

Two Women of the  
Great Schism:

The *Revelations* of  
Constance de Rabastens

by RAYMOND DE SABANAC

and

*Life of the Blessed Ursulina  
of Parma*

by SIMONE ZANACCHI



*Edited and translated by*

RENATE BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI &  
BRUCE L. VENARDE



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*Volume Editors' Introduction*

*Constance de Rabastens (active 1384–86) and Ursulina of  
Parma (1375–1408)*

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*The Other Voice*

It is not always possible to hear medieval women's voices directly. In many instances words and deeds were filtered through the writings of male authors. This was especially true for holy women who relied on their confessors to relay their visions and whose lives were written, sometimes posthumously, by male clerics. Such scenarios apply to the two women who take center stage in this volume, Constance de Rabastens (active 1384–86) and Ursulina of Parma (1375–1408). Although the texts we translate were written by men, they open an important window onto their protagonists' lives and works as well as the agency of women in the late Middle Ages. A large body of historical scholarship finds that European women's status, visibility, and opportunity eroded across the medieval centuries, leaving women victims of male oppression and even appropriation, to reprise the title of the series to which this book belongs, of their voices. It is difficult to arrive at coherent accounts of what Constance and Ursulina said and did, given that their actions are mediated through the genres of vision narrative and saint's life, written by Constance's confessor, Raymond de Sabanac, and by Ursulina's hagiographer, Simone Zanicchi, respectively. In that sense, learning about our two women of the Great Schism requires us to read against the grain, to try to peel away layers of editing and scripting to reveal an authentic core of female voice and experience.

However, some facts emerge that help us situate Constance and Ursulina in straightforward ways. Because of their forceful visionary and diplomatic interventions in the Great Schism, contemporaries took both women seriously enough to regard them as a threat to the political and ecclesiastical order, local and international. Constance and Ursulina managed to make their voices heard in a society that was dominated by men, and even in the extremely male-gendered spheres of secular politics and the Church hierarchy. Does that make them exceptional figures, or, as a male critic of the late-medieval author Christine de Pizan (c. 1364–c. 1430) described women who accomplished much in traditionally male-

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dominated spheres, freaks? We think not. Rather, the experiences of Constance and Ursulina show that whatever the rhetoric of female weakness and insignificance in late-medieval society—a rhetoric that can be deafening in the works of many male authors—the reality was rather different. Women could, especially if they were determined and intelligent, play important roles. Simply put, they made a difference to those around them, and for that reason alone, the challenges of sorting out the nature of their experiences, of pursuing hints and asides in the texts about them, are worth the trouble.

The presentation of a collection of revelations (with some letters) and a holy biography together may assist in what is necessarily an imaginative challenge. For Constance, we have vivid visions but little in the way of biographical detail; for Ursulina, we have a narrative account of her from birth to death that seems quite intentionally to shy away from detailed description of visionary experience. But read together, both with and against each other, our texts might offer a fuller view of women's experience. We can guess at the confusion and hostility with which the visionary Constance might have been received by reading about what everyone from neighbors to popes made of Ursulina, and we might heighten our understanding of Ursulina's rich interior religious life by reading about the (sometimes literally) colorful revelations of Constance. Did Constance ever travel? Did Ursulina ever see strange, brightly hued birds? These two women doubtless shared more than we can see from the historical record, given that they were similarly situated in time, social space, and religious perspectives. Had they ever met, they would have found a great deal to talk about. We moderns can worry too much about questions of mediation or manipulation by authors—for what written text is not at one remove from reality, from literal voice? What is certain is that the voices of these two women, and perhaps of many others of whom we have no documentary record, rang out loud and clear in their time. They mattered.

The texts presented in this book are very rich and thus demand some orientation. First, we briefly present the framework into which one can place our two protagonists: women's visionary experience and writings and the aspirations to holiness with a political twist. Then, we set the historical scene against which Constance of Rabastens and Ursulina of Parma played out their remarkable parts. There follows a concise biography of each woman along with consideration of the character of the writings from which our knowledge of their lives derives. Next

comes some commentary on what may be the most surprising aspect of Constance's and Ursulina's activities: their very public and politically engaged actions. A final section considers the complex relationship of subjects and authors in these texts, the nature of which makes a true understanding of the women's stories and significance a real but—we hope—worthwhile challenge. History, spirituality, literary form, and gender are all important axes along which to ponder the experience of these two women of the Great Schism.

### *Constance and Ursulina's Foremothers*

Throughout the Middle Ages, female visionaries could be found in many walks of life, in religious orders as well as among the laity. Many of these women lived lives of contemplation within the cloister walls or in the confines of *beguinages*, non-monastic communities of female spiritual seekers. Whatever the place, women established intimate relations with Christ or received privileged access to religious mysteries through their visions. Some of these women authored their own texts chronicling their visions and mystical experiences; others dictated them to scribes or confessors. Marie of Oignies (1177/78–1213), Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1282/87),<sup>1</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth (1200–1268), and Angela of Foligno (1248–1309) were women whose visionary experiences and writings centered on their interior lives.

But other women used their visions, at least in part, to try to intervene in the politico-religious conflicts of their time.<sup>2</sup> The earliest of these was the German Benedictine nun Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), who was not only aware of the political developments of her time but corresponded with rulers, such as the emperor Frederic Barbarossa, concerning the papal schism of 1159. Her younger contemporary Elisabeth of Schönau (1129–1165) also used some of her visionary experiences as a basis for various pronouncements on this schism.<sup>3</sup> Later on, we find female visionaries engaged in a variety

1. On the complex history of Mechthild's book and for a good introduction to women's religious writing see Sara S. Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

2. See André Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practice*, trans. Margery J. Schneider (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), chs. 18–19.

