


4-2016

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Group Discipleship and Individual Spirituality: Challenging Models of False Sanctity in Early
Modern Italy and Spain.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from
The College of William and Mary

by

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April 20, 2016

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Chapter One: Orientations to False Sanctity

Historians often refer to the idea that saints are made, not born. They argue that saints are a product of the culture and place they originate because they address certain needs of society and fit into societal values. Similarly, false saints, or those condemned by the Inquisition for feigning holiness, were also shaped by the world in which they lived. In *Aspiring Saints: Pretense of Holiness, Inquisition, and Gender in the Republic of Venice, 1618-1750*, Anne Schutte examines false sanctity in the political and cultural context of Venice. She uses sixteen Inquisition cases to illustrate the Venetian elite's perception and treatment of the crime. Although Schutte's work has brought a great deal of attention to this topic, her structural, reductionistic approach and reliance on Church texts and treatises obscure the individual characteristics and beliefs of these women and men. Schutte fails to examine agency and the religious practices that lay behind these false saints' quests for spiritual enlightenment and authority. She misses several areas ripe for exploration, including the confessor-penitent relationship, the process of gaining followers, and discipleship. By seeking to construct a model of false sanctity, Schutte has created something inherently static and unchanging that does not allow for nuances in time or place. She stripped her historical subjects of their unique characteristics in order to fit them into a model. I hope to flesh out Schutte's description of false sanctity by focusing more on individuals, rather than institutions. I also aim to put the topic into a broader context, by examining male and female false saints throughout Italy and Spain. Schutte has laid the foundation for understanding why false sanctity came about and how the Church

responded, but in refusing to adopt a more microhistorical approach, she has lost the element of personal belief that drove these people's lives. This thesis will explore how the abstract ideal of the Church came up against the importance of personal experience in early modern Catholicism.

Historians have heavily criticized Schutte's approach and methodology. Stanley Chojnacki maintains that Schutte concentrated on the culture and institution of the Church at the expense of the individual in order to recreate the "filter" the Church used to assess possible saints.¹ Adelisa Malena also critiques Schutte for placing too much value on institutional structures, stating that she "undervalues the role of mystical culture in the experience of aspiring Venetian saints."² Michelle Laughran takes issue with Schutte's treatment of the individual false saints as well, stating they are "lost in a panorama painted primarily by Church sources."³ She recognizes that Schutte has successfully demonstrated the Church's widespread distrust of women, but criticizes her reluctance to discuss motivation and adopt a more microhistorical approach. Jutta Sperling further argues that Schutte has failed in one of her major goals: to give a complete analysis of the role gender played in false sanctity. Schutte does not explore gender beyond identifying misogynistic attitudes present in the Church.⁴ While historians have regarded the work highly for its thorough examination of ecclesiastical culture and the Inquisitorial process, they have also challenged its treatment of agency and religious practice.

One of the greatest flaws in Schutte's work is her treatment of audience and power, which results from her reductionistic approach. She summarizes her main argument, "The imputation of sainthood, like its converse, the imputation of heresy or witchcraft, should be seen as a process of interaction or 'negotiation' between centre and periphery, each with its own

¹ Stanley Chojnacki, "Review of *Aspiring Saints*," *Journal of Social History* 3 (2003): 1087.

² Adelisa Malena, "Review of *Aspiring Saints*" *Renaissance Quarterly* 56 (2003): 1182.

³ Michelle Laughran, "*Aspiring Saints* Review," *American Historical Review* 107 (2002), 99.

⁴ Jutta Sperling, "Review of *Aspiring Saints*," *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 1317.

definition of the situation.”⁵ Essentially, Schutte sees false sanctity as a process by which groups of local people, on the periphery, venerate and follow a particular person, until supporters or opposition from this periphery bring them to the attention of the Inquisition, the center, which responds accordingly. She further explains the process of sanctity,

they [potential saints] receive positive recognition from their contemporaries- if they are perceived to embody the religious and social values considered most important at that moment and to meet urgent needs. Conversely if they appear to pose some challenge or threat to these values and needs, they are accorded negative recognition, frequently expressed in exemplary punishment.⁶

The problem with her line of reasoning is that it implies that saints must display the values of the core. She does not address the fact that they must also fulfill the needs of the periphery. Schutte maintains that what happens at the core is influential, and ultimately the deciding factor of, what happens on the periphery. Yet, how do the saints themselves fit into this analytical framework? They do not belong in the core, but they are reaching for and reflecting at least some of its beliefs. The periphery values these individuals because they are located in both places. Schutte states, “Broad popular acceptance of holy people, though necessary to a certain extent, is not sufficient to make them saints. Formal, official recognition that legitimizes public veneration (dulia) of such people...comes from the ‘center,’ through the process of canonization overseen by the papacy.”⁷ On the surface level, Schutte’s argument is correct. Of course saints could not achieve official status as such without the approval of the Church. This simplistic argument blankets over the complexities of popular religion and local cults. Schutte states that the process should be seen as a ‘negotiation,’ but does not present it as such in her work. I will rely on false sanctity to demonstrate the balance of power between the ordinary laity and Church authority.

⁵ Anne Jacobson Schutte, *Aspiring Saints: Pretense of Holiness, Inquisition, and Gender in the Republic of Venice, 1618-1750* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

False saints traverse two layers: periphery vis-à-vis center; and physical vis-à-vis spiritual, perhaps bridging the core and periphery with their ambitions.

Unfortunately, Schutte's structuralism does not allow for inquiries about dynamism; moreover, because her preferences are so dichotomous, the characteristics of each individual are lost in discussion of monolithic structures and institutions. If her assertion that the core determined what happened on the periphery is true, then why did the periphery, or "the people," keep promoting and worshipping these false saints who clearly failed to follow the new saintly model of heroic virtue that the Church promoted in the Catholic Reformation? Why were they still following men and women who were criticizing the Church and failing to follow its doctrines? She presents the relationship between the Church and the people in a top-down way: Church authorities decided and imposed theology on the people. The periphery presented possible saints, which the Church then approved or rejected. While it is important to explore larger societal and cultural factors in examining false sanctity, Schutte has done so to an extent that is detrimental to the individual. Schutte takes a far too rigid approach. I aim to balance institutions and structures with the people who challenged them to understand how personal spirituality and local religion matched or opposed Church authority.

In her book, Schutte examines sixteen different saints, but Cecilia Ferrazzi lies at the heart of the work. In 1609, Ferrazzi was born into an artisanal family and began to have deep religious feelings at a young age. She had was frequently ill and had visions and battles with the Devil.⁸ She refused to marry and lived with her family until she was twenty, when all of them, except her younger sister, died from the plague.⁹ From that point onwards, confessors shuffled

⁸ Anne Jacobson Schutte, trans., *An Autobiography of an Aspiring Saint*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

Ferrazzi between convents and homes of nobles. In 1648, at age thirty-nine, at a confessor's request, she began to take in young girls at risk of becoming prostitutes.¹⁰ By the time of her arrest in 1664, she was guarding three hundred women, ranging in age from five to thirty years old, in the church of Antonio di Castello.¹¹ The Inquisition convicted Ferrazzi of false sanctity in 1665 and sentenced her to nine years in prison. From 1667 to 1669, she lived under house arrest, supervised by the Bishop of Padua.¹² Ferrazzi disappeared from the historical record, only to reemerge when she died from fever in 1684. Ferrazzi's complicated and unusual life is the starting point of Schutte's argument. Examination of Ferrazzi's autobiography and other false saints' trials illuminates weaknesses in her work.

Schutte's analysis of Inquisition trials contain several problems with agency. She states that in most trials, a guilty verdict was a foregone conclusion, due to the prejudices of the inquisitors and their preordained views on these poor, illiterate holy women who lived outside convents.¹³ While it might be true that these people had no chance of being found innocent, this assertion does not increase our understanding of false sanctity. Even though the inquisitors might have already formulated their opinion, the defendants still believed they had an opportunity to defend themselves. For example, at the end of her questioning, Ferrazzi asked to dictate an autobiography for the court to use as evidence. Had she accepted her guilt as a foregone conclusion, she would not have made the effort to orally compose a nearly forty-page autobiography. By treating the trial outcome as predetermined, Schutte loses the opportunity to analyze the ways false saints defended themselves and reacted to the accusation of fraud.

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Ibid., 10-11.

¹² Ibid., 16.

¹³ Ibid., 110.

Another issue of agency in Schutte's work revolves around the relationship between female and male false saints. She states that women became false saints through their visions, and men became false saints because they were inspired by these women; she refers to male holiness as "derivative."¹⁴ Schutte removes agency from these male false saints, since she argues that without women to motivate them, they would have never existed. Even if most male false saints gained popularity because they were connected to female false saints, they still had their own individual experiences, actions, and goals. Inspiration from divine women alone does not account for their behavior, or explain why they were tried by the Inquisition. The relationship between female leaders and male disciples is complex and I will explore it in more depth in subsequent chapters, since male disciples, especially among the clergy, were crucial in the promotion and rise of these female false saints.

I will also explore male-female dynamics by examining the confessor-penitent relationship. In the Post-Reformation world, confessors were a large part of devout women's lives. After the Council of Trent, the Church tried to institute greater control of personal devotion in order to halt the spread of Protestantism and heresy, especially among women, who they viewed as morally inferior and thus especially prone to error.¹⁵ Confessors played a substantial role in false saints' lives, and thus merit significant analysis. These men were the most concrete representation of Church authority that these female false saints most frequently experienced. Women were not powerless in this relationship, nor did they accept their confessors' words as absolute truth. The two parties' responses to each other reveal complexities about male-female

¹⁴ Schutte, *Aspiring Saints*, 212.

¹⁵ Gabriella Zarri, "Living Saints: A Typology of Female Sanctity in Early Sixteenth Century," in *Women in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 249.

interaction and gives us a more personal, practical, on the ground understanding of Church authority.

The complex nature of the confessor-penitent bond was underserved in Schutte's work. Schutte missed an opportunity to expand our comprehension of male-female dynamics. Ferrazzi had quite a few confessors, but the one who receives the most attention in her autobiography and Schutte's text is Giorgio Polacco. Polacco was the vicar of nuns for the diocese of Venice and wrote treatises on how to recognize demonic possession in women.¹⁶ In *Aspiring Saints*, Schutte presents Polacco and Ferrazzi's relationship in a very one-sided way. She uses Polacco's treatises on women and spiritual discernment, which were written in the vernacular for ordinary priests, to illustrate the clergy's views on women. Schutte summarized his attitudes towards women,

Naturally inclined to all seven deadly sins, women rarely prove able to withstand the onslaught of temptation. Paradoxically, however, the vast majority of them are not mere passive objects of the devil's attention but cunning subjects who actively and willingly collaborate with the Evil One. Seeking fame and fortune, they fabricate encounters with divine powers and persuade naïve confessors and spiritual directors to endorse and publicize their feigned holiness.¹⁷

Schutte appears to base her conclusions solely on Polacco's formal texts. Schutte does not utilize Ferrazzi's trial and autobiography as evidence or examine the personal aspect of Polacco's interaction with her. Schutte goes into great detail on how Polacco saw women, but not Ferrazzi specifically. By using mainly his writings on sanctity and female spirituality, we see only his attitude as a vicar and inquisitor, not as a confessor. In his day to day relationship with Ferrazzi, Polacco was a more complicated figure than just a man who saw women as naïve and prone to sin. Furthermore, Schutte does not explore how Ferrazzi viewed Polacco; she merely states that

¹⁶ Schutte, *Aspiring Saints*, 121.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

Ferrazzi's account reveals that Polacco had a "more prolonged and substantial" role in her life "than he was willing to admit."¹⁸ Schutte ignores Ferrazzi's responses and reactions to Polacco, which illuminate the complexities of the confessor-penitent dynamic.

Schutte also fails to explore the balance of power within their relationship. Polacco tried to maintain control over Ferrazzi. He exorcised her many times, while Ferrazzi used her time in front of the Inquisition to criticize him. Of course, it is impossible to know their true feelings, but the relationship had more give and take than Schutte allows. She depicts Polacco as in firm control of Ferrazzi, albeit sometimes confused about what to do with her. She does not make an effort to show how Ferrazzi dealt with his behavior, even though Ferrazzi's own autobiography sheds light on her responses. Schutte does not present Ferrazzi as having feelings or attitudes about Polacco, which she certainly did. In this thesis, I will rely on Ferrazzi's and other false saints' trials to present a more nuanced interpretation of penance and confession.

Besides underserving the confessor-penitent relationship, Schutte misses a major source of context for understanding these women's religious behavior: the actions and models of established saints. Ferrazzi's autobiography contains several elements that strongly connect to Catherine of Siena's life. For example, the two of them had a very similar relationship to food. Just like Ferrazzi, Catherine vomited whenever she ate.¹⁹ Catherine survived on Communion alone, a sign of great piety.²⁰ While Ferrazzi did not directly state she did this, she implied it was the case, stating, "Everyone said that I lived on Communion alone."²¹ The Eucharist was a complex symbol for these women; they were consuming God and being filled with Jesus. Caroline Bynum argues that, "To eat God in the Eucharist was a kind of audacious deification, a

¹⁸ Ibid., 127.

¹⁹ Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 168.

²⁰ Ibid., 169.

²¹ Schutte, *Autobiography*, 23.

becoming of the flesh that, in its agony, fed and saved the world.”²² For female saints, daily Communion was a privilege that signified their holiness.²³ By implying that she only ate Communion, Ferrazzi placed herself in a prestigious pantheon of holy women. Ferrazzi believed that her body was the vessel by which she suffered, and thus served God. When the Devil tormented her, with God’s permission, she heard an inner voice say, “Cecilia, suffer, for those sufferings of yours will save that soul.”²⁴ God specifically chose her and marked her as worthy of enduring pain to help others. Interestingly, Catherine also saw her bodily suffering as a service to God. She believed that because of her fasting, God would free souls from purgatory.²⁵ Whether or not Ferrazzi consciously fashioned herself after Catherine, the similarities between the two certainly are striking. Catherine was a very famous and highly regarded saint, and maybe Ferrazzi saw her as an example of how to balance public notoriety, spirituality, and approval by the Church. Sara Matthews Grieco maintains that Catherine was a model for religious women and that, “the importance of the life and example of Catherine of Siena cannot be underestimated.”²⁶

Another example of possible saintly influence is Teresa of Avila, who was canonized in 1622, during Ferrazzi’s adolescence. According to Erin Rowe, Teresa presented herself as a highly feminine and obedient individual in order to shield herself from criticism and avoid overstepping Church authority.²⁷ Her supporters capitalized on this to promote the idea that because she was so humble and typically, femininely “weak,” God blessed her with divine

²² Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁴ Schutte, *Autobiography*, 73.

