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Divine Diets: Food and Fasting of Medieval Mystics in the Vitae of Thomas of Cantimpré

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THESIS APPROVAL

The thesis of HANNAH ANDERSON for the Bachelor of ARTS with Honors in History was presented JUNE 10th 2015, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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Abstract:

Food and fasting were central themes in the vitae of women mystics in the middle ages. However, second parties, primarily male hagiographers, recorded most of the written works about these women's lives and spiritual experiences. Thus the question of authorship and influence arises in discerning what arose from the women themselves as opposed to their writers. In this paper I analyze the women's vitae of one writer, Thomas of Cantimpré, from the 13th century to find what a comparison of the texts reveal about the subjects and the author's motivations in telling their lives. Though food and fasting features extremely differently in the lives of each Saint revealing individual forms of experience within the common theme, the author's concerns over heretical suspicion and guiding his flock on the orthodox path of religion are clearly drawn out in each.

DIVINE DIETS:
FOOD AND FASTING OF FEMALE MYSTICS IN THE VITAE OF THOMAS OF
CANTIMPRÉ

By
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requirements for the degree of

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1. Introduction

From the late twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries women experienced a widening variety of avenues to pursue a religious life. They were able to join cloisters as nuns, but also to remain in society as beguines, holy laywomen performing ascetic acts while living a life of charitable labor. They could become recluses in the church or in their own homes, or join in the many rising heretical movements, which often gave women more equal standing than they could receive within the Catholic Church. Young women looked to their mothers and others around them to guide their practices, but also to the stories of women saints and holy women, or *mulieres religiosae*, for guidance and imitation. Saints' lives or *vitae*, exempla, sermons, and other religious writings stemmed from a long line of religious texts with common themes relating to the religious life. Women canonized as saints drastically rose during this period, as did the production of their *vitae*. The *vitae* expressed a distinctly feminine spiritual experience, different from their male counterparts.

The *vitae* of medieval woman mystics were filled with miracles, which often confound the modern reader, as they defy death and the rules of the material world as we know them. One such category of miraculous feats is food and fasting miracles. Food was a central and singular arena over which women had control, as preparers of food as well as consumers. Their miracles, however, could go far beyond their mundane tasks of serving and eating. They could run against medieval and modern taboos like Catherine of Siena's consumption of pus and Catherine of Genoa's eating of lice.¹ To the modern eye the fasting of many saintly women could even resemble modern clinical disorders such as

¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 144-5.

anorexia. This is especially so in cases where women, such as Lidwinia of Schiedam and Catherine of Siena, claimed they could not eat as if it were an infirmity. Fasts could last anywhere from days to years, in one case thirty continuous years.² The line between performing sanctified abstinence or being ill, between purification or degradation of the body (a sin against God, who created it), was of great concern to medieval people. Ascetics such as Columba of Rieti and John the Good of Mantua performed the act of eating in front of audiences (on separate occasions), in Columba's case one solitary grape, to show that they were physically able to eat and that therefore their abstinences were voluntary.³ For some this distinguished their practices as sanctified, however involuntary fasting could also be interpreted as sanctified. The impact of the fasts were also considered carefully, such as the affect on the body of the ascetic, which will be addressed later on in the paper.⁴ Women's treatment of their bodies was a subject of the Catholic community's concern; it was regarded suspiciously and could be condemned or garner great admiration.

However shocking to modern and medieval senses these acts may be, they must be regarded within the context of food overall in the lives of medieval women and the saints' spiritual experiences. This is the approach Caroline Walker Bynum takes in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, in which she argues, "To religious women food was a way of

² Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 79. Examples include Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Genoa, Clare of Assisi, Colette of Corbie, Columba of Rieti, Dorothy of Montau, Elizabeth of Hungary, Gertrude of Helfta, Hadewijch Ida of Louvain, Juliana of Cornillon, Margaret of Cortona, Margery Kempe, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and many others.

³ Fasting was not an exclusively female practice and was often done in imitation of the Desert Fathers, early orthodox ascetics. However, in the medieval period there was more emphasis in male religious expression and ascetic practice on the renunciation of power and wealth. Furthermore, in a study of saints from 1000 to 1700, 17.5 percent of saints were women but 29 percent of saints performing extreme austerities such as fasting were women. The statistics combined with studies of exempla show an overwhelming majority of food miracles and metaphors involving and relating to women. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 76-9.

⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 196-7.

controlling as well as renouncing both self and environment. But it was more. Food was flesh, and flesh was suffering and fertility.”⁵ Saints performed not only fasting miracles but also miracles involving the multiplication of food, the transformation of food, and the production of food from the women’s own bodies in the form of milk, oil, or honey. Just as they were fed and saved by Christ through the Eucharist, other men and even Christ could feed and be saved from the holy women’s bodies filled with divine grace. The deprivation of fasting sanctified their bodies and turned them into divine nourishment for themselves and others. Food and fasting therefore became a powerful and uniquely female focus within the pantheon of ascetic and religious practices.

In the struggle to understand these saintly figures, historians have used a range of tools and perspectives to look at the lives of these women. Some attempt to diagnose a possible disorder to explain the mystics’ behaviors, while others try to understand them by placing them within the greater historical and religious context out of which they arose. In addition to these unusual themes concerning food and fasting, the subject of gender in the performance and presentation of these women’s stories has been and continues to be of concern to historians. The majority of texts available about the women mystics were written by male hagiographers entrenched in the male-dominated ecclesiastical hierarchy. Within the Church all mystics were viewed with a grain of skepticism due to their removed state from the proscribed course of the church, but this did not prevent many from admiring the mystics for their extreme devotion and miraculous performances. How much of these mystics’ stories and expressions of spirituality are uniquely feminine in tone and subject? How much were they changed and shaped by the opinions and objectives of their male writers?

⁵ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 5.

In this thesis I will address both these avenues of inquiry through a close inspection of the themes of fasting and food miracles in the *vitae* composed by Thomas of Cantimpré, a thirteenth-century Dominican theologian and preacher. I will perform a close textual analysis of the actions and events related to this theme in his hagiographies of Christina the Astonishing, Lutgard of Aywières, and Margaret of Ypres. In addition, I will also look at the events and context of his life, to see how that shaped his interpretation of the women's lives. After close consideration of both, I will argue that food and fasting practices in the *vitae* of the women mystics show both their own individual perspectives and personalities as religious devotees, as well as their author's primary concerns as a preacher and confessor in a time of heightened heretical fear about the conduct of female religious. In telling their stories Thomas presented different examples of religious devotion that he thought were to be admired and some that could be imitated. Though it cannot be explained why Christina was able to feed herself from her own breast high up in a tree, or how Lutgard withstood three consecutive seven-year fasts, we can more fully understand how these themes are unique to each mystic, as well as Thomas' goals and concerns in recounting them.

2. The Life of Thomas of Cantimpré

Thomas of Cantimpré was born c.1200 in Bellingen, near Brussels. He studied at the cathedral school in Cambrai from about 1206 to 1217. During the later years of his schooling Thomas heard Jacques of Vitry, a preacher from the Abbey of Oignies not far from Cambrai, speak. Jacques, born between 1160 and 1170 near Reims, was close to the rising community of beguines in the area and served as a preacher for the Albigensian Crusade in 1213 and the 1214 Crusade for the Holy Land. He wrote a prolific amount of sermons as models for other preachers to use including exempla, anecdotes, and illustrations. He also wrote the *vita* of Marie d'Oignies, a *mulieres religiosae* sometimes hailed as the first beguine.⁶ Jacques served as Marie's confessor and superior within the church but admitted that, "In the spiritual sphere she was master and he disciple."⁷ Thomas' relationship with Jacques would be highly influential on his path towards an apostolic life and his regard for holy women.

