of her spirituality.²³ The first *Vitae* of Saint Colette was authored by a Coletan²⁴ friar called Pierre de Vaux around 1447, and the other by a Colettine Poor Clare named Perrine de Baume around 1477.²⁵ Both authors corresponded and collaborated with Colette over the course of several decades, making them eyewitnesses to her life and reform.

Upon first glance at these *Vitae*, Colette seems like an unlikely candidate to have been chosen to reform the Franciscans. She was born Colette Boellet in Corbie, a small village in the northern French Picardy region that became an economic powerhouse under English occupation.²⁶ The only child of an aging carpenter and his wife, her childhood was simple and modest, and she formed close bonds with both of her parents. Her hagiographers emphasized her parents' devout Christianity as the driving force behind Colette's early interest in prayer and

²³ Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 2.

²⁴ "Coletan" refers to the male friars who were reformed by the Colettine reform.

²⁵ Renate Blumfeld-Kosinski, "Introduction: Saint Colette and Her World," in *Two Lives of Saint Colette: With a Selection of Letters to, by, and about Colette*, ed. and trans. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: Eter Press, 2022), 8.

²⁶ Roussey, *Histoire des Clarisses*, 120.

penance. According to Pierre de Vaux, when Colette was only four years old, her piety was so great that her father built a small, private oratory for her in their home, “where she occupied herself with thinking about God, loving and fearing Him, serving Him humbly and praying to Him devoutly.”²⁷

In the following years, Colette began exploring more intense forms of prayers and religious expression, and she developed a keen interest in mortification. Perrine de Baume goes into great detail explaining Colette’s devotions to the sufferings of Jesus, including Colette’s practice of locking herself in her room for hours on end to grieve and contemplate the mystery of the Passion.²⁸ Perrine attributes Colette’s mystical fascination with the Passion to her mother, who “remembered every day the holy Passion of Our Lord whether she was spinning, sewing, or taking care of small household tasks.”²⁹ Both accounts characterize Colette’s mother as particularly devout, going to weekly confession and receiving the Eucharist as often as possible.

It is notable that Colette’s family is so highly praised within her *Vitae*. In many comparable hagiographies, such as those dedicated to Saints Francis and Clare, subjects’ families often create obstacles along the paths to sanctity. In Thomas of Celano’s *Legend of Saint Clare*, he vividly depicts a scene in which Clare’s father and other relatives invoked “violent force, poisonous advice, and flattering promises” to compel Clare to forsake her religious vocation and renounce God’s will.³⁰ While hagiographers idealized their subjects, families were often heavily scrutinized. In light of this trend, the absence of criticism for Colette’s parents makes it even more likely that they were indeed pious and positively shaped her spiritual growth.³¹

²⁷ Pierre de Vaux, “The Life of Saint Colette,” 44.

²⁸ Perrine de Baume, “The Life of Saint Colette,” 195.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁰ Thomas of Celano, “The Legend of Saint Clare,” in *Clare of Assisi, the Lady: Early Documents*, ed. and trans. Regis Armstrong, OFM (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2006), 287.

³¹ Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 12.

The happiness of Colette's childhood came to an abrupt end when at the age of eighteen, she lost both of her parents. The pain and shock caused by these consecutive tragedies sparked a period of desolation and confusion in Colette's life.³² To ameliorate this crisis, she decided to sell her belongings and pursue a vocation to religious life.³³ Pierre de Vaux writes that Colette "desired fervently to become the servant of some good and devout nuns and... went humbly to present herself at a monastery of religious women."³⁴ However, her entrance into religious life was troublesome. She entered into lay service at a series of convents: first the Beguines, then the Benedictines, and even the Poor Clares for a time. However, she never stayed with these communities for long, feeling as though they did not adequately suit her vocational calling.³⁵

Colette's permanent entrance into Franciscanism would not come until 1402 when she met Father Jean Pinet, a guardian at the Franciscan friary in Hesdin who became her confessor and spiritual director. Sensing her vocational crisis, Fr. Pinet suggested she enter into a life of seclusion in the Third Order of Saint Francis – a vocation that was becoming increasingly popular.³⁶ After taking a personal vow of perpetual enclosure as a recluse, Colette publicly professed Franciscan vows on September 17, 1402.

Recluse and Mystic

For the next four years of her life, Colette would live in strict seclusion. Her experience as a Franciscan recluse would prove extremely formative in her spiritual maturation, as she not only became immersed in the Franciscan tradition, but she also developed an intense interest in asceticism and mysticism.

³² Roussey, *Histoire des Clarisses*, 122.

³³ Perrine de Baume, "The Life of Saint Colette," 185.

³⁴ Pierre de Vaux, "The Life of Saint Colette," 48.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁶ Perrine de Baume, "The Life of Saint Colette," 179.

Colette's seclusion only exacerbated her already intense practices of bodily mortification, as she came to embrace asceticism as a primary form of religious expression. In the process, Colette entered into a fully contemplative life, in which she spent the vast majority of her waking hours in prayer and refused to partake in non-religious social interactions. Pierre de Vaux writes that "she led a very sober and harsh life, wearing a coarse and inhuman hair shirt and wrapping around her vulnerable and tender body three cruel iron chains that wounded her innocent flesh very painfully; and she lay on the floor naked, putting her head on a hard block of wood as a pillow."³⁷ This example indicates a clear escalation from Colette's childhood forms of self-inflicted suffering, characterizing her period of seclusion as one of ascetic intensification.

As she deepened her asceticism, her reputation for holiness and wisdom spread rapidly throughout Corbie. She became known as a powerful intercessor and miracle worker, and visitors began visiting her cell in droves to solicit her advice. Suddenly, she needed to balance her vow of perpetual enclosure with the public's demands for her spiritual counsel, resulting in Fr. Pinet limiting her visiting times to only two to three hours each day.³⁸ This experience was valuable to Colette's development, as she entered into a role of spiritual maternity and learned to navigate conflicting ecclesiastical duties.

Perhaps most importantly, Colette's period of seclusion saw her introduction to mysticism. Shortly after becoming a recluse, Colette reported experiencing a series of mystical visions, which involved apparitions of the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus Christ. The most important mystical experience occurred in 1406, in which Colette received what she believed were divine instructions to reform the Franciscan Order. She experienced a "marvelous and frightening vision" in which she "saw and recognized all the different estates of the Church

³⁷ Pierre de Vaux, "The Life of Saint Colette," 53.

³⁸ Roussey, *Histoire des Clarisses*, 123.

and of secular society... then were shown to her the faults and offenses that each of these estates had committed against their governments and against God, to His great displeasure. She also saw the horrible pains and grievous torments with which every one of them was punished according to his just deserts.”³⁹ This vision greatly troubled her, and she was inconsolably anxious until she received a second mystical vision featuring Saint Francis himself, in which “the glorious father Saint Francis, in the presence of the glorious Virgin Mary and the blessed angels of paradise, presented his handmaid [Colette] to our glorious savior Jesus Christ and humbly asked Him that He should let her undertake the reform of his Orders.”⁴⁰

In the pursuit of God’s will, Colette decided to give up her life of seclusion and dedicate herself to the reform of the Franciscan Order. She resolved to venture from Corbie to Nice – over seven hundred miles on foot – to request permission from Pope Benedict XIII to be released from her vow of enclosure. But her journey would not begin until she was introduced to Henry de Baume, a Franciscan priest who would become her spiritual director, co-reformer, and personal confessor, and perhaps her most formidable spiritual influence.

Henry de Baume

The story of the Colettine reform, and particularly its spirituality, cannot be understood without considering Henry de Baume, Colette’s closest advisor. Henry de Baume was appointed as the minister of Colette’s reform by Benedict XIII, a role that required him to provide spiritual authority and personal guidance to Colette and her reformed monasteries.⁴¹ Henry’s supervisory

³⁹ Pierre de Vaux, “The Life of Saint Colette,” 56.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴¹ Anna Campbell, “Saint Colette and the Friars of the Bull: Franciscan Reform in Fifteenth-Century France,” in *Rules and Observance: Devising Rules of Communal Life*, ed. Mirko Breitenstein, Julia Burkhardt, Stefan Burkhardt, and Jens Röhrkasten (Berlin: Lit, 2014) 62.

role characterized the reform as an ultimately “male-controlled undertaking,” meaning that his input and direction would have been deeply influential on the reform’s spiritual objectives.⁴²

In practice, however, Henry never seemed to exercise any kind of absolute authority over Colette and her reform. On the contrary, he dedicated himself to Colette’s foundational vision and made inestimable contributions to its success, particularly in the reform’s early stages. While Colette’s force of personality and personal conviction helped her to secure initial papal backing, she did not have access to the powerful networks or possess the theological background necessary to capitalize on this momentum.

She found a complementary partner in Henry, a university-educated scholar in the faculties of literature and theology, renowned Franciscan preacher, and Burgundian nobleman with strong political awareness.⁴³ At the time that Colette received her series of mystical visions, Henry was a friar in a convent in Mirebeau – a small village in the northeast of France, three hundred miles from Corbie. Born into an affluent family in the ranks of minor nobility, Henry maintained close contacts with Burgundian noble families, even after his entrance into religious life.⁴⁴ As a friar, he was reform-minded, and he was linked to a small reform party of other Burgundian friars.

His desire for reform originated from similar concerns to those that Colette expressed; namely, Henry was dissatisfied with spiritual laxity and Franciscan disunity.⁴⁵ Like Colette, Henry aimed to reform from within and ultimately maintain obedience to the Conventual

⁴² Bert Roest, “A Textual Community in the Making: Colettine Authorship in the Fifteenth Century,” in *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe, 1200-1550*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2004), 165.

⁴³ Hugolin Lippens, “Henry de Baume coopérateur de S. Colette. Recherches sur sa vie et publication de ses Statuts inédits,” *Sacris Erudiri* 0, no. 1(1948): 236.

⁴⁴ Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 170.