²⁵ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 171.

²⁶ Sara F. Matthews Grieco, “Models of Female Sanctity in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy,” in *Women and Faith*, ed. Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarri (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 169.

²⁷ Erin Rowe, “The Spanish Minerva: Imaging Teresa of Avila as Patron Saint in Seventeenth Century Spain,” *Catholic Historical Review* 294 (2006): 582. For more information on St. Teresa of Avila, see Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

gifts.²⁸ In her autobiography, Ferrazzi also tries to present herself as a weak-willed, subservient woman. She stated that she was ill during Mass and that “at the elevation of the Most Holy Host, I made an offering to the Lord that through the authority of His servant, either my pain lessen or I die if He wished, for I remained completely and in everything in holy obedience to Him.”²⁹ She later abased herself, stating, “I’ve always held my actions suspect in the eyes of God, for I’m a sinner and have done evil, and the good, if there has been any, is derived from God.”³⁰ Ferrazzi fits within this tradition of holy women humbling themselves.

Both Catherine and Teresa were major female saints within the Church whose vitae or lives Ferrazzi and other false saints could have heard or known about. These significant connections to Ferrazzi’s life beg the question if earlier saints were a major influence in other false saints’ lives. Were they attempting to copy these approved models of sanctity? If so, why did they fail and end up falling under the Inquisition’s suspicion? These false saints had to have derived their religious practices from somewhere, and perhaps saints like Catherine or Teresa provided inspiration. In her effort to show how society and the Church viewed these women, Schutte missed the opportunity to explore sanctity on a time spectrum, tracing its changes and its influence on female false saints.

Although analyzing and tracing influence of earlier saints would certainly add to our understanding of sanctity, establishing influence is a difficult and problematic process. For most of these false saints, we do not have sources written by them, where it would be perhaps possible to find mention of earlier saints. Even when we have these types of sources, their writings rarely, if ever, explicitly refer to earlier saints. One could argue that even if these individuals did not

²⁸ Ibid., 583.

²⁹ Schutte, *Autobiography*, 52.

³⁰ Ibid., 41.

mention saints by name, it is still possible to find commonalities and trace influence, by connecting similar types of behavior. Yet, historian Quentin Skinner argues that this approach to history is precarious, “the danger is, however, that it is so easy to use the concept [of influence] in an apparently explanatory way without any consideration of whether the conditions sufficient, or at least necessary, for the proper application of the concept have been met.”³¹ Skinner elaborates on the conditions necessary to prove that writer A influenced writer B, “(i) that there should be a genuine similarity between the doctrines of A and B; (ii) that B could not have found the relevant doctrine in any writer other than A; (iii) that the probability of the similarity being random should be very low.”³² It may be possible to find evidence for Skinner’s first condition with Ferrazzi and Teresa or Catherine. The latter conditions are far harder to prove. Given the large number of female saints and local devotional cults, it is nearly impossible to create a direct line of influence between these false saints and specific earlier saints. It is possible to show that they followed devotional trends, but not to link them to unique personal types of sanctity. In the subsequent chapters of this thesis, I will not attempt to fill in Schutte’s gap by establishing influence. I will explore the ways in which earlier types of sanctity, in general, may have affected these false saints. Unlike Schutte, I will attempt to contextualize these individual’s religiosity within the grander chronology of female spirituality.

Perhaps the richest and most complex area Schutte almost entirely ignored was the content of these women’s beliefs and visions. She mentions when one of her subjects had ecstasies or fasted heavily, but does not go much further than this cursory level of analysis. She makes no effort to examine the reported content of these visions or investigate whether there were any specific commonalities in religious practice among false saints. For women like

³¹ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 1 (1969): 25.

³² *Ibid.*, 26.

Ferrazzi, the personal experience likely trumped all else in religion, considering that mass was said in Latin, that these women did not belong to confraternities, and that they had little formal religious role outside the convent. Lu Ann Homza argues that some “Spanish Catholics put supreme importance on personal conversance in their estimation of holiness and their understanding of religious persuasion...They based their understanding of the true, the good, and the sinful on people, conversations, and duration, rather than institutions and traditions.”³³ People’s inner dialogues and personal connection to God are just as important to understanding the phenomenon of false sanctity as are the inquisitorial manuals and clerical treatises Schutte so often relies upon. If we are to ascertain why the Inquisition saw these false saints as dangerous, we also need to understand the specifics of what they saw and promoted as truth to the public. Schutte takes the personal element away from these visions, writing, “By making contact with supernatural beings more powerful than their earthly superiors, they [these women] sought to overcome the handicaps of economic, social, and sexual subordination.”³⁴ Instead of employing visions to contribute to our understanding of female mysticism and false sanctity, Schutte simplifies these complex experiences to attempts to subvert lower societal status, a rather reductionistic approach to something so personal and intricate.

While Schutte fails to explore the vast majority of visions, she does attempt to analyze visions with sexual content. She cites one of Ferrazzi’s ecstasies, in which the Devil tempted her and urged her to have sex, as evidence that although these female false saints consciously avoided sex, their visions revealed their internal conflict over chastity.³⁵ She states, “From a modern perspective, these visions...suggest deep ambivalence on the seers’ part about their

³³ Lu Ann Homza, “Local Knowledge and Catholic Reform in Early Modern Spain,” in *Reforming Reformation* ed. Thomas Mayer (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 87-88.

³⁴ Schutte, *Aspiring Saints*, 110.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

commitment to chastity and their ability to persevere in the virginal state...As anxious to pursue a holy life as their spirit might be, their flesh was all too vulnerable.”³⁶ With this argument, Schutte imposes modern judgments and expectations onto the past; according to her, these visions have to have some deeper psychological meaning that explains them and makes them understandable to us. Even if her hypothesis on conflicted chastity were true, Schutte contradicts her previous statements. In her introduction she writes,

I have not tried and do not claim, however, to have probed systematically the psyches of my subjects so as to uncover “real” motives “masked” by religious language. Although some psychoanalytic paradigms offer useful heuristic leads, they cannot be transplanted successfully into situations very different from those in which they were generated.³⁷

Schutte acknowledges the difficulty of explaining people’s motives and exploring their inner thoughts, but does just that with her interpretation of their sexuality. She contradicts her explicit reluctance to speak to motivation and these women’s mental states. A large proportion of female false saints had visionary experiences, and they require more analysis than Schutte conducts.

Another important aspect of false sanctity that merits investigation is the different spaces false saints inhabited and the ways they moved through them. Most of these women lived in convents, where their mobility would have been greatly restricted. These false saints’ ability to enact their holy behaviors in public was crucial to gathering disciples and fame. Cecilia Ferrazzi’s efforts to take care of at-risk girls were not confined to their home. She often moved throughout Venice to perform Christian charity. One of her wards, Orsetta, ran away and Ferrazzi searched around Venice for her. When Ferrazzi finally found where she was staying, she ran into the man who was hiding her.³⁸ She “spoke harshly to put fear into him,” and when that

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 216-217.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv.

³⁸ Schutte, *Autobiography*, 49.

did not work she “ran up the stairs of the house” with him chasing her.³⁹ Ferrazzi moved throughout Venice, and her yelling and sprinting upstairs would have caused quite a scene. Ferrazzi likely thought these escape stories provided some evidence of her Christian charity and holiness, or she would not have bothered retelling several of them to the Inquisition. Ferrazzi and other false saints often performed typical saintly behavior, such as charity and fasting, but within the public sphere. Their ability to move freely was crucial to proving their holy behavior as holy to others.

False saints implicitly recognized the importance of space by choosing when to reveal and when to hide their holy behavior. Francisca Hernandez and Antonio Medrano, two false saints tried in sixteenth-century Spain, for example, engaged in sexual behavior with each other that they believed was still pure, but did so in secret, because it likely would have raised suspicion.⁴⁰ Ferrazzi retold many of her visions to her confessors and the general public. In one instance, a Jesuit visited her in a vision while she was in her room within her charitable home. A ward saw and told all the other girls that she was having sex with him. Ferrazzi’s public image could have suffered, if she were to have visions that contained men who were not Jesus or God. Her ward recognized this potential for harm and chose to spread malicious gossip about her. False saints did not always desire for their holy behaviors to be made public, especially when it posed a threat to their reputations. False saints had to weight the costs and benefits of certain actions when considering public and private space.

These women and men also used space in order to legitimize their holiness. Historians have argued that religious women had to live in convents for the Church to view their spirituality

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁰ Lu Ann Homza, ed., “Testimony by Francisca Hernandez, June 2, 1531,” in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), 104.

as divinely inspired. The Church doubted the chastity and devoutness of religious, unmarried, women who lived outside convents. Francisca Apostoles, a sixteenth-century woman tried by the Inquisition in Toledo, was not able to join a convent. She instead made founding a convent a primary component of her holy mission. Even before she succeeded in her goal, Apostoles lived with several other holy women in a convent-like environment. She acted as an abbess, monitoring the women and forcing them to take certain vows and live by her rules.⁴¹ The space of the convent served two purposes for Apostoles: her effort to create a holy place for religious women added to her public image as a charitable crusader. Her life in her quasi-convent, and later actual convent, served to validate her spirituality. She was not a free, undevout woman roaming through the streets of Toledo. Rather, she was a modest, chaste devotee who voluntarily enclosed herself. False saints negotiated with the space in which they lived in order to pursue their holiness. It could serve to legitimize their holiness, or hide potentially risky behavior. Most importantly, it is crucial to remember that these false saints had relative freedom in movement. Although they did not always control where they lived, they did control where and when they moved in public spaces. Their ability to move in and out of highly populated areas provided them the opportunity to pursue public holiness and obtain a popular cult.

Beyond space, Schutte missed several other themes, including confessors, visions, discipleship, and relative agency, that, if explored, would help flesh out how false sanctity worked on a personal and greater societal level. Overall, Schutte makes a substantial contribution in her study of how inquisitors and male Church authority treated and viewed these people, who challenged and reinvented traditional Catholic practice to fit their own needs and the needs of their disciples. Unfortunately, in an effort to understand these false saints, Schutte has blanketed

⁴¹ Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *The Inquisition of Francisca: A Sixteenth Century Visionary on Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 103.

over their individual and distinct characteristics. In trying to create a model of false sanctity, she has created an inflexible set of characteristics that does not allow for nuance or individualism. In trying to reveal how similar they were in social class, education level, and occupation, she has failed to explore their individual paths to holiness.

This thesis will address many of the questions Schutte's work leaves unanswered by exploring three areas of false sanctity: the confessor-penitent relationship, discipleship, and holy behavior. In order to round out the lives of these men and women, I will focus on the ways they viewed penance and interacted with their confessors. I will argue that we should view the confessor-penitent relationship as one of negotiation. I plan to expand our notion of the sources of spiritual guidance in the lives of the Catholic laity by examining the lay women that influenced false saints.

I will also explore the methods false saints relied on to gain disciples and I will present the disciple-saint relationship as one of mutual benefit and interest. Keeping and maintaining followers was a complex and difficult process for false saints, but one of paramount importance. I will rely on the holy behaviors false saints used to attract followers to explore their personal spiritualities. False saints often embraced the physicality of the body as an outward proof of visions and internal piety. Female false saints did not only perform typical feminine holy behaviors, such as fasting and penance. Some women obtained followers by performing masculine religious roles. False saints relied on a wide range of behaviors to gain a variety of disciples.

The basis of the analysis of these three areas is individual spirituality and local religion. Instead of reducing false saints to frauds caught by the Inquisition, my goal is to refocus attention on the personal aspect of belief and the interplay between local and institutional

religious practices. It can be difficult for historians to maintain evenness between individual agency and societal structures. It is necessary to achieve this balance in order to understand the personal elements of false sanctity and local religion.

Chapter Two: Balance of Power and the Confessor

Confessors were one of the primary ways Catholics in early modern Europe encountered Church ideology. Confession played a prominent role in the laity's lives; they were required to confess at least once a year and perform the sacrament of penance to receive the Eucharist.⁴² Analysis of the confessor-penitent relationship can reveal the ways people responded to Church authority on the local, personal level. False saints' interactions with their confessors demonstrate to what degree confession and confessors factored into their pursuit of sanctity. Several false saints achieved popularity without relying on confessors; others rejected them entirely and discerned their own penance and visions. False saints negotiated with their confessors to shape the relationship to fit their holy agendas. Furthermore, spiritual direction was not exclusively male priests controlling female penitents; lay and religious women spiritually influenced these false saints as well. Ultimately, these false saints' cases expand our conception of the range of spiritual actors who guided Catholics. Spiritual influence was fluid and came from a variety of people, no matter their religious position or gender.

Instead of analyzing the complexities of confession and spiritual discernment, modern historiography focuses on penance as a means of Church oversight. In *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450-1750*, Jodi Bilinkoff outlines the traditional view about confessors: "In theory, priests--male, formally educated, imbued with the power of office--directed penitents, male or female, who then blindly obeyed their dictates...Scholars have accordingly stressed the exclusively repressive aspects of the Catholic confessional system."⁴³ In *Religious Authority in the Spanish Renaissance*, Lu Ann Homza argues for a more complex

⁴² Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450-1750* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 47.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25.

interpretation of confessors' manuals and penance. She states that historians usually see these sources as weapons of clerical control, but contends that

they stressed activity--whether mental, physical, or emotional-- in the process of salvation, and directed that counsel to laymen and women as well as clerics. Their manuals' net effect was to promote a religious authority in which each end of the spectrum exerted influence upon the other.⁴⁴

If the manuals that guided confession could be more complex than we might assume, then the practice itself could be as well. On the surface, the formal structure of the sacrament of penance might seem to bestow the confessor with a great deal of power, but analysis of the interactions between penitents and confessors requires further investigation and subtlety.