After his education Thomas joined the Victorine abbey of Cantimpré connected to Cambrai, and was quickly promoted to confessor, a position which involved hearing the confessions of others, giving spiritual counsel and absolution. This was a task Thomas had considerable anxiety over, and it became a pivotal subject on which Lutgard of Aywières gave him guidance and relief. In 1223 he began the *Life of Abbot John of Cantimpré*, but this work would not be finished until five years later. Thomas' other hagiographical efforts were all directed towards *mulieres religiosae*, in the fashion of his early inspiration Jacques of Vitry. His first contribution to a woman saint's *vita* was a

⁶ William Kibler, "Jacques de Vitry (ca. 1160/70-1240)," in *Medieval France: An Encyclopedia*, ed. W. W. Kibler (New York: Garland Publishers, 1995), 484.

⁷ Margot H. King, "General Introduction," in *Two Lives of Marie d'Oignies*, trans. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1998), 9-12.

supplement to the *Life of Marie d'Oignies*, written c. 1229-32. Thomas' section served mainly as a chastisement of Jacques' abandonment of his pastoral work in the diocese of Liège to move up the ecclesiastical hierarchy (as he became cardinal bishop of Tusculanum in 1229) and his abandonment of the *mulieres sanctae*. This writing highlights the importance Thomas put upon the work of promoting the holy women. In Jacques' absence Thomas continued on the path he had inspired him to.⁸

From 1230 to 1240 Thomas worked on *Liber de natura rerum* (*On the nature of things*), a collection of natural explanations of plants and creatures featured in biblical passages.⁹ However, his best known works now, much like Jacques of Vitry's, are the *vitae of mulieres religiosae*. Following his entrance into the Dominican order at Leuven, in 1232, Thomas wrote the *Life of Christina the Astonishing*. In 1237 Thomas was sent by the order to the Dominican *studium generale* in Paris for further study and remained there for two to three years. On his way back to Leuven, passing through the town of Ypres, Thomas met with the cleric Siger of Lille and their conversation prompted him to write the *Life of Margaret*. Upon his return to Leuven, Thomas served as a lector and sub-prior of the community from 1246 on. He also continued to preach and hear confession as he had before leaving. His domain included the populous sees of Cambrai and Liège, as well as the neighboring sees of Tournai and Thérouanne.¹⁰

His third and final *vita* was written on Lutgard of Aywières shortly after her death in 1246, and was completed in 1248. Following this, in 1250 Thomas moved to Cologne to

⁸ Robert Sweetman, "Thomas of Cantimpré: Performative Reading and Pastoral Care," in *Performance and Transformation*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Zigler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 133-68. Barbara Newman, ed., *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives*, trans. Margot H. King (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).

⁹ Robert Sidney Sweetman, "Dominican preaching in the southern low countries, 1240-1260: 'Materiae praedicabiles' in the 'Liber de natura rerum' and 'Bonum universale de apibus' of Thomas of Cantimpré" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1989), 12.

¹⁰ Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives*, 3-54.

continue his studies at the *studium generale*, where he heard lectures by Albertus Magnus and met Thomas Aquinas. After this he was appointed as a preacher general to the province of Teutonia, during which he continued his pastoral missions. He also wrote his final work, a collection of exempla entitled *Bonum universale de apibus* (or *The Book of Bees*), an aid to preachers with observations on the nature of religious life.¹¹ Thomas of Cantimpré died sometime between 1265 and 1270.

¹¹ Sweetman, "Dominican preaching," 12.

3. The Times of Thomas of Cantimpré

The low countries in the early thirteenth century saw a surge in laymen and women's desire for expression of religious devotion, which for women led to the formation of the beguines. The newly established Dominican and Franciscan orders in the area provided instruction and care to the growing communities of women. However, even with the combined force of local clerics, Franciscans, and Dominicans, the rough estimate of 1,500 beguines in Liège in the 1240s created a logistical problem of supervision and control.¹²

Both Thomas of Cantimpré and Jacques of Vitry were situated in the heart of this growing community of religious women. The subjects of their *vitae* were not entrenched in beguine communities themselves, but all spent time or made contact with various communities during the course of their lives. Thomas and Jacques, in their positions as itinerant preachers and confessors, had close contact with and were immersed in these communities. According to Miri Rubin, their "impressions of the early beguines are thus based on a larger experience and reveal a greater sensitivity to the realities of their semi-religious life, which they tended to view, moreover, as worthy in its own right."¹³

Women's connections within these communities can be seen in the contact of various women in their *vitae*. Christina and Lutgard crossed paths through the recluse Jutta of Loon. During Christina's time with Jutta, their combined religious devotional practices

¹² Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 167-8.

¹³ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 38.

drew many apprentices.¹⁴ Additionally, Jacques of Vitry mentions Christina in his *vitae* of Marie d'Oignies, which was most likely the impetus for Thomas' *vitae*.

In addition to the proliferation of *mulieres religiosae* and the beguine movement there was a growing fear in the thirteenth-century church about heterodoxy, of great concern to ecclesiastical dignitaries and ordinary clerics alike. Thomas joined the Order of Dominicans in 1232. The order was formed by Dominic of Calaruega, a result of his preaching amongst the heretics in southern France, and was confirmed by Pope Honorius III in 1216.¹⁵ Subsequent Papal bulls in 1233 called upon the Dominican order specifically to engage in the inquisition of the heretics, the 'good men' and 'good women' we now know as the Cathars. These inquisitions were so connected to the Dominican order that they even served as fodder for jokes in popular society.¹⁶ Though only Thomas was a Dominican and neither were inquisitors, Thomas and Jacques both fervently supported the anti-Cathar campaigns and the Albigensian Crusade.¹⁷

The rise of beguines and the evangelical spirit among the religious laity inspired suspicion of their practices and possible heterodox leanings.¹⁸ This trend towards religious devotion and expression in the laity was due to the rising economic prosperity of the merchant classes, which in turn created a wider and more visible gap between the rich and the poor in urban centers. John of Cantimpré (the first subject of Thomas's hagiographical attention) was one of many preachers to encourage the sons and daughters of wealthy urban families to divest themselves of their dangerous wealth. Boys were

¹⁴ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 43.

¹⁵ William Kibler, "Dominican Order," in *Medieval France: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Kibler, 300.

¹⁶ Mark Pegg, *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245-1246* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 36, 50.

¹⁷ Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints Lives*, 16-17.

¹⁸ Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints Lives*, 14.

urged to become mendicants and ascetics, while girls could “open their pantries to the beggars.”¹⁹ However, these individual displays of religiosity were sometimes hard to distinguish from the acts of the Cathars and other heretics.

The Cathars, as we now refer to them, were centered in the Rhineland and the Languedoc.²⁰ The first documented group was recorded in Cologne around 1143-4. They would eventually become the most widespread heretical group of the Middle Ages. The Catholic Church viewed the Cathars as a threat because they completely denied the authority of the Church and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. They did not partake in mass, rejected all the sacraments except for baptism, and did not believe in purgatory.²¹ Cathars and most particularly the *perfecti* (good men and women of the highest order) avoided the consumption of foods that were by-products of animal reproduction, just as they avoided the act of intercourse themselves. This meant the avoidance of eggs, butter, milk, cheese, and of course meat.²² They could, however, eat fish as they were believed to be spontaneously generated from the water they swam in. These eating proscriptions were not dissimilar from the Catholic fasting practices, which in addition to the Cathar’s rejection of material goods and fornication, caused uncertainty about those engaging in similar ascetic practices, as it was difficult to tell if their underlying intention was orthodox or heretical. This issue of distinguishing orthodox and heretical eating practices

¹⁹ Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints’ Lives*, 11.