⁴⁵ Jacques-Théodore Bizouard, *Histoire de sainte Colette et des Clarisses en Franche-Comté : d'après des documents inédits* (P Jacquin: Besançon, 1888), 3.

Franciscan hierarchy.⁴⁶ By 1406, he became discontent with the state of his convent, where the friars had decided to remove themselves from the existing Franciscan hierarchy to determine their own leadership and regulations. According to sister Catherine Ruffiné, a Poor Clare sister and contemporary of Henry and Colette, Henry's brothers "were determined to never place themselves under the obedience of the ordinary ministers, but they and their companions would do their business separately, and would follow their own rules according to their own sort and manner."⁴⁷ After hearing word of a similarly reform-minded recluse in Corbie, Henry journeyed across France to acquire an audience with her. Nothing is known of their first encounter, but soon after they met, they left Corbie for Nice, accompanied by a few noble donors whom Henry had recruited to their cause, including Isabelle de Rochechouart and the Baroness of Brissay.⁴⁸

As a spiritual influence, Henry's place cannot be overstated. Though he was never canonized as a saint, Henry was granted the title of "Blessed" within the Franciscan Order immediately following his death – a great honor implying that he was highly regarded in his contemporary context. Some surviving evidence supports his widespread reputation for penance and humility; one contemporary abbot described him as follows: "He had a sharp, easygoing, penetrating spirit and sound judgment. He was no less learned for being religious, nor less religious for being learned. Even more esteemed for his modesty, he was neither proud of his birth nor his talents."⁴⁹ His renown was so great that upon his death, Colette violated traditional customs to ensure that his body was buried in the nuns' enclosure, rather than within his friary,

⁴⁶ Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 173.

⁴⁷ "Lettre de Catherine Ruffiné," in "Documents sur la réforme de Ste. Colette en France," ed. Ubald D'Alençon in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* vol. 3 (1910): 85. "[Les frères] se déterminèrent de non james estre sous l'obedience des ministres ordinaires, mais eulx et leurs alyés feroient leur fait a part eulx, et aroient leurs prelas de leur sorte et maniere." My translation.

⁴⁸ Perrine de Baume, "The Life of Saint Colette," 182.

⁴⁹ "Lettre de l'abbé Larceneux," in Jacques-Théodore Bizouard, *Histoire de sainte Colette et des Clarisses en Franche-Comté : d'après des documents inédits* (P Jacquin: Besançon, 1888), 3. "Il avoit l'esprit vif, aisé, pénétrant, un jugement solide. Il n'étoit pas moins docte que religieux, ni moins religieux pour estre docte. Plus estimable encore par sa modestie, il ne s'énfloit ni de sa naissance ni de ses talents." My translation.

so that his spirit might continue to bless and guide the sisters.⁵⁰ In a 1439 letter written to inform the Colettine network of his death, Colette expressed complete confidence in his sanctity, writing that “it is better that he pray for all of us than we for him.”⁵¹

Evidence also supports his direct influence on Colette’s thinking and religious expression. One example comes from the *Vita* of Sister Perrine, which recalls Henry instructing and correcting Colette in the practice of her asceticism. At the beginning of the reform, Colette had a practice of wearing a heavy iron belt that she would keep on “for such a long time that the flesh grew over this ring and one could only see its buckle.”⁵² When Henry learned of this, he required her to remove the belt. Cautious of the dangers that it presented to her health, particularly in light of Colette’s divine mission, Henry begged Colette that “the Order still needed her very much.”⁵³ The story provides an example of the balance that Henry brought to Colette’s spirituality. He encouraged her to be more practical in her asceticism and to exercise self-denial in moderation, and never to an extent that could hinder the reform.

Henry’s close relationship to Colette requires a contextualization of his spirituality. Though many of his works have been lost, bibliographers from the seventeenth century and beyond list his writings as among the most formative influences on the development of asceticism in fifteenth-century France.⁵⁴ Additionally, Henry was firmly established in the Franciscan tradition, as evidenced by a short series of *Statutes* that he wrote for the administration of the Coletan friars. This text offers a treatise on interior life, in which Henry

⁵⁰ Chanoine E. de Vregille, “Le Bienheureux Henri de Baume (1366-1349) et les documents concernant son culte immémorial,” in *La France franciscaine : mélanges d’archéologie, d’histoire et de littérature* (Editions franciscaines: Paris, 1913), 247.

⁵¹ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre circulaire à l’occasion de la mort de Henri de Baume*, 26 February 1439, Ronchamp, Archives of the Monastery of Saint Clare, manuscript copy, transc. by the sisters of the Monastery of Saint Clare. My translation.

⁵² Perrine de Baume, “The Life of Saint Colette,” 203.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁴ Lippens, “Henry de Baume coopérateur de S. Colette,” 247.

calls the friars to practice perfect self-denial, prayer, and brotherly devotion.⁵⁵ His Franciscan spirituality shines through in the utmost importance he accords to poverty, which he suggests can be exemplified through deliberate acts of charity and devotion to the Passion.

His largest and most meditative work survives in the Municipal Archives of Besançon: a treatise entitled *Meditation on our Savior's Life, Passion, Fifteen Principal Sufferings, and Death*. Despite Henry's scholarly background, this meditation on the Passion relies upon a provocation of the heart, rather than the intellect. It is a thorough and vivid description of "the scenes [of the Passion] as they probably would have or did happen" according to Henry's imagination.⁵⁶ The text connects Henry with traditional Franciscan devotion to the Passion, which implored the faithful to gaze upon the sufferings of Christ and unite themselves to his pain.⁵⁷ Though Henry's reflections are not original by any means, they reveal his familiarity with popular asceticism and his Franciscan heritage. Many of his allegories and reflections are borrowed directly from those of Saint Francis, indicating a keen interest in reinvigorating, rather than reinventing, Franciscan spirituality.

This interest in preserving foundational Franciscan principles and exploring asceticism to deepen one's relationship with Christ was shared by Henry and Colette alike, with Colette's beliefs being constantly shaped and strengthened by Henry's. As such, it is important to define and contextualize the Franciscan and ascetic movements as external influences upon Colette's spirituality.

Franciscan Spirituality: From Foundation to Crisis

⁵⁵ Lippens, "Henry de Baume coopérateur de S. Colette," 259.

⁵⁶ Henri de Baume, *Méditation de la vie, passion, quinze douleurs principales, et mort de Notre Sauveur*. Municipal Archives of Besançon, MS 1490-149. My translation.

⁵⁷ Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 366.

In the Catholic Church, all religious brothers and sisters who enter into a religious order make three lifelong vows to poverty, obedience, and chastity, and Franciscans are no exception. This raises the question: what sets Franciscanism apart from other religious orders?

The basic answer rests upon Franciscanism's particular interpretation of the vow to poverty – that is, the promise to live without any possessions of one's own. Before Francis's time, the practice of monastic poverty was generally a matter of individual observance. Religious brothers and sisters often lived personally austere lives while simultaneously being members of monastic communities that possessed wealth, accepted monetary donations, and ensured that all inhabitants' needs were met.

Francis, however, believed that he and his brothers should live free from property and monetary support, directly imitating Christ in his earthly poverty.⁵⁸ Early Franciscans were therefore forbidden from owning any possessions whatsoever, both individually and communally. They lived without fixed dwellings, refused monetary endowments from the Church, and relied entirely on their own begging and the charity of others to provide for their daily needs.⁵⁹ In the 1223 *Rule of Saint Francis*, Franciscan poverty is mandated as such:

Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all. As pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go seeking alms with confidence, and they should not be ashamed because, for our sakes, our Lord made Himself poor in this world. This is that sublime height of most exalted poverty which has made you, my most beloved brothers, heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven, poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue. Let this be your portion which leads into the land of the living. Giving yourselves totally to this, beloved brothers, never seek anything else under heaven for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ The practice of living in direct imitation of Christ is commonly referred to as *imitatio Christae* in Franciscan literature.

⁵⁹ John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From Its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 15-16.

⁶⁰ Francis of Assisi, "The Later Rule (1223)," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents – The Saint*, ed. and trans. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv., and William J. Short, O.F.M. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1999), 103.

In this excerpt, the heart of Franciscan spirituality shines through. Whereas many Orders sought to live the “apostolic life,” following in the footsteps of Christ’s apostles, Franciscans sought to live an “evangelical life,” following Christ himself. This distinction is important, as it compelled Franciscans to live in the manner of Christ, who was born in a stable, lived according to his own manual labor as a carpenter, followed an itinerant lifestyle of preaching and healing, and associated himself with the poorest and lowliest members of society. Through this special charism, Franciscans desired to completely entrust their lives to God’s provision, freeing themselves from the security that financial and landed endowments offered.

Though Franciscanism began with the friars, Francis’s teachings soon fell upon the ears of Clare de Offreduccio de Favarone, a young noblewoman whose family was “well-endowed” with “abundant means.”⁶¹ A regular attendee at sermons preached by Francis and his mendicant brothers, she resolved to forsake her own inheritance to pursue the evangelical life – a decision that culminated on Palm Sunday in 1212, when Clare ran away from her family home to be personally tonsured by Francis and become the first female Franciscan. Francis placed Clare in the church of San Damiano, where other women soon joined her. But their conversions created a difficult question for Francis: how could women live a mendicant way of life?

It is important to note that Francis always professed the call to poverty to be universal, meaning that he believed men and women alike could participate in the Franciscan lifestyle. However, because it was considered dangerous for women to wander about without a fixed dwelling and to preach as the brothers did, Francis penned an adapted *Form of Life* for the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. Though the original text does not survive, Francis’s instructions to the sisters to “live always in this most holy life and poverty... and never depart from this by reason

⁶¹ Thomas of Celano, “The Legend of Saint Clare,” in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents – The Lady*, ed. and trans. Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2006), 280.

of the teaching or advice of anyone” are quoted in Clare’s 1253 *Form of Life*.⁶² This early *Form of Life* affirmed that women could live out the vocation to poverty by living in a strict monastic enclosure, free from endowment income.⁶³ This exemption to live in absolute poverty was codified by Pope Gregory IX in the 1228 *Privilege of Poverty*, setting a precedent for other convents across Europe who wished to follow the lifestyle of San Damiano.⁶⁴

It was within this Clarissan tradition, characterized by strict enclosure, obedience, and above all, poverty, that Colette flourished as a reformer. But by Colette’s lifetime, the Franciscan Order looked very different than it had in the time of Francis and Clare, marked most importantly by the conflict between the Observant and Conventual Franciscans.