Historian Patrick O'Banion outlines the Church's expectations for confessors, penitents, and the sacrament. O'Banion argues that confessors were supposed to be legitimate, knowledgeable, and prudent.⁴⁵ The Church expected them to confess one penitent at a time, keep the seal of confession, and convince penitents to recount every sin. Meanwhile, penitents were supposed to engage in self-examination and come to confession prepared to disclose all their mortal sins.⁴⁶ The graver the sin they committed, the heavier the penance their confessor assigned. After the confessor ordered penitential behaviors, he granted the penitent absolution, or "the assurance that the offender's culpa had been forgiven by God."⁴⁷ O'Banion emphasizes the importance of confession for early modern Catholicism, "So fundamental was this second plank of salvation [i.e. penance] for the shipwrecked sinner...that without it there could be little hope of salvation. Those who avoided the sacrament separated themselves from the community,

⁴⁴ Lu Ann Homza, *Religious Authority in the Spanish Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 151, 174.

⁴⁵ Patrick O'Banion, *The Sacrament of Penance and Religious Life in Golden Age Spain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 48, 57.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

becoming religious and social outcasts.”⁴⁸ O’Banion argues that the “typical” confessor-penitent relationship consisted of a negotiation between two people, even though one held symbolic and actual authority over the other.⁴⁹

In contrast to O’Banion’s sophisticated examination of confession, Anne Schutte does not provide a nuanced analysis of the confessor-penitent relationship. Besides Inquisition trials, her main sources are confessors’ manuals, clerical treatises on sin, and written defenses of female saints.⁵⁰ She relies on these texts to illuminate the process of the discernment of spirits and the methods priests used to spiritually direct and control false saints. She fails to deeply explore communication and interactions between confessors and false saints, even though confessors were a central theme in the autobiography of her primary subject, Cecilia Ferrazzi. Schutte does not analyze the complexities of Ferrazzi’s relationship with one of her main confessors, Giorgio Polacco. Instead, she states that he “elects to treat these nuns as objects. He makes no secret of the reason why: they are females. Educated clerics know that the vast majority of women habitually lie, feign and do their best to deceive men.”⁵¹ She argues that Polacco’s behavior with Ferrazzi fits into his view of women as easily and morally corrupted, yet Ferrazzi’s autobiography, as well as many false saints’ trials, present different styles of the confessor-penitent interaction. Ferrazzi’s multitude of confessors, and especially her complex interactions with Polacco, demonstrate that there could be negotiation within the relationship. I aim to fill in the gap Schutte has left by examining the different ways false saints interacted with their

⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁰ Anne Jacobson Schutte, *Aspiring Saints: Pretense of Holiness, Inquisition, and Gender in the Republic of Venice, 1618-1750* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 44.

⁵¹ Ibid., 124.

confessors and the diversity of people who opposed and supported their spiritual behavior in a confessor-esque capacity.

Inquisition trials are the foundation of this thesis, but they can be problematic as sources; what witnesses and sentences assert cannot be taken as absolute truth. Inquisitors pressured witnesses for certain responses and notaries recorded trails in a formulaic way.⁵² We cannot be sure if the recorded words of witnesses and defendants are really what they said, or meant to say. These faults do not exclude Inquisition trials as sources of historical knowledge. Defendants were likely aware of the severity of their situation and attempted to prove their innocence. Logically, then, we can assume that they spoke and acted in ways that they thought would be convincing.⁵³ Lu Ann Homza argues that we can still use Inquisition trials “to reveal what individuals thought was rhetorically effective, which in turn illuminates the range of their voices, their sources, and their reasoning.”⁵⁴ Although the cases that follow are inherently flawed in their subjectivity and incompleteness, they give us a sense of these false saints’ understanding of their alleged crime, the implications of their behavior, and their relationship with Church authorities.

While remaining conscious of the nature of these sources, we can begin to examine confession and gender dynamics. Although the confessor-penitent relationship was inherently unbalanced, this inequality did not necessarily prove to be a disadvantage for false saints. Giulia di Marco, a seventeenth-century Neapolitan false saint, counted her confessor, Aniello Arciero, as one of her main disciples. Arciero was convinced that Giulia had an extraordinary chastity.⁵⁵ The two touched each other while naked, yet believed that they stayed “insensible” to sexual feelings. In such moments, Arciero, “felt that his spirit was elevated closer to God and that he

⁵² Homza, *Religious Authority*, 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁵ Jean-Michel Sallmann, *Santi Barocchi*, (Paris: University of France Press, 1994), 259.

was filled with love.”⁵⁶ When Arciero promoted di Marco publicly, he focused on her purity, replacing the importance of mental prayer with the adoration of her special chastity.⁵⁷ Arciello and di Marco gained disciples by inviting people to participate in their “pure” sexual behavior.⁵⁸ In front of the Inquisition, di Marco stated that she transmitted, “her gift of chastity to the faithful through the multiplication of sexual relationships among her and her disciples.”⁵⁹ Additionally, inquisitors believed that Arciero helped di Marco by giving her information that she used to prophesize people’s futures.⁶⁰ Bilinkoff argues, “A watchful readiness to direct spiritually advanced women could yield considerable benefits, personal and professional.”⁶¹ Mutual benefit in di Marco’s and Arciero’s relationship took the form of sexual favors for support. Their dynamic very strongly echoes Francisca Hernandez and Antonio de Medrano’s relationship. Hernandez and Medrano, two sixteenth-century Spanish false saints, also believed that they could engage in sexual acts and remain pure. Di Marco and Hernandez acquired strong supporters, while Arciero and Medrano gained intimate relationships. The confessor-penitent interaction was based on a system of mutual benefit that in the case of these four individuals, revolved around the body.

For di Marco and Arciero, sexual activity was crucial to their method of gaining disciples. Arciero connected to God by performing sexual activities with di Marco and she engaged in “pure sex” with her disciples to cement their devotion to her.⁶² Arciero acted as their confessor, and then used the information from those confessions to help di Marco prophesize.⁶³

⁵⁶ Ibid., 263.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 263.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 263.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 263.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 263.

⁶¹ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 81.

⁶² Sallmann, *Santi*, 263.

⁶³ Ibid., 263.

Arciero was key to di Marco's sanctity; after he left, she could no longer prophesize effectively.⁶⁴ Di Marco turned to a sorceress to obtain the information on her disciples that Arciero had been providing for her.⁶⁵

Although di Marco and Arciero's sexual relationship may seem surprising or unusual, the confessor-penitent relationship was already intimate. Confessors and penitents could become dependent on each other and develop a deep connection. Bilinkoff states that "They [confessors and penitents] interacted like many married couples. The only significant difference was the lack of sexual congress."⁶⁶ Arciero and di Marco took this last step. Since they already shared intimate feelings and secrets like a couple, a sexual relationship was possible; for them it was the next phase in the development of their close connection. Most importantly, the relationship between Arciero and di Marco demonstrates that a priest could be both a confessor and a disciple.

Sex grounded di Marco and Arciero's relationship, but mysticism was the foundation of the relationship between Francisca Apostoles, a sixteenth-century woman tried in Toledo, and her confessor, Miguel Ruiz. He played an important role in helping Apostoles understand and come to terms with her visions. According to her trial,

She said she felt great battles within her and with many torments in her body and they took her out of her senses, so she went...to speak with Miguel Ruiz. And because her mind was troubled, she could not manage to talk with him about how she felt; and when they stopped depriving her of her senses, and all those demons who were inside her spoke through her and declared to Miguel Ruiz that they were the demons of pride. Then when the defendant returned to herself, Miguel Ruiz told her to have patience and explained to her all that the demons had said.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid., 263.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 263.

⁶⁶ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 88.

⁶⁷ Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *The Inquisition of Francisca: A Sixteenth Century Visionary on Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 135.

Ruiz acted as the mirror for Apostoles' mystical encounters. Her trial record states that, "All the demons came back to give themselves over as defeated, saying that Our Lord had ordered them to give up and to come tell Miguel Ruiz what they had done."⁶⁸ Apostoles depended on Ruiz to be the conduit through which the demons made their messages known to her. Her willingness to reveal such intense and complex events to Ruiz indicates that she trusted him. Ruiz gained from this relationship as well, by being put into direct contact with God, who was combatting these demons. Ruiz and Apostoles' relationship exemplifies one of the male-female dynamics that Bilinkoff examines: "Many priests accepted that they would not be directly granted raptures, visions, voices, and the like. But they could be granted the next best thing: intimacy with women who could have these experiences."⁶⁹ With their relationship, Ruiz gained access to divine interactions, while Apostoles acquired the ability to understand them.

While Ruiz and Apostoles cooperated to comprehend her visions, Cecilia Ferrazzi's relationship with one of her principal confessors, Giorgio Polacco, was much more complex and ambivalent. Based on his treatises on spiritual discernment, Schutte maintains that Polacco saw nuns and women as objects, subject to moral weakness, which is perhaps why he felt free to relocate them as he saw fit. A more attentive reading of Ferrazzi and Polacco's interactions reveals that Polacco did not possess total control over her. Ferrazzi states that while she was in the convent at Santa Maria Maggiore, "Signor Polacco came to the grate...and wept and drenched three or four handkerchiefs, telling me, 'I've betrayed you, assassinated you! I know I've done wrong, but bear with me, because you are possessed.'"⁷⁰ If true, this story reveals the conflicting feelings Polacco held towards Ferrazzi. He believed she was possessed by the devil

⁶⁸ Ibid., 135.

⁶⁹ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 86.

⁷⁰ Schutte, *Autobiography*, 27.

and had her exorcised twice, yet also felt that he had acted wrongly in some way. When asked why she thought she was being investigated by the Inquisition, Ferrazzi responded, “Signor Polacco spread the word that I had the stigmata and that I lived on communion alone.”⁷¹

Although Polacco denied Ferrazzi communion and believed she was possessed by the devil, he still circulated reports of her holy behavior: two conflicting, contradictory actions.

Ferrazzi’s reactions to Polacco’s behavior reveal that she viewed the relationship as ambiguous and uncertain. After a convent refused to house her, Polacco, “started shouting at them, saying, ‘I’m putting in a saint, one who lives on communion, one who has the stigmata!’ Since they wouldn’t obey...he began throwing some little slips of paper into the convent and told them ‘I’m excommunicating you!’”⁷² Polacco felt strongly about Ferrazzi; his dramatic reaction to the convent’s refusal escalated quickly, with his threat to excommunicate the nuns. This story strengthens Ferrazzi’s claim that Polacco promoted her sanctity, since he told the nuns she only consumed Communion. He also had Ferrazzi exorcised for this very same behavior.⁷³ Ferrazzi wrote, “He urged me to have myself put in an underground room, and...he had me exorcised by various men in his presence...And the reasons for the exorcisms was that everyone said that I lived on communion alone, and that if I tried to eat, I didn’t hold down the food.”⁷⁴ Polacco promoted Ferrazzi’s sanctity to others, but eventually grew so suspicious of her spirituality that he had her exorcised. He doubted Ferrazzi and questioned the source of her mysticism.⁷⁵

Since Ferrazzi is our only source for Polacco’s behavior, her voice mediates and obscures Polacco’s true feelings and motivations. Ferrazzi’s focus on Polacco’s contradictory actions

⁷¹ Ibid., 28.

⁷² Ibid., 61-62.

⁷³ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 27.

reveals that they were significant to her. She retold the story of the convent excommunication to the Inquisition twice. Perhaps she was attempting to deflect guilt onto Polacco. She may have been trying to disprove the idea that she spread news of her own sanctity by blaming Polacco for her popularity and characterizing her confessor, her spiritual guide, as inconsistent and difficult. Whether this was her goal or not, her testimony does emphasize the skepticism and doubt that colored their relationship. For Ferrazzi, the confessor-penitent dynamic was uncertain and precarious.

Although her relationship with Polacco was unstable, throughout her autobiography and trial, Ferrazzi was unafraid to censure him and her other confessors. Ferrazzi's criticisms undermine Schutte, who presents the confessor-penitent relationship as a top-down phenomenon, with the confessor using his role to influence and shape the life of the penitent. Ferrazzi said she pitied Polacco and stated, "Signor Polacco kicked me around like a ball, making me go here and there, and that caused murmuring among the people."⁷⁶ Ferrazzi resented Polacco's ability to move her and disrupt her life whenever he believed it was necessary to do so. Ferrazzi prayed to Mary when Polacco's actions upset her. In a vision, Mary told her, "Don't bother about Polacco's having been offended... There wouldn't have been martyrs if there hadn't been tyrants. Go now, and carry on bravely."⁷⁷ Here, Ferrazzi's critique of Polacco gained greater legitimacy, since the Virgin Mary herself recognized his tyrannical behavior. Ferrazzi did not confront Polacco with this vision directly. Instead, she retold it to the Inquisition, and intentionally or not, condemned his treatment of her. Ferrazzi's reactions to Polacco demonstrate that confessors did not hold absolute control over their penitents. She responded to her perceived maltreatment at his hands by choosing to criticize him in front of an ecclesiastical institution that she knew was

⁷⁶ Ibid., 27, 28.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 62.

powerful. Her censure of Polacco reveals that the confession was a negotiation between two people.

Ferrazzi's behavior with her many other confessors further illuminates the complex nature of the confessor-penitent relationship. Ferrazzi spoke about one of them,

Monsignor Zogalli always treated me with abhorrence and disdain, berating me even in the presence of other people...because he must have been afraid of me, and I of him...He mistreated and mortified me in a disdainful manner, and I wept and thanked God all day long because this flesh felt the effects.⁷⁸

Ferrazzi's statement that Zogalli "must have" feared her implies that she perceived fear to be the only explanation for his mistreatment of her. Her statement of mutual fear echoes the difficulty and uncertainty that was also present in her relationship with Polacco. The phrase "must have" may also imply that Ferrazzi thought they should have been afraid of each other; i.e. that she believed fear was standard, or expected, between confessors and penitents. This is also another example of Ferrazzi using her time in front of the Inquisition to criticize her confessors, perhaps in an effort to displace culpability. Zogalli's actions and maltreatment had consequences that resulted in his removal as Ferrazzi's confessor by the Patriarch, demonstrating that confessors did not hold unchallenged authority over their penitents.⁷⁹ Ultimately, female penitents, and female false saints, were not without their own courses of action when it came to their confessors. Although the confessor-penitent relationship was inherently unequal, female penitents were able to respond to their confessors' behavior and defend their interests; both individuals exerted pressure on each other.