3. See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Visions and Schism Politics in the Twelfth Century: Hildegard of Bingen, John of Salisbury, and Elisabeth of Schönau," in *Saints, Scholars, and*

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of political missions. Margaret of Cortona (1247–97), for example, became famous in Tuscany as a preacher of peace and the crusade, while Clare of Montefalco (1268–1308) fought the heresy of the Free Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

The two women who can most be considered Constance and Ursulina's immediate foremothers are Birgitta of Sweden (1303–73) and Catherine of Siena (1347–80). They were among the very few female visionaries who were formally canonized, recognized as saints, although Catherine's canonization was not finalized until more than eighty years after her death. Birgitta, by contrast, was canonized no fewer than three times (in 1391, 1415, and 1417) by popes of different schismatic factions, the final time just at the end of the Great Schism. Her aristocratic background and the strong canonization lobby that sprung up around her undoubtedly account for the speediness of these proceedings.

Many female visionaries aroused suspicions of churchmen that made their canonizations, if not impossible, problematic. In fact, the famous French theologian Jean Gerson (1363–1429) challenged Birgitta's canonization at the Council of Constance in 1415 and seemed to target Birgitta and Catherine when in 1423, six years after the end of the Great Schism, he looked back on the 1377 decision of Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome (which may have contributed to the Schism: see below) and blamed the undue influence visionaries had on this pope.<sup>5</sup> It is within this contentious climate regarding visionary activity and aspirations to holiness that we have to place our protagonists.

How did Birgitta and Catherine attempt to intervene in the politics of their time? We can give only the briefest summary of their complex roles here. Birgitta, a Swedish widow of aristocratic origin and a mother of eight, used her visionary authority to speak out concerning the Hundred Years' War between England and France and sent messages to the Swedish king as well as Pope Clement VI when war resumed in 1346. She then moved to Rome and toward the end

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*Politicians: Gender as a Tool in Medieval Studies*, ed. Mathilde van Dijk and Renée Nip (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 173–87.

4. See Peter Dinzelbacher, *Mittelalterliche Frauenmystik* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1993), ch. 10.

5. Although Gerson actually says "male as well as female visionaries." See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism, 1378–1417* (University Park: State University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) 34 and n. 10. Dyan Elliott sees Gerson's words as part of a "major campaign against female mysticism." See *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 264; see 268 for Gerson's challenge at Constance.

of her life was especially vocal in her campaign to persuade popes Urban V (1362–70) and Gregory XI (1370–78) to return the papal see from Avignon to Rome.<sup>6</sup> On one occasion, after a vision Birgitta told Gregory XI that the devil retained him in Avignon and that his love for Christ had grown cold, that he was a paralytic corrupted by cold blood and humor, and that this paralysis prevented him from moving to Rome.<sup>7</sup> Despite these exhortations, the pope did not consent to leaving Avignon and Birgitta died before the ardently desired return to Rome became reality.

Catherine of Siena, twenty-third child of a Sieneese dyer and thus a member of the artisan class, played a political role that was more important than that of any other holy woman of her time. In 1374 she met the future master general of the Dominican Order, Raymond of Capua, who became her spiritual advisor and biographer. Like Birgitta, Catherine agitated for the papacy's return to Rome; in fact, she functioned as a successor to Birgitta and her advisory mission after Pope Gregory XI contacted her through Birgitta's confessor, Alfonso of Pecha. Before the beginning of the Great Schism, Catherine's major political involvement concerned the conflict between the republic of Florence and the papacy as well as the numerous other hostilities between the different Italian city-states.<sup>8</sup>

Catherine's rhetoric urging Gregory XI to move to Rome was forceful and picturesque. In one letter dating from 1376, for example, she told Gregory that his egoism kills virtue—which then resembles the stillborn baby of an unfortunate mother. Somewhat later, she writes “Up, Father! No more irresponsibility!”<sup>9</sup> Gregory returned to Rome in 1377. It is hard to judge how important a role Catherine played in his decision, which was motivated by a whole host of political and ecclesiastical considerations. Jean Gerson, as we just saw, seemed to blame Catherine and Birgitta for Gregory's return to the eternal city. A fifteenth-century painting by Benvenuto di Giovanni

6. For her biography and political roles see Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2001) and on the return to Rome, Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries*, 36–42.

7. See Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries*, 40. Birgitta here refers to the medical theory of the humors, which were believed to govern people's temperaments.

8. E. Thomas Luongo, *The Sainly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

9. *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, ed. Suzanne Noffke, 2 vols. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 1:246 and 249.

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in the Ospedale di S. Maria della Scala in Siena shows Catherine leading Pope Gregory XI in a splendid procession entering the city of Rome, confirming the belief of a sizable group of people that the saint had indeed been instrumental in this momentous return.<sup>10</sup> After the pope's return to Rome and the beginning of the Great Schism in 1378, Catherine's became one of the loudest voices urging the reunification of the Church. Her passionate letters to European rulers, cardinals, and the Roman pope Urban VI are extraordinary examples of saintly eloquence put to political use.<sup>11</sup> Sadly, none of her reasonable proposals were heeded, none of her impassioned pleas acted on: the Great Schism was to divide the Church for another generation.