Beginning in the fourteenth century, a set of reforms took place within the Franciscan Order called the Observant reforms. These reforms aimed to restore strict observance to the original *Rule of Saint Francis*, as many felt that the Order had strayed too far from its original ideals. Most importantly, Observant reformers believed that the Conventual Franciscans had become too lax in their observance of poverty, as many Conventual communities permitted the communal ownership of property and buildings, arguing that it was necessary for the implementation of their ministries and charitable deeds.⁶⁵ The Observants also placed a higher value on contemplative prayer and meditation.

Rather than reforming from within the Order, the Observant Franciscans organized their own hierarchies, which were further fractured during the Schism into those organized under authority in Avignon and those organized under authority in Rome.⁶⁶ Like the Observants,

⁶² Clare of Assisi, “The Form of Life of Saint Clare,” 118.

⁶³ Lezlie Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi: Female Franciscan Identities in Later Medieval Italy* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008), 24.

⁶⁴ Joan Mueller, *The Privilege of Poverty: Clare of Assisi, Agnes of Prague, and the Struggle for a Franciscan Rule for Women* (University Park: The Pennsylvania States University Press, 2006), 41.

⁶⁵ Duncan Nimmo, *Reform and Division in the Franciscan Order: From Saint Francis to the Foundation of the Capuchins* (Rome: Capuchin Historical Institute, 1987), 484-485.

⁶⁶ Campbell, “Saint Colette and the Friars of the Bull,” 57.

Colette hoped to return to a strict interpretation of Francis’s teachings, but she cautioned against the disunity that the Observant reformers introduced to the Order and refused to place her communities under Observant rule.⁶⁷ This period of chaos and fracture in the Franciscan Order and greater Church informed Colette’s characteristic belief in strict hierarchical obedience, which would come to supersede all other virtues in her spirituality – even poverty and penance.

The “Feminization of Sanctity”

Religion in the mid to late Middle Ages was marked by the “feminization of sanctity.”⁶⁸ Beginning with the popular itinerant preaching and penitential movements of the twelfth century, medieval women across Latin Europe began abandoning their families and financial security in droves, seeking to join and form communities of sisters dedicated to the virtues of evangelical perfection – that is, to *imitatio Christae*. As a result, the image of Christian religious life fundamentally changed. Religious vocations no longer necessitated lives of cloistered contemplation, and many brothers and sisters began participating in active service and public ministry. This shift expanded the vocational possibilities available to women, resulting in new female religious orders forming across Europe.

However, women were limited in their expressions of *imitatio Christae*. Societal and canonical restrictions on female authority and movement relegated most evangelical power to men, and canon law explicitly forbade women’s preaching.⁶⁹ Women were therefore unable to fully live the Gospel, as they could not preach, live an itinerant lifestyle, or independently minister to others. When women desired to enter into public ministries, whether through

⁶⁷ Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 173.

⁶⁸ David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 127.

⁶⁹ Tanya Stabler Miller, *The Beguines of Medieval Paris: Gender, Patronage, and Spiritual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 118.

providing spiritual direction or serving the poor, they were met with much higher degrees of skepticism. Women who claimed to have experienced mystical encounters or visions would be immediately assigned a male confessor to carefully review the validity of her testimony and supervise her ministry, just as Colette was paired with Henry.⁷⁰

Often, the most accessible and acceptable form of *imitatio Christae* for women was private suffering.⁷¹ As women were driven towards more interior means of expressing their faith and devotion, this resulted in a pronounced gender difference in medieval religious practices. Women were far more likely than their male counterparts to engage in mysticism, penance, and self-mortification.⁷² They developed particularly strong devotions to the Passion, engaging in extreme forms of self-harm in order to imitate Christ's pain on the cross, with sources citing examples of penitent sisters wearing hair shirts, violently whipping themselves, and attempting to survive on Eucharistic bread alone.⁷³ Jacques de Vitry, a thirteenth-century hagiographer, said this of his visit to a Beguine community – the penitential, informal order of lay women to which Colette belonged before her reception into Franciscanism:

You saw other women who were wasting away with such an intimate and wondrous state of love in God that they were faint with desire and who for many years could only rarely rise from their beds... when the soul of one of these women wondrously and perceptibly melted from the magnitude of love, her bodily cheeks became sunken and wasted away... she obtained the grace of so many tears that, as often as God was in her heart through thought, a stream of tears flowed from her eyes through devotion, so that the traces of her tears appeared on her cheeks from habitual weeping.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid., 232.

⁷¹ Miller, *The Beguines of Medieval Paris*, 117.

⁷² Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987), 26.

⁷³ Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 155.

⁷⁴ Jacques de Vitry, *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*, ed. and trans. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1993), 40.

Acts of self-mortification such as these were not only commonplace, but highly praised. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell argue that these practices were admired particularly in the context of the cloister, as they “reinforced rather than challenged the medieval view of what was appropriate to the female sex. Vanity, lust, and frivolity were regarded as the besetting sins of femininity; they could best be expiated by practices that banished pride, chastised the flesh, and disciplined the spirit.”⁷⁵ Consequently, the late Middle Ages experienced a revolution in the evolution and respectability of feminine sanctity; whereas only 11.8% of saints in the twelfth century were women, by the fifteenth century, this figure more than doubled to 27.7%.⁷⁶

Given Colette’s exposure to a variety of women’s religious communities and personal devotion to asceticism and mysticism, she was likely influenced by popular feminine spiritual practices. Although there was certainly overlap in these practices with other contemporary trends, such as the Franciscan devotion to the Passion, Colette’s experience as a female reformer was, to at least some degree, shaped by her gendered experience.

Similar statements can be made for each of the above-mentioned spiritual influences. While their importance to Colette’s historical and biographical context means that they influenced her spiritual development to some degree, the exact extent of any one influence cannot be determined; too few primary sources survive for these conclusions to be drawn. But the study of Colette’s spiritual development is no less important to the study of her spirituality as a whole, as it lays the groundwork for her spirituality to be analyzed as a function of its time.

⁷⁵ Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, 234.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

Chapter Two – On the Path to Sanctity: The Spirituality of Saint Colette

We must turn to our good and true patron, our Lord Jesus Christ, and pray to him that he may arm us with these weapons so that we can follow him better and more surely. These weapons... were: against the world, true and holy poverty from his birth until his death naked on the cross; against the flesh, pure, holy, and clean chastity of heart and body, born and conceived of a pure virgin mother; against the enemy, perfect humility and true obedience up to his death, and all these in perfect charity. And whoever is thus armed can go confidently into battle.⁷⁷

– Colette of Corbie, 1442.

In this 1442 letter to a sister in the midst of a vocational crisis, Colette outlines a series of spiritual “weapons” with which the sister can equip herself against doubt, shame, and anxiety. Above all, Colette grounds this advice in the life of Christ, encouraging the sister to unite her sufferings to his Passion and engulf herself in the call to *imitatio Christae*. Colette’s literary style underscores her devotion to asceticism and self-denial, as she metaphorically frames the acquisition of virtue as an eternal battle against selfish and worldly desires.

As a short piece of spiritual counsel, this source offers a valuable glimpse into which principles Colette most extolled to her sisters. Using the three primary virtues outlined by Colette in this excerpt – poverty, chastity, and obedience – as an outline, this chapter will attempt to discern Colette’s spiritual beliefs and the ways in which they shaped Colettine life. Ultimately, Colette’s spirituality will be characterized as a unique blend of ascetic, practical, and Franciscan elements that emphasized obedience and authority over all else. This carried many implications for reformed communities, as Colette exercised streamlined control over her sisters and closely regulated their religious practices. In the interest of studying Colette on her own terms, this

⁷⁷ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre à la dame Marie Boen*, End of 1442, Ronchamp, Archives of the Monastery of Saint Clare, manuscript copy, transc. by the sisters of the Monastery of Saint Clare. “Nous avons besoin de nous retourner à notre bon et vrai patron Notre-Seigneur Jesus-Christ et lui prier qu’il lui plaise nous armer de ces armes afin que le puissions mieux et plus sûrement ensuivre. Ces armures... ont esté contre le monde, vraie et sainte pauvreté dès sa nativité jusqu’à sa mort, tout nu en croix ; contre la chair, pure, sainte, et nette chasteté de coeur et de corps, né et conçu de pure vierge mère ; contre l’ennemi, parfaite humilité et vraie obediencia jusques à la mort et toute en parfaite charité ; et qui ainsi pourrait être armé, sûrement à la bataille pourrait aller.” My translation.

investigation will rely primarily on Colette’s writings, rather than on secondary testimonies and observations. As such, this chapter will draw no conclusions regarding the extent to which Colette “practiced what she preached;” rather, it aims simply to determine her spiritual thought.

Although Colette spent most of her reform efforts focused on daily monastic operations and maintaining valuable connections, she managed to leave behind a small collection of writings. We know that Colette was literate, but it is possible that her writings may not have all been written in her own hand, or entirely in her own words. However, according to an authentication investigation conducted by Elizabeth Lopez, Colette’s signature is considered genuine, and there is no evidence to contradict the oral tradition.⁷⁸ Few original writings survive, but the manuscript copies made over the years are also considered generally reliable.

Colette’s writings can be divided into two categories: epistolary and administrative. In the epistolary category we find sixteen short letters written between 1416 and 1447. They were addressed to individuals, religious communities, and secular authorities, and they primarily considered isolated situations. The administrative category includes her monastic *Constitutions*, the governing rules for Colettine convents based on the *Rule* of Saint Clare, as well as her *Testament*, *Final Recommendations*, *Sentiments*, and *Ordinances*. These were regulatory in nature, dealing with the internal life and religious practices of reformed communities. Together, these sources provide a glimpse into her complex spirituality and outline its implications for her greater reform movement.