Another theme in Ferrazzi's autobiography is her reliance on visions to justify her actions, especially when they contradict her confessors' orders. Ferrazzi gave money to a man

⁷⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 34.

asking for alms and told her confessor about it. He rebuked her, and said that the devil was trying to tempt her and lead her astray. Ferrazzi stated that later, “the Most Holy Mother with St. Catherine appeared to me there, and they ordered me to ask my confessor’s pardon and give him the message from them that charity brooked no delay. So I did.”⁸⁰ Just as the Virgin confirmed Ferrazzi’s negative opinion of Polacco, here Ferrazzi’s visions allowed her to challenge her confessor with Mary’s support. Her visions provided her with the opportunity to pursue her ambitions and attempt to act independently of her confessor.

Visionary experiences served a similar purpose for Francisca Apostoles. When Ruiz forbade Apostoles from sending letters to her sister, Isabel, she disobeyed, writing to her, “while I was receiving communion, I begged Our Lord to show me if He was served by my writing you. I felt with clarity that I should write you what I do now with his favor.”⁸¹ Just as Ferrazzi relied on her visions to criticize her confessors, Apostoles relied on her special connection to God to defy Ruiz. For both women, God’s messages justified their disobedience.

Ferrazzi and Apostoles’ actions contribute to a larger analysis of visions and false saints. In both cases, the visions they use to disobey their confessors lack the normal physicality present in other visions. The Devil is not beating Ferrazzi, nor is Apostoles receiving graphic visions from God. In this arena then, the content of visions trumps the importance of the body. Perhaps this is because of the purpose of their visions. In contrast to their intense physical ecstasies, the women are not attempting to gain disciples or provide evidence of their holiness. Rather, they are trying to find the freedom to engage in behavior that is important to them, such as giving alms and writing letters: behavior which is not directly connected to communication with God. The

⁸⁰ Ibid., 68.

⁸¹ Ahlgren, *The Inquisition of Francisca*, 55.

importance of the body diminishes when false saints are not attempting to outwardly prove their holiness.

In addition to disobeying their confessors, false saints found spiritual guidance outside of them. Miguel Ruiz was not Francisca Apostoles' sole source of spiritual direction. Ruiz told Isabel Apostoles, her sister, to enclose herself, live modestly, and pray often.⁸² In response, Isabel took his directions a step further by performing significant fasts and penances, and Francisca did the same in order to follow her.⁸³ Here, Ruiz's influence on Francisca was mediated by a female figure. The confessor could be the starting point for a pursuit of holiness, as it was in Francisca's case, but the false saint could interpret and internalize their direction or advice in their own ways. Isabel also significantly shaped Francisca's earthly mission. One of her main goals was to found a convent, a plan that Isabel originally conceptualized and spearheaded by bringing a petition to the king.⁸⁴ What began as Isabel's idea grew into one of the primary components of Francisca's public holiness, demonstrating the effect other spiritual women could have on false saints.

Alfonsina Rispoli, a Franciscan tertiary tried in Naples in 1581, is another example of a false saint who found spiritual guidance in women.⁸⁵ She disliked confessors and their influence, but she realized that sanctity required spiritual legitimacy.⁸⁶ Instead of relying on a priest, she chose Orsola Benincasa, a well-known Neapolitan woman, as her "protector" in order to increase her influence.⁸⁷ Benincasa was famous for her visions and prophetic abilities. She was imprisoned by the Inquisition and examined, but it declared her to be free from demonic

⁸² Ibid., 64.

⁸³ Ibid., 64.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁵ Sallmann, *Santi*, 229.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 236.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 236.

influence and to have genuine holiness. After her trial, Benincasa founded a convent and acted as an adviser to Neapolitan elites.⁸⁸ For Rispoli, Benincasa was an example of how to become a popular, Church-approved local holy figure. She tried to copy Benincasa's mystical behavior and found a legitimizing influence in a popular model of female sanctity, rather than a confessor.⁸⁹ Although Benincasa herself did not reject confessors, by modeling herself on Benincasa, Rispoli believed she freed herself from the need for them.

Ferrazzi's relationship with Marietta Cappello, a Venetian noblewoman, further broadens the scope of spiritual direction in false saints' lives. Cappello housed Ferrazzi for nine years, and mediated her contact with the outside world.⁹⁰ Ferrazzi stated that, "Marietta Cappello came to remove me from Signor Polacco's hands and took me to her house, changing my name so that I wouldn't be known where I was, and I was called Chiara."⁹¹ She punished her, as a confessor would give penance, by making her go to mass in an apron covered in sausage blood as a humiliation.⁹² Cappello resembled a confessor by controlling Ferrazzi's access to Communion, something she greatly desired. Catholics were required to confess and do penance before receiving the Eucharist, thereby connecting Communion with the confessor.⁹³ Ferrazzi stated that she could not take Communion except when Signora Cappello and her confessor allowed it.⁹⁴ Cappello arranged for her own confessor to become Ferrazzi's and Ferrazzi provides evidence of them working together to shape her holiness.⁹⁵ After sustaining a serious injury, Ferrazzi wrote that Signora Cappello, "on instructions from my confessor, Signor Father Alvise

⁸⁸ David Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch: The System of the Sacred in Early Modern Terra D'Otranto* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1992), 178.

⁸⁹ Sallmann, *Sancti*, 236.

⁹⁰ Schutte, *Autobiography*, 28.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹³ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 15.

⁹⁴ Schutte, *Autobiography*, 44.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

Zonati, always assisted me in all my troubles...they were talking about summoning the barber to treat me.”⁹⁶ This statement implies that Cappello and Zonati had discussed Ferrazzi’s mysticism and debated her medical treatment together. After receiving a vision, Ferrazzi stated, “I revealed all this to my confessor, and I believe he told Signora Marietta, for then she asked me many questions about it.”⁹⁷ If Ferrazzi’s judgment was correct, then Zonati believed that Cappello was important enough in her life for him to break the sacred seal of confession. Cappello and Ferrazzi’s relationship demonstrates that spiritual direction and physical control in a false saint’s life emanated from other sources besides a confessor. Cappello guided the course of Ferrazzi’s everyday life, as well as her spiritual one. Male spiritual direction is perceived to be highly controlling, but female spiritual direction had the potential to be domineering as well.

Cappello and Polacco’s interactions with Ferrazzi share many similarities. Cappello resembled Polacco when she decided what environment best suited Ferrazzi. Like Polacco, Cappello also had Ferrazzi examined by priests. Ferrazzi wrote, “She decided to take me to Padua...and while we were there, she summoned two of those fathers...She talked with them about me and what had happened to me; the fathers said they wanted to test me with a mortification.”⁹⁸ Ferrazzi described the event,

They told me to spit on my hands and ordered me to climb up on the prayer stools, get my hands thoroughly covered with soot, and then rub it all over my face...Once I’d gotten down off the prayer stools, completely black, they took the chain of the fireplace, put it around me, and commanded me to go into the salon and pay my respects to some gentlewomen who were there.⁹⁹

Cappello, like Polacco, was perhaps unsure of how to manage Ferrazzi’s intense visions, and thus called upon knowledgeable clerics for help. Two of Ferrazzi’s primary spiritual directors

⁹⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 61.

were uncertain enough about her to test and analyze her sanctity through invasive and intensive procedures.

While Cappello and Polacco were uncertain about Ferrazzi's holiness, Ferrazzi was afraid of them witnessing her mystical experiences, further demonstrating the complexity of spiritual direction. She had a vision in which the Devil beat her violently, causing her to lose a large amount of blood. Ferrazzi wrote, "The Mother of God collected the blood and I begged her not to do so, but to keep everything hidden so that Signora Marietta Cappello wouldn't see it."¹⁰⁰ Her desire for Cappello not to see the evidence of her divine contact implies that Ferrazzi thought she would be better off if Cappello was unaware of her visions. This behavior reflects Ferrazzi's fear and mistrust towards Cappello, or at the very least, doubt and uncertainty. Her attempt to escape into a convent further demonstrates her negative feelings towards Cappello. Ferrazzi stated,

One time when I was taken to Murano by Signora Marietta Cappello, she took me to the Capuchin mothers...Seeing me, the Abbess persuaded me to go into the convent, telling me that she'd leave the door open so that I could flee inside, but first she'd draw Signora Marietta aside so that she wouldn't notice or try to stop me. Agreeing readily, I went through the door, but as I passed through it I was held from behind. Turning to see who was holding me, I saw that it was the Most Holy Mother.¹⁰¹

According to Ferrazzi, had the Virgin Mary not interceded, she would have left Cappello, a sign of the complexity of Ferrazzi's feelings towards her. Had their relationship been entirely positive, Ferrazzi would not have "readily agreed" to the abbess' invitation. Ferrazzi's relationships with both Cappello and Polacco were multi-faceted. Spiritual guidance, whatever the source, constituted a negotiation between two individuals.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 73.

Clerical investigation, fear, complex feelings, and possibly resentment characterized Ferrazzi's interactions with both Polacco and Cappello. While it can be unwise to make broad generalizations, throughout her autobiography, Ferrazzi tended to struggle with the role of the confessor in her life. She never documented a relationship with a confessor that was free from negative feelings, maltreatment, or complaint. For some false saints, like Giulia di Marco, confessors could be a blessing, but for Ferrazzi they seemed to be a significant obstacle to her holy mission. Whether sought by a false saint or imposed, male and female spiritual direction could complicate a person's pursuit of sanctity.

Ferrazzi's criticisms and actions contradict a common theme in modern historiography, which, according to Bilinkoff, tends to stress "the cases in which clerics manipulated and controlled their exemplary female penitents."¹⁰² Even in cases of strong confessor control, women still had some choice in how they led their lives. Although confessors exorcised, rebuked, and relocated Ferrazzi many times, she still managed to pursue holiness in her own way. Her confessors' strong presence in her life did not prevent her from running her home for at risk girls and living independently outside a convent as an unwed woman. Although spiritual directors shaped Ferrazzi's life and affected one component of her religious experience, her religiosity and path to holiness were her own.

For example, Ferrazzi chose to interpret her visions independently, rather than relying on priests. She often presented her visions to her confessors as if she had already discerned their meaning. She stated that the "Most Holy Mother appeared to tell me that I must distribute to sinners...the insignia of the Passion of Jesus Christ."¹⁰³ Ferrazzi had the ability to identify the figures in her visions without assistance. She also had many visions of her battling the Devil, and

¹⁰² Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 25.

¹⁰³ Schutte, *Autobiography*, 55.

often Mary intervened. “Shortly the Devil in the form of a woman came into the room holding a little bucket, which she gave me, and when, before drinking, I said ‘Jesus Mary,’ the Devil ran away, yelling and screaming so noisily that it seemed as if there were four or five carriages in the dormitory.”¹⁰⁴ Without the aid of a confessor, Ferrazzi distinguished which women represented Mary and which personified the Devil. Even though her confessors exorcised her and controlled her living situation, Ferrazzi did not rely on them to understand her mysticism.

Apostoles also frequently interpreted her visions without the assistance of a confessor. She received an intense vision about the final judgment coming to Toledo; God told Apostoles, “You have seen what my church has cost me. Go out to all the world and preach penance to them, that they might abandon the mistaken paths they tread, because if they do not a great punishment against the world has been decided upon.”¹⁰⁵ Apostoles understood the vision and independently interpreted God’s intentions for her. She believed He wanted her to tell the vision to others so they could perform penance.¹⁰⁶ In the early modern period, confessors became responsible both for providing spiritual discernment and the sacrament of penance.¹⁰⁷ Weinstein and Bell argue that women needed confessors partly because they helped them analyze their visions.¹⁰⁸ Ferrazzi and Apostoles demonstrate that women could perform this action for themselves. Although both women had confessors, they did not always rely on them for interpretation. Even if society and the Church at large saw confessors as necessary to understand and validate female mysticism, female false saints did not necessarily view the confessor in this way, and could choose to be their own discerners.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰⁵ Ahlgren, *The Inquisition of Francisca*, 81.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰⁷ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 17.

¹⁰⁸ Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, *Saints and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 232.

Beyond being her own interpreter, Francisca Apostoles also directly questioned the role of the confessor. She criticized how a confessor treated her sister Isabel, “Remember how much Saint Catherine of Siena suffered with the disbelief of her confessors...It is clear that if they had spoken with you as we have and had seen you pass so many months fasting on only bread and water with so much spirit and strength, they would have had to take you in hand!”¹⁰⁹ Apostoles was displeased that Isabel’s confessor failed to recognize her great holiness and denied her Communion.¹¹⁰ Apostoles compared Isabel’s suffering to Catherine of Siena’s and argued that both of their confessors failed to recognize their holy gifts. Although Apostoles relied on her confessor to understand her contact with demons, she did not unquestioningly accept his authority.

Often, Apostoles did not limit her critique to confessors, but expanded them to include the clergy in general. She stated that she dedicated herself to a holy life in order to account for the sins of “churchmen, who serve and love God with hypocrisy, pretending to be holy with our half-hearted works, not to give honor to God but instead to gain honor and authority.”¹¹¹ Apostoles believed that the clergy wasted money, let the poor die, and only looked out for themselves.¹¹² Perhaps her strong condemnation of the clergy connects to her critique of confessors, a common element in many texts written by religious women. Bilinkoff states, “The neglect or mistreatment of penitents by confessors is a virtual commonplace, a theme that female readers of hagiographies would have encountered in the accounts of earlier women.”¹¹³ Like many female penitents, Apostoles did not view all confessors, and certainly not all priests, as

¹⁰⁹ Ahlgren, *The Inquisition of Francisca*, 46.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 57.

¹¹³ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 77.

moral, qualified, and knowledgeable. It is possible that Apostoles is engaging in the trope of the “bad confessor,” but this seems unlikely, given that she repeatedly condemned the clergy as a whole, rather than only confessors. Apostoles demonstrates that faith in confessors in certain matters did not equate to approval of the confessor and clergy in general.

Even if false saints mitigated the role of the confessor in their lives, clerics could still be important to their holy agendas. Although she criticized priests, one of Apostoles’ main goals and sources of spiritual legitimacy related to the clergy. Apostoles believed that in order to save Toledo, its archbishop, Bartolome Carranza, had to be released from prison. She wrote that, “while I was kneeling down my spirit was enraptured with great sweetness and I saw the Mother of Mercy who was interceding with her Son...asking that they charge Archbishop Bartolome with its reform.”¹¹⁴ Apostoles was able to distinguish between levels of the clergy: she rejected ordinary priests, but incorporated an archbishop into her public image. Apostoles’ visions confirmed the validity of her plan; she had a vision where Jesus told God, “Our Father, you see here Bartolome, who will be enough to reform the church. Be happy in him, because I am pleased with him and I will represent him.”¹¹⁵ Since Jesus approved of Carranza, by associating herself with him, Apostoles added to her own legitimacy and holiness. Apostoles eschewed confessor influence, but embraced the clergy when they strengthened her cause. Although female false saints struggled with male Church authority in some areas, priests could still factor into their pursuit of holiness.

