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A Welcome Presence: The Custodial Activities of Third Order Women Religious in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Italy

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Abstract:
Third order women religious actively participated in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian society. Scholars have argued that the introduction of monastic enclosure for all women religious after the Council of Trent crushed non-enclosed forms of female monasticism in Italy and Europe. The study of third orders reveals, however, that non-enclosed monastic communities survived the Tridentine reforms and met specific social needs in the early modern society. Third order women religious provided education, care, and companionship to women of all ages and socioeconomic ranks. They thus filled a gap left by other monastic and custodial institutions. Ecclesiastical and secular authorities as well as neighbors considered women's third orders an asset to local communities. Drawing on examples from Bergamo and Bologna, this article examines the social activities of tertiary women and shows activity to be a useful category of analysis for recovering the place of women religious in early modern society.

Keywords: women religious – third orders – monasticism – education – custodianship – elderly-care – Counter Reformation – Italy

Introduction

This article considers the social activities of third order women religious in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy. I propose that third orders filled a gap in the socio-religious institutional complex that emerged in Counter-Reformation Italy to frame women's lives. Women excluded from other monastic and custodial institutions such as orphanages, shelters, or conservatories because of their age, class, or disability found education, custodianship, and companionship in third order communities. Consequently, both local populace and civic and ecclesiastical authorities welcomed the presence of third orders in early modern Italian neighborhoods and towns. In this article, I examine the social activities of third order women religious and the reception of these activities by their contemporaries. I show activity to be a useful category of analysis for the study women religious in the early modern period.[1] In the process, third orders emerge from the shadows into which they have fallen in the current historiography of early modern monasticism.

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Women's third orders emerged in Italy and in Europe in the thirteenth century when pious laywomen formed loosely organized communities in response to new forms of penitent piety and demographic and economic changes in medieval cities. Even though these women sought active engagement in society, they had to regularize within the framework of existing monastic orders in order to be recognized by the Church.[2] In 1289, Pope Nicholas IV approved the Franciscan Third Order and gave it a rule with the bull *Supra montem*. For over a century, *Supra montem* remained the only papally-recognized quasi-religious way of life; the Servite, the Dominican, and the Carmelite religious orders approved their respective third order rules only in the late-fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries.[3] In addition to following a third order rule, medieval third order women religious took one or more of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, often picking and choosing which rule and which vows to adopt. Consequently, medieval and Renaissance tertiary communities were heterogeneous. No two communities were alike, even if they nominally belonged to the same religious order.[4] Nevertheless, by the early-sixteenth century, women's third orders were ubiquitous across the Italian peninsula and deeply integrated in institutional structures of local communities. Tertiaries assumed key positions in the quotidian life of towns and courts, undertaking social and political activities that combined spirituality and social engagement.[5]

The second half of the sixteenth century brought a radical disruption in this history of women's third order monastic communities according to current scholarship. The last session of the Council of Trent (1545-63) and subsequent papal bulls reintroduced and reinforced monastic enclosure for women religious. First instituted by Pope Boniface VIII in 1298, monastic

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[1] For the definition of activity as a category of analysis in this special issue refer to Liise Lehtsalu, Sarah Moran, and Silvia Evangelisti, "Introduction."

[2] Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame, 1995); Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, With Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New York, 1969); Anna Benvenuti Papi, *"In castro poenitentiae" Santità e società femminile nell'Italia medievale* (Rome, 1990).

[3] Mario Sensi, *"Mulieres in Ecclesia" Storie di monache e bizzoche*, vol. 2, (Spoleto, 2010), 788–794; Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly Saints: Social Interaction of Dominican Penitent Women in Italy, 1200-1500* (Helsinki, 1999).

[4] Raimondo Creytens, "La Riforma dei monasteri femminili dopo i Decreti Tridentini," in *Il Concilio di Trento e la Riforma Tridentina: Atti del convengno storico internazionale, Trento 2-6 settembre 1963*, vol. 1 (Rome, 1965), 48–9; Alison More, "Institutionalizing Penitential Life in Later Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Third Orders, Rules, and Canonical Legitimacy," *Church History* 83, no. 2 (2014): 297–323.

[5] Gabriella Zarri argues that such women religious were mostly of noble background, Gabriella Zarri, *Le sante vive: Profezie di corte e devozione femminile tra '400 e '500* (Turin, 1990).

enclosure sought to separate women religious from the secular world by banning women from leaving their convents and restricting severely visitors' access. After Trent and subsequent papal bulls, most notably the *Circa pastoralis* of Pope Pius V in 1566, only those women religious who had professed all three monastic vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty and observed enclosure were recognized as *moniales* (nuns) and institutionalized within the Church. Canon lawyers did not recognize non-enclosed women religious as *moniales*, even if their lifestyle imitated that of enclosed nuns. Non-enclosed women religious either had to adopt solemn vows and enclosure or face the extinction of their communities.[6]