²⁰ In reference to Cathars and Albigensians historians debate the subject of terminology. Most of the actual historical groups and figures addressed would not have used the nomenclature of scholars today, who also imply more cohesion and homogeneity than was present at the time. This stands in contrast to the Waldensian heretics, who were referred to for the most part as *Valdenses* in primary source documents from the period. However, though aware of the imposition of the nomenclature, for the purpose of this paper I will continue to use the terms Cathar and *perfecti* for clarity and because that debate is too great for the scope of this paper. Pegg, *Corruption of Angels*, 15-19.

²¹ Michael Costen, *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 59.

²² Costen, *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade*, 64.

was of great concern to Thomas in presenting the woman saint's practices, which will be shown later in my analysis of the primary sources.

In stark contrast to the practices of the Catholic Church, women were considered spiritual equals by the Cathars. They were respected, able to actively participate in the faith, and even to reach the highest echelon of religious standing within the faith as *perfecti*. *Perfecti* fasted three times a year for forty days, mimicked Christ's experiences in the wilderness, and played a great part in spreading the Cathar beliefs.²³ No such rank or trust was afforded to women in the Catholic Church, which may have made the faith more appealing to them. However, certain women of note and some respect within the Church were able to command attention through their connection to God as mystics. Religious women such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), an abbess, theologian, and writer, was able to transcend the ban on women preaching or speaking out in public. This was because her knowledge and insight was gained through visions by the grace of God and a considerable amount of male supporters who petitioned the pope to grant her apostolic license, which he did in the winter of 1147-8.²⁴ One such vision was apocalyptic in nature and revealed to her that the Cathars represented the Devil being released from hell.²⁵ In a sermon on her vision of the heretics in 1171, Hildegard declared that the devil corrupted the good people through the same deception he used upon Eve, through breaking God's commandment that men go forth and multiply and that he "maliciously urges them to restrain their bodies to the point of maceration with

²³ Sean Martin, *Cathars: The Most Successful Heresy of the Middle Ages* (Great Britain: Old Castle Books, 2012), 59-74.

²⁴ Maud Burnett McInerney, "Hildegard of Bingen, Prophet and Polymath," in *Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays*, ed. Maud Burnett McInerney (New York: Garland Publishers, 1998), xvi-xxv.

²⁵ Martin, *Cathars*, 50.

fasting.”²⁶ Hildegard shows the place women could take in the battle against heresy as well as the themes such as fasting which continued to be grounds for opposition and defense, both of which Thomas and his subjects took part in perpetuating.

Women could be important allies to the Catholic Church against the heretical movement, but because of it also endured even more scrutiny than usual over the sanctity of their own actions. For Thomas and Jacques a key defense of the *mulieres religiosae* lay in the women’s devotion and reliance upon the priesthood. The male cleric’s ecclesiastical power over penance and the sacraments was reinforced by the women’s Eucharistic fervor.²⁷ Their extreme devotion to consuming the body of Christ stood in stark contrast to the Cathars’ complete rejection of it, but the saintly women could subvert this power dynamic as well. While the holy women supported preachers and other ecclesiastical figures, they could also be critical of them, showing the men’s weaknesses and wresting power from them through their connection to Christ. Additionally, their evangelical actions could transgress the boundaries of what was approved by the ecclesiastical authorities.²⁸ Thus, while promoting holy women like Lutgard and Christina, hagiographers such as Thomas and Jacques had to put emphasis upon the limits of the women’s powers and reinforce the definite theological grounds of their spiritual practices. Such close textual supervision allowed Thomas of Cantimpré to praise the women as “spiritual mothers,” and to use them as guides onto the proper Catholic religious path.

²⁶ Hildegard of Bingen, “A Sermon on the Perverse Doctrine of the Heretics,” in *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 170-4.

²⁷ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 253-64.

²⁸ As in the case where Christina hears the deathbed confession of Louis of Looz, whose sins, Thomas needs to stress she had no power to absolve. Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints Lives*, 21.

4. Hagiographical Style and Secondary Scholarship

Scholarly works on the *vitae of mulieres religiosae* from this period concern themselves primarily with two questions. First and foremost is the question of the influence male hagiographers exerted in their portrayal of women's spiritual expression and experience. How much can really be determined to have originated from the women themselves? The second, though not completely separate question, is how certain miraculous or bizarre events could have occurred or what real causes could explain them.²⁹ Both call into question the motives and literary style of the author, as well as common themes in religious writing at the time. For the purpose of my study I will focus mainly upon the first question by asking if and how the food and fasting practices in the women's *vitae* by Thomas of Cantimpré reflect the women's own individual spiritual expression or the author's didactic agenda.

Taking up the question of male authorship and influence, historian Miri Rubin, in her study *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in the Late Medieval Culture*, questions how much historians assume the erotic and sensual sensory descriptions of Eucharistic fervor came directly from women saints. Rubin instead holds that men inserted their own presumptions and fantasies of female carnality and sensuality into descriptions of the women's experience.³⁰ As women were regarded as more of the flesh than men, this argument makes some sense; because their bodies were more fragile and defective,

²⁹ The second question of real causes is largely in reference to modern medical explanations of the women's behavior, as well as the basis of various miracles. While it is important to address this focus in the secondary literature when it arises, my concern is what both the women saints and their biographers believed and understood to have happened, not how we can understand it through modern science. Analyses in this direction include Rudolph Bell's *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), and Barbara Newman's "Devout Women and Demoniacs in the World of Thomas of Cantimpré," in *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and their Impact* (Hull: Brepols, 1999), 35-60.

³⁰ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 168-9.

women were more subject to sin and corruption. This conception of women and their bodies was culturally pervasive, having stemmed from Aristotle and the classical writers. Women no doubt had internalized it, since in their spirituality we see them transform it into an avenue of positive and powerful religious expression. Caroline Walker Bynum, in her overarching study *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, uses evidence from the *vitae* written by male hagiographers and women's own writings to show the theme's persistence in the writing and spirituality of both genders.³¹ In addition, Bynum shows that the spirituality of the confessors and hagiographers was significantly impacted by contact with the holy women.³² Just as women were influenced by society's conceptions of their bodies, their translation of that into their spiritual practice influenced the men.

This is a pattern we see evident in the life and writings of Thomas of Cantimpré. From early on in his religious life, Thomas was deeply entrenched in the community of religious women and with individual *mulieres religiosae*, first through the influence of Jacques of Vitry and then through his own preaching and pastoral service. For example, Thomas' work as a confessor was directly influenced by his relationship with Lutgard of Aywières. Upon expressing his fears of being swayed to sin by the confessions of his flock, Lutgard prayed for him and gave him assurance in the form of a "prophetic vision of (his) constancy."³³ He considered Lutgard his "spiritual mother" up to and after her death. Other themes prevalent in the women's *vitae* he wrote, like that of purgatory in Christina's, were not only reflective of messages Thomas himself wished to convey through the *vitae* for the conversion and redemption of sinners, but also the influences that the holy women had impressed upon him. As Sweetman found in his study of

³¹ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 73-188.

³² Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 282-7.

³³ Sweetman, "Dominican preaching," 12.

purgatory themes in Cantimpré's works, "He wrote of what he saw and, despite the demonstrable maleness of his vantage point, saw his heroines truly."³⁴ Like purgatory, food and fasting was a strong theme for both Thomas and his *mulieres religiosae*. It can be used to reveal both his and the women's motives and goals in their expressions. However, to better understand Thomas' goals in writing the *vitae* we must first look at his two other, non-hagiographical, works.