Penance was another significant element in false saints’ quests for sanctity. Catholics relied on their confessors to assign penance to account for their sin. Female false saints negated the importance of the confessor in this area by choosing their own penance, without spiritual

¹¹⁴ Ahlgren, *The Inquisition of Francisca*, 44.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

guidance. Apostoles, for example, believed she had to fast for thirty-three days for Christ and sixty-three days for Mary.¹¹⁶ By fasting for thirty three days, the same number of years Christ lived on earth, Apostoles was honoring His life.¹¹⁷ She, “felt, while praying... that in the interior of her soul she was told to make another fast in honor of all the saints.”¹¹⁸ Apostoles mitigated the need for a confessor by relying on her inner connection to God to choose penance. She believed her direct relationship with Him and her internal soul were all that were necessary to understand His will,

An internal voice made her recognize that in herself she was nothing and unable to make satisfaction for the smallest fault, even though she had vowed to do so, unless His Majesty, because of the great love that He has for the world, wanted to set up in this experience of hers a model so that other people who also wanted to satisfy His justice would understand how to do so.¹¹⁹

She believed that a confessor was unable to absolve her of her sin because only God could do so. Even more strikingly, Apostoles said that God created a holy model in her. Not only did she not require a confessor, but she promoted the penance she independently chose as divinely ordained and supported.

While Apostoles embraced penance, other false saints further challenged the necessity of the confessor by rejecting the sacrament entirely. Many of the alumbrados in Spain viewed penance as unnecessary, believing that total abandonment to God, rather than external works of good faith, led to piety. For example, the Inquisition accused both Medrano and Hernandez of saying that it was not sinful to break fasts.¹²⁰ According to his trial,

Medrano was heard to say that it was necessary in the past for him to perform certain penances and abstinences...But now he no longer performed such works, because God

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 80.

¹¹⁷ John MacQueen, *Numerology: Theory and Outline History of a Literary Mode* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 95.

¹¹⁸ Ahlgren, *The Inquisition of Francisca*, 80.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 82.

¹²⁰ Lu Ann Homza, ed., “Testimony by Francisca Hernandez, June 2, 1531,” in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), 110.

had accomplished other greater graces in him...and Medrano was heard to say that it was true he used to perform abstinences...and he was a fool at that time.¹²¹

The Inquisition also suspected Medrano saying that people who performed penitential acts were inferior and lowly.¹²² Maria de Cazalla, another Spanish alumbrado tried in the sixteenth-century, was accused of denigrating external works as well. The prosecutor said that she “believed that exterior works...achieved nothing and were unnecessary...As for those who said they gained pardon through physical acts of humility...Maria de Cazalla and other people said that amounted to business transactions.”¹²³ Cazalla did not see confession or penance as critical to salvation, and openly criticized confessors before the Inquisition.¹²⁴ She was accused of saying that “confession did not sit well with her, and [she] did not hold it as good.”¹²⁵ She admitted that she might have said that a particular confessor, “was like a stone, that he sat there like a stone, and that he neither gave good advice nor said worthwhile things.”¹²⁶ Unlike Cazalla, Medrano and Hernandez did not explicitly condemn or reject confessors, but by criticizing and dismissing the need for penance, they essentially invalidated the role of the confessor. This behavior undermines a common theme in the historiography of female false sanctity. Weinstein and Bell argue that heavy penance and asceticism were one of the primary ways in which female saints gained followers.¹²⁷ Yet, both Hernandez and Cazalla rejected these paths to sanctity. If false saints renounced penance and, by extension confessors, and still managed to acquire fame for their holiness, there must have been alternative routes to popular sanctity.

¹²¹ Ibid., 110.

¹²² Lu Ann Homza, ed., “Summary of the Prosecutor’s Accusation against Antonio de Medrano. Toledo Tribunal,” in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006)111.

¹²³ Lu Ann Homza, ed., “Excerpts from the Trial of Maria de Cazalla, 1532-1534,” in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006) 129.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 124.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 124.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 124.

¹²⁷ Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, 233.

While Cazalla and Hernandez represent the ways the alumbrados justified rejection of confession, Fra Ludovico, a sixteenth-century Neapolitan hermit, is an important example of how male false saints interacted with confession. Like women, men faced the same obligation to confess at least once a year.¹²⁸ Instead of confessing, Fra Ludovico made his followers take an oath of obedience to him. The oath was, “I...promise obedience, chastity and solitude in the hand of the father Fra Ludovico, general of the hermits, and [if I] do not observe the above things condemn me to the eternal fire.”¹²⁹ Ludovico made his disciples beholden to him, much like penitents were expected to be obedient to their confessors. The Inquisition also saw Ludovico in this way, and worried that he had founded a religious congregation that was solely devoted to him, the “general of the hermits”.¹³⁰ Instead of acting as a penitent, Ludovico served as a priest and confessor to his disciples. Just as female false saints attempted to act independently of confessors, so did male false saints. Ludovico embraced the idea of the confessor, but only when he could embody the role.

Like Ludovico, Francisco Ortiz embraced spiritual guidance from an untraditional, unorthodox source. Ortiz was priest and a devoted disciple of Francisca Hernandez. She spiritually directed Ortiz and bestowed him with divine gifts. In his letter to the Inquisitor-General Alonso Manrique, Ortiz writes, “I know that the filth [against her] which filthy hearts have raised shall not survive in the face of the purity that God has shown me and worked in me through the means and intercession of his holy bride.”¹³¹ As a result of Hernandez’s assistance, Ortiz became more closely connected to God. Ortiz was quite devoted to Hernandez, writing, “I

¹²⁸ Homza, *Religious Authority*, 157.

¹²⁹ Sallmann, *Santi*, 239.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹³¹ Lu Ann Homza, ed., “Letter From Friar Francisco Ortiz to Inquisitor- General Alonso Manrique,” in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614 : an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), 98.

used to call this dove and clean virgin (who had the simplicity and innocence of a child, as I saw)...my love, my heart, my guts, my eyes.”¹³² Ortiz’s behavior corresponds to the connections Bilinkoff has made between male and female spirituality. She argues, “Being a conduit of divine messages and recipient of divine graces was the prerogative of women, and the best a man could hope for was a vicarious experience through close contact with a charismatic woman.”¹³³ Since Ortiz saw himself as a profound male sinner and thus incapable of receiving divine visions, he relied on Hernandez’s holy connection to gain access to God.

Ortiz’s defense of Hernandez reveals that she was a fundamental source of spiritual guidance for him. In his letter to Manrique, Ortiz relied on his position as a priest and respected preacher to defend Hernandez, writing, “It has been six years since I received such magnificent gifts from God with her holy communication and your Lordship never knew me before I knew her, and if I was ‘lost,’ after communicating with her, then why did your Lordship hold me in esteem, and why I was praised?”¹³⁴ Ortiz based his defense of Hernandez on her positive effect on him. Since Manrique praised Ortiz while he was under Hernandez’s direction, then surely she must have been divinely inspired. Instead of Hernandez needing a confessor to be seen as legitimate, for Ortiz, she was legitimate because she was like a confessor, bestowing gifts and deep religiosity on him, her “penitent.” He further elaborates that her followers “left behind many sins and varieties of blindness.”¹³⁵ Hernandez helped her disciples turn their back on sin, much like a confessor absolved his penitents. Ortiz’s behavior is typical of clerics’ interactions with religious women. Bilinkoff argues that, “many responded to another imperative of their priestly office: to promote saintly lives and hold them up as models for emulation. To

¹³² Ibid., 99.

¹³³ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 80.

¹³⁴ Homza, “Letter from Friar Francisco Ortiz,” 96.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 96.

accomplish this they turned to sermons and to...the written word.”¹³⁶ Ultimately, Ortiz did fall under the Inquisition’s suspicion for promoting Hernandez through his preaching and letters. In Ortiz’s and Hernandez’s relationship, the roles of priest and spiritual director were separate. Ortiz fulfilled his duty as a cleric by using his position to heighten and defend her sanctity, while Hernandez fulfilled the role of spiritual director by deepening her followers’ connection to God. Hernandez and Fra Ludovico both fulfilled elements of the role of the confessor, demonstrating that for false saints, spiritual direction was a flexible concept.

Spiritual influence and guidance took many forms in early modern Europe. Confessors, whether accepted, mitigated, or rejected, played a prominent role in false saints’ lives and their paths to sanctity. Some false saints attempted to gain fame for holiness without the aid or legitimizing presence of the confessor. While confessors were an important element of Catholicism for the laity, they were not necessary for false saints to gain prominence. Others did not go as far as outright rejection: some false saints interpreted their visions and penance independently. They frequently embraced the importance of penance, but disregarded its usual agent. Other false saints criticized their confessors, but still confessed, in order to receive the Eucharist. Many of these trials weaken the dichotomy of male confessor and female penitent. In some cases, female false saints found spiritual guidance in, or were controlled by, other women. Other female false saints spiritually directed their followers. Confessors are often characterized as controlling and unsympathetic, but female false saints worked with and against their confessors to pursue their goals. Although the confessor-penitent relationship was inherently unbalanced, there was still room for negotiation. False saints were able to shape their relationships with their confessors in order to pursue their own style of holiness. For them,

¹³⁶ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 27.

confessors and confession were not fixed concepts, but flexible roles and practices that they could mold to fit their holy agenda.

Chapter Three: Visions, the Body, and Discipleship

Exploring gender dynamics in Catholicism necessitates moving beyond the confessor-penitent relationship to examine discipleship. Schutte does not study this topic, despite the strong textual evidence available. Analysis of discipleship offers a glimpse into the dialogue between false saints and their community, and between men and women. Disciples chose to follow false saints because the saint fulfilled their needs or estimations of holiness. By examining which spiritual behaviors disciples and false saints focused on, we can extrapolate on the qualities and character of local, popular religion. False saints appealed to potential followers in a variety of ways. For women, the body was important in obtaining disciples, both as a source of physical evidence and as a way to subvert societal ideas of female inferiority. Male disciples entered into mutually beneficial relationships with female saints, and often their spirituality complemented the public holiness of the woman they venerated. A primary way women garnered followers was by engaging in typically clerical behavior through the care of their disciples' souls. I argue that discipleship was a nuanced, symbiotic, and complex relationship that hinged on women's ability to combine speech and the body in a way that attracted disciples and met their priorities.

Women pursued sanctity in a variety of ways, but often they relied on the body as proof of their special relationship with God. Magdalena de la Cruz, a Spanish nun tried by the Inquisition in 1546, maintained that she was crucified many times. According to her sentence, "she had chapped hands and a fissure in her side, and she pointed to them as a miracle. She wore an opening in her tunic in order to point out the wound in her side, which she showed off in order to be viewed as holy."¹³⁷ She also gave people pieces of her skin and drops of her blood as relics. By doing so, she displayed parts of her body as evidence of divine contact. Her blood and skin

¹³⁷ Lu Ann Homza, ed., "Heresy and False Sanctity of Magdalena de la Cruz, 1544-1546," in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), 172-173.

served as physical manifestations of her relationship with God. Most of her visions consisted of a demon attacking her in a very corporal, material way. One demon pushed her from behind, which made her bleed significantly.¹³⁸ Her mental visions produced extreme physical effects that signified her connection to God. De la Cruz stated that a “demon appeared to her as Christ crucified and moved her to devotion and sanctity; he told her to crucify herself as well, and she crucified herself by putting some nails in the wall...The demon constricted her two little fingers as his sign, and they never grew.”¹³⁹ The stunted growth of her fingers was physical evidence of her vision. Although de la Cruz performed miracles and had visions, her body was one of the fundamental ways she proved her holiness. Cruz made some effort to promote her sanctity, by distributing her skin and blood as relics and displaying her wound. Cruz consciously popularized her cult by relying on bodily proof of visionary experience. Cruz’s visions combined a mental aspect with a physical element, demonstrating that visions alone did not gain a false saint public support.

Alfonsina Rispoli provides another example of the importance of the body in popularizing sanctity. She received the stigmata in a church in Naples, which must have made quite a public scene. The stigmata were deep enough for her to show them to her disciples, and later the Inquisition. They crusted over eventually, but still bled every Friday.¹⁴⁰ The stigmata had great importance for Rispoli’s status as a false saint because it amplified her appearance of holiness.¹⁴¹ They were one of the major turning points in Rispoli’s life; they brought her greater

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁴⁰ Sallmann, *Santi*, 232.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

notoriety, and ultimately caused her to be denounced to the Inquisition.¹⁴² The physicality of her spirituality brought her fame initially, but eventually proved to be her downfall.

Magdalena de la Cruz also attempted to recreate the stigmata wounds on herself. The prosecution's sentence stated, "She confessed that when she was enraptured, the demons put some large needles through her feet...This was done so that she would be viewed as holy...She bore these signs on her feet for many days."¹⁴³ The stigmata held great significance in Catholicism. According to Arnold Davidson, when St. Francis first received the stigmata, it was an entirely novel, mystical event. Davidson states that "representations of the stigmatization focused on its unparalleled and wondrous character and had the effect of heightening its miraculous status."¹⁴⁴ The stigmata demonstrated a uniquely intimate relationship with God, since the bearer shared the wounds of Christ.¹⁴⁵ Thus, by receiving, showing, and displaying the stigmata, Rispoli and de la Cruz marked themselves as special and unique.

False female saints' focus on their bodies could have stemmed from the suspicion they faced from the Church. Gillian T.W. Ahlgren argues that women lacked the necessary theological education to understand their visions, and were seen as morally weak and easily deluded by the Devil.¹⁴⁶ The writings of Jean Gerson, a prominent French theologian of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, demonstrate the strong skepticism the Church held towards mysticism. Gerson wrote about the necessity of discerning the veracity of visions, stating, "Lying angels try to abrogate the authority of true and holy revelations through sophistical deeds and the

¹⁴² Ibid., 229.

¹⁴³ Homza, "Heresy and False Sanctity," 172.