Historians have adopted these canon law categories despite repeated calls to study instead how the Tridentine decrees and subsequent papal bulls were experienced and modified in the daily life of women's monastic communities in early modern Italy and beyond.[7] They have examined the top-down imposition of enclosure by the Church hierarchy, societal and political pressures on monastic communities to adopt enclosure, and resistance to enclosure by nuns and their communities.[8] Most of these studies have focused on the convents of the early modern social and economic elites. Monastic enclosure and its utilization to achieve social order have also framed studies of the early modern custodial institutions such as shelters and conservatories. Here scholars often discuss the transformation of custodial institutions into monastic communities and use the acceptance of monastic enclosure by women religious as a litmus test for such a transformation.[9] Consequently, even though the Congregation of Regulars recognized quasi-religious women with the formula "non si approvano, se ben si tollerano" ("not approved but tolerated") as early as in 1616, and despite historians recognizing the continued existence of semi-monastic communities in societies across Catholic Europe in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, activities that systematically breached the letter of enclosure decrees and monastic institutions that did not adopt enclosure remain understudied.[10] To bring quasi-religious women and their communities into focus, a shift away from the norms of enclosure as the principal category of analysis for the study of early modern women's monastic communities is necessary. We must study instead the economic, social, and cultural activities of women religious. To recover the place of third order and other quasi-religious women in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Catholic societies, we must examine their role(s) and activities in the societies that surrounded them. A shift from enclosure to activity as a principal category of analysis substantially revises the theoretical framework for studying early modern women religious and expands our current, still limited understanding of the social and cultural significance of monastic communities between 1560 and 1800.

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[6] Elizabeth Makowski, "*A Pernicious Sort of Woman": Quasi-Religious Women and Canon Lawyers in the Later Middle Ages* (Washington, D.C., 2005), xxix. Unenclosed women religious were first recognized with a papal bull in 1749 by Benedict XIV, Francesca Medioli, "Monache e monacazioni nel Seicento," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 33 (1997): 670–93. See also, Creytens, "La Riforma dei monasteri femminili dopo i Decreti Tridentini"; Giancarlo Rocca, "Voto," *Dizionario degli Istituti di perfezione*, vol. 10 (Rome, 2003), 548-570.

[7] Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt, "Baby Jesus in a Box: Commerce and Enclosure in an Early Modern Convent," in *Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces in the Early Modern World*, ed. Merry Wiesner-Hanks (Farnham, 2015); Francesca Medioli, "La clausura delle monache nell'amministrazione della Congregazione Romana Sopra i Regolari," in *Il monachesimo femminile in Italia dall'alto medioevo al secolo XVII: A confronto con l'oggi*, ed. Gabriella Zarri (Verona, 1997).

[8] Silvia Evangelisti, "Wives, Widows, and Brides of Christ: Marriage and the Convent in the Historiography of Early Modern Italy," *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 1 (2000): 233–47; Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Enclosed Lives and Broken Vows in the Renaissance Convent* (New York, 2003); Elisa Novi Chavarria, *Monache e gentildonne: Un labile confine: Poteri politici e identità religiose nei monasteri napoletani: secoli XVI-XVII* (Milan, 2001); Elizabeth Rapley, *The Devotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal, 1990); Juta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago, 1999); Ulrike Strasser, *State of Virginity: Gender, Religion, and Politics in an Early Modern Catholic State* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2004); Gabriella Zarri, *Recinti: Donne, clausura e matrimonio nella prima età moderna* (Bologna, 2000).

Activities

Third order monastic communities dotted seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian towns and their hinterlands. There were three third order communities in the North-Italian town of Bergamo, which belonged to the Republic of Venice; the hinterland of Bergamo counted further six such monastic communities.[11] The Papal city of Bologna was home to thirteen third order communities, with a further dozen in its hinterland and the nearby towns of Modena, Ferrara, and Imola.[12] The average size of a community in Bergamo was twenty women religious, while communities in Bologna were slightly smaller and averaged fifteen women.[13] However, third order women religious did not live only in organized communities. Many women donned the tertiary habit but continued to live with relatives or in small female-only households. Such "house-nuns" have been considered predominately a medieval phenomenon that continued in early modern Southern Italy; however, archives of third order communities in Bergamo and Bologna reveal women in North-Central Italy adopting the tertiary habit but establishing only a loose affiliation to an organized third order community throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[14] The presence of third order women religious in early modern Italian towns was more wide-spread than the number of organized communities reveals. Moreover, the number of Ursulines and other quasi-religious women was also increasing in early modern Italy.[15] In this section, I examine social activities of tertiaries that targeted secular women in different stages of the early modern female life cycle, using examples from Bergamo and Bologna.[16] The study of these custodial activities reveals the central place that third order women religious occupied in early modern urban society.

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[9] Sandra Cavallo, *Charity and Power in Early Modern Italy: Benefactors and Their Motives in Turin, 1541-1789* (Cambridge, 1995); Sherrill Cohen, *The Evolution of Women's Asylums Since 1500: From Refuges for Ex-Prostitutes to Shelters for Battered Women* (New York, 1992); Angela Groppi, *I conservatori della virtù: Donne recluse nella Roma dei Papi* (Rome, 1994).

[10] Medioli, "Monache e monacazioni nel Seicento." For scholarship recognizing the continued existence of quasi-religious women, see Marina Caffiero, "Dall'esplosione mistica tardo-barocca all'apostolato sociale (1650-1850)," in *Donne e fede: Santità e vita religiosa in Italia*, ed. Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarri (Rome-Bari, 1994); Craig Harline, "Actives and Contemplatives: The Female Religious of the Low Countries before and after Trent," *The Catholic Historical Review* 81 (1995): 541–67; Elizabeth Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime* (Montreal, 2001); Alison Weber, ed., *Devout Laywomen in the Early Modern World* (London/New York, 2016). For mentions of quasi-religous women and their activities in early modern society, see P. Renee Baernstein, "In Widow's Habit: Women between Convent and Family in Sixteenth-Century Milan," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25 (1994): 787–807; Monica Chojnacka, "Women, Charity and Community in Early Modern Venice: The Casa Delle Zitelle," *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998): 68–91; Virginia Cox, "The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Market in Early Modern Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, (1995): 513–81; Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York, 2004); Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life: French Ursulines and English Ladies in Seventeenth-Century Catholicism* (Aldershot, 2005); Nicholas Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna* (Baltimore, 2005).