Bonum and De Natura

Both of Thomas' other texts were written for the purpose of teaching laypeople and those within the church on the proper path to God, and reflect his concerns as a preacher and a theologian. Robert Sweetman, in his dissertation on Thomas' *Bonum universale de apibus* and *De natura rerum*, seeks to determine Thomas' preaching and lecture style. Preaching and hearing confessions were the main pillars of Thomas' work as a Dominican preacher. After the eleventh century the care of souls became integral to monastic and mendicant self-understanding, and Thomas expressed great concern and joy in preaching converted sinners to penitence.³⁵ Mendicant authority lay in both the religious life they professed and in the authority granted to mendicants by the papacy, first and foremost that of hearing confession. The profession of religious life was a common bond shared with the holy women, while the authority granted to them by the church was a constant subject for maintained distinction and separation.

³⁴ Robert Sweetman, "Thomas of Cantimpré, *Mulieres Religiosae*, and Purgatorial Piety: Hagiographical *Vitae* and the Beguine 'Voice,'" in *A Distinct Voice*, ed. Jacqueline Brown and William P. Stoneman (University of Notre Dame Press: Indiana, 1997), 616. This article was written in response to an argument by Michel Lauwers that the *vitae* of beguine women did not at all reflect their spirituality and practices but that of their male advisors, simply becoming ecclesiastical propaganda. This Sweetman makes the more convincing argument that the male and female views were not completely irreconcilable, and therefore both were influenced by each other and the writings reflect such influences.

³⁵ Sweetman, "Dominican preaching in the southern low countries," 15-17.

Liber de natura rerum, written over the span of ten years, was in some respects a response to St. Augustine's call for a text explaining the properties of natural things, plants and creatures, to promote a better understanding of Bible passages containing them. One such explanation focuses upon how the devil took the form of a snake and talked through the snake to Eve. This, Thomas explained, was by way of its inhabiting a dracontope, with the face of a man and disturbing the air around it so as to make sound.³⁶ This task of composition was taken by Thomas to fulfill his own more pressing concerns, which "turned St. Augustine's call on its head." Sweetman argues that the text offers itself as a preaching aid and, instead of revealing the true nature of biblical passages, weaves enticing stories designed to trick the listeners into conversion and repentance. The novel and fantasy elements of *Liber* therefore become more pronounced.³⁷

In addition to weaving wondrous tales, Thomas also provides steadfast defenses of the more supra-human acts within the Bible, arguing against the application of Aristotelian thought to theological matters.³⁸ This argument is the most overt example of address to any contemporary heretical debate within the text (in particular it addresses whether the sacrament was truly Christ's blood and body, rejected by the Cathars as impossible). Heretics do, however, feature occasionally in allegories. The porcupine, for example, is "like the heretic," who sticks his needles of doubt and heresy into the unsuspecting layperson.³⁹ Besides these off-hand mentions Sweetman finds heretics to be

³⁶ Sweetman, "Dominican preaching in the southern low countries," 88.

³⁷ Sweetman, "Dominican preaching in the southern low countries," 95.

³⁸ Sweetman, "Dominican preaching in the southern low countries," 118.

³⁹ Sweetman, "Dominican preaching in the southern low countries," 124. As an example of a more positive animal allegory, Thomas holds the fish to be a very fine creature in its contentment with its lot in life and its propensity for sharing for the common good of the species (127).

non-entities within *De natura rerum*, of less concern than the individual's awareness of their propensity towards everyday sins.

The *Bonum universale de apibus*, written last of all his works, reflects Thomas' later experience within the Dominican order. Just as *Liber de natura rerum* was written as an aid to preachers, *Bonum* was written as an aid to those of the Dominican order in fulfilling their full potential on their religious paths. It reflects a great shift in focus from the *Liber*, as his style of preaching and conversion, once aimed to surprise and beguile, later became more gentle and persuasive.⁴⁰ While his first work was aimed at recording the order of natural things and the properties of sins and virtues, his last tries to reveal the order of grace, the nature and patterns of the supernatural and sanctified. Though not central to his argument or thesis, Sweetman mentions that this shift was undoubtedly affected by Thomas' deep involvement with the *cura mulierum*. Sweetman describes both the *Bonum* and *Liber* as having a loosely hagiographical structure, a structure that is also loose in the *vitae* themselves being by default chronological. Thus the *vitae* and the *exempla* could be considered as very closely tied in relation to Thomas' aims and message.

Thomas' central concern in these works was the salvation and care of souls through preaching and hearing of confession, as well as understanding and guiding those already on the religious path towards grace. It is with these aims in mind that we must consider his hagiographical works completed between his two greater compendia of *exempla*. The individual events in the women's lives should be considered one by one, as each story had potential import to the preacher in his conversionary efforts. Each woman's life can also be considered on its own, as potentially reflective of individual religious expressions

⁴⁰ Sweetman, "Dominican preaching in the southern low countries," 242-3.

arising from the saints themselves. To examine all three cases together is potentially reflective of Thomas's own religious goals and expression in telling the saint's lives. It is with these three levels of reading in mind that I now turn to the primary sources, specifically focusing on the theme of food and fasting. I will look at these closely to find how the food and fasting practices of the women's *vitae* by Thomas of Cantimpré reflect the women's own individual spiritual expression and the author's didactic agenda.

5. Primary Sources: The *Vitae* of Thomas of Cantimpré

Thomas of Cantimpré wrote three holy women's *vitae*, as well as a supplement to the life of Marie d'Oignies. The supplement to Marie's *vita* was written in 1230, Christina's in 1232, Margaret's in 1240, and Lutgard's in 1246. From these writings I will focus upon the three complete lives of the holy women Christina, Lutgard, and Margaret.⁴¹ In chronological order I will lay out three types of food-related activities in the women's lives. The first is fasting, both habitual and periodic. The second is food miracles, such as the production of food, ability to consume food, etc. The last is the taking of the sacrament. These themes are not independent; fasting often leads to a miracle involving food or is a miracle on its own. However in separating out the components of the miracles, distinctly different patterns of use become obvious in each woman's religious expression and Thomas' interpretation of them.

Christina The Astonishing

Thomas's first *vita*, of Christina the Astonishing, is widely regarded with skepticism for its extreme displays of the saint's erratic behavior.⁴² Its wild and fantastical aspects, however, did nothing to impede its popularity. Twelve manuscripts remain in the original

⁴¹ Though Marie's life was influential to his later writings, as seen in her frequent guest appearances in his holy women's lives, Thomas' supplement to her *vita* does not cover the span of time or themes of interest to this paper. John of Cantimpré's *vita* by Thomas will also not be covered in this work, because his gender and lack of food related focus render him unimportant to the main question. *De natura* and *Bonum universal*, though potentially helpful in understanding Thomas' approach to food and naturalistic symbolism, are not available in translation. So, these works will only be addressed through secondary scholarship.

⁴² Though undoubtedly erratic and unusual, Newman goes so far as to suggest Christina was possibly "brain damaged by a coma" and otherwise mentally disturbed. While I do not care to apply these labels to Christina, it is a testament to her extreme behavior and the questions of cause and plausibility it raises for other historians. Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' lives*, 30-7.

language as well as translated versions in Dutch and Middle English.⁴³ Christina, a laywoman, died at the beginning of her *vita*, but upon visiting Purgatory was sent back to earth by God to save poor sinners from the fate she witnessed awaiting them. This was unfortunately hindered by her difficulties assimilating back into society, a process that provided the pivotal turning point of the *vita* when she was able to fulfill her purpose within society and the Church. However, even more than other mystics she remained aloof and distinctly separate from both for the rest of her life.