Obedience: The Highest Virtue

Throughout Colette’s writings, both epistolary and otherwise, the virtue of obedience features most prominently – even surpassing that of evangelical poverty. In her *Testament*,

⁷⁸ Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 166.

Colette confirms the necessity of obedience to achieve salvation: “above all other virtues, I recommend to you holy obedience, and with this virtue, we can die to ourselves in order to achieve a life everlasting.”⁷⁹ Though her emphasis on hierarchical obedience may appear to be a strictly pragmatic choice to ensure her reform’s efficiency, Colette’s writings indicate this choice had deeply spiritual roots. To Colette, obedience to earthly authorities was an extension of obedience to God. As such, she believed that obedience should be immediate and unconditional; one could only disobey an authority’s command if it contradicted biblical or Catholic teaching.

Her model for perfect Christian obedience came from Christ himself – an unsurprising choice, given that the Franciscan call to evangelical perfection relied on *imitatio Christae*. Although Christ was God himself, with perfect goodness and wisdom, he obediently placed himself under the dictates of his earthly authorities, “submissive to Saint Joseph and obedient to his dear Virgin Mother.”⁸⁰ In the same way, Colette advised her sisters not to “place our own senses over the senses of our superiors,” even if those superiors seemed unqualified or unwise.⁸¹

Colette described obedience as a sort of “gateway virtue” without which other virtues could not flow forth; in essence, it was the foundation for salvation. Driven by a pressing interest in her sisters’ eternal souls, Colette devoted most of her daily energy to enforcing the strict obedience to the *Rule* of Saint Clare and to her own *Constitutions*, rather than to the spiritual aspects of poverty and prayer. Elizabeth Lopez defines this phenomenon as “the replacement of sisterly love with sisterly correction.”⁸² This focus is evident in Colette’s correspondences with Colettine convents and Coletan friaries, in which she uses explicitly spiritual language to

⁷⁹ Colette of Corbie, *Testament de Sainte Colette*, Late 15th century, edited in 1671 by the Clarisses at Besançon. Ronchamp, Monastery of Saint Clare, uncatalogued manuscript, transc. in modern French by the sisters of the Monastery of Saint Clare, 2. “Sur toutes autres vertus, je recommande sainte obédience, et avec cette vertu, puissions-nous mourir pour avoir vie perdurable.” My translation.

⁸⁰ Colette of Corbie, *Testament de Sainte Colette*, 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸² Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 257.

admonish her sisters and brothers to complete submission to their superiors. In a 1446 letter to the Monastery of Saint Clare in Besançon, home of the first reformed Colettine community, Colette instructs the sisters to obey their abbess “in order to avoid punishment for these transgressions, which will be even greater after this present life, and to be able to possess the eternal life that has been promised to them.”⁸³ Acknowledging the difficulty of this task, she adds that “the toil is brief, but the repose is long; for a bit of pain, one will receive great praise.”⁸⁴ Such language is common throughout her letters, as she encouraged her correspondants to practice obedience by highlighting the heavenly rewards that awaited them as compensation for their earthly humility.

In her more administrative writings, Colette provided practical advice regarding how her followers could orient their lives towards perfect obedience. She taught that obedience was best achieved through the complete denial of the will, a process of intense humility and detachment that reflected her ascetic influences. In her *Sentiments*, she writes that “there is no broader path leading to hell than doing one’s own will; but at the same time, there is no narrower path leading more directly to heaven than rejecting one’s own will.”⁸⁵ Similar ideas are echoed in her *Testament*, in which she calls personal will “the surest path to the fires of hell.”⁸⁶

In Colette’s spirituality, holy obedience was paramount. Throughout all levels of her reform, Colette promoted a strict culture of hierarchical deference, striving to strengthen

⁸³ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre à l’abbesse du monastère de Besançon*, 18 July 1446, Original, Besançon, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 1490, fol 3. “Afin de eviter les pugnacions pour ycelles transgressions ordonnees et encore plus grandes que ycelles ne sont apres ceste presente vie et plus et posseder la vie perdurable qui leur est promis.” My translation.

⁸⁴ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre à l’abbesse du monastère de Besançon*. “La labour est brief mais le repos est longue pour petit de paine on rechevera grant louer.”

⁸⁵ Colette of Corbie, *Les sentiments de sainte Colette*, Poligny, Monastery of Saint Clare, MS 43. My translation.

⁸⁶ Colette of Corbie, *Testament de sainte Colette*, 2. “C’est la seule matière du feu d’enfer.”

cohesion across Colettine communities while guiding her sisters and brothers along surer paths to heaven.⁸⁷

Spiritual Maternity: Authority and Affection

However, simply instructing her sisters and brothers to obey was not enough; Colette needed to consider the place of authority and discipline in her new way of life. As the leader of the Colettine movement, Colette acted as a spiritual mother to all reformed communities. This spiritual maternity was a pastoral position involving added responsibility, as her rulership made her personally accountable for the salvation of every Colettine sister. Because of these high stakes, Colette prioritized attentiveness to her daughters' spiritual needs through maternal authority and affection.

Throughout the reform, Colette strengthened the authority of the office of abbess, giving the abbesses significant power over their sisters, particularly with regards to discipline. Although the abbess was herself part of the Conventual hierarchy, she was responsible for directly punishing each of her subordinate sisters who fell short of complete obedience to herself and to the *Rule*. Colette believed this duty to be among an abbess's most important responsibilities, since behavioral correction had the potential of helping sisters along the path to heaven.⁸⁸ In the letter to the community in Besançon, Colette charges the abbess with ensuring "that all faults are justly punished" that violate "the holy *Rule*, the holy declarations, and all the holy ordinances."⁸⁹ The weight of this responsibility encouraged Colettine abbesses to be strict and uncompromising in their judgment and to embrace discipline as a means of spiritual edification.

⁸⁷ Romani, *Méthodes et mécanismes*, 33.

⁸⁸ Romani, *Méthodes et mécanismes*, 35.

⁸⁹ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre à l'abbesse du monastère de Besançon*.

As a result, abbesses imposed penances that were often severe and public. According to Colette's *Constitutions*, abbesses were required to call a weekly meeting for the sisters, during which the sisters were required to publicly confess their sins. After the group confession was complete, the abbess would assign individual penances. Although this was a traditional monastic practice, Colette was unique in the precision and severity of her punishments. Sisters were forbidden to respond to or question their penance, the nature of which ranged from being prescribed a diet of bread and water, which was required to be eaten off the refectory floor, to a period of imprisonment.⁹⁰ Sisters were equally encouraged to report one another's sins to the abbess. However, these self-corrections did little to enhance the sisters' power over their lives, as only the abbess could judge offenses and enact discipline. In effect, self-correction was another mechanism through which the abbess's authority was strengthened.

Although Colette was intensely strict with her sisters, her writings also indicate genuine maternal affection and care – a “tough love” characteristic of many medieval monastic leaders. This shines through particularly in her letters, which she often addressed to entire Colettine communities or to individual sisters struggling with spiritual doubts and discernment. In a letter to a woman named Marie Boen, who was likely experiencing a vocational discernment crisis about whether she should enter a Colettine convent, Colette encourages Marie to seek comfort and clarity through prayer. She reminds Marie that “without the help and grace of Our Lord, we cannot do anything well or resist our adversaries. We need to turn to our good and true patron, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and pray to him to arm us with these spiritual weapons, that we may be made better and follow him more surely.”⁹¹ Though Marie had not yet chosen to enter into consecrated life, Colette still paid careful attention to her spiritual and discernment needs. It is

⁹⁰ Romani, *Méthodes et mécanisme*, 33.

⁹¹ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre à la dame Marie Boen*.

important to note that throughout the letter, Colette does not attempt to sway her toward a vocation as a Colettine sister but rather, encourages her to thoroughly discern God's calling for her life. This detail further reveals the responsibility that Colette felt for her sisters' souls, as she took great care to avoid distracting Marie from divine will.

Colette often placed herself at the emotional service of her sisters, providing spiritual counsel and support during times of crisis. In a 1415 letter to sister Loyse Basende, a newly professed Colettine sister, Colette responds to Loyse's struggles to adapt to the strict rules of Colettine enclosure, which forbade her from contact with her friends and family. She encourages Loyse to "commend your heart perfectly into the hands of God, for we who have left this world must never concern ourselves with our parents or friends, except to pray to God for their salvation."⁹² By thoughtfully advising Loyse to transform her longing for loved ones into prayers for them and to entrust her struggles to God's care, Colette reveals a tender and attentive side of her personality that brings nuance to her uncompromising exterior.

However, Colette's affection did not only manifest itself in the form of counsel. To emphasize her maternal love, Colette always addressed her sisters with terms of endearment; "my most treasured daughter" and "my dearly beloved" were among her most frequently used titles. In a few of her letters, she also includes personal comments regarding her own sentiments and state of mind. To modern audiences, this may seem unremarkable; however, fifteenth-century correspondence rarely contained expressions of sentiments or self-reflection – whether in personal or official letters.⁹³ Monastic letters were not written with the purpose of providing personal updates but rather, to build communal bonds and establish spiritual direction.

⁹² Colette of Corbie, *Lettre à soeur Loyse Basende*, c. 1416, Ronchamp, Archives of the Monastery of Saint Clare, manuscript copy, transc. by the sisters of the Monastery of Saint Clare. "Mettez parfaitement vostre cuer en Dieu. Car nous qui avons quitté le monde, ne nous doit jamais chaloir de parens, ne de amis, senon pour prier Dieu pour leur salut." My translation.

⁹³ Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 199.

With this context in mind, her small expressions of affection are all the more meaningful, and her occasional willingness to express her inner thoughts indicates a degree of emotional intimacy with her sisters.