Young women of diverse backgrounds received education in third order communities. The role of convents in educating the daughters of the early modern Italian elites and assimilating these girls into the networks and customs of elite society is well-established. Scholars argue that for many elite girls convent education served as a prelude to becoming a nun.[17] This scholarship focuses on enclosed convents, access to which was restricted by recruitment-practices based on established social and family networks, high fees, and the requirement of an apostolic permission to enter enclosure for the *educanda* (educational boarder).[18] Such permission was not necessary to enter third order communities, which were not recognized as communities of *moniales* as I discuss above. The Servite tertiaries of Ognisanti in Bologna accepted to educational boarding daughters and nieces of legal and medical doctors, notaries, and civil servants as well as daughters and nieces of shopkeepers and minor clergy and orphans whose education fees were paid by benefactors.[19] Unlike their counterparts in enclosed convents, only a limited number of the *educande* in Ognisanti later adopted the tertiary habit.[20] Instead, the educational boarders learned reading, writing, and Christian doctrine as well as needlework, spinning, weaving, and other feminine handicrafts.[21] By engaging the boarders in activities that were considered virtuous for the female sex, third order women religious assimilated them into the middling rank milieu from which most of these girls originated.[22] Most tertiaries in Bergamo and Bologna were themselves of the middling and professional ranks. They were daughters, sisters, and nieces of merchants, notaries, craftsmen, and artisans and would have learned aspects of artisanal and crafts work at home before taking the third order habit.[23] The founder of S. Maria delle Grazie in Bologna, for example, was the widow of a master bricklayer; she had woven veils of raw silk to support her children and herself before she founded the tertiary community in the 1720s.[24] Third order communities also expected the women who wished to take their habit to be able to work and contribute to communal finances.[25] Third order communities therefore expanded the educational options available for girls in early modern society. Tertiaries also expanded the traditional role of women within the Church by actively engaging in society and teaching laywomen a curriculum that furthered the Counter-Reformation ideal of a good wife and mother.[26] As enclosed convents that assimilated the daughters of nobility into the elite society, third order communities occupied an important place in educating girls of middling ranks.

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[11] A. Caprioli, A. Rimoldi, and L. Vaccaro, eds., *Diocesi di Bergamo*, Storia religiosa della Lombardia (Brescia, 1988), 230–1.

[12] Mario Fanti, *Abiti e lavori delle monache di Bologna in una serie di disegni del secolo XVIII* (Bologna, 1972), 104–27.

[13] Archivio Storico Diocesano di Bergamo [ASDBg], Monasteri femminili, I, S. Antonio di Padova, Elezioni; ASDBg, Monasteri femminili, I, S. Giuseppe, Elezioni; Archivio di Stato di Bologna [ASBO], Demaniale, 1/1768-2/1769; ASBO, Demaniale, 34/4482, Visite; ASBO, Demaniale, 1/4847 – 5/4841; ASBO, Demaniale, 13/6290, "Registro degli Atti Capitolari. 1714 sino al 1768"; ASBO, Demaniale, 14/6291, "Registro degli Atti Capitolari. 1768-…".

[14] For example, ASBO, Demaniale, 32/4480, Fondazione, Donne secolari; ibid., 1/4837, num.s 11, 33; ibid., 15/6292, "Ill.mo e Rev.mo Signore…". On house nuns, Novi Chavarria, *Monache e gentildonne*, 161–201; Papi, *"In castro poenitentiae"*; Gabriella Zarri, "Le sante vive," in *Le sante vive: Profezie di corte e devozione femminile tra '400 e '500* (Turin, 1990).

[15] Querciolo Mazzonis, "The Company of St. Ursula in Counter-Reformation Italy," in *Devout Laywomen in the Early Modern World*, ed. Alison Weber (London/New York, 2016); Medioli, "Monache e monacazioni nel Seicento," 683.

[16] I draw on my Ph. D. research. Liise Lehtsalu, "Negotiated Lives: Third Order Women Religious and Their Communities in Seventeeth- and Eighteenth Century Italy (Ph. D. Diss., Brown University, 2017).

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[17] Among others, P. Renee Baernstein, *A Convent Tale: A Century of Sisterhood in Spanish Milan* (New York, 2002), 94–6; Novi Chavarria, *Monache e gentildonne*, chaps. 3–4; Elissa B. Weaver, *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* (Cambridge, 2002).

[18] To enter an enclosed convent as an educational boarder, an individual application to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars was necessary. After a positive response from Rome, the application was forwarded to the local bishop for archiving. At this point, the convent had to hold a vote on the candidate, who was accepted for education only if this vote was positive. After their entrance in a convent, *educande* were subject to enclosure. Francesca Terraccia, *In attesa di una scelta: Destini femminili ed educandati monastici nella Diocesi di Milano in età moderna* (Rome, 2012), 14–16, 21, 31–37.