The distribution of food and consumption-based matters are focused upon in the first half of Christina's life. This is in part because the *vita* is structured following the three stages of spiritual life from the theological writings of William of Saint-Thierry. William of Saint-Thierry (1070-1148) was a theologian and mystic at Saint-Thierry near Reims, whose writings within the Cistercian traditions were influential to both Vitry and Cantimpré.⁴⁴ William's three stages outlined in the Golden Epistle were: the animal (having to do with control of the body and the natural material world), the rational (dealing with education and intellect), and then finally spiritual (a state of attained spirituality).⁴⁵ The Golden Epistle was written by William while he was in residence at the charterhouse of Mont-Dieu as a guide for the brethren on their religious paths as hermits.⁴⁶ It was thus a handy device for explaining Christina's transition from erratic holiness to a more acceptable (and relatable) standing in the church and society. This

⁴³ Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints' Lives*, 8.

⁴⁴ William Kibler, "William of Saint-Thierry," in *Medieval France: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Kibler, 978.

⁴⁵ The translator Margot H. King found this connection and influence. Miriam Marsolais found a more subtle influence in Vitry's life of Marie d'Oignies, which she states in defense of claims that Vitry abandoned structural concerns in favor of propaganda. Miriam Marsolais, "Jacques de Vitry and the Canons of St. Victor," in *Two Lives of Marie d'Oignies*, trans. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1998), 13-7.

⁴⁶ Richard Strachan, *William of St. Thierry: The Man and his Work* (Spencer: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 94-105.

structure is directly stated at the end of the prologue, “first of all we will describe how she was nourished, and then how she was educated, and finally we will describe her other deeds.”⁴⁷ Though somewhat explanatory of the emphasis on feeding in the first part of Christina’s life, it does not explain the continued use of food in her following two phases of life.

A primary theme in female mystics’ lives is the act of fasting, sometimes involuntary, sometimes deliberate, often from a young age and for extended periods of time (from months to years).⁴⁸ In Christina’s *vita* there are three mentions of restricted eating. The first occasion of fasting was involuntary; during her imprisonment by her family, they “fed her like a dog on only a little bread and water.”⁴⁹ The second and most explicit was in relation to her post-baptismal eating habits, in which she consumed a poor selection of foods, barely palatable, and taken only after fasting for two to three days at a time.⁵⁰ This is a relatively subdued example of fasting. The last mention, which is just barely applicable to the category, occurred near the end of her life when she “ate little and very rarely.”⁵¹ The first third of her development and the *vita* is focused upon nourishment, which was the only temptation that impeded her complete rejection of society. Her later life does present a shift in her approach to food, but not such an extreme shift as to bring her in line with other holy women. Instead, food became a medium through which she demonstrated and exercised her connection to God and knowledge of Purgatory. But to fully demonstrate this we must move from fasting to food miracles.

⁴⁷ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 13.

⁴⁸ All of which is exhaustively examined in Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

⁴⁹ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 26.

⁵⁰ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 30.

⁵¹ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 44.

Occasions of food miracles in Christina's *vita* are far more prominent, with five major events in the nourishment stage and three subsequent explanations of continuing miracles or miraculous abilities connected to food and consumption later on. After her return from Purgatory, though revolted by the smell of humans, Christina was "reinvigorated by food."⁵² This is as a difficult conundrum when contrasted to the fasting holy women. She "could not live without food" and was "tortured by grievous hunger" all during the period in which she rejected the company of men and behaved in animalistic ways to escape them.⁵³ During the first food miracle she was tortured by this hunger while residing high in a tree, having recently escaped the town mob. But after praying to God, "she turned her eyes to herself, she saw that the dry paps of her virginal breasts were dripping sweet milk against the very law of nature."⁵⁴ It was not unusual for many female saints to exude some food-like substance from their bodies such as milk or oil. However, the purpose of the production being Christina's own nourishment is quite a divergence from the usual displays of divine grace. She was nourished for nine weeks from her own breasts, reminiscent of the nine months of a baby's gestation. Christina's period of activity after her re-birth from Purgatory was animalistic and child-like, so it would seem she had to nourish herself as if she were an infant with the help of divine grace.

Christina's second food miracle was not so much the production of food but mimicking the process of food using her own body. In her animalistic phase, "She crept into fiery ovens where bread was baking," residing there in the torments of the fire until removed by force. She also threw herself into hearths, pots of boiling water, and when

⁵² Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 18.

⁵³ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 20. Such behaviors include residing in trees and rivers for periods as long as months, flying up to the tops of towers, and curling into the shape of a hedgehog to roll about.

⁵⁴ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 20.

unable to wholly submerge herself would torture parts of her body instead of the whole. She always emerged unscathed.⁵⁵ All other methods were resorted to when “no oven was at hand.” Thus Christina’s first choice for mortification, to be baked in an oven, draws a strong connection to another holy bread, the body of Christ.⁵⁶ She offered her body as flesh, like Christ, to be transformed into something else, something from which sinners could be nourished and saved. The salvation of others through the body and the body as food was therefore a theme instilled even before Christina’s re-entry into society to fulfill her purpose.

Christina’s third miracle was once again to nourish herself in a time of need. After being captured by her family, she was left chained in a dungeon and fed only bread and water. However, the yoke weighed her down and restricted her ability to eat. The Lord took pity upon the pains of Christina, and her virginal breasts flowed like before, but this time with “a liquid of the clearest oil.”⁵⁷ The oil flavored her bread such that she was able to consume it. The oil also healed her wounds. Upon viewing this miracle her family finally released her, acknowledging her miraculous abilities and connection to God. Unchanged after this episode, Christina continued her animalistic actions, fleeing the company of men and society, residing in rivers and trees. The prayers of her newly awakened family and neighbors, that God “moderate his miracles in Christina,” leads to the major shift in Christina’s *vita*. Stirred by the spirit, she baptized herself in the city of

⁵⁵ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 21.

⁵⁶ All of these associations between Christina and Christ are highlighted in the footnotes of *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Works*, in miracles such as her passing through water untouched (n.14), hanging on trees and the gallows among the thieves like Christ on the cross (n.19, n.21), and being bound to a pillar by the physician (n.24). Newman, *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Works*, 133-7.

⁵⁷ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 26.

Wellen and was miraculously calmed.⁵⁸ This ends the first phase of Christina's animalistic growth and nourishment.

After her self-baptism and re-entry into society, Christina's relation to food did change, but not so drastically as to fit in with the majority of female saints. Like many others she lived off of alms, but she bore the sins of those who fed her. Thus, Christina's feeding of herself aided in the redemption of the sinners as they fed her. This is exemplified in the specific event of Christina receiving wine from a wicked man. Moved by her and providing for her, the wicked man was thus redeemed and she could proclaim his final redemption to come.⁵⁹ The tone of Christina's consumption changed from nourishing, sweet, and flavorful, in other words positive, to very negative. Food acquired unjustly, while still eaten and still redeeming for the giver, tasted to Christina like "swallowing the bowels of frogs and toads or the intestines of snakes."⁶⁰ This description portrays Christina's consumption as penance, penance for those she is fed by. The feeling or taste of that food reflects the sins connected to it with taboo or undesirable foods. Toads and frogs were considered close to the ground and unpalatable, while snakes were of course associated with immoral behavior in connection to the fall of Adam. This is common, however, with many female saints; when not directly consuming other's sins, Christina ate only that which is barely acceptable as food for a human.⁶¹ Described as "vile and loathsome," "fit only for the garbage," and always "boiled in water," this food corresponds with the avoidance of any indulgent or pleasurable consumption on the part

⁵⁸ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 26-7.

⁵⁹ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 27-8.

⁶⁰ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 29.

⁶¹ Other women saints were known to eat foul substances, such as pus in the case of Catharine of Siena, lice in the case of Catherine of Genoa, and water from washing the sores of lepers in the case of Angela of Foligno. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 144-5.

of female mystics. However, the direct transfer of food from the sinner to Christina, her received knowledge of their sins from the food, and their subsequent redemption, does stand out from other *vitae*.

