

THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT OF FASTING AND ABSTINENCE IN THE LIFE OF ST. NICHOLAS OF TOLENTINO (†1305)

The seven hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Nicholas of Tolentino provides a fitting occasion to recall the life of this holy man, who was the first member of the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine to be canonized. In many ways, like John the Baptist between the two Testaments, St. Nicholas stands on the border between the ideal of sanctity based on an eremitical style of life and that of the new Mendicant orders.¹ Two primary sources composed some twenty years after his death are available to researchers, namely, the *Processo* with the documentation compiled in 1325 to present to Pope John XXII for his canonization and the *Vita* completed shortly after by his fellow Augustinian friar, Pietro da Monterubbiano.² Both of these sources attest to the saint's severe ascetical practices.³

The most important of these practices was his self-denial in fasting and abstinence, which will be the focus of the present study. For, as Caroline Walker Bynum remarks: "Self-starvation, the deliberate and extreme renunciation of food and drink, seemed to medieval

¹ See André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, translated by Jean Birrell (Cambridge, 1997), 329-36. Vauchez discusses both St. Nicholas of Tolentino and Blessed Giovanni Bono (John Bonus) under the title "Eremitical Sainthood" and points out that many of their practices pertain to the eremitical type of spirituality. Regarding St. Nicholas, Vauchez remarks (336): "His contemporaries seem to have admired [the] harmonious balance between asceticism and apostleship.... There could be no clearer indication that, with St. Nicholas of Tolentino, we are already much closer to the ideal of sainthood of the Mendicant orders than to that of the hermits."

² See Pietro da Monterubbiano, *Vita S. Nicolai Tolentinatis*, in *Acta Sanctorum* 43, September III (Paris and Rome, 1868), 644-64. All references to the *Vita* will be to this edition by page and paragraph number, unless otherwise noted. See also *Il Processo per la Canonizzazione di S. Nicola da Tolentino*, ed. by Nicola Occhioni, OSA (Tolentino and Rome, 1984). The reader will note that the orthography in this document varies. For the most part, the text of the edition cited will be followed. With few exceptions, the names of the witnesses follow the form found in the *Processo*.

³ A few definitions of the terms to be used are: *Fasting* means limiting the amount of food one takes to one full meal a day without meat. A *perfect fast* means taking only bread (salt) and water. *Abstinence* means not eating certain foods. Meat along with juices or fat derived from it is always the principal item to be avoided, but the Medieval Lenten fast also forbade cheese and eggs and, in some instances, fish. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, 4, dist. 15, quest. 3, art. 4b, resp. 4: "Quamvis usus casei et ovorum in quadragesima sit generaliter interdictus, tamen in aliis jejuniis apud diversos in his est diversus abstinentiae modus."

people the most basic asceticism."⁴ Fasting and abstinence too have received much attention in recent studies, especially those concerned with female saints.⁵

The present study first focuses in some detail on the correspondence between the *Vita* and the evidence of the witnesses, especially the friars who lived with St. Nicholas and those laity who were personally acquainted with him.⁶ This part of the study is undertaken to obtain as accurate statement of the facts as possible. To situate the saint in his historical setting, the background of the newly formed Order of St. Augustine with its roots in the previous eremitical movements as well as a summary of the observances of fasting and abstinence before and after the unification will follow. In order to understand the spiritual teaching underlying the saint's practices, a survey of selected sources of monastic spirituality that formed the tradition of fasting and abstinence is presented next. Finally, the personal motivation attributed to St. Nicholas's ascetical practices in the documentation will be investigated as well as the influence of previous hagiography on Pietro da Monterubbiano's presentation.

The Sources and the Process of Canonization

Over the years, the *Vita* of St. Nicholas written by Pietro da Monterubbiano has shaped virtually all the subsequent literature on the saint until recently. Much iconography too has been based on the episodes recounted by Pietro or by his imitators. In composing the *Vita* of St. Nicholas as part of the documentation for the process of canonization, Pietro da Monterubbiano had several purposes in mind. Above all, he needed to present a continuous narrative of the saint's life, illustrating his progress in virtue as well as the miracles worked

⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987), 2. Peter Brown echoes this idea in discussing the asceticism of the Egyptian hermits and monks in late antiquity: "While the Nile valley was a zone of food, braced against the threat of famine, the desert was thought of as the zone deprived of food; it was a zone of the nonhuman. The most bitter struggle of the desert ascetic was presented not so much as a struggle with his sexuality as with his belly." See *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), 218-21.