[19] ASBO, Demaniale, 13/6290, Atti capitolari; ASBO, Demaniale, 14/6291, Atti capitolari.

[20] Scholars of early modern Italy have only recently recognized that monastic education was not necessarily a prelude to monacization. In her study of Milan, Francesca Terraccia shows that only 7- to 26-percent of the young women who received a monastic education later adopted the habit. The percentage was the highest among nobility and girls educated in convents in the countryside, Terraccia, *In attesa di una scelta*, 16, 72–73, 112–113. Sharon Strocchia has also noted that only a fraction of the girls who received monastic education donned the habit in Renaissance Florence, Sharon T. Strocchia, "Taken into Custody: Girls and Convent Guardianship in Renaissance Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 17 (2003): 181.

[21] Biblioteca Communale di Bologna Archiginnasio [BA], B4342, Raconto informativo della Vita, e Virtù della Serva di Dio Madre S.r Maria Maddalena Mazzoni Sangiorgi…; Biblioteca Civica di Bergamo, *REGOLE OVERO ORDINI DELLE VEN. SORELLE Tertiarie di Bergamo del Collegio di S. GIOSEPPE dette del Retiramento* (Milan, 1673), 9.

[22] Isabella Campagnol, "Penelope in clausura. Lavori femminili nei monasteri Veneziani della prima età moderna," *Archivio Veneto* 6 (2012): 117–26.

Beyond the educational boarders, third order women religious expanded the availability of education in local communities through day schools that some tertiary communities operated in parallel to accepting boarders. In day schools, women religious taught a similar curriculum to the one provided to the boarders. However, day school pupils did not live with the women religious. Girls whose families could not afford boarding fees, or who did not receive a place in a convent or a conservatory, thus had access to education by attending a school room in a third order community. The Carmelite tertiaries of S. Maria delle Grazie in Bologna opened a day school immediately after the community's foundation in the early 1720s, teaching reading, writing, the basics of Christian doctrine, and manual labor to girls younger than sixteen years of age.[27] The women religious considered their educational work as beneficial to the society around them. In a letter to the archbishop of Bologna in 1791, the tertiaries stressed that they "keep in education a good number of girls, of both citizen and noble rank… and also operate a [day] school for other young women for the communal benefit of the city."[28] Day schools have been considered a nineteenth-century development in Italy, even though Catholic Europe saw the emergence of such schools already in the seventeenth century, and recent scholarship has underscored local demand for catechizing education in contemporary Italy.[29] Introducing third order communities into the scholarship reveals that women's monastic communities actively engaged girls beyond the elites and offered girls across socioeconomic ranks access to basic education.

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[23] Anna Bellavitis, *Il lavoro delle donne nelle città dell'Europa moderna* (Rome, 2016); Sheilagh Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets, and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (New York, 2003).

[24] BA, B4342, Raconto informativo della Vita, e Virtù della Serva di Dio Madre S.r Maria Maddalena Mazzoni Sangiorgi…; Alessandro Albertazzi and Maria Paolina del Vecchio, eds., *Una fondatrice bolognese. La serva di Dio Maria Maddalena Mazzoni* (Pontecchio Marconi, 2008), 9.

25 Archivio di Stato di Milano [ASMI], Archivio Generale del Fondo di Religione [AGFR], 2970, Statuti, "Per lo governo", "Del ricevere alla Congregatione le Novitie e della loro educatione"; ASBO, Demaniale, 15/6292, "Ill.mo e Rev.mo Signore…".

[26] Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life*; Rapley, *The Devotes*.

[27] BA, B4342, Raconto informativo della Vita, e Virtù della Serva di Dio Madre S.r Maria Maddalena Mazzoni Sangiorgi…

[28] Archivio Arcivescovile di Bologna [AAB], Mischellanea Vecchie [MV], 283, "Documenti e carte varie, secc. XVIII" and "Visite".

Third order communities not only gave more women access monastic institutions but also brought diversity and filled gaps in the socio-religious institutional complex of early modern Italy. Educational boarders and day school students were mostly girls in their teens. Yet tertiary communities in Bologna accepted as educational boarders also women in their twenties and thirties. In Ognisanti, for example, mature *educande* entered in roughly equal numbers to the younger women.[30] According to apostolic guidelines on monastic education, the upper age limit for educational boarding in enclosed convents was twenty-five.[31] Most conservatories and orphanages in Counter-Reformation Italy also observed this limit.[32] In Bologna, the conservatory of S. Croce expelled all women who had reached their twenty-fourth birthday.[33] At the same time, age at first marriage was increasing steadily in early modern Italy; by the later-eighteenth century, women in North-Central Italian towns could expect to marry for the first time when they were twenty-five years old, or older.[34] There was an increasing gap between when a boarder had to leave a convent or a conservatory and when she could expect to marry. Third order communities addressed this gap by providing women a respectable home in the interim. This is the dynamic at work, for example, in the legacy that one Giovanni Malvezzi left two women in Ognisanti in Bologna in 1736. The women were former charges of the *Ospedale dei bastradini*, a charitable hospital for abandoned children and youngsters. Malvezzi's legacy paid for the women's stay in Ognisanti and provided each with a dowry for their marriage or monacization.[35]

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[29] Laurence Lux-Sterritt, "Between the Cloister and the World: The Successful Compromise of the Ursulines of Toulouse, 1604-1616," *French History* 16 (2002): 247–68; Celeste McNamara, "What the People Want: Popular Support for Catholic Refrom in Veneto," *The Catholic Historical Review* 102 (2016): 492–516; Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister*; Giancarlo Rocca, *Donne religiose. Contribuito a una storia della condizione femminile in Italia nei secoli XIX-XX* (Rome, 1992).

