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The Privilege of Poverty: Clare of Assisi, Agnes of Prague, and the Struggle for a Franciscan Rule for Women

Joan Mueller

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Early in the thirteenth century a young woman named Clare was so moved by the teachings of Francis of Assisi that she renounced her possessions, vowing to live a life of radical poverty. Today Clare is remembered for her relationship with Francis, but her own dedication to poverty and her struggle to gain papal approval for a Franciscan Rule for women is a fascinating story that has not received the attention it deserves. In *The Privilege of Poverty*, Joan Mueller tells this story, and in so doing she reshapes our understanding of early Franciscan history.

Clare knew, as did Francis, that she needed a Rule to preserve the “privilege of poverty”—a papal exemption that gave monasteries of women permission not to rely on endowment income. Early Franciscan women gave their dowries to the poor and were as passionately holy and shrewdly political in this choice as were their male counterparts. Mueller shows the crucial role played in this by Agnes of Prague, one of Clare’s closest collaborators. A Bohemian princess who declined an engagement to Emperor Frederick II in order to found a monastery of Poor Ladies in Prague, Agnes capitalized on the papal need for a political alliance with the kingdom of Bohemia to negotiate the privilege of poverty for her monastery and set up a hospital for the poor in Prague.

The efforts of Clare and Agnes ultimately paid off, as Pope Innocent IV approved a Franciscan Rule for women with the privilege of poverty at its core on Clare’s deathbed in 1253. Only two years later, Clare was canonized, and the Poor Clares—as they came to be known—continue today as contemplative and active communities devoted to the same ideals that inspired Francis and Clare.

The Privilege of Poverty not only contributes new insight into Franciscan history but also redefines it. No longer can we view early Franciscanism as primarily a male story. Franciscan women were courted by their brothers and by the papacy for their essential contributions to the early Franciscan movement.

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