The least prominent theme in Christina's life is the consumption of the Eucharist. Taking the sacrament is mentioned twice in her *vita*, both times after her miraculous productions of food. After the nine weeks of feeding from her own breast, Christina thirsted "for the holy flesh" and frantically appealed to several priests in the city of Liège. Upon receiving of it she once again fled society.⁶² Her baptism followed later, which is the pivotal point where she went from the animal to the rational phase of her education and became more able to dwell in the society of men. The first sentence in the new phase of her life is that "She frequently partook of the sacrament."⁶³ While not a heavily stressed theme in Christina's life, taking the sacrament was directly correlated to her food production miracles and to her continued spiritual growth at least partly within the fold of the church.

At the end of Christina's life she returned to a reclusive state, albeit in a far calmer fashion. This hermitage was only punctuated by contact with society for "the salvation of men or the partaking of food," once again paired and presented as the dominant and codependent themes in her *vita*.⁶⁴ Food and feeding was an avenue through which Christ expressed his divine favor for Christina, as well as way in which she tried herself in her religious devotion, purifying and transforming her body. Finally, it is the method through which Christina received the sins of others and redeemed them. In all these processes her

⁶² Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 21.

⁶³ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 27.

⁶⁴ Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 41.

body was a vessel of transformation, turning raw flesh into something purified for consumption, turning hunger into nourishment, and sin into redemption.

Christina in this way became a symbol of feminine spiritual power, potentially quite alarming to the church and its monopoly on redemption. Thomas outlined the contractual nature of Christina's place on earth, she is there by the grace of God to save, emphasis on the grace given by God.⁶⁵ But this alone was not enough to combat the threatening aspect of her story. The translator, Margot H. King, suggests and I agree, that Christina's begging for the food in the first place was also suspect, as public begging especially by women "outraged its (i.e., the Church's) sensibilities."⁶⁶ Christina's unusual actions and expressions of divine grace required a greater emphasis on Thomas' part for a theological explanation (which took the form of William of Saint-Thierry's stages) and the presence of Catholic sacraments, which came together in her later phases of spiritual growth as she began to lead the sinners into the arms of the church and its sacraments, as well as consuming them herself.

The unique method of Christina's miracle working and the direct action she took in the process of redemption could very easily have been interpreted as threatening to the Church's power. Despite this Thomas did not exclude the details of transactions for ecclesiastical acceptance, but instead presented and defended Christina as a saint (instead of a manic, possessed heretic). He did not make many direct or overt explanations as to why her behavior was not heretical, except to say that in her erratic behavior no heretical practice could be discerned. She ate whatever was given to her and did not follow any

⁶⁵ Christina explains to the Church congregation that God gave her this second life after she agreed "without hesitation that she wished to return under the terms which had been offered" to her, a much more overt contractual agreement than other saints' relationships to God and their own service. Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 19.

⁶⁶Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, 61.

fasting diet like other saints or heretics. She was singular, her body completely altered and transformed for the Lord's purposes. Christina's story therefore presented a fantastical and engaging story of a religious woman, able, like the allegories of the *Liber*, to capture people's attentions and lead them onto the holy path. Christina could not be imitated, but she could be held in awe as an example of the power of God and the urgency of redemption.

Margaret of Ypres

Margaret of Ypres was a holy laywoman, who, though still embedded in society and her family, tended towards the reclusive. Margaret's calling to holy life and Christ began at the age of 5. Her entire life story, in particular the events leading to the loss of her dowry and marriageability, were attributed to God's intended purpose for her. A main theme in her *vita* is chastity, as she was plagued by her father's early wishes for her to marry and by her own feelings for a young man. Margaret's mortifications were extreme and left her body sickly, seeming more like afflictions than blessings. Those mortifications, however, gave her a close and intimate connection to Christ.

Margaret's fasts began at the age of seven. At the age of nine she fasted for forty days before Easter and for six days and nights in observance of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She also "abstained from all food except bread and water twice a week during the whole year."⁶⁷ She observed every fast on the church calendar and avoided foods "which usually arouse human appetites such as onions, pepper, and similar

⁶⁷ Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, trans. Margot H. King, Judith S. Neaman, Simon Tugwell (Toronto: Peregrina, 1999), 18.

things.”⁶⁸ This fasting, though following the church’s approved schedule for regular fasting, set her apart from her family. She showed no aversion to being in their presence while eating, but did not join in.⁶⁹ Later in her life the fasting intensified, as “A child of three could barely have lived on the food she ate while she dwelt in the flesh.”⁷⁰ She was described by Thomas as blind to food, not even able to pass it to others at the table. She abstained from foods and liquids, completely foregoing wine, meat, and “delicate foods.”⁷¹ After Thomas wrote of these extreme measures, which continue later on in her life, he provided a defense of Margaret’s extreme mortifications of the flesh, fasting, prostrating, and sleep deprivation, by calling upon the words of Marie d’Oignies, Paul, and Augustine. His conclusion was that “nothing which she did within herself from the greatness of her love was seen by anyone and the sign [that this is true] is that she bore all things without destruction to herself.”⁷² So her body’s ability to withstand the deprivation, as well as her obedience to the church’s prescriptions for fasting, were what made her fasting sanctified.

The defense of Margaret’s fasting as not detrimental to her body is difficult to understand from a modern perspective. Her death was preceded by ailments such as her nails and hair falling out as her body wasted away with great pain. However, later episodes provide some illumination. After fasting for forty days following Easter, she was “weakened in the body,” and yet she “rose up strengthened, and without difficulty” at her preacher’s words, and followed him to hear his sermon.⁷³ It would seem from this

⁶⁸ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 18.

⁶⁹ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 29-30.

⁷⁰ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 30.

⁷¹ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 31.

⁷² Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 31-2.

⁷³ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 41.

story that although the body was affected by her fasting, it was still able to do the Lord's bidding. For a year before her death Thomas said she felt no sensations, and "she was unable to distinguish different foods with her palate."⁷⁴ Margaret's fasting and relation to the consumption of food is much more negative than Christina's. Her lack of consumption, her aversion to food, and its results upon her body portray a more extreme form of female asceticism. Undeterred by this Thomas defined its acceptability on the basis of her ability to function when the Lord willed it, not necessarily her everyday state.

As a young child many of Margaret's fasts were paired with miracles of feeding others while she was depriving herself. Her childhood fasting and other mortifications "brought plants to blossom before harvest."⁷⁵ In an accident Margaret broke fresh eggs only to have them miraculously become whole again. She then fed them to her family while she sat by and did not partake. Though she did not partake herself, it is important to note that Margaret aided in the consumption of eggs, a food Cathars abstained from. Even though Margaret abstained herself she promoted the consumption of a food, which the heretics would not have condoned, showing that the underlying ideology of her practices was not heretical.

Another significant miracle, reflective of the Eucharistic emphasis in Margaret's life, presents itself when she received the body of Christ from Christ himself. Upon waking one morning and not sensing the presence of the Lord, Margaret ran through the town weeping and praying. The Lord answered and gave her "a share in his own body under the species of bread"; "she chewed with her teeth and she discerned the taste from the

⁷⁴ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 50.

⁷⁵ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 18.

material form.”⁷⁶ Following this she was filled with grace for fifteen days. What is stressed in this episode is the material and substantial form of the body of Christ given to Margaret. It was not just the essence or taste, but also the tangible material in the form of bread as body, which was filling and nourishing. This directly contradicted the Cathars’ rejection of the Eucharist, which they believed could not be the body of Christ.