¹⁴⁴ Arnold Davidson, "Miracles of Bodily Transformation, or How St. Francis Received the Stigmata," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Gillian T.W. Ahlgren, "Negotiating Sanctity: Holy Women in Sixteenth Century Spain," *Church History* 64: (1995), 376.

trickery of magicians.”¹⁴⁷ In order to ascertain if a visionary was divinely inspired, he maintained that theologians should analyze her humility, discretion, patience, truth, and charity.¹⁴⁸ Certain physical behaviors, such as fasting, could prove that a woman possessed these virtues. By fasting, women separated themselves from their weak bodies, and thus their desires. By removing all regard for themselves, women demonstrated great humility.¹⁴⁹ The body could demonstrate Christian values and also serve as a counter to this suspicion of the mind. Visions could be doubted, but the stigmata were proof that validated visions and a special connection to God. The body could signify and represent what occurred spiritually.

Schutte maintains that women mainly gained followers and cults through their visions.¹⁵⁰ While visions were a crucial part of their public sanctity, the body gave legitimacy to these ecstasies. Caroline Bynum argues that the physical aspect of visionary experiences cannot be ignored. Even in primarily mental devotions, such as re-enacting Christ’s Passion, there was still a physical element. Bynum states that when women share Christ’s wounds, “the telescoping into divine agency leaves around the edges...an anxious awareness that someone stabs and must be responsible for the stabbing. At the heart of this piety... lies violence occluded not erased.”¹⁵¹ Someone had to create the physical wounds, which represented internal connection to God. With some false saints, like Magdalena de la Cruz, the visionary was the one who, through self-harm, made herself resemble God. Even if the activity was centered on connecting to God spiritually through his suffering, women still relied on the physical to demonstrate this connection to others. Visions alone did not guarantee popular following; the body authenticated these spiritual events.

¹⁴⁷ Jean Gerson, *Jean Gerson: Early Works*, trans. Brian Patrick McGuire (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 335.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁴⁹ Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, *Saints and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 155.

¹⁵⁰ Schutte, *Aspiring Saints*, 212.

¹⁵¹ Caroline Bynum, “Violence Occluded: The Wound in Christ’s Side in Late Medieval Devotion,” in *Feud, Violence and Practice: Essays in Medieval Studies in Honor of Stephen D. White*, ed. Tracey Billado, Stephen White, and Belle Tuten (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 116.

Even in the cases of female false saints who relied primarily on visions, their spirituality still had a strong physicality. Cecilia Ferrazzi had visions that resulted in physical harm. Ferrazzi stated, “I was in bed, wounded all over my body from the Devil scratching me while fighting with me for entire nights- especially when I was praying for some particular soul or for sinners or the souls of the dead.”¹⁵² Ferrazzi believed that in order to save souls from purgatory, she had to pray, which often involved visceral battles with the Devil. By enduring bodily harm, she served God.

In his work *Holy Anorexia*, Rudolph Bell maintains that this type of bodily violence was quite common among the female saints of the sixteenth-century. Of the 261 cases he examined, fasting or self-harm played a major role in the lives of thirty-one percent of these women.¹⁵³ Fasting and self-harm are similar to the devil-produced violence in these women’s visions. All three resulted from intense connection to God and served as signs of holiness. A demon visited Magdalena de la Cruz and told her to crucify herself, which resulted in her breaking two ribs.¹⁵⁴ When a demon came to her on another occasion, he, “abused her because she refused to consent to a certain lascivious act that he wanted her to perform. In anger, he took her by the hair and raised her up very high and then let her fall...She was greatly wounded and ill for many days.”¹⁵⁵ Cruz’s retelling of her vision and her ability to withstand temptation, despite bodily harm, speak to her devotion to God, as refraining from food would have. Marina Caffiero argues that women connected to Jesus through this physical suffering because He endured physical pain during the

¹⁵² Schutte, *Autobiography*, 45.

¹⁵³ Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 177.

¹⁵⁴ Homza, “Heresy and False Sanctity,” 172.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 173.

Passion.¹⁵⁶ These visions demonstrate that the body and visions were intertwined: a false saint might be connecting to God on a higher spiritual plane, but the body was the means by which this communication occurred. Whether in a physical or spiritual sense, the idea of the body was central to these women's religious practice.

Another major way in which the body helped to prove sanctity and attract disciples was through fasting. All Catholics were expected to fast on certain days, such as Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and were supposed to refrain from consuming meat during Lent. Many religious women, including Ferrazzi, took this baseline of behavior many steps further. Whenever Ferrazzi ate, she vomited large amounts of blood.¹⁵⁷ She stated,

Because of my infirmity, I ate little, and almost never any meat, for I was unable to hold food in my stomach, and I prayed the Most Holy Mother to bring me back to the condition of an ordinary person...I heard an internal voice that told me, "Cecilia, you're born to obey and to let the will of Lord God be done, but it's your responsibility to command my dear Son."¹⁵⁸

Ferrazzi believed her inability to consume food was another way God wanted her to suffer to serve others. She thought that her pain would cause God to release souls from purgatory.¹⁵⁹ By fasting, she allowed God's will to be accomplished through her. Ferrazzi's fasting worked for many reasons. On the most basic level, she was performing an act of penance and renouncing gluttony, a major sin.¹⁶⁰ Eating was a loaded concept in Renaissance society because Jesus gave food to the needy and also inhabited the Eucharist.¹⁶¹ In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Caroline Bynum explains that food went beyond just control for religious women. "Food was flesh, and

¹⁵⁶ Marina Caffiero trans. Keith Botsford, "From the Late Baroque Mystical Explosion to the Social Apostolate 1650-1850," in *Women and Faith*, ed. Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarri (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 178.

¹⁵⁷ Schutte, *Autobiography*, 23.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁶⁰ Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

flesh was suffering and fertility. In renouncing ordinary food...women moved to God not merely by abandoning their flawed physicality but also by becoming the suffering and feeding humanity of the body on the cross, the food on the altar.”¹⁶² As a byproduct of fasting, women could also make themselves ill, which brought them closer to God, since they were closer to death.¹⁶³

Fasting had a public element for Ferrazzi and other false saints, which contributed to their saintly identities. Ferrazzi stated that news of her inability to eat spread, “Everyone said...that if I tried to eat, I didn’t hold down the food. And for the same reason becoming suspicious, he [her priest] removed me from the charge of that Carmelite confessor.”¹⁶⁴ She gained notoriety and a reputation for her behavior. In contrast to strictly cloistered nuns, Ferrazzi had greater freedom of movement and the ability to travel through public spaces and display signs of her holiness. In order for fasting to be convincing evidence of holiness and an effective method of gaining disciples, it required visibility and eyewitnesses. Fasting was also important for de la Cruz. In her trial, she confessed to lying about fasting for eleven years.¹⁶⁵ A priest locked her in a cell to test if her fasting was legitimate, but she escaped.¹⁶⁶ Fasting was a significant enough sign of sanctity for it to merit examination by religious authorities. With fasting, these women took a basic Church tenet, abstention from food on certain occasions, and enlarged it to heroic proportions. They appropriated and expanded Church ideas to express their spirituality. The relationship between food and the body was a way for women to convey their devotion to God and attract public attention.

¹⁶² Ibid.,5.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 156.

¹⁶⁴ Schutte, *Autobiography*, 23.

¹⁶⁵ Homza, “Heresy and False Sanctity,” 173.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 173.

For Maria Sparano, a Neapolitan woman tried in 1608, a failure to follow expected religious fasts actually resulted in her trial. When one of her followers, Aquila Galasso, noticed that Sparano neglected to observe Lenten fasts, she denounced her to the Inquisition.¹⁶⁷ Interestingly, Galasso denounced Sparano not for the variety of heretical beliefs she promoted—such as her assertion that confessors were unable to absolve penitents of sin— but for failing to adhere to rather routine Church practice. Galasso expected Sparano to follow Church dogma; since Sparano did not meet this minimum criteria, she lost her saintly authority for Galasso. Sparano needed to be in line with basic Church practice by fasting to maintain her allegiance. To Galasso, Sparano’s extraordinary healing powers and visions were important, but only when added on to a foundation of orthodoxy. Although this was not the same type of extraordinary fasting that demonstrated spiritual gifts, food played a large enough role in potential saints’ lives that failure to conform to expectations surrounding the body could result in a loss of followers and, ultimately, trial by the Inquisition. At the very least, food was crucial because it was a way to demonstrate obedience to Church doctrine.

Besides fasting, the traditional historiography also strongly associates women’s efforts to achieve sainthood with chastity. Ahlgren maintains that the body was connected to sex and sin. In order to prove themselves as holy, somehow women had to separate themselves and their religiosity from the corruptive influence of their bodies.¹⁶⁸ Weinstein and Bell argue that saints could have other aspects of sanctity, such as mysticism or humility in shades, but chastity could not be ambiguous, since it was the most important virtue for a female saint.¹⁶⁹ The cases of

¹⁶⁷ Sallmann, *Santi*, 254.

¹⁶⁸ Ahlgren, “Negotiating Sanctity,” 382.

¹⁶⁹ Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, 73.

several female saints challenge this interpretation by demonstrating that abstention from sex was not the only option.

In fact, a willingness to embrace the physical and sexual aspects of the body played a significant role in the attempted sanctity of some women. Maria de Cazalla, a Spanish woman arrested in 1529, was accused of saying that having sex with her husband brought her closer to God than any prayer would have.¹⁷⁰ The Inquisition suspected her of placing sexual relations on a higher plane than virginity.¹⁷¹ If Cazalla did indeed spread this type of message, then she did not view her body as unclean and sinful. Similarly, Francisca Hernandez maintained that she could stay pure, no matter the sexual implications of her actions. She admitted to touching and kissing one of her disciples, Antonio de Medrano, but maintained that sex was not their intention.¹⁷² Hernandez stated that “she thought that he had the same love for her as she had for him through God, and for this reason, she consented.”¹⁷³ Both Cazalla and Hernandez were, consciously or not, subverting the idea that the female body was a source of shame and should be dismissed in order to maintain chastity. Alumbrados like Cazalla and Hernandez rejected external works and penances and instead turned inwards to total abandonment to God.¹⁷⁴ Since they renounced the body as a source of salvation, they also denied that it was a source of sin. Their ability to use their bodies in somewhat sexual ways signified their view of chastity as a less meaningful external work. Their devaluation of chastity could have also appealed or reflected the popular consciousness, since the majority of people around these women would not have been

¹⁷⁰Lu Ann Homza, ed., “Excerpts from the Trial of Maria de Cazalla, 1532-1534,” in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), 117.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁷² Lu Ann Homza, ed., “Summary of the Prosecutor’s Accusation against Antonio de Medrano. Toledo Tribunal,” in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), 105.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Tapia, *The Alumbrados of Toledo: A Study in Sixteenth Century Spanish Spirituality* (Philadelphia: F.A. Weber, 1974), 72.

eternally celibate. It is also possible that the traditional version of saintly “heroic chastity” did not resonate with the ordinary laity. By embracing their bodies as non-sexual objects, these women were able to renounce traditional ideas about sexuality, virginity, and female sanctity.

Hernandez’s perfect purity despite her sexuality perhaps brought her disciples. Other male followers besides Medrano attempted to gain access into her inner circle and “holy” sexual activity. Hernandez stated that Friar Pedro de Segura “followed her for a long time and tried to touch her breasts. He tried to kiss her and take her hands, and he attacked her, saying he would die.”¹⁷⁵ She rejected him because she knew he was in a state of sin.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, she sent Bernardino de Tovar away because she knew he was evil by his touches.¹⁷⁷ These men clearly desired the same type of relationship with Hernandez that Medrano had, but she refused them. The body was a factor in attracting followers and also in the follower-saint relationship itself. Hernandez did not freely give access to her body; it was something that was withheld and only granted in particular circumstances. She only permitted her closest and, in her eyes, purest disciples the privilege of intimacy with her. For Hernandez, the body was a demarcation of close discipleship. In general, female false saints did not reject the body as a cause of sin. Rather, the body was a key component of attracting followers.

The bodies of disciples themselves also played an important role in their devotion to saints. Hernandez’s disciples valued her because she helped them overcome their own struggles with their bodies. Hernandez provided relief from sexual temptation and sin for Medrano. According to Mary Giles, Medrano, a priest, had broken his oath of chastity several times and

¹⁷⁵ Lu Ann Homza, ed., “Testimony by Francisca Hernandez, June 2, 1531,” in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), 107.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

struggled to come to terms with his behavior.¹⁷⁸ Hernandez released him from his guilt and strife. In his trial Medrano claimed, “that after he knew Francisca Hernandez, he felt the mercy of God [but] no longer felt he stimulation of the flesh. He could be in bed with a woman without harm.”¹⁷⁹ Hernandez’s teachings maintained that he could behave sexually without sinning and without heavy penance, as long as it was pure in intent. She solved a substantial moral problem for Medrano by allowing him to embrace the body in general, and her body specifically. Similarly, Ortiz had struggled with masturbation for many years.¹⁸⁰ Hernandez cured him of his affliction by giving him a blessed sash, an item which she also gave to Medrano.¹⁸¹ Ortiz attributed all his holiness to Hernandez, “I have even received such gifts here in this [inquisition] cell (which is precious to me), by means of His most faithful and beloved bride, the blessed Francisca Hernandez.”¹⁸² Hernandez bestowed him with spiritual gifts and removed sin from his body. Thus, the teachings and ability of Hernandez to cure the bodily afflictions of disciples caused them to become devoted to her. For her disciples, Hernandez demystified and simplified the body by removing it as a cause of sin. She solved her disciples’ bodily afflictions, so they could grow closer to God.

Besides illustrating the importance of the body, Medrano’s and Hernandez’s testimonies also illuminate the reciprocity present in their relationship. Witnesses stated that he “praised Francisca Hernandez so people would hold her as a saint” and that they “hid themselves and avoided other people in order to communicate and arrange their business.”¹⁸³ Hernandez did

¹⁷⁸ Mary Giles, “Francisca Hernandez and the Sexuality of Religious Dissent,” in *Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World* ed. Mary Giles (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 80.

¹⁷⁹ Homza, “Antonio de Medrano,” 109.

¹⁸⁰ Giles, “Francisca,” 86.

¹⁸¹ Homza, “Antonio de Medrano,” 111.

¹⁸² Lu Ann Homza, ed., “Letter from Friar Francisco Ortiz to Inquisitor General Alonso Manrique, April 9, 1529,” in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), 94.