This vulnerability can be observed in Colette's 1439 letter informing her sisters of the death of Henry de Baume. She narrates the event from her own point of view, writing that she "recently experienced great pain, anguish, and bitterness, of both the heart and body, and not without just cause."⁹⁴ Fearing for the state of his soul following his death, she commends his soul to the prayers of her entire community. She writes, "for as long and as dearly as I can and with as much affection as possible, I beg you from the bottom of my heart that, if you loved him loyally while he was living, that after his passing this love should not be lessened, but increased by doing your duty with all diligence to pray to God for him."⁹⁵ Through her openness, Colette reveals a closeness to her monastic community – a familial bond brought forth through their shared vows.

Colette deeply valued her maternal role in her sisters' spiritual lives, and this identity was at the forefront of her daily actions and guiding principles. However, it is important not to over-gender this identity, as even Francis considered himself a "mother" to his followers. In his *Letter to the Faithful*, he writes that "we are mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through a divine love and a pure and sincere conscience and give birth to Him through a holy activity."⁹⁶ Colette's maternity was therefore not based on a biological reality but rather, on the

⁹⁴ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre circulaire à l'occasion de la mort de Henri de Baume*. "Je vous fait sçavoir que nouvellement m'est advenu une grande douleur, angoise et amertume de cuer et de corps, et non pas sans juste cause."

⁹⁵ Ibid. "...tant que je puis et scai et cherement et le plus tres affectionnement que faire se peult, je la vous recommande, vous suppliant de tout mon ceur entierement, que si l'avez aimé loialement luy vivant, que l'amour après son trepas ne soit point amoindry, mais augmenté en faisant vostre devoir, en toute diligence de prier Dieu pour luy."

⁹⁶ Francis of Assisi, "The First Version of the Letter to the Faithful," in *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents Volume One: The Saint*, ed. and trans. Regis Armstrong, OFM (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1999), 42.

belief that she could mystically carry Christ into the world by allowing the Holy Spirit to dwell within her heart, mind, and soul. Through her motherhood, she strove to draw her daughters closer to Christ through her own receptivity to his love and to keep them on the narrow path to salvation through any means necessary.

Evangelical Poverty: Body and Spirit

As a Franciscan, Colette expressed a great love of poverty, wishing to restore her reformed monasteries to the practice of complete evangelical poverty originally envisioned by Francis and Clare. In terms of its importance, Colette placed poverty second only to the virtue of obedience, as put forth in her *Testament*: “after renouncing ourselves, the Lord wants us to carry our own Cross – that is, our holy vow of poverty.”⁹⁷ Like the poverty of her Franciscan predecessors, Colette’s conception of poverty required that one not only be materially poor, but spiritually poor as well. While material poverty can be defined simply as a lack of material possessions, spiritual poverty is a much more complex concept – one that involves a complete self-emptying of one’s ego and desires to instead be filled with God’s perfect will and grace. Just as the materially poor might beg for essential items, so too should a spiritually poor person beg God for his mercy and favor. Spiritual poverty discourages any form of self-reliance and invites its adherents to detach themselves from all earthly comforts, whether material or immaterial, to become utterly dependent on God. Colette’s ideas of material and spiritual poverty were therefore closely interconnected, relying on her own humility and self-surrender to come to fruition.

⁹⁷ Colette of Corbie, *Testament de sainte Colette*, 2. “Après la renonciation de soi, notre Seigneur veut que nous portions notre Croix : c’est notre vœu de sainte pauvreté.”

Colette's *Testament* offers her most detailed thoughts on poverty, as she encourages her "beloved sisters" to "love, love this noble virtue through the example of Jesus Christ, of our glorious father Saint Francis, and of our mother the Lady Saint Clare."⁹⁸ To Colette, living in perfect poverty meant more than simply discarding possessions; it also mandated a joyful disposition and attitude. Following the example of Christ, who embraced his lot as a poor, uneducated carpenter without complaint, Colette believed that good Christians should be content to lead lives of material poverty and manual labor.

Therefore, Colette considered indulging in any unnecessary extravagances to be contradictory to Christ's teachings. She was harsh and uncompromising in this belief, writing that "whoever at the hour of his death is found to be owning anything, whether in fact or in deliberate desire, will be expelled from the kingdom of heaven."⁹⁹ Given the necessity of poverty for salvation, Colette went to great lengths to regulate ownership across Colettine communities. She counseled that sisters should be content to wear only the habit they were given upon entering the order, and that they should be highly suspicious of any other goods: "books, threads, needles, pins, and all other trivia; kerchiefs, veils, and other things for your own singular use."¹⁰⁰ While sisters could "use" these items if necessary, such as for the purpose of manual labor, they were strictly forbidden from claiming ownership of any item, whether privately or communally.¹⁰¹ Colette viewed *all* forms of ownership as invitations for corruption and greed to enter a person's heart, drawing them away from evangelical perfection and the hope of eternal life.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 2. "Mes très aimées soeurs, aimez, aimez cette noble vertu à l'exemple de Jésus Christ, de notre glorieux Père saint François, et de notre Madame mère sainte Claire."

⁹⁹ Ibid., 2. "Quiconque à la mort sera trouvé propriétaire ou de fait ou de volonté délibérée, expulsé il sera du Royaume des cieux."

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰¹ The concept of "poor use" was papally mandated for Franciscan communities. "Poor use" was famously theorized and argued by Peter John Olivi in his thirteenth-century *Treatise on Poor Use*. For more information, see David Burr, *Olivi and Franciscan Poverty: The Origins of the Usus Pauper Controversy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

For the items that the sisters were permitted to “use,” Colette required that they be selected from the poorest and most uncomfortable of materials. For example, the sisters’ habits were required to be made of “common, rough, heavy material so that the holy poverty and austerity of their profession will shine forth.”¹⁰² Colette further emphasized the relationship between physical deprivation and poverty in her *Testament*, as she defined “the cross of holy poverty” as “continual fasting every day, going barefoot and enduring the cold ground, sleeping on a hard bed, poverty of clothing, and being content with little, tough meat and manual and spiritual labor.”¹⁰³ By comparing evangelical poverty to a “cross,” Colette emphasizes her belief in the redemptive nature of self-imposed suffering. Not only was poverty a means through which she renounced her physicality, but it allowed her to become like Christ, as she embraced all the qualities of poverty, humility, shame, and vulnerability that he experienced during the Passion.

She frequently encouraged her Colettine followers to pursue spiritual poverty through devotions to the Passion; in a letter to Pierre de Vaux, who would become her hagiographer, Colette encourages him to seek unity with the crucified Lord: “my dear father, with all the power of my poor soul, I beg you to put all the pain you can into loving our Lord, envelop your heart in the blessed Passion of our blessed Savior, bear and feel his pains like a true child, go everywhere after him with ardent desire, despise all love other than his.”¹⁰⁴ Devotion to the Passion was firmly rooted in the Franciscan tradition; Clare of Assisi similarly instructed a fellow abbess to “look upon Him who became contemptible for you, and follow Him, making yourself

¹⁰² Colette of Corbie, *Les sentiments de sainte Colette*.

¹⁰³ Colette of Corbie, *Testament de sainte Colette*, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre à Pierre de Vaux*, c. 1439, Ronchamp, Archives of the Monastery of Saint Clare, manuscript copy, transc. by the sisters of the Monastery of Saint Clare. “Mon cher pere de toute la puissance de ma povre ame, je vous prie que nous mettés toute la paine que vous pouves d’amer nostre seigneur, embrasés vostre cuer en la benoite passion de nostre benoit sauveur, pourtés et sentés ses painnes comme vray enfant, alés partout apres li par ardent desir, mesprisés toute autre amour que la sienne.” My translation.

contemptible in the world for him.”¹⁰⁵ The Passion was the exemplar of both material and spiritual poverty, and Colette devoted herself to becoming contemptible in the eyes of those around her to fully enter into Christ’s mental and emotional anguish.

In Colette’s writings, she consistently disparages herself in the interest of humility. This is most commonly observed in the way she signs each of her letters; she is not “mother Colette,” but “sister Colette” – a deliberate self-degradation in response to her correspondents addressing her as “mother.” Almost as if to remind herself of her own unworthiness, Colette frequently expressed immense guilt and dissatisfaction with herself. In her letter to Pierre de Vaux, she begs him to pray for her salvation, believing herself to be too wretched to merit entrance into heaven on her own: “I commend to you my poor soul, the poorest of them all. Alas! What will I do when I appear before the Supreme Judge? Certainly I do not dare to think of my horrible offenses because I believe I am the cause of all despair. I have no sense of spiritual good.”¹⁰⁶

Through her expression of helplessness and despair, Colette communicates her desire for spiritual poverty. By acknowledging her own weakness and uselessness, she invites God to bring satisfaction and fulfillment where she alone cannot. These sentiments reveal the essence of Colette’s Franciscan poverty. While she was not original in her conception of Franciscan poverty, her desire to fully restore it to the Franciscan Order made the virtue an inseparable part of her mission and spiritual identity.

Enclosure and Chastity: Colette as the Bride of Christ

¹⁰⁵ Clare of Assisi, “The Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague,” in *Light Shining Through a Veil: On Saint Clare’s Letters to Saint Agnes*, ed. Edith A. Van den Goorbergh, OSC and Theodore H. Zweerman, OFM, trans. Aline Looman-Graaskamp and Frances Teresa, OSC (Assen: Peeters, 2000), 211.

¹⁰⁶ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre à Pierre de Vaux*. “Je vous recommande ma povre ame, la plus povre de tout le monde, helas que fereige, que devenraige devant le souverain juge, certes je n’ose penser a mes orribles offences car je croye cause de tout desesperance, je suis sans sentiment des bien spirituels.”