While fasting became a theme early in Margaret’s life, receiving the sacrament started even earlier. At the age of five Margaret “smelled a wonderful odor” coming from the sacrament and begged for it. Thereafter she was given the sacrament three times a year (when once a year was all that was required by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215).⁷⁷ A little later in her life we are told that Margaret taking the sacrament every two weeks alleviated the hardship to her body caused by mortifications of the flesh. At one point, however, Margaret, racked with doubts about her purity, “did not dare to receive the body of Christ as had been her wont.”⁷⁸ However, the Lord entered into her heart and showed her the error of her ways, after which she had no more doubts. As she got sicker and sicker leading up to her death, she received the sacrament every Sunday and felt no pain after doing so.⁷⁹ Though at the end of her life she could not even drink water, she could take the sacrament.⁸⁰ This Eucharistic fervor, sets Margaret apart in comparison to Christina, but was not uncommon to other holy women. Fasting and receiving the sacrament fueled the intense relationships of religious women, like Margaret, with Christ.

As Margaret lived all her life with her family, she was less engaged with Church hierarchy or formal orders and therefore slightly outside their sphere of control, except in

⁷⁶ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 39.

⁷⁷ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 17.

⁷⁸ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 42.

⁷⁹ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 50-1.

⁸⁰ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 55.

her receipt of the sacrament. She was also much less engaged with her family and community, focused upon her own asceticism and relationship to Christ. Very little arises in her *vita*, which would have been perceived as threatening. Indeed the only theme that Thomas had to contend with was the extremity of her mortifications and their more involuntary nature. These were ameliorated by the divine grace shown through miracles and the continued emphasis on the preservation of the body despite deprivations. Her individual acts also created opportunities to shun Cathar practices and distinguish them from her own. Margaret's spirituality was very personal and much less focused upon others, unlike Christina. Though occasionally Margaret produced miracles that benefited others, like the eggs renewed and the crop growth, primarily her miracles were restricted to her own body and her relationship to Christ. Margaret was an example for admiration, but a complicated example for imitation.

Lutgard of Aywières

In contrast to Christina and Margaret, Lutgard of Aywières' life followed a much more conventional and acceptable track for a holy woman in the Catholic Church. The main theme of her early life going on into later years was one of chastity, the rejection and protection against the affections of earthly men to preserve herself for her holy communion with Christ. This carried through to the rejection of other worldly comforts, for which visions and intimate relations with Christ were her reward. Lutgard's life was highly social as opposed to reclusive. Beginning at the age of twelve she was committed to the order of St. Benedict in the monastery of St. Catherine at Saint-Trond. She was later made prioress of that convent, and then subsequently around the age of 24 became

prioress at the Cistercian convent in Aywières.⁸¹ Influenced by the writings of Augustine, Thomas's account of Lutgard's life is much more tame than Christina's, but still contains many fantastic miracles and the same wholehearted mind turned only to God.⁸²

Over the course of her life Lutgard performed three major fasts, each seven years long, each commanded by a divine figure, and each with a specific miracle or outcome determined at the outset. The first fast, conveyed to Lutgard through the Virgin Mary, was to rectify the mistreatment of Christ that had caused the Albigensian epidemic (another prophetic condemnation of heresy like that of Hildegard's).⁸³ Lutgard consumed only bread and beer, and when forced by others to consume a more substantial repast, "would try and take some food into her mouth, yet no food was able to make its way into her throat, not even anything as small as a bean."⁸⁴ Her second seven-year fast was for sinners, as commanded by Christ in a vision in which she was told to "offer yourself up totally for my sinners and turn away the zeal enkindled against them in retaliatory punishment."⁸⁵ This time the fast allowed for bread and vegetables, but followed the first fast directly. The subsequent third fast followed the second directly as well, for a total twenty-one years of fasting. This last fast's origin was unspecified, but "by which God would avert an evil which, it was feared, was certainly looming upon the Church of Christ by a certain enemy."⁸⁶ The foods allowed in this fast were also not specified. However, she assured Thomas that her fasts were not without fruit. Thus, as she aged her

⁸¹ Thomas of Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, trans. Margot H. King (Toronto: Peregrina, 1991), 22, 39, 41-3.

⁸² Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 15-18. For an example of a fantastical miracle, take Lutgard's emittance of fire from her mouth while singing. Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 61.

⁸³ See above, p. 9.

⁸⁴ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 45.

⁸⁵ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 52-3.

⁸⁶ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 90-1.

fasts became continually less restrictive and a concern for her wellbeing while fasting was present.

A positive and cautious regard for fasting was shown throughout Lutgard's narrative by both Thomas and Lutgard herself. In addition to the three seven-year fasts, there were five more mentions about fasting in the *vita*. All show a concern for preserving the health of the body and moderation. Thomas condemned a masochistic reading of Lutgard's rejection of material life through mortification, "if I declaimed the way of Christ in tribulation, you should think of Lutgard wearing herself out in fasts and afflictions which she manifestly performed more thoroughly throughout her whole life than any man or woman lived in our age."⁸⁷ Thomas could claim this, he said, because "the more she continued fasting, the stronger she was in body and heart."⁸⁸ Her disposition while fasting towards food was not one of repulsion or fear, rather she displayed great happiness when her community had an abundance of food to partake and did not shy away from it despite her lack of joining in. The reasons for her fasts as well as her support of the community's feasting shows a deep regard and concern in Lutgard's practices for the community's collective moral and physical health.

The consumption of food was regarded as a subject of concern on an individual basis, based upon Augustine's teachings that "discretion ought always to be pre-eminent in all of us and that we ought to discern our individual desires, as it were by moderating them."⁸⁹ This was shown in two cases where Lutgard aided other fellow nuns in their own abstinence. The first occurred on a Sunday after Lutgard received the sacrament, and instead of subsisting on the body of the Lord asked that she be permitted "to eat and be

⁸⁷ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 46.

⁸⁸ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 46.

⁸⁹ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 62.

refreshed,” and that he “go instead to Elizabeth who cannot abstain from food for even one hour.”⁹⁰ Elizabeth’s consumption was portrayed as compulsive, as even during the night she would eat multiple times. Lutgard thus gave up her post-sacramental fast, a blessing from Christ, and in exchange gave her ability to Elizabeth. This story was meant as an example to others of the proper restraint and balance in such matters as fasting. Lutgard was heralded as having “great discretion,” as she “did not want to weaken her body on account of her spiritual occupations.”⁹¹ The opposite and inappropriate form of fasting occurred when those who, “having tasted once or twice the sweetness of spirit, become enemies to themselves and reject their bodies cruelly.”⁹² Lutgard and Elizabeth’s fasting was therefore acceptable and even worthy of imitation, but only because of their individual needs to abstain in this way and their ability to do so in moderation.

The second case involved a young nun of the Cistercian order who asked Lutgard to intercede on her behalf and pray to God “that she might be able to bear the labors of her Order and abstain from eating meat.”⁹³ This was a hard task, as she was sickly at a young age and therefore not strong enough to withstand fasting. Lutgard was resistant to do so because of the girl’s age, expressing the ever-present concerns for the nature of fasting and its sanctity as contingent upon the body’s sustained health. This focus upon meat as a strengthening substance for the ill was an important note in this story, as it emphasized the proper consumption of meat at times, in contradiction to the Cathars’ complete rejection of it. While aligning with medieval dietetics it also emphasized the proper regard and concern Catholics should observe in fasting matters. Despite her doubts

⁹⁰ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 62.

⁹¹ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 63.

⁹² Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 63.

⁹³ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 69.

Lutgard acceded to pray for God's grace and favor for the girl, who was ever after repulsed by meat and completely did without it. Most importantly abstinence and "any mortification of the body which she wished to sustain was easier and caused no harm to her."⁹⁴ Thus as we saw in Margaret's *vita* the acceptability of fasting and other mortifications of the body were based upon the individual's need for moderation in themselves, but only if the body of the performer was not injured, through divine support or moderation.