¹⁸³ Homza, “Francisca Hernandez,” 104.

admit that they never kissed or touched outside the group's close inner circle, giving some weight to the accusation that they communicated together in secret.¹⁸⁴ The two mutually praised each other, although Hernandez denied that she praised him because he praised her. She stated that, "she praised him thinking he was a servant of God."¹⁸⁵ The witnesses state that, "in communicating with Francisca Hernandez, the intention of that person [Medrano] was to acquire fame for being holy."¹⁸⁶ Of course, what witnesses argue in Inquisition trials cannot be taken as truth, but the two did have a very close connection. Their relationship was important enough for him to risk legal retribution in order to continue it. After his trial in 1531, Medrano was prohibited from seeing Hernandez under the threat of excommunication, but he continued nonetheless. Regardless of spiritual, emotional, or material intent, their relationship was mutually beneficial in the sense that both received promotion and assistance from each other in questing after public attention for holiness.

Hernandez and Medrano's relationship was based on complementary goals. Medrano, who was also tried for false sanctity, was accused of saying, "that he had revelations from God that told him when someone was receiving the Eucharist...in a state of grace or sin."¹⁸⁷ He later said he believed that Francisca knew who went to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory.¹⁸⁸ Their abilities went hand in hand: Medrano knew who was sinning, and Hernandez knew who was going to Hell. His connection to God was enhanced by hers, and vice versa. If Medrano maintained that someone was sinful, then Hernandez could confirm and validate his judgment if she stated that

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 106.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 107.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 104.

¹⁸⁷ Homza, "Antonio de Medrano," 109.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 110.

the same person was going to Hell. Thus, their interactions with potential followers could have been mutually affirming.

For the inquisitors, the most important issue in Hernandez's relationship with Medrano was its possible sexual nature. The Inquisition asked many questions about how and why Medrano touched, kissed, and held Hernandez. She admitted that they engaged in this behavior, but that it was not carnal in nature.¹⁸⁹ Rather, she maintained that "she thought he had the same love for her as she had for him through God, and for this reason, she consented."¹⁹⁰ In a similar vein, in his trial, Medrano stated that, "He could embrace his followers, male and female, when they were nude, as if they were clothed. Cloth did nothing, the will everything...his Life and Francisca Hernandez's life exemplified only the highest liberty."¹⁹¹ For them, the act itself was not sinful; only sexual behavior for the purpose of pleasure was immoral. Regardless of the true motivation of this behavior, the explanations Hernandez and Medrano gave match and complement each other. By performing typically sinful actions, but remaining pure in intention, they were able to demonstrate their greater connection to God. They were also subverting typical ideas of purity; one no longer had to abstain from all sex, just sex that was intended for carnal pleasure. The fact that Hernandez rejected offers from men to enter into a similar type of relationship demonstrates that theirs was one of mutual participation and consent. She did not allow other men, such as Friar Pedra de Segura, to kiss or touch her.¹⁹² Discipleship was not a given; false saints had to permit a disciple to follow them. Medrano and Hernandez's relationship reveals that saints and disciples complemented each other; their connection could be

¹⁸⁹ Homza, "Francisca Hernandez," 105.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁹¹ Homza, "Antonio de Medrano," 110-111.

¹⁹² Homza, "Francisca Hernandez," 107.

mutually beneficial. Rather than support flowing just from the disciple to the saint, the saint too provided advantages, in spiritual and material terms, to the disciple.

Male false saints often operated independently of, or at least in tandem with, female saints, an important counterpoint to the traditional historiography. Schutte has argued that, “Women- not God, Christ, the Virgin, the saints...or books- impelled them [male false saints] toward extraordinary holiness.”¹⁹³ She removes all agency from male false saints, and reduces their motivation to devotion to a female false saint. Medrano demonstrates that while he was a loyal follower of Hernandez’s, he had his own abilities and spiritual behaviors. He was not merely tried for being Hernandez’s disciple, but for his own effort to be holy. The Inquisition accused him of promoting doctrine contrary to Church teaching, including saying that he was unable to sin, even when embracing a naked woman.¹⁹⁴ Medrano, as an individual, had his own agenda and goals that cannot be reduced simply to a desire to follow Hernandez. The case of Fra Ludovico further weakens Schutte’s argument. Ludovico preached in the piazzas of Naples, and gained a strong group of twelve followers, who “organized in a small congregation” around him.¹⁹⁵ Ludovico was not strongly influenced by a female saint; he maintained his own cult and gained fame for his severely ascetic life.¹⁹⁶ In their actions and beliefs, male false saints demonstrate that female saints were not a requirement for the development of male pursuit of holiness.

For both male and female false saints, money was a critical component in the follower-saint dynamic. Maria Sparano traded spiritual favors for followers’ vocal and financial support. Sparano had the ability to communicate with the dead, and used this gift to solve the anxieties of

¹⁹³ Schutte, *Aspiring Saints*, 212.

¹⁹⁴ Homza, “Antonio de Medrano,” 110.

¹⁹⁵ Sallmann, *Santi*, 237. It is safe to assume that twelve followers means twelve disciples.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

her disciples and to gain their allegiance.¹⁹⁷ She told Aquila Galasso, one of her primary followers, that her dead husband had visited her. Galasso's husband told her that their two dead children were in purgatory and Sparano maintained that Galasso would have to celebrate 100 masses in order to save them. Sparano offered to perform this obligation and to pray for her. In exchange, Galasso had to give Sparano seven ducati and two tari for each mass and she estimated that she paid her as much as 170 ducati for these services.¹⁹⁸ The theme of spiritual help for money runs throughout Sparano's case.

In other instances, Sparano traded these spiritual favors for strong support from wealthy Neapolitans. For instance, Cecilia Grimaldi, a woman from a wealthy merchant family, came to Sparano when her servant broke her arm. Sparano used her healing abilities to mend the broken arm, and, as a result, gained a follower in Grimaldi.¹⁹⁹ Later, a duchess, Andriana Carafa, set aside money in her will for Sparano to be clothed and fed, demonstrating that she had achieved a strong following among wealthier individuals.²⁰⁰ Sparano's case reveals that reciprocity was the basis of the saint-disciple relationship, often in the form of money for devotional mediation with God. The idea of money for support is also present in Hernandez and Medrano's trials. He confessed that, "he received goods and money from a number of people for himself and Francisca Hernandez."²⁰¹ Magdalena de la Cruz was also accused of misusing alms given to her. "She took the alms that great people had given to the convent out of love for her, and frittered them away to whomever she wishes."²⁰² Cruz's gifts attracted money to the convent, which the Inquisition suspected her of taking from the nuns and spending on herself. It is impossible to

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 254. Unfortunately, the Sallmann source does not detail the duration of Galasso and Sparano's relationship.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁰¹ Homza, "Antonio de Medrano," 110.

²⁰² Homza, "Heresy and False Sanctity," 169.

ascertain to what extent the lure of money was behind these false saints' actions, but clearly it was something they expected to obtain from followers.

Yet, financial support did not always equate to absolute devotion; the relationship between followers and false saints could be fragile. Aquila Galasso ultimately denounced Sparano to the Inquisition because she witnessed her breaking Lenten fasts.²⁰³ Sparano also lost Galasso's support after an incident involving one of the latter's family members. When Galasso's young male relative was ill, she came to Sparano for help.²⁰⁴ Sparano told her that he was sick because he had committed a mortal sin by having premarital sex. He would be saved if he confessed to her. Galasso and her two sisters were shocked by Sparano's accusation and refused to believe he could have done this. It was one thing for a saint to tell her disciple to confess, but in putting shame on Galasso's family, Sparano went too far. These saints walked a fine line between having a special relationship with God and pleasing their followers. Sparano's statement upset the balance between godly authority and the concerns of her disciples.

Hernandez also had to weigh gaining followers with the implications of the actions necessary to do so. Hernandez describes four men, Cristobal de Gumiel, Cabrera, Friar Pedro de Segura, and Bernardino Tovar, who all wanted to engage in carnal behavior with her.²⁰⁵ Had she allowed them, she might have obtained four more disciples, but increased her risk of being accused of sexual impropriety. She rejected all four of them, demonstrating that not all potential disciples were viewed equally. When potential disciples and saint's goals did not align, the saint would not permit them to follow her. Medrano was allowed to follow and sexually embrace Hernandez because they were pursuing the same goal: holiness.

²⁰³ Sallmann, *Santi*, 254.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

²⁰⁵ Homza, "Francisca Hernandez," 107.

Other denunciations further demonstrate the precariousness of the disciple-saint relationship. Chiara Bacchis condemned Cecilia Ferrazzi because she refused to release Bacchis's own daughters and nieces from her home for at-risk girls. Chiara Garzoni, a former ward, also denounced Ferrazzi.²⁰⁶ Similarly, Francisca de Apostoles was denounced by two beatas who lived with her. According to her trial, Apostoles, "said her faults and ordered the rest to say them and they said them...She placed great fears in the women who were in her company if they did not observe the rule that she had invented."²⁰⁷ Likely, the strong order and rules Apostoles imposed on the community resulted in her denunciation. Both Apostoles and Ferrazzi failed to manage the balance between their commitment to their vocations with popular support. They placed the importance of their missions, sheltering young girls and founding a convent, respectively, above appeasing followers. Growing and maintaining a local cult was a complex process that required the balance of the saint's pursuit of holiness with their disciples' interests.

Francisco Ortiz, another disciple of Hernandez, exemplifies that disciples could serve their saints in non-monetary ways. When Hernandez was arrested in 1529, Francisco Ortiz, a friar, wrote to the Inquisitor-General, Alonso Manrique, to defend her.²⁰⁸ In a lengthy letter, Ortiz argued that Hernandez's imprisonment was unjust. He praised Hernandez, calling her a "blessed bride of Jesus" and told Manrique to "write to her with the honor and reverence owed to such servants of God."²⁰⁹ He also accused Manrique of sin. Ortiz boldly stated, "I know that what you did so publicly is a sin. The sin is so scandalous that its fame will endure for the next two hundred years."²¹⁰ This blunt, accusatory tone carried on throughout Ortiz's letter to a very

²⁰⁶ Schutte, *Aspiring Saints*, 14.

²⁰⁷ Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *The Inquisition of Francisca: A Sixteenth Century Visionary on Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 103.

²⁰⁸ Homza, "Friar Francisco Ortiz," 93.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

powerful individual. His devotion to Hernandez must have been quite great to take such a strong stance. Perhaps this stemmed from the fact that Ortiz believed that his special relationship with God was the result of his contact with Hernandez. Ortiz wrote, “I received such magnificent gifts from God with her holy communication.”²¹¹ Ortiz provides a contrast to a disciple like Aquila Galasso. Unlike Galasso, Ortiz remained committed to Hernandez, and also unlike Galasso, could serve Hernandez in a public way. In three other letters, as well as in sermons, Ortiz acted as her public defender.²¹² He utilized his authority and abilities in order to assist her. Ortiz represents the possible strength of the devotion of a disciple to a saint, and that they could risk their own well-being in order to serve the saint.

Ortiz’s typically feminine conceptualization of Hernandez relates to traditional ideas about sanctity. Ortiz defended her in a gendered way; he stated it would be “a tremendous cruelty to a person as delicate as Francisca Hernandez [to be imprisoned]...I know if Your Lordship knew how delicate and sick my blessed mother is, out of natural kindness you would not consent to leave her alone.”²¹³ Throughout the letter, he referred to her as an innocent, pure child, honest virgin, and bride of Christ. His defense relied on citing the gendered roles she fulfilled, like virgin and bride, and her typically feminine, weak character. Ortiz conceptualized Francisca with the same type of language that St. Teresa of Avila’s disciples utilized to promote her holiness. According to Erin Rowe, Teresa presented herself as a highly feminine, obedient woman. Her supporters seized on this hyper-femininity to prove that her divine gifts came from humility and obedience. She was not threatening because her spiritual gifts and knowledge were

²¹¹ Ibid., 96.

²¹² Ibid., 93.

²¹³ Ibid., 101-102.

the result of God and her female weakness.²¹⁴ Ortiz's defense of Hernandez similarly focused on her feminine nature. Although female false saints' gender created certain additional doubts about the veracity of their visions and their strength of character, hyper-femininity was a tactic disciples used to defend and support their saints.

Gender also contributed to the ways female saints embodied the traditional male religious roles of preacher or confessor to gain disciples. Maria de Cazalla, for example, preached and instructed the public. The Inquisition accused her of being a "teacher and dogmatist" who "taught them, quoting authorities and psalms of Holy Scripture, and expounding it all in Spanish, twisting Holy Scripture."²¹⁵ Not only did Cazalla expound her beliefs in public, but she also taught people the Bible in the vernacular.²¹⁶ By inhabiting this role of preacher, Cazalla effectively spread her ideas and gained notoriety for them. According to her trial, "many people went to hear her as if she were a preacher."²¹⁷ Her ample base of supporters is verified by the fact that her followers wanted to make a book out of her letters.²¹⁸ Cazalla's preaching was likely a factor in her attracting the inquisitors' attention. According to Christopher Black, in the post-Tridentine era, the Church enacted a strong ban of all vernacular translations of religious texts.²¹⁹ The Inquisition opposed Cazalla's actions; the prosecutor stated, "She could not and should not have preached. Such preaching is prohibited because she is a woman."²²⁰ Her behavior was wrong on two counts: because of its content and because of her gender. Gabriella Zarri states that the Church especially distrusted educated, knowledgeable women, and believed that teaching

²¹⁴ Erin Rowe, "The Spanish Minerva: Imaging Teresa of Avila as Patron Saint in Seventeenth Century Spain," *Catholic Historical Review* 294 (2006): 582.

²¹⁵ Homza, "Maria de Cazalla," 130.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

²¹⁹ Christopher Black, *Church, Religion and Society in Early Modern Italy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 183.

²²⁰ Homza, "Maria de Cazalla," 130.

was supposed to be an “exclusively masculine role.”²²¹ Cazalla demonstrates the benefits and consequences that came with enacting male duties. She gained a significant following, but fell under the suspicion of the Inquisition. By preaching, Cazalla was successful in the short term, but ultimately was tried by the Inquisition as a result of crossing the line of proper female conduct.