[30] ASBO, Demaniale, 13/6290, Atti capitolari; ASBO, Demaniale, 14/6291, Atti capitolari.

[31] Admission to monastic boarding was limited to girls who were at least seven-years-old and not older than twenty-five years, see Terraccia, *In attesa di una scelta*, 21–37.

[32] Nicholas Terpstra, *Cultures of Charity: Women, Politics, and the Reform of Poor Relief in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 69.

[33] ASBO, Conservatorio di Santa Croce, 1, *Statuti, ed ordini sopra il governo delle zittelle del Conservatorio di S. Croce* (1760), 23-24.

[34] Marzio Barbagli, *Sotto lo stesso tetto: Mutamenti della famiglia in Italia dal XV al XX secolo*, 3rd ed. (Bologna, 2013), chap. 7; Mauro Carboni, *Le doti della "povertà." Famiglia, risparmio, previdenza: il Monte del Matrimonio di Bologna (1583-1796)* (Bologna, 1999), 166–169; Maria Fubini Leuzzi, *"Condurre a onore" Famiglia, matrimonio e assistenza dotale a Firenze in Età Moderna* (Florence, 1999), 159.

[35] ASBO, Demaniale, 4/6281, August 26, 1736.

The conservatory of S. Croce recorded dozens of women throughout the eighteenth century who had to leave the conservatory because of their age and who entered third order communities in Bologna or nearby for a period of boarding before either marrying or professing religious vows in a monastic community.[36] By accepting these older women into educational boarding, Ognisanti and other tertiary communities filled a gap in the socio-religious institutional complex that shaped women's lives both in early modern Italy and beyond. A young woman had two socially and legally recognized prospects before her: marriage or a convent.[37] Until she reached one of these two statuses, her honor, which was essential for achieving either marriage or monacization, was guarded by her family. This duty of the family could be replicated by either a monastic or a custodial institution; a stay in a custodial institution could also reinstate lost honor.[38] Third order communities created flexibility in this system by facilitating movement between various monastic and custodial institutions and natal and marital families. They offered a place for women who would have otherwise fallen out of the socio-religious institutional complex.

Widows and never-married women also found companionship and a place to stay in third order communities. In 1702, an unmarried woman named Maria Maddalena Fabri paid 1500 lire to enter the Franciscan tertiary community S. Elisabetta in Bologna as a *convittrice* (boarder); Fabri lived out her life among the tertiaries, who provided her with food, clothing, and care.[39] Half a century later, in 1756, the tertiaries of S. Elisabetta agreed to provide daily room and board to a widow named Teresa Galletti until the end of her life; in return, Galletti paid 600 lire and forgave a debt of 1500 lire to the women religious.[40] Third order communities presented an attractive option for widows and elderly never-married women. According to contemporary ideals, early modern Catholic widows had to retreat from the world and pursue a life of contemplation and prayer.[41] Never-married women were expected to live and work as dependents in male-headed households.[42] In early modern Italy, elite widows often did retreat to monastic communities or donned a tertiary habit in their own home; other elite widows served as patrons of monastic communities.[43] Current scholarship suggests that middling and professional rank widows were rarely able to enter monastic communities because of prohibitive fees.[44] Evidence from third order communities in Bergamo and Bologna shows, however, that such women did enter these communities as *convittrici*. The sums paid by Maria Fabri and Teresa Galletti to S. Elisabetta in Bologna reveal that both women had some means, which they used to organize the remaining days of their lives. In addition to paying and donating a total of 2100 lire to S. Elisabetta, Galletti in her last will also disinherited her brothers in favor of the tertiary community.[45] In addition to a monthly boarding fee, Galletti and other *convittrici* also paid a one-time fee of 200 lire.[46] The one-time fee seems to have functioned as a dowry of sorts and reserved the elderly *convittrici* a place in the tertiary community for life; *educande* did not pay this one-time fee. Even though boarding with the tertiaries was not necessarily economical, the sums paid by Fabri and Galletti were comparable to middling rank dowries in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bologna.[47] Third order communities filled a gap. In third orders, widows and elderly never-married women of middling and professional ranks were able to spend their remaining life in a monastic setting, in an environment that offered an alternative to elite convents that were financially and socially out of reach to non-elite women.

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[36] ASBO, Conservatorio di Santa Croce, 18, *Campione per l'entrata et uscita delle putte di S. Croce.*

[37] Evangelisti, "Wives, Widows, and Brides of Christ: Marriage and the Convent in the Historiography of Early Modern Italy." These two standard paths characterized female lives across Catholic Europe, Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe* (New York, 1996).

[38] Cohen, *The Evolution of Women's Asylums Since 1500*; Lucia Ferrante, "Honor Regained: Women in the Casa Del Soccorso Di San Paolo in Sixteenth-Century Bologna," in *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore, 1990); Terpstra, *Cultures of Charity*.

[39] ASBO, Demaniale, 9/4457, num. 1.

[40] ASBO, Demaniale, 12/4460, num. 20; ASBO, Demaniale, 13/4461, num. 4.