Raymond of Capua wrote Catherine's first life, the *Legenda maior*, between 1385 and 1395; Thomas Caffarini penned a second account, the *Legenda minor*, in the early fifteenth century; and between 1411 and 1416 the *Processo castellano*, part of the Dominican campaign in support of Catherine's canonization, gathered numerous testimonies to her holiness. Unlike Birgitta's case, confirmed three times in twenty-six years, Catherine's dossier languished, and it was not until 1461 that the Sienese pope Pius II canonized his hometown's saint.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that the nuns of San Quintino were inspired by this event to begin thinking about the canonization of the holy woman buried in their church, their very own Ursulina of Parma.

How can we explain the emergence into the public arena of our two eloquent women? Daniel Bornstein suggests that eras that see "cracks in ecclesiastical structures" are especially open to "female influence and to experimentation with novel religious roles." He states:

It was during the long decades of the Avignon papacy and of the Great Schism, when the validity of any particular religious authority was rendered doubtful, first by the removal of the papacy from its proper seat [i.e., from Rome to Avignon] and then by the spectacle of two (and later three) competing hierarchies, that women like St. Catherine of Siena, St. Birgitta of Sweden,

10. The painting is reproduced in the *Bibliotheca sanctorum* 3:1002 (Rome: Pontificia Università lateranense, 1963).

11. For an analysis of her letters relating to the papacy's return to Rome and her attempts to end the Schism see Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries*, 42–54.

12. In 1939 Catherine was named one of the patrons of Italy and in 1970 she was declared a doctor of the Church.



and lesser figures were able to emerge as vociferous protagonists of the religious life. It was when the male hierarchy was in obvious disarray that prominent churchmen were most willing to listen to strange voices, disregard decorum and timeworn proprieties, and concede these women a place at (or near) the altar.<sup>13</sup>

Constance de Rabastens and Ursulina of Parma thus fit into a lineage of politically engaged visionaries, women who used their supernatural experiences and their charisma to create voices that allowed them to speak to the rulers and prelates of their time, either judging them and consigning some of them to hell (as did Constance) or actively pursuing diplomatic efforts through untiring travel between Rome and Avignon (as did Ursulina). The Great Schism laid bare the fissures in ecclesiastical authority Bornstein describes. But it was not only female visionaries who felt authorized and compelled to speak out against the pope they considered illegitimate. The same period also saw some male visionaries engaged in seeking support, through their revelations, for one or the other pope. The prime example of a male visionary in this role, Friar Pedro of Aragon (1305–81), was a highly placed Franciscan and the uncle of the king of Aragon. That his counsel to support the Roman pope was not heeded by his nephew was not due to his gender but to the political expediency that finally moved all the Spanish kingdoms to adhere to the Avignon pope.

Still, it is safe to say that our two women, of different backgrounds but motivated by similar missions, were aided by the spiritual uncertainty and crisis of authority of their era when they wanted to make their voices heard. The same goes for Marie Robine (d. 1399), a peasant woman from the Pyrenees who settled in Avignon and became spokeswoman for the Avignon popes Clement VII and Benedict XIII. The latter even sent her to Paris in 1398 to persuade the French king not to withdraw obedience from his papacy. The

13. Daniel Bornstein, "Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy: History and Historiography," in Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, ed., *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 6. For a slightly later period, the early sixteenth century, Gabriella Zarri traces the fates of fourteen women who in many ways can be seen as descendants of our two women: their revelations and prophecies were adapted to the political problems of their own time and they frequently found the ear of the rulers of the many different Italian states. See Gabriella Zarri, "Living Saints: A Typology of Female Sanctity in the Early Sixteenth Century," in Bornstein and Rusconi, ed., *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, 219–303.

crisis occasioned by disputes between this pope and the king thus enabled Marie to become a papal ambassador. Her mission, however, ended in failure and led to her disillusionment with the papacy she had so fervently served and revered earlier.<sup>14</sup> It is likely that women of the background and social class of these three women—whether a small-town widow like Constance, a peasant woman like Marie, or a member of the urban middle class as was Ursulina—would not have had the ear of churchmen had the Great Schism not caused political upheavals and doubts about the continued authority of the Church in the regions they inhabited.

In order to demonstrate in more detail the seriousness of the issues with which they chose to engage, we will take a closer look at the Great Schism, the grave crisis that divided the Church into two and eventually three factions for thirty-nine years.

### *The Great Schism: Christendom Divided*

For over a generation the Great Schism (1378–1417), pitting first two and then three popes against each other, divided Christian Europe. During most of the fourteenth century the papacy had resided in Avignon, and all the popes from Clement V (1304–14) to Gregory XI (1370–78) were of French or Occitan origin. In the second half of the century more and more voices—poetic, prophetic, and diplomatic—clamored for a return of the papacy to Rome. Birgitta of Sweden (1303–73), Catherine of Siena (1347–80), and Friar Pedro of Aragon as well as the poet Petrarch (1304–74) were among those urging the pope to move his see back to Rome. Finally, in 1377, Pope Gregory XI decided to undertake the fateful move to Rome. But already in March 1378 Gregory was dead, and the papal election that occurred a month later caused one of the most profound crises the Western Church had ever experienced.<sup>15</sup> The conclave of the sixteen cardinals trying to choose a new pope was surrounded by a mob of armed Romans who demanded an Italian pope. The cardinals, after much deliberation,

14. On Marie Robine see Matthew Tobin, “Les Visions et révélations de Marie Robine d’Avignon dans le contexte prophétique des années 1400,” in *Fin du monde et signes des temps. Visionnaires et prophètes en France méridionale (fin XIIIe–début XVe siècle)*. *Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 27 (1992), 309–29 and Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries*, esp. 81–85.