Women also challenged ideas of expected female behavior by adopting the male role of the confessor. Francisca Hernandez acted as a confessor to her disciples. Hernandez was said to be able to tell whether someone was sinning and if they would be going to Heaven or Hell.²²² Thus, she engaged in spiritual discernment, much like a confessor would. Since Hernandez was holy and allegedly could not sin, she placed herself in a strong position to determine if others did. It makes sense that her role as arbiter of sin gave her power and attracted followers. Disciples could come to her time and time again, in order to find out if they were free of sin and going to Heaven. The ability to divine people’s future in the afterlife made her a substitute for a confessor. Ortiz viewed her as his spiritual director, calling himself “a child of [Hernandez’s] heart.”²²³ He also called her his guardian multiple times.²²⁴ Hernandez provided the same type of discernment over sin that a confessor did and acted as such to her disciples. Alumbrados like Hernandez eschewed typical penance and abstinences.²²⁵ Hernandez produced the desired effect of confession, relief from sin, without the difficulty of penance. For her disciples, confession with Hernandez could have been far more attractive than traditional confession.

²²¹ Gabriella Zarri, “Living Saints,” 234.

²²² Homza, “Antonio de Medrano,” 110.

²²³ Homza, “Friar Francisco Ortiz,” 101.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

²²⁵ Homza, “Antonio de Medrano,” 111.

Maria Sparano took the role of the confessor a step further. Rather than just being able to identify sin like the *alumbrados*, Sparano maintained that she could actually absolve people of it.²²⁶ She relied on a story of her meeting Pope Clement VIII to legitimize this claim. She said that the Pope told her that her prayers, including the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary, would free souls from purgatory.²²⁷ Sparano spread this story to support her assertion that she could absolve sin. Arguably, she was trying to gain prominence in her disciples' lives by replacing their confessor. In fact, she even critiqued confessors, and ordered her disciples not to go to them. Sparano said that "the confessors absolve only volumes of superficial sins," while she "absolved in depth."²²⁸ Sparano placed herself above ecclesiastical authority to give herself greater legitimacy. In a similar vein to Hernandez, Sparano did not require her followers to perform penance. Rather, Sparano fasted and made penance for them. Her followers considered themselves her "spiritual daughters" and believed that as a result, they were obligated to obey her.²²⁹ By absolving her disciple's sins and doing their penances, Sparano created a type of imbalance or debt that caused her disciples to become devoted to her. Sparano and Hernandez both demonstrate that saints could gain disciples by playing on people's basic fears: purgatory and the afterlife. They modified the service of the confessor to make it easier for people to free themselves from sin.

Many of these false saints connect to the practice of "cura animarum" in Catholicism. Particularly after the Council of Trent began releasing its decrees in 1545, the "cura animarum," or "care of souls," encompassed the parish priests' and bishop's responsibility to guide parishioners toward salvation. It was a larger obligation than simply the administration of

²²⁶ Sallmann, *Santi*, 251.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

sacraments, though the latter was clearly a part of it.²³⁰ C. Lincoln Johnson and Andrew Weigert explain the care of souls, “Traditionally, the penitent presents sufficiently detailed accounts of his or her actions for the priest-confessor to make two judgments: Are the actions ‘sins’? And does the penitent have the proper sorrow and motivation to try to avoid future sins to that the priest may grant ‘absolution.’”²³¹ Hernandez and Sparano fit within this framework: both helped their followers cleanse themselves of sin. Ferrazzi also chose the confessors for the girls in her home, and was even accused of acting as a confessor to them.²³² These women did not, and could not, precisely inhabit the role of confessor for their disciples. They did engage in priest-like behavior though, especially by paying attention to the specific concerns of their “penitents.” Sparano helped her disciple worried over her family in purgatory, and Hernandez assisted her sexually ashamed male followers. Hernandez further connects to the “cura animarum,” since she was able to discern who was sinful.²³³ Sparano too was able to absolve her followers, much like a priest would. It is doubtful that these women saw themselves as confessors, but their behavior demonstrates that for their followers, they took the place of the priest in the area of the personal care of souls.

Many of these female false saints also relate to the typology of “living saints.” According to Gabriella Zarri, before the Reformation, in the fifteenth-century, many female mystics attracted cult followings for their miracles and charity work, and were called “living saints.”²³⁴ They gained fame for their intense, violent visions, where they fought the Devil, received the stigmata, or reenacted Christ’s passion.²³⁵ Their male confessors often recorded their lives in

²³⁰ C. Lincoln Johnson and Andrew J. Weigert, “Frames in Confession: The Social Construction of Sexual Sin,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 4 (1980): 370.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 370.

²³² Schutte, *Autobiography*, 33.

²³³ Homza, “Antonio de Medrano,” 110.

²³⁴ Zarri, “Living Saints,” 234.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

vitae, or biographies, which all had a similar narrative.²³⁶ These women, born into Christian families, felt a religious calling from a young age, fought the Devil, performed miracles, suffered humbly to save others, and then eventually died in God's favor and embrace.²³⁷ In many ways, female false saints strongly resembled these women. Ferrazzi presented her life as following a similar storyline. Ferrazzi, Apostoles, and Sparano all performed charity or healing miracles. Ferrazzi and Cazalla both expressed their visions in a very visceral, grounded way. They physically battled with the Devil, who made his presence known through bruises and wounds. Although Apostoles did not fight the Devil, she did have vivid visions that involved hostile demons. It is possible that these false saints heard living saints' stories, despite their probable illiteracy. With the rise of the printing press and the frequent publishing of these famous women's *vitae*, they may have heard them at home or at church, especially considering their deep religiosity.

Beyond connecting to past models of sanctity, these trials also contain evidence that challenges traditional historical interpretations of female false sanctity. Schutte focused mainly on how these women used ecstasies or visions to gain followers. Although this was an important element for many false saints, this was not the only avenue towards a reputation for holiness. Even Ferrazzi, Schutte's main focus, did not rely solely on visions. Caring for at-risk girls added to her saintly image because she was performing Christian charity. Her role as a caretaker gave her the opportunity to be a public figure, display her holiness, and to make connections to possible disciples, including the Venetian elite. Ferrazzi fits into Zarri's argument that that saints gained fame and followers through their personality, miracles, and talents.²³⁸ Schutte fails to

²³⁶ Ibid., 239.

²³⁷ Ibid., 235.

²³⁸ Ibid., 219.

attend to these nuances and the variety of social networking these false saints actually carried out; instead, she lumps female false saints under the banner of “little women,” stating that most of these female false saints were uneducated, illiterate women of a lower class status.²³⁹ Cazalla weakens this argument; clearly, Cazalla was literate and educated enough to read and preach Scripture. Even though it is true that most of these women were on the margins of society, Schutte does not give them individual agency or priorities. She merely explains that, “By making contact with supernatural beings more powerful than their earthly superiors, they sought to overcome the handicaps of economic, social, and sexual subordination.”²⁴⁰ Even if this was truly the purpose behind these women’s actions, Schutte does not explain the variety of ways women overcame these obstacles.

In *Saints and Society*, a major work on the classification of saintly behavior, Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell maintain that most female saints either gained cult followings through asceticism or penance.²⁴¹ Bell argues that women had few options and few sources of power, so they turned inwards.²⁴² While this in general may be true, the trials of false saints demonstrate that there were other paths. Harsh treatment of their bodies was not their only tool and they were not as powerless as Bell maintains. These false saints took on public and masculine roles that resulted in large followings. Even when false saints did rely on their bodies, they were not contained in rooms or convents practicing extreme fasting or penance alone. They could use their bodies publicly as proof of holiness and closeness to God.

The process of attracting and keeping a strong cult of followers was complex for these false saints. Often, they attempted to embody typically masculine roles to attract disciples who

²³⁹ Schutte, *Aspiring Saints*, 57.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁴¹ Weinstein and Bell, *Saints*, 233.

²⁴² Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 55.

became dependent on them for spiritual guidance, like women usually relied on their male confessors. These cases reveal that the saint-disciple relationship was one of give and take. The goals of saints and followers could complement each other and result in mutual benefit. The body was of prime importance for these false saints. They embraced it as a source of legitimacy for their holiness and as a way to overcome typical perceptions about female weakness. Overall, these trials demonstrate that gaining disciples was a multi-faceted endeavor. Female saints could use a variety of behaviors to attract followers, who in turn had their own agendas. Ecstatic visions, extreme fasting, embodiment of male roles, and the care of souls could gain false saints disciples, but these behaviors carried risk. There was some kind of line that demarcated acceptable behavior of women in the eyes of the Church and the public. While it is impossible to say why false saints did what they did, it is clear that they were willing to employ a variety of methods to achieve their ultimate goals. These methods were more varied than what historians have previously argued. Female false saints combined body and speech in order to achieve holiness. They were more than ecstatic visionaries; they were preachers, confessors, and caretakers as well.

Conclusion

False saints may appear to be a problematic subject for historical study. Unlike canonized saints, there is not a wealth of evidence available. Our main sources consist primarily of Inquisition trials, which are themselves inherently flawed. Unlike Catherine of Siena or St. Teresa of Avila, false saints cannot tell us about educated women or the representation of religious women over a long time period. For all these weaknesses, false saints still merit historical analysis because of the value they add to our understanding of gendered spirituality and popular religion. Their trials shed light on female visionary experience, the importance of the body, the dynamics of the confessor-penitent relationship, and the process of discipleship. Rather than demonstrating the Church's views on spirituality, they show us the different ways the laity conceptualized sanctity and religiosity.

This thesis began as a critique of Schutte's influential work, *Aspiring Saints*. One of the biggest problems with Schutte's argument is her simplified, top-down model of popular religion and Church authority. Analysis of the lives of false saints weakens this theory. Sara Matthews Grieco argues that in the Catholic Reformation, the "post-Tridentine Church tried to impose on female religious orders a model lifestyle based on contemplation and prayer, unquestioning obedience, subordination to hierarchy, and charitable activity."²⁴³ False saints did not follow these reforms to the letter. They instead continued to perform traditional holy behaviors, such as asceticism, fasting, and surviving on Communion alone. Grieco argues that the Church had, "a grudging forbearance when faced with the survival of...devotional traditions inherited from the Middle Ages."²⁴⁴ Fasting, Communion, and penance were all church-approved, and even

²⁴³ Sara Matthews Grieco, "Models of Female Sanctity in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy," in *Women and Faith*, ed. Luccetta Scaraffia and Gabreilla Zarri (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 175.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

mandated, behaviors. False saints developed their own spiritualities by taking these requirements to the extreme. Rather than just refraining from meat during Lent, false saints like Cecilia Ferrazzi and Francisca Apostoles performed fasts that lasted for weeks or months. Instead of consuming Communion and confessing annually as required, they consumed Communion daily or weekly and confessed frequently. Scholar Mary Laven connects these ascetic behaviors to the “long tradition of suffering and self-inflicted pain in Catholic devotion...Mourning and self-mortification permitted a continuity with earlier threads of Catholic spirituality.”²⁴⁵ Even when false saints acted against Church doctrine, they were still responding to the baseline of Church policy. Grieco further argues that the continuation of ecstasies and visionary experience in the Catholic Reformation is logical. She states, “The Tridentine enforcement of ecclesiastical hierarchy and strict enclosure gave an impetus to the practice of ecstatic vision, and the causes behind the post-Tridentine multiplication of mystical nuns and tertiaries becomes self-evident.”²⁴⁶ Although the vast majority of these women were not nuns, some, like Francisca Apostoles, desired to become them, and also had intense mystical experiences. The behaviors of these false saints represent a negotiation between the core and the periphery. These lay, primarily uneducated men and woman of middling to low status did not fully embrace the Church’s preferred model of sanctity in the Catholic-Reformation. They followed basic Church practice, but on such an extreme level to make their spirituality their own.

The trials of these false saints necessitate moving beyond the top-down model of Catholic spirituality to a model of negotiation. On the surface level, the core’s suspicion of mysticism in the Catholic Reformation won out in these cases, since the Inquisition convicted all of the false saints analyzed in this thesis. The Neapolitans, Spaniards, and Venetians’ willingness to follow

²⁴⁵ Mary Laven, “Encountering the Counter-Reformation,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 59 (2006): 712.

²⁴⁶ Greico, “Models of Female Sanctity,” 175.

these false saints is a sign of mediation between the core and periphery. People continued to devote themselves to these false saints, even though the Inquisition repeatedly rejected them. The Church's views on proper sanctity clearly did not disseminate widely among the ordinary Catholic laity. Although the Church condemned four of the saints the Neapolitans venerated, the population still presented local holy figures as models of sanctity. Neither the core nor the periphery were entirely successful in their goals; each had different views towards sanctity which at times conflicted with each other. Historian David Gentilcore argues for the importance of studying false sanctity, "Spontaneous devotion to local holy men and women versus official canonization further exemplifies the process of negotiation between levels of society."²⁴⁷ False saints' trials created situations in which the values of popular religion met and challenged doctrine. The theme of negotiation, if included, could have made a significant difference in Schutte's work. The Inquisition was a repressive Church institution, but it was not an all-powerful one. The Church's flock had a mind of its own and held on to its own beliefs and values.

The goal with this thesis was to illuminate the individual nature of spirituality on the local level by rounding out the lives of these false saints. I have attempted to present them as dynamic agents acting within a local context. I have sought to complicate Anne Schutte's reductionistic argument; these false saints were not merely victims or liars. They were Catholics who had their own desires and goals, and strived to find popularity among their fellow laity. They relied on the body as proof of internal visionary experience, and balanced their needs with those of their disciples to maintain their cult. In contrast to Schutte, I have attempted to portray the confessor-penitent relationship as one of nuance and shared influence. Ultimately, these false

²⁴⁷ David Gentilcore, "Methods and Approaches in the Social History of the Counter-Reformation in Italy," *Social History* 17 (1992): 82.

saints and this thesis demonstrate the balance of power that was between the ordinary laity and the Church as an institution. Catholic doctrine was not universally successfully imposed, nor did popular religion proceed unchecked by Catholic authority. Whether or not these false saints were truly holy or not is unimportant: to many lower clergy and a large section of the laity they were, and to the highest levels of the Church, they were not. They embody the conflicting interests the public and the institutional Church sometimes held. False saints require us to expand our range of thought: in terms of the confessor-penitent relationship, in terms of female spirituality, and in terms of the strength of popular religion. Sometimes it is too easy to see Catholicism as a uniform, static force, given its historical impact and continued relevance. The doctrines and ideas of Catholicism could not have continued without the institutional Church, but they also could not have endured without the ordinary, and sometimes extraordinary, believers.

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