[41] Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner have identified three stereotypes of widows in medieval and early modern Europe: the good widow, the merry widow, and the poor widow. The ideal widow maintained the memory of her late husband and lived as a perpetual widow in chastity and continued obedience. This ideal was furthered in prescriptive texts by Juan Luis Vives and St. Francis de Sales. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, eds., *Widowhood in Medieval and*

However, third order women religious did not accept all boarders with open arms. Third orders both in Bergamo and Bologna took concrete measures to limit the number of *malmaritate*, i.e., women facing marital break-down in their communities. A testimony from the archives of the Franciscan tertiary community S. Giuseppe in Bergamo elucidates how *malmaritate* arrived

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Early Modern Europe (Harlow, 1999), 6–9, 20–23. Also, Erin J. Campbell, "Prophets, Saints, and Matriarchs: Portraits of Old Women in Early Modern Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 63 (2010): 807–49; Janine M. Lanza, *From Wives to Widows in Early Modern Paris: Gender, Economy, and Law* (Aldershot, 2007), chap. 2.

[42] Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, eds., *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800* (Philadelphia, 1999); Maura Palazzi, *Donne sole: Storia dell'altra faccia dell'Italia tra antico regime e società contemporanea* (Milan, 1997).

[43] Baernstein, *A Convent Tale*; Evangelisti, "Wives, Widows, and Brides of Christ: Marriage and the Convent in the Historiography of Early Modern Italy," 246; Cavallo, *Charity and Power in Early Modern Italy*, 159–160; Carolyn Valone, "Women on the Quirinal Hill: Patronage in Rome, 1560-1630," *The Art Bulletin* 76 (1994): 129–46.

[44] Lanza, *From Wives to Widows in Early Modern Paris*, 74.

[45] ASBO, Demaniale, 13/4461, num. 4.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Middling rank dowries ranged between 200 and 1600 lire in seventeenth-and eighteenth-century Bologna. Brides of artisinal rank had dowries between 700 and 900 lire in the late-seventeenth century, Carboni, *Le doti della "povertà,"* 187; Lucia Ciammitti, "Quanto costa essere normali. La dote nel conservatorio femminile di Santa Maria del Baraccano (1630-1680)," *Quaderni Storici* 53 (1983): 469–97.

in third order communities. In 1708, the bishop of Bergamo asked the tertiaries of S. Giuseppe to accept one Laura Alberici. Alberici had married Diodato Clivati in 1707, but shortly after the wedding ceremony Clivati started to act differently, according to Alberici's testimony. She heard from her new sisters-in-law that Clivati did not approve of her leaving the house occasionally, or standing at the windows. Clivati soon removed Alberici from Bergamo to the countryside. There a short-lived peace was disrupted by the visit of Alberici's cousin. According to the testimony, the cousin inquired about Alberici's well-being at the request of her mother, and Alberici assured the cousin that all was well. Yet the visit had a dramatic impact on the relationship between Alberici and Clivati, who accused his wife of infidelity with the cousin, threatened her with physical harm, and pleaded with her to confess. Alberici stated that she refused at first, but finally relented and gave a false confession, after which Clivati rode to Bergamo and shot Alberici's cousin. He then returned to the countryside to kill Alberici but was interrupted by a friend. Clivati then renounced Alberici as his wife, declaring that she should live separate from him, together with his sisters.[48] Alberici thus lost her husband's immediate guardianship without returning to her natal home and the guardianship of her male relatives. Such a position left Alberici and her honor vulnerable and probably led to her arrival in S. Giuseppe, where the monastic setting was supposed to guard her until the marital conflict was resolved. The length of Alberici's stay in S. Giuseppe remains unknown.

Women religious feared that women like Alberici would disrupt communal life and tarnish the reputation of their monastic institution. The tertiaries of S. Giuseppe appealed to Venice both in 1730 and in 1737; they asked to be relieved of any obligation to accept secular women who were sent to S. Giuseppe by local ecclesiastical and civic authorities. The text of neither appeal survives, but the corresponding ducal decrees indicate that the women religious wished to exclude "widows, married women, women who had left other congregations or convents, and all other similar women." The women religious did not want to be forced to accept women who were no longer virgins, or those whose honor was otherwise damaged. According to the early modern sexual and social order, women who had been sexually active outside marriage or otherwise lost their honor would have, by association, tarnished the honor and moral integrity of the women religious.[49] In their appeal, the women religious of S. Giuseppe seem to have argued that their community would lose educational boarders if they accepted *malmaritate* and other such women.[50] Another Franciscan tertiary community in Bergamo, S. Antonio appealed to

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[48] ASMI, AGFR, 2992, Alberici Laura.

[49] Elizabeth S. Cohen, "Honor and Gender in the Streets of Early Modern Rome," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22 (1992): 597–625; Strasser, *State of Virginity*.