15. See Walter Ullmann, *The Origins of the Great Schism* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1948).

agreed on the archbishop of Bari, Bartolomeo Prignano, who took office as Pope Urban VI.

Urban soon showed his true nature, as the cardinals later complained. Autocratic and irascible, he began to curtail the cardinals' autonomy and the luxurious lifestyle they had imported from Avignon. In response, the cardinals left Rome in the summer of 1378 and took refuge in Anagni. Here, in the month of September, they proceeded to elect another pope, claiming that the April election was invalid because there had been no liberty of choice in face of the menacing throngs outside the conclave. Their new choice was Robert of Geneva, a relative of the French king Charles V, who quickly accepted the papal tiara as Pope Clement VII, and, after various troubles, settled in the impressive papal fortress in Avignon. Thus, within the space of five months the same group of cardinals had elected two different popes.

This unprecedented event had immediate political repercussions, since every European ruler had to choose one or the other pope. England adhered from the beginning to Pope Urban VI, while the French monarchy—after some deliberation—not surprisingly chose the Frenchman Clement VII. Spain, after protracted inquiries into the true circumstances of the double election, eventually opted for Clement VII, as did Scotland, while the Empire and the Italian region preferred the Roman pope. Flanders remained divided.

At the moment Constance de Rabastens (active 1384–86) and Ursulina of Parma (1375–1408) appeared on the scene, the Schism had become entrenched and no solution seemed to be at hand. There is no doubt that the division of the Church caused great anxiety to Christians from all walks of life. Contemporary chroniclers, such as Michel Pintoin, the chronicler of Saint-Denis in Paris, give many examples of the doubts and anguish that ordinary Christians experienced in the face of two popes whose open hostility toward each other included military action and mutual anathema.<sup>16</sup> Our two women were among those Christians who, by divine command, attempted to intervene in the crisis of the Church.

16. See Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries* for many examples of this anxiety and for the responses offered by writers and artists in different countries and milieus. The chronicler of Saint-Denis had his finger on the pulse of the French people; indeed Bernard Guenée uses this chronicle as the touchstone for public opinion at the time in his fascinating study *L'opinion publique à la fin du Moyen Age d'après la "Chronique de Charles VI" du Religieux de Saint-Denis* (Paris: Perrin, 2002).

Constance hailed from Languedoc, a region that had seen some turmoil just prior to the onset of Constance's visionary activity. Languedoc had become a French crown territory in the early thirteenth century, following on the cruel and destructive Albigensian crusade, which, though proclaimed to be a campaign against heretics, was in fact a move to enlarge the domain of the French king. After the death of King Charles V in 1380, Languedoc was supposed to come under the administration of the Count of Foix-Béarn, Gaston Fébus (1331–91). But the regents, Charles V's brothers, who took over for Charles's twelve-year-old son, contravened the late king's orders and appointed one of their own allies to the position. Defeated in armed resistance, Gaston Fébus renounced the lieutenancy of Languedoc but held on to his own territories of Foix-Béarn.

Being under the domination of the French crown, Languedoc embraced the Avignon pope Clement VII. But the attitude of the count of Foix resembled the wait-and-see stance of the Spanish kingdoms and then evolved into one of neutrality, although he did require a tithe in favor of the Avignon pope.<sup>17</sup> Constance admired the count of Foix, yet her visions endorse the Roman pope, a contradiction that for her clearly needed no resolution.

But Europe was divided not only by the Great Schism. For two decades, France and England had been pitted against each other in the Hundred Years' War. Constance was as aware of this conflict as she was of the Schism. Several times (in Chapter 2.23 and Letter 6) she speaks of Flanders, a contested region, although she seems to have misunderstood the political situation. The cities of Flanders had risen up against their count, Louis de Male, and had shown pro-English leanings. In response, the new French king, fourteen-year-old Charles VI, invaded Flanders, in a military campaign styled as a "crusade" aimed at eradicating revolt and heresy (that is, adherence to the Roman pope) and at forestalling any alliance with the English enemy. Constance rightly sees Flanders as the French king's enemy, yet Flanders for the most part supports the Roman pope, the one favored by Constance. Therefore, Constance's statement in Letter 6 ("Flanders ... will be punished for the persecution") contradicts some of her other statements of support for one or the other side. Thus she admires and seems concerned about the young king of France even though he adheres to the Avignon pope whom Constance considers

17. See Pierre Tucoo-Chala, *Gaston Fébus et la vicomté de Béarn, 1343-1391* (Bordeaux: Bière, 1959), 328–29.

the devil incarnate. Clearly, Constance's papal and monarchical allegiances are at irreconcilable odds.

We must read the political portions of Constance's *Revelations* against this multifaceted background at the end of a troubled century. On the one hand, Constance supported the young French king Charles VI despite his support of the "wrong" pope. On the other, she idolized the Count of Foix, whose leanings were also pro-Clement and even somewhat pro-English. As for the situation in Flanders, Constance was aware of some crisis there, but she never articulated any coherent opinion on the Flemish problems. Constance's views of the events of her time were not always accurate or even consistent, but they do betray a passionate desire to intervene in the politics of the day on the part of an ordinary woman from the south of France.