There was a direct equation between Lutgard's fasting and her miracles. Each of the three seven-year fasts had an intended result, as well as her prayers for the two nuns. However, there were a number of miracles involving the production of food as well. Not yet past puberty, Lutgard, when distressed, would be visited by Christ and "suck a wondrous sweetness" from his side.⁹⁵ After consuming it, "she was stronger and quicker in the service of God," and "for a long time afterwards the saliva in her mouth tasted mellower than the sweetest honey."⁹⁶ This feeding from Christ abated the illnesses that afflicted her as a young girl and sent her into deep contemplation, as her heart did "inwardly ruminate on the honey of divinity and the milk of the humanity of Christ while her tongue was silent."⁹⁷ She also produced food herself. While residing with a recluse in Looz, during her prayers, her hands started to drip oil. She declared herself "so filled up inwardly by the grace of his superabundance that even now my fingers are outwardly dripping a kind of oil as a manifestation of grace."⁹⁸ In a subsequent miracle Lutgard was denied the sacrament by an abbess who was subsequently punished by God, as her mouth

⁹⁴ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 70.

⁹⁵ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 32.

⁹⁶ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 33.

⁹⁷ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 33.

⁹⁸ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 35-6.

was sealed shut until Lutgard was allowed to receive the sacrament.⁹⁹ This is the only mention of taking the sacrament in Lutgard's *vita*, as presumably her direct feedings from Christ overshadowed the connection obtained through the Eucharist. It is important enough however to bring punishment upon another when it was denied her.

Food in Lutgard's *vita* was a primary avenue of relation to Christ and caring for the community. She was fed by him and she fasted for him, to the benefit of her fellow man. It was a direct and personal relationship, but did not impede her interactions with the larger hierarchy of the Church. Except in two cases, when the abbess denied her the sacrament and when the cause of her final seven-year fast was a great evil in the church. However, the rest of her life was that of an obedient sister and a respectable prioress, making those events rare but necessary. In her own life and her interactions with others she showed a concern for moderation in fasting, a theme strongly supported by Thomas' theological support through the use of Augustine.

Lutgard needed fewer defenses through theological support than Christina or Margaret, as her entire life was led under the watchful and approving eye of the Church. This condition may possibly be a contributing factor to the lack of emphasis upon her consumption of the Eucharist, as her obedience had already been attested to. More importantly, Lutgard was a strong female voice against the Cathar heresy, through her prophetic support of the Albigensian crusade. Also, her story directly counseled others to follow her lead in fasting, but according to their own individual abilities and needs, hailing both her extremes and moderations. Lutgard's life had all the proper elements for a Catholic female saint, a figure for admiration and for imitation, by all wishing to follow the saintly path.

⁹⁹ Cantimpré, *The Life of Lutgard of Aywières*, 57.

6. At the Same Table: A Trio (or Quartet?) of Voices

Though fasting, food miracles, and the taking of the Eucharist run through each woman's *vita*, their use and tone changes significantly from case to case. Christina's taking of the sacrament indicated a very pivotal movement in her religious growth, her re-entrance to common society and the Church. Her fasting and feeding was also central to her role as a vessel for redeeming souls headed to Purgatory. Margaret's fasting was almost involuntary and consumed her life, just like her devotion to Christ, to the exclusion of all others. Her deprivations were matched only by her frenzied ecstasy in receipt of the Eucharist, though she was held back at times by her own self-doubt and trials of faith. Lutgard's fasting in comparison to both was extremely controlled and predetermined, with purposeful results, and a repeated emphasis on conservatism. The Lord commanded her to fast and she did so for the betterment of all those around her. All three women were inspirations for other *mulieres religiosae*, but only Lutgard offered a guide to imitation.

Thomas wrote these biographies over the span of fourteen years. Margot H. King remarks that it affected his style on some themes, such as his "treatment of holy folly" becoming more subtle from Christina's embarrassed flight after being taken by the Lord, to Margaret's more reserved shyness.¹⁰⁰ This relates to his other works, *Bonum universale de apibus* and *De natura rerum*, which Sweetman found showed a shift in style from tricking listeners with wild tales to gently coaxing with straightforward stories. This is certainly obvious in his choice of subjects, as Christina was as wild a tale as one can find of a religious ascetic, male or female, and his later subject Lutgard was much more conservative and mainstream (for a mystic) in her religious expression. It also

¹⁰⁰ Cantimpré, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, 72.

reflects his slight shift in audience from the laity to include others of his order already on the holy path.

In regards to food miracles and fasting, however, there is no shift in intensity of action. Lutgard's miracles and Margaret's fasts were just as extreme as Christina's, if something like that can be quantified. It cannot be disregarded that in addition to Thomas maturing as a pastor and writer, the different subjects came with their own distinct differences in story and action. In fact, though the practices and their extremity vary, the defenses put forth by Thomas that their behavior was saintly and divinely supported is consistent throughout each *vita*. Thomas portrayed each woman's miraculous actions as reflections of the greater themes of the ascetic life and divine grace so revered by Thomas and his brethren. In addition each bears a distinct emphasis on why the women's saintly practices were not heretical, for the reader's regard towards the saints as well as their own possible imitation.

The place of food in each of these saint's lives directly corresponded to the trajectory and tone of their overarching religious experience. What we see in Thomas's portrayal of that is the use of common scriptural and ecclesiastical commentaries to interpret each woman's individuality within the acceptability of the Church at the time, thus making their stories correspond to the accepted ideologies while remaining distinctive. Food in these women's *vitae* was an avenue of exchange between the women and the divine, as well as the women and their fellow men. Each woman's relationship with the divine and their fellow man was distinct, and therefore their use of food-related activities was correspondingly individual.

7. In Conclusion

The rise of the Cathars and their positive receipt of women as religious equals revealed a great disadvantage for the Catholic Church. Paired with the rise in religious expression by laypeople and that of the beguine movement, female religious expression was a subject in need of addressing by clerics and confessors. Thomas and Jacques saw in their mystics strong voices and examples which could lead their flock on the right path. Not only were their ascetic practices and divine grace to be admired on their own merit, but they also provided subtle and overt opposition to the heretical practices of the Cathars.

The very theme of Eucharistic fervor and devotion stood in opposition to the Cathars' rejection of it. Every small mention of partaking in the sacrament reinforced their anti-heretical stance, just like every vision or mention of Purgatory. In addition to this the *vitae* made outright declarations supporting the Albigensian crusade in the case of Lutgard, and in the smallest of deeds in Margaret's case of the egg miracle. But the Cathars were not the sole threat to the Catholic Church, nor the only heretics under suspicion. As with many women before them, their place outside the male ecclesiastical hierarchy and ascetic practices put them under close scrutiny. It is this scrutiny which Thomas' theological defenses speak to.

Thus, it would seem that the *vitae* of Thomas present the lives of very distinct and individual women mystics. They were mystics whose religious expression was born out of orthodox Catholic doctrine, but also from a tradition of religious expression particular to women, a tradition and community that Thomas was deeply affected by in his work as a confessor and confidant to Lutgard and many other beguines. It is unmistakable that

Thomas was concerned with particular issues like heresy, which shaped his presentation of their lives. In the food practices alone the issues of heresy, proper ascetic practice, and conversion appear many times. So we may conclude, then, that the food and fasting practices in the *vitae* of the mystics reflect each woman's method spiritual expression within the common theme but particular to their lives, as well as Thomas of Cantimpré's primary concerns as a preacher and confessor guiding other *mulieres religiosae* in a time of heightened heretical fear.

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