Another common motif throughout Colette's writings is her emphasis on enclosure – the vow which required Poor Clares to remain strictly cloistered inside their monastic walls, forbidden from venturing into the outside world without grave cause. While Poor Clare nuns had lived in enclosed lives since their founding, Colette noticeably strengthened restrictions on the sisters' movement and external communication.¹⁰⁷ Most notably, Colette upheld Pope Benedict XIII's decision to ban "external sisters,"¹⁰⁸ lay sisters who were permitted to serve outside the convent, in the Poor Clare Order "because of the many inconveniences and dangers this could inflict upon the sisters and convents."¹⁰⁹

One such "danger" was the degradation of contemplative life. Throughout the fourteenth century, laxity regarding enclosure decreased the amount of time Poor Clares spent in prayer and contemplation. Informed by her focus on order and discipline, Colette was wary of worldly distractions entering into her sisters' lives and leading them astray on their paths toward salvation. As a result, Colette's *Constitutions* strictly regulated the sisters' clausturation.

Colette also believed that the sisters' enclosure could function as an act of charity, since the sisters could devote more time and focus to praying for the redemption of earthly souls. In her *Testament*, Colette likens the sisters' enclosure to "the sepulcher of Jesus" – the tomb in which Jesus spent three days following his crucifixion prior to his ascension into heaven.¹¹⁰ She writes, "how precious is that sepulcher – your enclosure – into which devout souls enter to obtain their salvation. From the depths of this tomb, these souls take flight!"¹¹¹ Just as Jesus's entombment brought forth the hope of salvation, so too could the sisters' enclosure bring

¹⁰⁷ Roussey, *Histoire des Clarisses*, 183.

¹⁰⁸ Clare of Assisi, "The Form of Life of Saint Clare," 122.

¹⁰⁹ Colette of Corbie and Henry de Baume, "Constitutions de sainte Colette," in *La Règle de sainte Claire, Constitutions of sainte Colette, et Concorde de la Règle et des Constitutions*, ed. Augustin Audouard (Lyon: Maillet, Girard et Josserand, Imprimeurs, 1852), 79. "...à cause de tant d'inconvénients et des dangers qui pourraient en résulter pour les Soeurs et pour les couvents." My translation.

¹¹⁰ Colette of Corbie, *Testament de sainte Colette*, 3.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

spiritual fruit into the world. Therefore, it was essential that sisters remain “enclosed for the whole of their lives,” so that through their petitions with God, they could contribute to the redemption of the Earth.¹¹²

Beyond contemplation, the sisters’ enclosure served equally as a guardian of their chastity, with Colette describing the cloister as their “impregnable tower.” Its “gatekeeper,” Christ, protected all those inside from “vice and sinful occasions” and the “assaults of the flesh and the devil.”¹¹³ Chastity and enclosure were therefore intimately linked and placed at the service of one another. The sisters’ isolation from the world could also be considered another form of “self-emptying;” as they remained chaste and free from relational entanglements, they in turn allowed themselves to be even freer to receive the fullness of Christ’s love.

Chastity was important to Colette as another means of finding unity with Christ. Like many of her medieval mystic predecessors, including both Francis and Clare, Colette considered her chastity as preparation for her eternal union with Christ in heaven – which she metaphorically termed her “blissful marriage.”¹¹⁴ To understand Colette’s conception of “espousal to Christ,” it is important to distinguish medieval and modern conceptions of spousal love. As Poor Clare Sister Edith A. Van den Goorbergh writes, “we should always remember that the metaphors of bride and mother for the relationship between the faithful and Christ do not refer to specific physical dispositions nor to expressions of love proper to women nor do they apply in their love-relationship with a man or in their maternal love for a child.”¹¹⁵ Therefore, the spousal relationship to Christ was open to all who “lived in the perfection of the holy Gospel in

¹¹² Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 254.

¹¹³ Colette of Corbie, *Testament de sainte Colette*, 3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Van den Goorbergh and Zweerman, *Light Shining Through a Veil*, 89.

this human condition;” even Francis frequently ascribed the term “bride” to himself and his brothers.¹¹⁶

However, consecrated women embodied the role of the bride in a special way. While all Christians could become spiritually espoused to Christ, religious sisters embodied the physicality of the bridal relationship through their womanhood and virginity. Virginity was the pinnacle of a woman’s spiritual depth and respectability; without it, a woman could no longer be the *most* holy.¹¹⁷ Even married women were considered less holy than consecrated ones, as engaging in sexual activity, regardless of whether it was within wedlock, was considered a weakness of the flesh. Within the medieval context, consecrated women were living icons of the Church’s mystical marriage with Christ, and their choice to remain virgins and espouse Christ relieved them from the burden of earthly marriage.¹¹⁸ Because they were wedded to the king of heaven, religious sisters were generally considered members of a sort of divine nobility. This awareness is evident in Colette’s spirituality, as she defines chastity as the “noble crown that one will wear for the wedding feast to their spouse Jesus Christ in the kingdom of heaven.”¹¹⁹

Though this mystical marriage bestowed royal status upon all those who espoused the Poor Christ, Colette’s writings reveal that, above all, she believed that her eternal union would be a love match. She expressed an intense desire to receive Christ’s love, writing in her *Final Recommendations* that “God wants me to forget all created things and to have no other objective than to prepare myself to go before the Groom.”¹²⁰ Colette’s “preparation” involved an intense purification of her own soul, made possible through complete detachment from earthly concerns

¹¹⁶ Michael W. Blastic, OFM, “Clare, Human Embodiment, and Espousal of the Poor Christ,” *Magistra* 13, no 1 (Summer 2007): 96, ProQuest.

¹¹⁷ Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, 88.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹⁹ Colette of Corbie, *Testament de sainte Colette*, 3.

¹²⁰ Colette of Corbie. *Les derniers avis de Sainte Colette*, 2. “Dieu veut que j’oublie toutes les choses créées et que je n’aie plus d’autre soin que celui de me disposer à aller devant l’Époux.”

and a total receptivity to Christ's will. In fact, like in so many other facets of her spirituality, her desire for chastity stemmed from her primary desire to directly imitate Christ, "lamb without blemish, virgin and son of a virgin."¹²¹ By living in reflection of Christ's own earthly chastity, Colette understood that she was made pure through imitation, ultimately viewing her bridal role as one of transfiguration.

Overall, Colette's spirituality is difficult to satisfactorily characterize. Marked by complexities and a variety of competing influences, she both followed the examples of her predecessors and diverged when she deemed it necessary. Poverty and enclosure were certainly dear to Colette, but her strict emphasis on authority and order stands out among all other ideals – both in Colette's words and in her actions.

This strictness caused anxiety among her contemporaries, as such a harsh emphasis on discipline and order was unfamiliar to most Poor Clares. After receiving a preliminary copy of Colette's *Constitutions* in 1434, which outlined Colette's rigid expectations for her reformed communities, Guillaume de Casale wrote to her, "I am afraid of imposing too heavy a burden on your sisters."¹²²

Why did the Minister General believe that these impositions might overwhelm the Poor Clares? To answer this question, it is important to understand Colette's place in the Franciscan theological tradition – the extent to which she followed, and departed from, the Franciscan figures and principles that came before her.

¹²¹ Colette of Corbie, *Testament de sainte Colette*, 2.

¹²² Guillaume de Casale, Quoted in Renate Blumfeld-Kosinski, "Introduction: Saint Colette and Her World," in *Two Lives of Saint Colette: With a Selection of Letters to, by, and about Colette*, ed. and trans. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: Eter Press, 2022), 25.

Chapter Three – *En fonction du temps*: Colette and the Franciscan Tradition

In 1410, only four years after her papal selection to reform the Franciscan Order, Colette received a copy of the *Rule of Saint Clare* to her convent.¹²³ This choice placed Clare's *Rule*, both literally and ideologically, at the center of Colette's reform from the beginning. In her *Considerations on the Rule*, which would later come to be known as her *Sentiments*, Colette wrote the following of her intentions regarding the *Rule*:

I do not want to say or declare anything that might be contrary to the intentions of our father Saint Francis and our mother Saint Clare, or against the substantial provisions of our form of life, but all that I have said is so that we may more perfectly hear, perform, and guard it. In light of the perils of our present time and in the interest in remedying them... it is not necessary to keep those matters which are not the substance or essence of this form of life, for they might be the cause of its downfall into ruin. This is why I have chosen to remove some and modify others.¹²⁴

While Colette's spirituality was undeniably Franciscan, it was neither "servile nor literal."¹²⁵ Rather, Colette adopted Franciscan spirituality "en fonction du temps" – as a function of her times – which necessitated that order and stability be brought to the decaying Second Order.

The fight for unity and discipline across convents seems to have been Colette's primary objective in enacting her reform. Evidence for this can be seen in her role as a charismatic leader who exercised complete control over her reformed communities. She was directly involved in the establishment and reform of each community brought into the Colettine fold, and she installed her close female companions as the first abbesses of these foundations.¹²⁶ Colette maintained

¹²³ Bert Roest, "Rules, Customs and Constitutions within the Medieval Order of Poor Clares," in *Consuetudines et Regulae: Sources for Monastic Life in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period* ed. Carolyn Marino Malone and Clark Maines (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014), 322.

¹²⁴ Colette of Corbie, "Les sentiments de sainte Colette."

¹²⁵ Roussey, *Histoire des Clarisses*, 173

¹²⁶ Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 174.

regular and authoritative correspondence with these communities, ensuring that the abbesses “justly punished” their sisters’ faults.¹²⁷

To further ensure unity, Colette collaborated with Henry de Baume to compile additional legislative texts to supplement the *Rule of Saint Clare*. Finalized in the early 1430s, these *Constitutions* strictly regulated a series of matters left previously to the discretion of the nuns.¹²⁸ While this document emphasized poverty and humility, a greater emphasis was placed on obedience and authority, particularly in regards to punishment and discipline.