In Italy, too, the Schism cast a long shadow over political affairs. Not a united nation-state until the nineteenth century, the Italian peninsula was from ancient times a land of cities. One of these was Parma, lying at the crossing of two streams in the enormous flood plain of the Po River in northern Italy.<sup>18</sup> The city was on the Via Emilia, the major Roman thoroughfare that ran along the southern edge of the Po Valley. Parma declined in the late Roman era, but attained new economic and strategic importance in the early Middle Ages, eventually coming under the dominion of emperors from north of the Alps. In the clashes between emperors and popes in the central Middle Ages, however, Parma ended up siding with Rome and soon after, like many Italian cities, established a communal form of government that, despite the ideal of a commune as an alliance of various citizen interests, remained largely under the control of a small group of wealthy families for centuries. Intense competition between several prominent families in the fourteenth century, economic and fiscal troubles, and even famine led finally to the takeover Parma by the powerful Visconti lords of Milan, a city 75 miles to the northwest, in 1346. When Ursulina was born in 1375, the city was under the rule of Galeazzo II Visconti, succeeded shortly afterwards by his son Gian Galeazzo, who increased the already large territory centered in Milan by extending control over cities to the east and south, into the Apennine mountain region of central Italy.

In the period around Ursulina's lifetime there emerged the general pattern of late-medieval and Renaissance Italian political

18. A standard account is Ferdinando Bernini, *Storia di Parma*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Parma: L. Batti, 1976).

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organization: five major city-states (Milan, Venice, Florence, the papal states centered in Rome, and Naples) that controlled most other cities in a dizzying succession of alliances, conflicts, and realignments. When the Great Schism began, Ursulina was three years old. The northern city-states, Milan, Venice, and Florence, remained loyal to the Roman papacy, of which they were the political rivals. The situation in Naples was different, however, since the rulers of that city and its large territory in southern Italy had strong ties to France, whose royal family had pan-European connections by blood and marriage.<sup>19</sup> Joanna I, queen of Naples 1343–82, was descended on both sides from French royalty; her colorful life included four marriages, numerous challenges to her legitimacy from relatives in Italy and Hungary, and several periods of sole rule. When Urban VI, formerly the archbishop of Bari and thus Joanna's subject, was elected pope in 1378, he promptly announced plans to support a Hungarian claim to the throne of Naples. When Clement VII was elected as a rival to Urban VI, Joanna took the Avignon side in the schism. Joanna died as a prisoner in 1382 during the ensuing civil war, waiting to be rescued by her designated heir, Louis of Anjou, uncle and former regent of the French king Charles VI so revered by Constance of Rabastens. Queen Joanna's successor (an adopted son and perhaps also her assassin, since her death was probably murder) was another Charles, crowned king by none other than the Roman pope Urban VI, who had supported his claim to the throne. Charles died only a few years later and was succeeded by his son Ladislas. Ladislas, an adherent of the Roman papacy, spent his reign of almost thirty years—covering the rest of Ursulina's lifetime—locked in struggle with another rival claimant, this one the son of Joanna's final choice as heir, Louis of Anjou.

In short, while most of Italy remained loyal to the Roman papacy, it was also centered geographically between the Avignon-loyal French kingdom and Naples, where political rivalries and dynastic struggles were always linked to support for rival popes. In Italian politics at the time, nothing was entirely predictable, in regions or individual cities. Although it was not until much later that a French king actually led an army into Italy, the constant presence of members of the French royal house on the peninsula throughout the period of the schism meant that the Avignon popes had powerful allies to the south of Rome.

19. See Tommaso Astarita, *Between Salt Water and Holy Water: A History of Southern Italy* (New York: Norton, 2005), 54–85, for a sketch of southern Italy in the later Middle Ages.

At least as important as the geopolitical landscape, though, was Ursulina's immediate environment in her native city. Despite remains of a Roman theater and amphitheater, she probably attached more importance to the religious structures in Parma, for example, the Romanesque cathedral consecrated in the early twelfth century and a distinctive octagonal baptistery built a century later. But there were many other churches in Parma, parishes serving city neighborhoods and the churches of various religious groups of monks, canons, friars, and nuns. One of the latter was San Quintino, the monastery church of a community of nuns established in the twelfth century. It was at San Quintino that Ursulina's body was buried after her death; and it was there, around those holy relics, that a cult developed in the course of the fifteenth century, encouraged by the account of her life Simone Zanicchi wrote in 1472 at the behest of Abbess Magdalena Sanvitale.

### *Constance de Rabastens and her Revelations*

Little is known for certain about Constance de Rabastens.<sup>20</sup> All our information comes from her revelations as they were transcribed by her confessor, Raymond de Sabanac. Her earliest vision deals with the death of her husband; in Chapter 2.15 Constance mentions a daughter; and in 2.20 we learn that her son was a Benedictine monk in Toulouse and wrote some texts for her. A heading in the unique manuscript informs us that Constance was at one point in prison. While the exterior circumstances of her life remain mostly unknown we learn much about her rich interior life through her revelations.