[50] From the ducal decree in 1737, "trovarsi esaudibile il ricorso di codeste Terziarie di S. Francesco, che implorano di non essere in avvenire astrette a ricevere contro la volontà loro nel proprio Collegio di S. Giuseppe Donne Vedove, o maritate, o Vergini uscite da altri colleggi, e conventi, o di altra simile Condizione. Oltre l'apportar ciò pregiudizio al di loro legittimo arbitrio, cause esser possindo disconsenti alle med.e, per la ristretta abitazione, di disturbo nel servizio del Sig.re Iddio, e di danno ancora per quel cupo di sussistenza che tengono

Venice two decades later, claiming that after local authorities sent a *malmaritata* to their community the number of educational boarders in S. Antonio had halved. The relatives of the *educande* did not wish their daughters to live side-by-side with a *malmaritata*, the women religious of S. Antonio claimed.[51] *Malmaritate* and other such women usually found shelter in dedicated houses for *malmaritate* or repentant prostitutes.[52] As the examples from Bergamo show, some *malmaritate* nonetheless found their way to tertiary communities. We can see again how third orders added flexibility to the socio-religious institutional complex that shaped women's lives in Counter-Reformation Italy, at times also against the expressed will of the third order women religious themselves.

Third order women religious were reluctant to accept *malmaritate* and other irregular women because the social activities of the tertiaries intertwined with their economic activities, as the above appeals of S. Antonio and S. Giuseppe to Venetian authorities reveal. In eighteenth-century France, the *pensionats* of religious communities that had started out as teaching congregations generated an increasingly diversified income; as Elizabeth Rapley argues, "once almost entirely dedicated to schoolchildren, they now became retirement homes, hotels, and sometimes prisons for all variety of women."[53] Rapley sees social and governmental pressures on the religious congregations as the cause for such a transformation, arguing that the congregations were not able to resist these pressures due to their weak financial standing.[54] Also in Italy, secular and ecclesiastical authorities expected third order communities to assume new social functions and considered these communities useful precisely because the women religious represented a ready refuge to a variety of secular women, to which I will return below. However, third order communities in Bergamo and Bologna had accepted a variety of secular boarders (*educande*, *convittrici*, and *malmaritate*) since their foundation in the seventeenth century, and continued to do so throughout the eighteenth century. This also despite the attempts of women religious to restrict access to some boarders in order to facilitate the presence of others. The third order communities in Bergamo and Bologna benefitted financially from accepting a variety of boarders. Boarders brought a regular income to third order communities that possessed only limited landed property and often struggled to keep account books in balance. The account books of the Servite tertiary community Ognisanti in Bologna reveal that the women religious started to accept more boarders of all types in the mid-eighteenth century, when the finances of the

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dall'educazione di figlie, volemmo, che non abbino a risentire in tal parte molestia alcuna, ne possano restar obbligate ad accogliere come sopra le donne stesse...". ASMI, AGFR, 2970, Privilegi, Immunità, Statuti.

[51] ASMI, AGFR, 2945, Monache, e Converse, Vestizioni … al 1795.

[52] Sherrill Cohen, "The Convertite and the Malmaritate: Women's Institutions, Prostitution, and the Family in Counter-Reformation Florence" (Ph.D. Diss., Princeton University, 1985).

[53] Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister*, 196.

[54] Ibid., 246–256.

community became particularly dire.[55] In late eighteenth-century Bologna, the Carmelite tertiary community S. Maria delle Grazie received roughly 95-percent and the Franciscan tertiary community S. Elisabetta roughly 30-percent of their respective annual incomes from boarding fees.[56] Boarders were as vital to the third orders as the third orders were vital to render the early modern socio-religious institutional complex more flexible and diverse.

Third order women religious acted as teachers, caregivers, and custodians of women, young and old, and were closely integrated in the social lives of local communities in early modern Italy. They sheltered women and children who needed a place to stay, offering a monastic setting that was easier to access than that of the enclosed convent. Most, if not all, of the tertiaries' activities violated the norms of monastic enclosure laid out in papal bulls and enforced by the Church hierarchy and social expectations.[57] And yet, these were the activities that the contemporaries of these women religious expected of them and that ensured the relevance and financial continuity of tertiary communities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Reception

Neighbors as well as civic and ecclesiastical authorities welcomed third order communities in their towns and cities. In Bergamo, for example, neighbors testified on behalf of the Franciscan tertiary community S. Giuseppe when the women religious petitioned Venetian authorities for a permission to open an oratory in their community in the early 1640s. The witnesses pointed out that S. Giuseppe accepted young women to educational boarding without the apostolic permission that enclosed convents required and that the women religious charged lower fees for boarding than other monastic institutions in Bergamo. They also highlighted that the new oratory would bring a church onto a street where none existed yet.[58] The neighbors of S. Giuseppe argued that the community contributed to the social and spiritual life of Bergamo and its families. In Bologna, neighbors were also called upon to testify on behalf of third order women religious. In 1706, neighbors testified to the *buona fama* or the "good reputation" of the Franciscan tertiaries of S. Maria della Carità. Honor was a key social construct in early modern Italy; a person's behavior and others' perception of it determined their reputation, which in turn shaped their social worth and relations and their ability to act within the early modern society and economy.[59] One neighbor of S. Maria della Carità claimed that he had lived next to the women religious for sixty years and two of his close female relatives had donned the tertiary habit in the community; moreover, the man had also supported an orphan who had taken the habit in S. Maria della Carità by delivering annual rations of "bread, wine, firewood and other things" to the community. To underline his close relationship with the women religious, this neighbor closed his testimony by stating that "in case of illness, and other cases of household distress," he always sought spiritual support from the women religious of S. Maria della Carità. The local parish priest also testified to the good reputation of the community, stating that "in the twenty-two years that I have been the rector of this church, I have never heard a mean or a bad thing [about the women religious]." Finally, a neighbor who lived and operated a shop next to S. Maria della Carità, confirmed that the women religious "were on the best terms with everybody in the neighborhood (*vicinanza*)".[60] Both in Bergamo and in Bologna, neighbors perceived tertiaries and their activities as useful to local society and entered in frequent contact with the third order communities.

