

**Catherine M. Mooney, *Clare of Assisi and the Thirteenth-Century Church: Religious Women, Rules, and Resistance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Print, 312 pp., US\$65.00, ISBN: 9780812248173.**



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*Review*

In *Clare of Assisi and the Thirteenth Century Church*, Catherine M. Mooney, Associate Professor of Church History at Boston College, provides a fresh perspective on both Clare and the development of the order which now bears her name. Mooney challenges perceptions of Clare as sole founder of the 'Poor Clares', portraying her instead as involved in a series of complex negotiations between papal regulation and the spiritual self-determination of Clare's Order of San Damiano and other women's orders. Mooney presents readers with a 'micro-study' of the history of the Order of San Damiano and its growing identification with mendicant ideals. However, she also suggests that Clare's attempts to establish a *forma vitae* ('way of life') for her community formed part of a wider movement in which communities of religious women struggled to maintain their own spiritual ideals while ultimately subject to papal control.

Mooney's study consists of nine chapters, over the course of which she charts the progress of Clare's life as well as that of the Order of San Damiano, examining key texts from each stage of its development. Chapter 1 focuses on Clare's early life, her relationship with Francis of Assisi and her decision to embrace the life of a 'penitent' (a word carefully chosen by Mooney to encapsulate the diverse groups in search of the *vita apostolica*). Chapter 2 examines Clare's early involvement with San Damiano, whilst Chapter 3 demonstrates how this community came to be, with Mooney painting a picture of a papal order meant to ensure conformity among the women of Clare's community. Chapter 4 focuses on San Damiano's continued

development from 1226-30, a period which saw the death of Francis. Chapter 5 shifts the narrative focus back to Clare herself in a close examination of her four surviving letters to Agnes of Prague. In chapter 6, Mooney delves deeper into the debates about which rule the Order should conform to, including Agnes of Prague's attempts to create and establish a new *forma vitae* for her monastery. Chapter 7 continues to explore these controversies, addressing Pope Innocent IV's issuing of a new *forma vitae* and the possible reasons for its failure. Chapter 8 provides an in-depth look at the 1253 *forma vitae* often attributed to Clare herself, as Mooney attempts to tackle the question of its 'true' authorship. Finally, Clare is given the 'final say' in chapter 9, with an exploration of her final letter to Agnes of Prague, as well as the *Testament* and *Blessing* attributed to her. Yet a study of these documents, too, raises fundamental questions about their authorship, and thus the way in which modern-day perceptions of Clare have been constructed.

The tension between Clare's real-life persona and her hagiographic portrayals lies at the heart of Mooney's argument – that her role in the development of the Order of San Damiano was significantly more complex than is often imagined. As such, one of the book's great strengths is its firm foundation in, and close critical examination of, the texts from which details of Clare's life have been gleaned. From the first pages, Mooney shows a flair for the literary; in response to the pun-filled description of *Clara claris praeclara meritis* ('Clare outstandingly clear with clear merits'), she offers a pun of her own, 'the truth about Clare is not so clear to me'. Her careful examination of the blurred lines between 'history' and 'hagiography' serve not only to illuminate Clare's presentation as a literary figure, but also possible details of her life that her hagiographic portrayals may adapt or obscure. Additionally, Mooney takes care not to take modern historians' interpretations of Clare's actions as axiomatic, arguing that her portrayal as a 'valiant woman' itself

serves as a form of hagiographical hyperbole. Instead, she returns to the original Latin sources in which Clare appears, providing critiques of long-established translations and adding her own. Through peeling away the layers of interpretation that have contributed to Clare's construction as a saintly figure, Mooney brings some 'clarity' to the woman behind the hagiographic accounts, even as she shows the boundaries between such accounts and 'reality' to be less than clear.

Whilst Mooney approaches her sources with caution and an eye for detail, the very textual limitations that she identifies mean that her analysis, too, can sometimes approach conjecture. For example, she at times relies heavily on the testimony of Clare's fellow penitent women prior to her canonisation as some of the few eyewitness accounts of the saint's life. However, whereas she is careful to show how such accounts differ from later hagiographic portrayals, she does not offer much close analysis of the sisters' possible motivations for portraying their beloved 'abbess' in a certain way. Further, the book's stated purpose as a 'micro-study' necessarily means that it focuses on the inner workings of the Order of San Damiano. However, this does contribute to an impression of an incomplete picture of how the struggle for control over the order formed part of wider attempts by communities of religious women to assert spiritual autonomy, and how such attempts played out beyond those orders that identified with Franciscan ideals. Yet it is precisely this incompleteness which invites further consideration of interactions between the papacy and other women's communities. Mooney's study thus functions as a call for a more nuanced view of the ways in which female religious negotiated their spiritual environments.

*Clare of Assisi and the Thirteenth-Century Church* demonstrates a fundamental shift in the perception of both Clare and the order to which she devoted her life. By consciously moving away from portrayals of Clare as a lone, saintly figure in the

growth of 'her' order, Mooney allows for a more nuanced picture of Clare as working both within and against papal authority. Furthermore, this perspective enables a host of other personalities to emerge within the narrative of the order of San Damiano, including popes and cardinals, monks and nuns, as well as Francis of Assisi himself, whose relationship with Clare and her order more generally is shown to be more ambiguous than might be expected. The book's methodology also paves the way for further 'micro-studies' of women's religious communities, offering the opportunity to form a 'clearer' picture of the lives of the individuals who made up these communities and their negotiations with attempts at papal regulation. In attempting to deconstruct Clare's hyperbolically 'valiant' portrayals, Mooney reminds readers of religious women's capacity to shape their own spiritual environments and provide their own forms of resistance to higher authorities' attempts at control.

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