The transcription of her revelations made by Raymond de Sabanac, possibly a law professor from Toulouse, was probably originally in Latin or Provençal. Today it exists only in medieval Catalan in manuscript Bibliothèque nationale de France, latin 5055 (folios 35 recto to 58 recto). The editors, Valois and Pagès, believe that the writing comes from late fourteenth-century Rousillon, an area that was then part of Aragon.<sup>21</sup> Constance's revelations and letters appear in no strict chronological order. We first read a preface that lays out the principles of the discernment of spirits, a set of rules

20. The lively scenes of Constance's village life and her interactions with others described in Jean-Pierre Hiver-Bérenguier's *Constance de Rabastens: Mystique de Dieu ou de Gaston Febus?* (Toulouse: Privat, 1984) are pure fantasy.

21. See Noël Valois and Amédée Pagès, "Les Révélations de Constance de Rabastens et le Schisme d'Occident (1384-86)," *Annales du Midi* 8 (1896), 242.

that was devised in the later Middle Ages to “test” visions for their authenticity.<sup>22</sup> Here Raymond assures us that Constance’s revelations met all the appropriate criteria. Then follows a long series of visions as told to Raymond, complemented by some visions told to her son and then transmitted to Raymond; finally we find six letters from Constance to the inquisitor in Toulouse, probably written for her by her son. All the other texts in the manuscript are in Latin and deal with a variety of subjects, including treatises by historians and by some of the Church Fathers as well as a text on anatomy and a treatise on games. Since a number of the folios are bound upside down in this codex, one wonders about how and by what rationale it was put together. In any case, the folios containing Constance’s revelations stand out by their beautiful writing and rather clean pages in an otherwise quite dirty and even torn codex.

How can one define the genre of Constance’s text? It is not a purely mystical text in the sense that meditations on Christ’s suffering and the desire of joining herself to Christ are not at the center of her text, though they are undeniably present. Nor is there any easily defined doctrinal content. Central to the *Revelations* is rather Constance’s political mission: to denounce the Avignon pope as a usurper and to persuade the clerical and secular authorities of the region around Toulouse to adhere to the Roman pope. A divine power sends her dramatic revelations and a divine voice instructs her how to interpret the striking scenes that appear before her eyes and at the same time provides her with a script for her communications with the bishop of Toulouse and his entourage. Biblical echoes (especially from the Book of Revelation) and imagery inspired by these texts give a scriptural authority to the messages Constance is ordered to disseminate to those around her.<sup>23</sup> Thus by far the most common command Constance receives is “Write this down and transmit it to...” (e.g., 2.22, 2.33, 2.37, 2.48, 2.62). The voice does not always name the person to whom Constance’s writings should be addressed. Sometimes it is a general order indicating that writing down her revelations will profit the people; at other times the voice names the intended recipient, for example, the inquisitor in Toulouse.

22. See Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003) and Elliott, *Proving Woman*.

23. These biblical intertexts become much more numerous after section 2.30, perhaps because Constance’s revelations became more and more threatening to the ecclesiastical authorities and therefore needed increased legitimization.



The divine voice insists again and again on Constance's election to this mission and on the fact that she is a woman. Her gender allows for identification with a number of female biblical figures, such as the Virgin Mary, whose disconsolate state Constance is said to imitate (2.44 and 57; see John 19:25) or the woman "clothed in the sun" in Revelation 12, who is given wings and transported into the desert in order to escape from the threatening serpent (2.41; see Rev. 12:14). But most striking is the voice's recognition that as an unlearned woman, Constance has never studied the Scriptures (2.32, 2.63, and Letter 4). Nonetheless she is called upon by Christ to explain the Scriptures to learned men, a task that is as sacred as it is risky (2.63).

As her revelations multiply and her confessor transcribes and circulates them, Constance's reputation as a visionary spreads. For some she becomes a kind of oracle to be consulted on political questions, such as the significance of the duke of Anjou's death (2.45), or how much longer the Great Schism might last (2.46) and whether the end of the world is near (2.47). But for the clerical authorities she becomes a major nuisance, a simple woman who attempts to play a public role denouncing the Church's policies. Her visions of the Avignon pope and his cardinals burning in hell prove to be intolerable to the authorities in Toulouse and Constance ends up in jail, as we learn at the beginning of Part 3. But imprisonment does not silence our outspoken visionary—she now uses her son to carry her messages to the inquisitor of Toulouse, Hugues de Verdun. What ultimately happened to Constance is not known. Her revelations were preserved, in but a single manuscript and only in a Catalan translation. It is possible that this translation was made so that it could circulate in Aragon as part of the pro-Urban VI propaganda, a movement that tried to persuade the Spanish kingdoms, which had not yet decided who was the rightful pope, to rally themselves to the Roman pope.<sup>24</sup>

### *Ursulina of Parma and her Vita*

We have far more detailed knowledge of the life Ursulina of Parma, most of it from the Latin biography written over sixty years after her

24. See Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism*, 63. Another saintly personage, Pedro of Aragon (1305–81), a Franciscan friar and uncle of the Aragonese king, was also engaged in pro-Urban VI propaganda (*ibid.*, 55–59).

death. The author of this *vita*, or saint's life, was Simone Znacchi.<sup>25</sup> In the first section of the *vita* he lists the Latin and vernacular sources he drew on for his work. Znacchi was a member of the austere Carthusian order of monks and nuns who combined communal and hermit-like existences in their communities. He had entered monastic life in Parma and risen to be prior, that is, head of a Carthusian house, in 1458, and served as prior in Pisa and Bologna before going to Montello, a house near Treviso in northeastern Italy, in 1467.<sup>26</sup> Montello, founded in 1349, had a tumultuous early history outlined by one of its monks in a chronicle in 1420.<sup>27</sup> Like Europe, the Carthusian order had been divided by the Great Schism, and the heads of houses siding with Rome met at Montello three times in the late fourteenth century. So Znacchi, as fellow citizen and head of a monastery loyal to the Roman cause during the schism, was a doubly appropriate choice of holy biographer for the Roman advocate Ursulina of Parma.