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[55] ASBO, Demaniale, 13/6290, Atti capitolari; ASBO, Demaniale, 13/629014/6291, Atti Capitolari.

[56] This is based on the inventories complied by Napoleonic officials in preparation of monastic suppressions. ASMI, Archivio del Fondo di Religione, 2287.

[57] Baernstein, *A Convent Tale*; Helen Hills, *Invisible City: The Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Convents* (New York, 2004).

[58] ASMI, AGFR, 2970, Fondazione, Supplica n.ra pro Constirne oratorij… 1641. 22. Jan.i, testimonies of Antonio Meris, Pietro Gigli, Giacomo Boscaino from February 7, 1642 and the testimony of dom Pietro Torre from February 19, 1642.

Authorities, both ecclesiastical and secular, also readily admitted that third order communities were a useful addition to local society. Even though ducal decrees in 1730 and in 1737 excused S. Giuseppe in Bergamo from accepting married women and widows, as I discuss above, the Council of Ten did consider women's monastic institutions to be an appropriate place to stay for *malmaritate* as they waited the decision of ecclesiastical courts on their marriage dispute.[61] And since there was no need for a special apostolic permissions to enter a tertiary community, these communities were more accessible to a broader variety of women compared to enclosed convents. In the words of one early nineteenth-century Bolognese episcopal official, a third order community represented for the authorities "the considerable benefit of having a provisional place where to place the unmarried girls facing some danger"; third orders were shelters where to send married women in case of "inconveniences that can arise between a husband and a wife, and that can be resolved using the means of such a retreat."[62] The episcopal see of Bologna sent *malmaritate* to the Servite tertiary community Ognisanti regularly throughout the eighteenth century.[63] In 1767, "based on just motives", the vicar general of Bologna sent one Angela Ferrari Pignoni—whose husband was still alive—to Ognisanti, together with her "two small daughters"; the women religious accepted Pignoni and her daughters without the usual chapter vote.[64] In 1771, countess Maria Caterina Ringhieri, whose husband lived in

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[59] Cohen, "Honor and Gender in the Streets of Early Modern Rome."

[60] ASBO, Demaniale, 2/4838, nr. 29.

[61] ASMI, AGFR, 2969, Indice, 2v-3r; ASMI, AGFR, 2970, Privilegi, immunità, statuti. ASMI, AGFR, 2942, Suppliche, Rescritti, e Ducali 1749 a 1790, riguardanti fondi, legati, ed oggetti diversi.

[62] AAB, MV, 265, S. Elisabetta, n. 38.

[63] ASBO, Demaniale, 13/6290, Atti capitolari, p. 146; ASBO, Demaniale, 14/6291, Atti capitolari, 12, 17, 24, 26, 70, 77, 82.

[64] ASBO, Demaniale, 13/6290, Atti capitolari, 146.

Parma, entered Ognisanti at the request of the archbishop. The tertiaries agreed to accept Ringhieri because, "even though [they] are reasonably against taking in married women, [due to] the veneration and esteem they have of His Excellence, the archbishop, they have conceded to accept her."[65] Ringhieri first stayed with the women religious for two years. Then, in 1776, the archbishop asked the women religious of Ognisanti to readmit Ringhieri, which they did, claiming it was out of duty to the archbishop.[66] Three days before the second admission of Ringhieri in December 1776, the women religious also accepted another married women at the request of the archbishop.[67] Both in Bologna and in Bergamo, ecclesiastical and civic authorities saw in third order communities a valuable addition to local socio-religious institutional complexes and actively used these communities to maintain order in and guard the honor of local societies. Third order women religious undertook activities that were fundamental to the orderly functioning of early modern Italian society.

Conclusions

This article adds to recent scholarship showing that the decrees of the Council of Trent did not force all women religious to enter enclosure: many nuns and quasi-religious women led lives of active service.[68] I have shown that non-enclosed monastic communities, in this case third order communities, were fundamental institutions in early modern Italian society, and in the lives of women in particular. Third orders brought flexibility to the socio-religious institutional complex that shaped Counter-Reformation society. More importantly yet, I have shown that a shift away from enclosure as a primary category of analysis for the study of early modern female monasticism is necessary. A focus on the activities of women religious recovers third order monastic communities to scholarship. Moreover, a focus on activity permits us to explore the social meaning and value of women religious' work and to recover the place of individual women religious in early modern society.[69] Through the study of the activities of variety of women religious, and not only of enclosed nuns, the social, economic, and cultural history of early modern female monasticism comes to include women of a variety of social and economic backgrounds. This expands our still-limited understanding of the social and cultural significance of monastic communities between 1560 and 1800. The shift away from enclosure as a primary category of analysis therefore reshapes the field of study, opening new avenues to examine the history of women and monasticism in early modern Italy and beyond.

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[65] ASBO, Demaniale, 14/6291, Atti capitolari, 12.
[66] Ibid., 26.
[67] Ibid., 26.
[68] Harline, "Actives and Contemplatives: The Female Religious of the Low Countries before and after Trent"; Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life*; Weber, *Devout Laywomen in the Early Modern World*.
[69] On this, refer also to Sarah Moran's and Naomi Pullin's articles in this special issue.