

MEDIEVAL APPROACHES TO SAINTHOOD AND CHRISTIAN LIFE

- Topic: Cistercian, Dominican, and Franciscan: Medieval Approaches to Sainthood and the Christian Life
- Convener: Shawn Colberg, University of Notre Dame
- Moderator: Rita George Tvrtković, Benedictine University
- Presenters: Daria Spezzano, University of Notre Dame
Catherine Cavadini, University of Notre Dame
Shawn Colberg, University of Notre Dame

Saints exercise undeniable influence on the imagery and direction of Christian life. This session examines the way in which three medieval schools—Cistercian, Dominican, and Franciscan—depict sainthood and link it to Christian perfection and union with God. The first paper explores St. Paul as a model for transformative union with Christ from a Cistercian perspective; the second focuses on presentations of St. Dominic as an apostle *par excellence*; and the third treats depictions of St. Francis as a simultaneously imitable and inimitable model of Christian perfection.

In her paper, “‘I am black but comely’: Paul as model of the Bride in Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*,” Daria Spezzano suggests that the reason Bernard uses Paul to reflect on the line “I am black but beautiful” is because for Bernard, Paul is the best example both of “blackness” (meaning “the struggle of the soul against the downward pull of sin, flesh, and the demands of service”) and beauty (meaning the heights of mystical union). And Paul, in turn, is conformed by love to Christ, who is himself both black and beautiful in his suffering humanity. Bernard the monk could relate especially well to Paul the apostle, for each experienced both the lows of suffering and the highs of contemplation while on the path to God.

In her paper, “From the Breast of the Father: St. Dominic as the Perfect Apostle,” Catherine Cavadini examines the ways in which two Dominican saints, Thomas Aquinas and Catherine of Siena, viewed the founder of their order. She notes that Dominic was revered by later Dominicans because in their opinion, “so well did Dominic’s words and deeds harmonize . . . that his whole life became what Augustine would call an ‘eloquent speech.’” To them, Dominic was not only a saint, but also the perfect apostle; his special status is nowhere clearer than in Catherine of Siena’s vision of Dominic emerging directly from God’s breast at the very same time Christ emerges from God’s mouth.

In his paper, “Bonaventure on Francis as Perfect Saint and Archetype of the Christian Life,” Shawn Colberg analyzes Bonaventure’s famous hagiography of St. Francis of Assisi, the *Legenda*, and notes the ways in which it describes Francis as both “set apart” and yet a model of saintliness for all. While Bonaventure emphasizes Francis’s uniqueness, he also structures the *Legenda* so that any Christian “who unflaggingly desires and imitates Francis’s biographical ascent can herself become a *vir hierarchus*.” Francis’s conformity to Christ is seen most clearly his unique reception of the stigmata, and yet the stages leading to this end

(purgation, illumination, perfection) are presented as imitable by anyone willing to undertake the journey.

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