Znacchi provides exactly one date: the birth of Ursulina on May 14, 1375. Ursulina was born to Pietro de' Veneri and his wife, Bertolina. Pietro, whose family name appears in two papal bulls later granted to his daughter (and translated below), had been a widower devoted to prayer when a divine message instructed him to remarry. Several clues—not least of all Ursulina's ability to travel extensively during her short life—point to the status of this family: they were comfortable but not of the elite class of late-medieval Parma. Pietro died not long after Ursulina's birth, but Bertolina was her daughter's companion as long as she lived. Ursulina was an unusual little girl, according to Znacchi; although she first spoke at the age of four months, she was small, unable to walk very well until she was five, and unsociable. It was at five that she began to have mystical visions, the first concerning the resurrection of the dead.

Ursulina's visions continued throughout her life. As a girl she refused to listen to sermons lest, as she explained, people might

25. The only full-length study of Ursulina to date is Ireneo Affò, *Vita della Beata Orsolina da Parma* (Parma: Reale, 1786). Affò relied on Znacchi's account plus materials from various archives in Parma. Some of these, for example the apparently extensive transcriptions of Ursulina's visions Znacchi describes, have not survived the intervening centuries. The brief sketch here is much enlarged by Znacchi's full account and further explained in the notes to the translation.

26. Albert Gruys, *Cartusiana*, 3 vols. (Paris: CNRS, 1976–78), 1:174. Znacchi subsequently returned to Parma and died as prior in Pisa in 1497.

27. *La cronaca della Certosa del Montello*, edited by Maria Luisa Crovato (Padua: Antenore, 1987).

think her holy wisdom came from them and not divine revelation. Starting when she was fifteen, at divine command she began to dictate her revelations to others, ultimately creating a great cache of writings, none of which is known to survive. Her knowledge of Scripture and theology dazzled those with whom she modestly shared it in her adolescence. On Easter, 1393,<sup>28</sup> the voice of God told Ursulina to prepare for a journey, subsequently specifying that she was to go to Avignon. She and her mother made the long journey, guided for a while by a figure the young visionary recognized as John the Evangelist. Once in Avignon, Ursulina received instructions to find the antipope Clement VII, with whom she spoke at length, so terrifying the prelate, as Zanicchi puts it, that he refused to see her again. Returning home to Parma, Ursulina rested only a few days before hearing a command to go to Rome and tell her story to Pope Boniface IX. When her truthfulness was confirmed by the report of a monk who had been in Avignon when Ursulina was there, she was highly honored by the pope and his court, who sent her off on a second embassy to Avignon, armed with a sealed papal letter urging the Avignon papacy and court to give up its claims to sacred authority in favor of Rome.

Returning to Avignon in early 1394, Ursulina learned of plots against her life in the Avignon court. Undeterred, she spoke so brilliantly before Clement VII and his cardinals that some of the court, in Zanicchi's account, prepared to give up its claims. But another faction remained hostile and conspired to ensure that this troublesome Italian teenager would not have further access to sympathetic ears. This group of cardinals tried (unsuccessfully) to trick Ursulina in theological discussions, accused her of witchcraft, attempted to poison her, and finally agreed to kill her slowly when an earthquake destroyed the house in which she was being tortured. The standoff continued for seven months, with Ursulina triumphant against every conspiracy and technique designed to harm her. When Clement VII learned to his surprise that she was still in Avignon, Ursulina took the opportunity to deliver the letter from Rome. Thunderstruck, he died a few days later, in September 1394. Just as the plan to reunite the Church looked as if it might succeed, the Avignon college of cardinals elected a new (anti-)pope. Her hopes dashed, Ursulina went home to Parma with her mother.

28. Because Zanicchi provides no dates beyond Ursulina's birth, those provided here derive from comparison of internal and external evidence, working forward and backward from known chronology.

A little more than a year later, Ursulina decided to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. For this journey, she received the express consent of the Roman pope Boniface IX when she visited Rome in early 1396; the pope's bull on the matter, addressed jointly to Ursulina and Bertolina, is also translated in this book. After an emotional visit to the holiest places in and near Jerusalem, she went home again to Parma via Venice, where she stayed briefly but left a profound memory of holiness.

The last phase of Ursulina's life began with her exile from her native city, part of a series of factional disputes in a time of civic unrest. Departing with her mother and an abbess in late 1404 or early the next year, Ursulina spent a short time in Bologna before settling for three years in Verona, where she lived in obscurity. After a painful illness relieved by many divine visions, she died, most likely in the year 1408; her feast day, that is, the presumed date of her death, is April 7<sup>th</sup>.<sup>29</sup>

Buried in Verona, the well-traveled visionary had one final journey; a year and a half after her death, her body was transferred to the monastery of San Quintino in her native Parma. Her cult grew across the fifteenth century, encouraged by a series of abbesses of the powerful Sanvitale family, female members of which guided the monastery for over a century starting in 1425, not too long after Ursulina reached her final resting place. The second of these Sanvitale abbesses, Magdalena, asked Simone Znacchi to write a formal account of her life, which he completed in 1472. Miracles that had begun in Ursulina's lifetime continued through the early modern period and in 1786, Pope Pius VI declared her a saint. Her body still lies in what is now the parish church of San Quintino in Parma.<sup>30</sup>

From several standpoints, Znacchi's account is typical of medieval saints' lives.<sup>31</sup> In one sense, that is no surprise, since

29. Affò, *Vita della Beata Orsolina*, 43–48, creates a timeline for the last years of Ursulina's life that results in a death date of 1408, rather than the traditional 1410. Affò's logic, based on Znacchi's account, the political history of early fifteenth-century Parma, and dated documents from ecclesiastical archives, is sound.