To consider Colette’s similarity to the existing Franciscan spirituality, this chapter will place Colette’s *Constitutions* in light of previous key Franciscan heritage documents: notably the *Rule of Saint Clare* and the 1260 *Constitutions of Narbonne*. The *Constitutions of Narbonne* have been selected to encourage a more accurate and detailed comparison. Because monastic Constitutions were inherently more specific and legislative than Rules, it would be insufficient and inaccurate to only compare Clare’s *Rule* with Colette’s *Constitutions*. Additional spiritual writings by Francis and Clare will supplement this discussion. Ultimately, this chapter will shed light on Colette’s place in the Franciscan tradition, concluding that while Colette largely conformed to the Franciscan tradition, she was willing to adapt certain aspects of Franciscan spirituality in the interest of her ultimate goal – the cultivation of unity and stability. As a result, Colette tended to value practicality over tradition and orthodoxy, and she stood out among Franciscans for her unique emphasis on discipline and punishment.

Poverty

¹²⁷ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre à l’abbesse du monastère de Besançon*.

¹²⁸ Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 174.

Regarding the virtue of poverty, Colette notably distinguishes herself from her Franciscan predecessors. While Colette upheld the practice of evangelical poverty in her reformed communities, she was less concerned with orthodoxy. While Francis and Clare praised poverty as the foundational mission of the Order, Colette considered the practice of uniform poverty to be an indicator of her larger goal of Clarissan unity.¹²⁹ Poverty remained a key virtue, but Colette was consequently less strict and more practical in its daily enforcement.

In the *Constitutions of Narbonne*, it is given as a prerequisite to entry into the Franciscan postulancy that “no one may be received into our Order unless he first renounces all his possessions, since according to the teaching of the Gospel and the profession of our Rule, poverty is the primary foundation of the whole spiritual edifice.”¹³⁰ Generally, those wishing to take preliminary Franciscan vows were instructed to rid themselves of all possessions, both monetary and material, and to donate them to the poor. This humbling act was a key part of the self-emptying process, as it forced new Franciscans not only to surrender their security and material identities, but also to place them into the use of others. Clare gave similar instruction in her *Rule*, adding that sisters should “take care and distribute their proceeds to the poor.”¹³¹

Colette strictly upheld this practice of complete poverty; no Colettine sister was permitted to fully enter into the Order without first renouncing their rights and practice of ownership. However, her approach to this self-emptying process was quite different, and its markedly practical elements underscore Colette’s more managerial personality. It should also be noted here that Colettine convents received a disproportionate amount of postulants from wealthy, noble backgrounds, due in large part to Henry and Colette’s close partnerships with powerful nobility

¹²⁹ Roest, *Order and Disorder*, 174.

¹³⁰ “The 1260 Constitutions of Narbonne,” in *Works of St. Bonaventure, Vol. V: St. Bonaventure’s Writings Concerning the Franciscan Order*, ed. and trans. Dominic V. Monti (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1994), 76.

¹³¹ Clare of Assisi, “The Form of Life of Saint Clare,” 110.

from Burgundy, Geneva, and Savoy.¹³² As a practical matter, under the Colettine *Constitutions*, sisters were no longer expected to immediately surrender all possessions if it was imprudent for them to do so. The secession of property could now coincide with, rather than strictly precede, the postulancy stage, as Colette permitted sisters to gradually donate their belongings “in small quantities, so that no one will look unfavorably on them.”¹³³ Regarding what became of the discarded belongings, Colette left this outcome to the sisters’ discretion. She writes that sisters would be welcome to donate their possessions to the poor “if the donor (out of pure liberality), without having been obliged to do so, wanted to give them something.”¹³⁴ Unlike in early Franciscan writings, which greatly emphasized the intentions behind charitable actions, Colette tended to give more weight to the actions themselves. In fact, under Colettine rule, postulants were even permitted to donate small amounts of their fortunes to Colettine convents in the form of alms.¹³⁵

These diversions, although few in number, indicate the extent of Colette’s uniqueness in the Franciscan tradition. Although she ultimately adhered to the core tenets of original Franciscan poverty, such as the renunciation of material attachments, her small amendments shed light on a spirituality grounded not only in tradition, but also in the needs of its time.¹³⁶ However, while Colette lifted some burdens of poverty off her sisters, she also intensified others.

Leadership and Authority

¹³² Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 246.

¹³³ Colette of Corbie and Henry de Baume, “Constitutions de sainte Colette,” 56. “...en petite quantité, afin que personne ne les regarde de mauvais oeil.” My translation.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 56. “Si la donatrice (par pure libéralité), sans y avoir été engagée, leur voulait donner quelque chose, comme elle ferait à d’autres pauvres, pour les soulager et les aider à supporter leur grandes nécessités.” My translation.

¹³⁵ Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 247.

¹³⁶ Roussey, *Histoire des Clarisses*, 174.

Colette's most drastic amendment to the practice of the *Rule* can be found in her augmentation of the authority of the abbess – a manifestation of her fixation on obedience, uniformity, and order. Under Colette's leadership, conceptions of the nature of the abbess changed, likely altering the relationship between abbesses and their sisters in turn. In Clare's imagination of monastic leadership, she saw the role of abbess as one of servitude, writing, "let the abbess be, on her part, be so familiar with them that they can speak and act with her as ladies do with their handmaid. For this is the way it must be: the abbess should be the handmaid of all the sisters."¹³⁷ The exhortation to become a "handmaid" was a high calling; Mary, the "handmaid of the Lord," whom Clare references with this phrase, embodied perfect poverty and humility and remained at the complete disposal of those she served. Using Mary as their exemplar, abbesses were expected to place themselves at the humble service of their sisters, thereby earning obedience through strengthening their own reputation and virtue. Abbesses were instructed to "strive to exceed the others more by her virtues and holy life than by her office, so that, stimulated by her example, they [her sisters] obey her not so much because of her office as because of love."¹³⁸

Colette demonstrates a very different conception of the office of abbess and the obedience owed to it. In Colette's view, decades of disunity and disorder within the Poor Clares had disproven that sisters would naturally obey their abbess out of reverence for the *Rule*. She advocated a much more proactive role for the abbess, encouraging an offensive strategy to quell laxity before it even had the chance to manifest itself. Therefore, her *Constitutions* include specific and innovative regulations which strengthened the abbess's power and jurisdiction. She writes:

¹³⁷ Clare of Assisi, "The Form of Life of Saint Clare," 123.

¹³⁸ Clare of Assisi, "The Testament of Saint Claire," in *Clare of Assisi, the Lady: Early Documents*, ed. and trans. Regis Armstrong, OFM (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2006), 64.

We ordain that in all convents the Abbess, and in her absence the Vicar, advise sisters and inflict punishments with humility and charity, lest, by their negligence in doing so, they allow their sisters to fall into the abyss of laxity and derangement. These superiors must undoubtedly discharge this duty with true charity and with the gentleness of humility, but they must be careful that, under the appearance of humility and gentleness, they do not encourage the negligence and laxity of the guilty¹³⁹

When it came to these “corrections,” Colette left an unprecedented amount of freedom to the abbess to create and assign penances. The *Constitutions* discuss the establishment of a “discipline room” in every convent, which had not historically existed in Franciscan monasteries. Sisters would be sent to “discipline rooms” to fulfill assigned penances for “grave sins,” with the abbess deciding which transgressions were “grave.”¹⁴⁰ Most often, penance would consist of a diet of bread and water eaten on the floor for a given number of days, but Colette gave abbesses the freedom to determine these punishments “according to her good conscience and sensible judgment.”¹⁴¹ Recommendations for punishments were given in the *Constitutions*, but ultimately, the abbess was at complete liberty to dole out justice as she saw fit.

This power is drastically reduced in the *Constitutions of Narbonne*, as the document provides very specific punishments to be administered by the minister of the friary for “grave sins.” The document even specifies the conditions signifying that a “grave sin” has been committed, which is defined as “an offense which is such by reason of the nature of the sin itself, such as fornication or heresy, or by reason of aggravating circumstances, such as the theft of a particularly valuable object, the public notoriety of the offense, or by the frequency of its

¹³⁹ Colette of Corbie and Henry de Baume, “Constitutions de sainte Colette,” 114. “Nous ordonnons que dans tous les couvents l'Abbesse, et en son absence la Vicaire, donnent aux Soeurs des avis et leur infligent des punitions avec humilité et charité, de peur de, par leur négligence à le faire, elles les laissent tomber dans l'abîme du relâchement et du dérèglement. Il faut sans doute que ces Supérieures s'acquittent de ce devoir avec une vraie charité et avec la douceur de l'humilité, mais qu'elles prennent bien garde que, sous couleur d'humilité et de mansuétude, elles ne favorisent la négligence et le relâchement des coupables.” My translation.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

repetition.”¹⁴² Great detail is devoted to prescribing required penances for a variety of “grave sins;” for example, a brother found guilty of depositing “valuable articles of gold, silver, gems, or other precious material” in places of safekeeping was to “fast three days on bread and water.”¹⁴³ Overall, while the *Constitutions of Narbonne* value order and authority, the document is simultaneously wary of granting superiors too much authority. In contrast to Colette’s *Constitutions*, in which abbesses exercise nearly absolute control, superiors in the Narbonne *Constitutions* are much more limited in their power.

Although Colette was strict, she was not a tyrant. She was cognizant of the burden that power placed on her soul, believing that she would be held accountable before God for the souls of all those under her authority. She encouraged abbesses to “take care that everything is done and kept as it is necessary to be done, so that you may render a good account before God of all that you have been charged with doing.”¹⁴⁴ Her perspective on the accountability of superiors closely resembles Francis’s own words, who wrote of authority in his 1209 *Earlier Rule*:

Let the ministers and servants remember what the Lord says: *I have not come to be served, but to serve*; and because the care of the brothers’ souls has been entrusted to them, if anything is lost on account of their fault or bad example, they will have to *render on account* before the Lord Jesus Christ on the *day of judgment*.¹⁴⁵

While Colette was not unique in her emphasis or philosophy on hierarchical obedience, she introduced unforeseen levels of discipline and punishment to the Second Order. She vested abbesses with nearly absolute power over their communities, encouraging them not to fear their power but rather, to harness it towards the spiritual development and salvation of their inferiors.