30. We are grateful to Professor Katherine McIver of the University of Alabama for sharing her information on this church and providing us with evocative photographs of Ursulina's tomb.

31. The classic account of medieval writing about saints, first published in 1905, is Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography*, trans. V. M. Crawford (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961). A more recent general consideration is Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

he was a monk, the prior of an order of monks founded in the late eleventh century, and thus part of a long and conservative tradition; Carthusians liked to boast that their order, unlike others, had never needed reforming. The structure of the *vita* is typical, almost stereotypical. Znacchi starts his account with great rhetorical flourish, greeting his patrons, praising the desire for an account of the holy person, saying something about his sources, and lamenting his own unworthiness, spiritual, intellectual, and stylistic, to complete the task assigned to him, asking for corrections and emendations as necessary (sections 1–2). He begins the narrative portion of the account with Ursulina's parents, both highly religious people whose holy progeny is foretold through visions and dreams (sections 3–5). Early signs of the newborn Ursulina's holiness are noted (section 5), followed by an account of her childhood and adolescence, filled with marvels concerning her physical development, visions, and humility (sections 6–11). Ursulina's first voyage comes next: her supernatural summons to Avignon, the journey there from Parma, including a stop in Provence at the shrine of Mary Magdalene, a figure much beloved by pious medieval laywomen, her reception at the papal court and conversation with Clement VII, and her eventual return home after the fearful Clement refuses to see her again (sections 12–19). Quickly following are the first journey to Rome and a meeting with Boniface IX, her second, now Roman-sanctioned journey to Avignon, where her self-confidence infuriates the papal court and where she is imprisoned and tortured and fails to prevent the election of a successor when Clement VII dies (sections 20–29). She makes second and third trips to Rome, then a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (sections 29–32). A period of holy meditation at home in Parma is ended with exile, during which Ursulina stays in Bologna, and then, for three years, in Verona (sections 33–35). During a long illness, Ursulina speaks to her companions and prays at length, begging for mercy right to the moment of her death (sections 36–40). The author proceeds with a sermon-eulogy on Ursulina's character and example (sections 41–48). After more apologies for unworthiness, Znacchi tells about the return of Ursulina's body to Parma and then recounts several miracles at her tomb, or miracles performed in response prayers for her intercession (sections 49–56), before a brief conclusion (section 57).

Virtuous life, pious works, great devotion, a holy death, and miracles: all this is quite typical matter, set out in a standard format. Znacchi, staying close to the hagiographical model, stresses

the orthodoxy of his subject, despite her very unusual life story: Ursulina is attended to by major saints like Peter and Paul (section 5) and John the Evangelist (sections 13–16), has holy conversations throughout her life with a variety of individuals and groups on mainstream subjects like the Trinity and the nature of Jesus Christ (sections 7–40, *passim*), and even acts as a monastic reformer late in her life (section 35). Her final words are directed to God, prayers of praise and pleas for mercy (sections 39–40). The sermon-eulogy contains a discussion of Ursulina in relation to the seven standard Catholic virtues (sections 42–45) and stresses an eighth: chastity. The virginity lauded at the sermon's end is a kind of Christian humility, as Zanicchi explains it (sections 46–47). He refers to Ursulina as a virgin over seventy times in the *vita*, some fifteen times during her second, long visit in Avignon, as if to stress Ursulina's goodness in face of the wickedness and abusiveness of the cardinals, who try to make *her* out to be a charlatan or a witch. The miracles after her birth are equally orthodox: illnesses cured, a people in mortal peril saved, and a young woman freed from a forced marriage—by a holy illness and death on a Sunday.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, Zanicchi's style is as traditional as his narrative and themes. His Latin is straightforward and slightly prolix, its syntax at times more like a vernacular Romance language than its predecessor language. The Carthusian prior does not demonstrate much interest in quoting classical (pagan) authors, including authorial asides, or using classicizing vocabulary and tropes as did so many humanist hagiographers of his age.<sup>33</sup> That style may, however, represent a conscious choice to write in a familiar idiom rather than lack of interest or competence. Zanicchi's Montello, in fact, had some interesting literary connections. In the 1370s Montello was the beneficiary of the patronage of the noted French soldier, diplomat, crusade promoter, and author Philippe de Mézières. Around the same time, the house got

32. Alison Knowles Frazier, *Possible Lives: Authors and Saints in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 23–24, describes the model "canonization *vita*" as "a rigid ordering of the events of the life, followed by a survey of the virtues, then an account of the pious death and canonization, and finally a coda of miracles." Zanicchi reverses the sequence of survey of virtues and death almost completely—although it could be argued that the stress on humility and virginity woven into the biography signals those most important virtues before the account of Ursulina's death.

33. See Frazier, *Possible Lives*, 19–20 and 321 for descriptions of the style of the humanist historiographers. Most of these writers did not follow the canonization *vita* structure, either.