¹⁴² “The 1260 Constitutions of Narbonne,” 105.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁴⁴ Colette of Corbie, *Lettre à l’abbesse du monastère de Besançon*. “...que vous prendés bien garde que tout soit bien fait et garde qui se appartient a faire et garder afin que de la charge qui vous est commise vous puissés rendre bon compte devant dieu.”

¹⁴⁵ Francis of Assisi, “The Earlier Rule (The Rule Without a Papal Seal) 1209/10-1221,” in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents – The Saint*, ed. and trans. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv., and William J. Short, O.F.M. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1999), 66-67.

Enclosure

Colette further altered the nature of the Poor Clares through her heightened restrictions regarding the nuns' enclosure. Although the Poor Clares had been an enclosed order since their foundation, enclosure was not part of Clare's foundational vision. In fact, Clare originally wanted the sisters to live active lives of charity and service among the poor, following in the footsteps of the already established Franciscan brothers. However, this radical objective was quickly rejected by the ecclesiastical hierarchy on account of the Poor Clares' gender, and Clare reluctantly accepted the imposition of cloistered life.¹⁴⁶ For this reason, their enclosure was simply a necessary consequence of securing an independent rule for women in the medieval Church. Consequently, although enclosure was part of the *Rule*, Poor Clares did not take formal vows of enclosure in the rite of profession.¹⁴⁷

Colette amended this practice upon her undertaking of the reform movement, requiring Colettine sisters to take vows of enclosure, along with the traditional vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity.¹⁴⁸ This decision solidified the reform's dedication to the practice of strict enclosure, as enclosure was now considered equal to the three religious vows. Not only did she elevate reverence for enclosure, but she also intensified the practice as it existed. This choice allowed Colette to extend closer control over her reformed communities and maintain a monastic culture of strong communal ties.

In the ninth chapter of Clare's *Rule*, she dedicates significant time to describing the ideal conduct of "external sisters" serving outside the monastery.¹⁴⁹ These sisters were to behave

¹⁴⁶ Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi*, 21.

¹⁴⁷ Lopez, *Learning and Holiness*, 254.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁴⁹ Clare of Assisi, "The Form of Life of Saint Clare," 122.

discreetly and to perform their assigned tasks in as efficient a manner as possible: “let them conduct themselves virtuously and say little, so that those who see them may always be edified.”¹⁵⁰ In the copy of the *Rule* which Colette adapted for her sisters’ use, she deleted the phrase “sisters who serve outside the monastery” entirely, and no provisions are made for this role in her *Constitutions*. In fact, Colette delegates the responsibility of attending to external matters to “pious women,” rather than sisters, of the community.¹⁵¹ It seems as though Colette recruited women interested in religious life, or simply associates of Colettine sisters and patrons, to fill this role. She ordered that these women “must wear the secular habit and may not in any way be admitted into the interior of the monastery.”¹⁵² This ensured that professed sisters would remain distinguished and separated from the rest of the world, completely free from outside influences, dangers, and corruption.

Stricter censorship rules regarding the communications that the nuns could send and receive were also enforced. In many ways, this practice was a continuation of Clare’s tradition, as she always required that external communication be limited. In the section of her *Rule* which deals with external contact, Clare writes that the sisters’ self-isolation is necessary to the process of self-emptying; by removing relational attachments from their lives, the sisters could better fulfill their vocations “as pilgrims and strangers in the world.”¹⁵³

Colette followed suit, but her rationale was noticeably different. Enclosure was strictly mandated not so much to aid the sisters in their attainment of spiritual poverty, but to prevent temptations that could spark disorder. She writes that “to ensure greater security, we forbid any sister, regardless of her office or condition, to deposit or facilitate the deposit... of any letter of

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 122.

¹⁵¹ Colette of Corbie and Henry de Baume “Constitutions de sainte Colette,” 79.

¹⁵² Ibid., 80. “...qu’elles portent un habit séculier, et qu’elles ne soient admises en aucune manière dans l’intérieur du monastère.” My translation.

¹⁵³ Clare of Assisi, “The Form of Life of Saint Clare,” 119.

recommendation or missive, sealed or open, for herself or for others, to be sent or carried out of the convent.”¹⁵⁴ External correspondence could only enter the convent at the abbess’s discretion, and the abbess was required to read all letters that were sent to and from her convent – a practice that had not been followed by Clare.¹⁵⁵

While Colette was guided by foundational principles, she was unafraid to create concessions when she deemed them necessary. Acknowledging the newfound burdens she was placing upon her sisters, she said as much, writing “although in the time of Saint Clare this [serving outside the convent] was permitted and appropriate, nevertheless in this day and age it could be harmful and very damaging to the sisters.”¹⁵⁶ This justification adequately captures the complicated essence of Colette’s spirituality, particularly how it fits into the existing Franciscan canon. Loyal to the Franciscan tradition, yet thrust into ecclesiastical and political turmoil, Colette’s creativity and pragmatism made her a unique contributor to Franciscan spirituality, as she brought forth successful and inventive combinations of prudence and proactivity, flexibility and order.

¹⁵⁴ Colette of Corbie and Henry de Baume “Constitutions de sainte Colette,” 82. “Pour plus grande sûreté, nous défendons qu’aucune sœur, quelle que soit sa charge ou sa condition, ne dépose ou fasse déposer... aucune lettre de recommandation ou missive, close ou ouverte, pour elle ou pour d’autres, afin qu’on l’envoie ou qu’on la porte au dehors.” My translation.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 117. “Car quoique du temps de sainte Claire cela fut permis et convenable, néanmoins en ce temps-ci cela pourrait être nuisible et très dangereux aux Soeurs.” My translation.

Conclusion

Among the most important reformers in the history of the Franciscan Order, Colette's monastic model serves as the standard for Poor Clare communities throughout the world today. Colettine convents adhering to the *Rule of Saint Clare* in tandem with Colette's *Constitutions* can be found across five different continents, with thousands of sisters living their religious vocations according to the life prescribed by Colette.¹⁵⁷ Colette's largest contribution to the Franciscan Order was her ability to bring order to the Poor Clares to a degree unseen since the Order's foundation. Her achievements are particularly astounding given the tumultuous historical context surrounding fifteenth-century France and the Catholic Church.

Whereas the First Order would go on to formally fracture in 1517 under Pope Leo X, who divided the friars into the Conventual and Observant fraternities, the sisters never endured such a split, remaining legally unified up until today. Colette's charismatic personality, combined with the help of her devoted co-reformers and loyal noble supporters, contributed at least in part to the comparative stability of the late medieval Poor Clares.¹⁵⁸ Their work ensured that Colettine monasteries were well-supported by their surrounding lay communities and efficiently connected to a wider network of sister communities, providing these monasteries with the support and stability necessary to healthy functioning.

Beyond her more practical achievements, Colette equally contributed to the development and practice of Franciscan spirituality. Due largely to Colette's relatively small literary legacy, her spiritual thought and contributions have remained largely understudied, particularly when compared with other Catholic spiritual reformers. Her undertakings were similar to those of

¹⁵⁷ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Introduction: Saint Colette in Her World," 2.

¹⁵⁸ Romani, *Méthodes et mécanismes*, 121.

Teresa of Avila, who would reform and unify the Carmelite Order in the following century. While both women solidified and strengthened the futures of their respective orders, only Teresa has been hailed as a great theologian of the Catholic Church – even being promoted to the title of *Doctor of the Church* in 1970 by Pope Paul VI in recognition of her significant contributions to theology and doctrine. While Teresa was her own biographer and left behind a significant spiritual canon to affirm her originality and influence, Colette wrote very little. The writings that Colette did author were administrative in nature. Our knowledge of Colette’s biographical information and spiritual personality depend largely upon the testimonies of her contemporaries – namely, Pierre de Vaux and Perrine de Baume. Undoubtedly, Colette’s relative obscurity and mystery have encouraged Colettine convents over the centuries to adopt their own imaginings of their patron figure, mythologizing Colette according to their own contemporary issues, fears, and hopes.¹⁵⁹

Despite Colette’s mythic status within monastic communities, new scholarship surrounding her life, associates, and significance continues to emerge. In France, a task force has been assembled to finally translate Colette’s writings into modern French and create a collection of Colette’s writings. This collection will be annotated by French-speaking scholars of Franciscan history, in hopes of contributing to current dialogue regarding Colette’s reality and legacy. Additionally, the translations into modern French will likely facilitate eventual translations into English, opening the door for even more scholarly investigations and discoveries. It seems as though interest in the figure of Colette is beginning to experience a revival in the field of Franciscan studies.

Given Colette’s exceptionality, it is easy to see why she has such a modern appeal. Following in the footsteps of Clare, the first woman to author a monastic rule, Colette was

¹⁵⁹ Roussey, *Histoire des Clarisses*, 190.

remarkable in the extent to which she gained and exercised influence and authority as a medieval woman. Beyond reforming the Poor Clare nuns, Colette was papally-chosen to reform the first and third Franciscan orders as well, necessitating that she hold power over men and women alike. Not only did she succeed in this assigned objective, but she seemed to do so with relative ease; Colette received very little gender-based criticism, and many religious men and priests were willing to place themselves completely at the service of their “mother.”¹⁶⁰ She exercised leadership in both the Church and the state, complicating many popular conceptions and beliefs regarding women in the Middle Ages.

Today, when so many myths about life in the Middle Ages continue to persist, it remains important to study figures like Colette, whose lives call into question ideas of Church authority, the status of women, and the medieval conscience. To study Colette on her own terms, free from modern projections and prejudices, is the best way to preserve her intentions and legacy. Colette’s story as an uneducated female religious leader is certainly exceptional in the medieval context, but its very existence prohibits and contradicts commonly-made generalizations about women in the Middle Ages. Perhaps there are more figures like Colette who have yet to be discovered, or perhaps her life truly was as singular as it seems. Regardless, the study of Colette and her complicated personality and spirituality can ultimately encourage dialogue regarding the complex nature of gender and religious authority in the Middle Ages and create a fuller and more accurate picture of medieval life.

¹⁶⁰ Nimmo, *Reform and Division in the Franciscan Order*, 448.

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