⁵ To cite only a few examples in addition to Bynum, Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, with an Epilog by William N. Davis (Chicago, 1985); Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: on Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, translated from the French by Felicia Phesant (Oxford, 1988); Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, 1998).

⁶ See the classification of witnesses in the "Introduzione" to *Il Processo*, xxiv-xxv.

by him in life and after death. He also had to present a theological perspective on the saint by citing parallels from Holy Scripture and making appropriate comments. Thus, for example, in relating the story of St. Nicholas's birth, he foreshadows God's choice of Nicholas as his servant by making a connection between the situation of Anna, the mother of Samuel, and that of Anna, the mother of St. Nicholas. Doubtlessly too, Pietro had in mind the probability that the *Vita* would be used for the lessons in the Divine Office and as a source for his fellow friars to propagate devotion to St. Nicholas. In contrast to the influence of the *Vita*, the documents compiled during the canonical investigation remained in manuscript and were largely unknown until their publication in the critical edition of 1984.

The canonical process began officially with the papal bull *Pater luminum et misericordiarum* issued by Pope John XXII on 23 May 1325. Behind the bull lay the petitions made to the pope by the Augustinians, who were desirous of official recognition for their confrere. A papal commission was established to conduct the investigation.⁷ As representative of the Order, Tommaso da Fermo, who held the degree of lector, was directed to present documents and to supply witnesses.⁸ He submitted a list of twenty-two *Articuli* containing the topics to be investigated along with a list of persons to be interrogated. These documents were accepted by the commissioners, and the testimony of the witnesses began on August 12. The commission was convened in several towns in the Le Marche area to obtain the testimony of 371 witnesses. The whole process closed on 28 September 1325 and the documents were forwarded to the Pope.⁹ A synthesis of the testimonies covering the principal points was prepared by a commission of cardinals and finished in 1328.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the canonical process was halted at this point and

⁷ See "Introduzione" by Domenico Gentili, OSA, in *Il Processo*, x. The bull was delivered to Federico, bishop of Senigallia, and Tommaso, bishop of Cesena, by the Augustinian provincial, Pietro da Castello, and the prior of Tolentino, Simone da Montecchio, in July of the same year. Another commissioner had been designated, Ugolino, abbot of S. Pietro in Perugia, but he declined to accept the commission. To represent the Augustinians, Tommaso da Fermo, who held the degree of lector, was chosen along with Nuncio di Ugolino as representative of the *commune* of Tolentino.

⁸ *Il Processo*, 15: "Eadem die [23 July 1325] supradicti domini episcopi, pro tribunali sedentes sub transanna domorum fratrum ipsius loci de Tholentino, monuerunt supradictum fratrem Thomam, syndicum et procuratorem, quod si vult ad informationem facti ipsorum dominorum episcoporum aliquos articulos et testes, sive instrumenta, vel aliquid aliud producere vel probare super dicto negotio et miraculis dicti fratris Nicolai, quod id facere procuraret."

⁹ *Il Processo*, ix-xii.

¹⁰ See *Il Compendio del Processo di Canonizzazione di San Nicola*, ed. by Rossano Cicconi (Tolentino: Biblioteca Egidiana, 2002), 9.

not taken up again by the Holy See until the time of Eugene IV, who finally canonized St. Nicholas on 5 June 1446.¹¹

Because the wording of the *Articuli* is similar to that of the *Vita* when the same matter is treated, the question arises as to which of the documents was first. In his biography of the saint, Domenico Gentili, OSA, states his belief that the *Articuli* were based on the *Vita*.¹² The Bollandists, however, place the date of the *Vita* in 1326. This date is confirmed by the *Explicit* of the codex Urbanus Latinus 1376 of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.¹³ Nevertheless, in view of the close correspondence in wording and the fact that Pietro was not called upon to give testimony, it appears clear that he had a hand in drawing up the *Articuli*. He must have been researching the material for some time and had probably composed an initial sketch or draft of the *Vita*. Thus the events singled out for questioning in the *Articuli* and the order in which they appear have the same general arrangement as in the *Vita*.

The articles themselves set limits to the answers given by the witnesses, many of whom were content to affirm without further comment that the contents were true. By keeping closely to the wording of the articles, the commissioners did not generally encourage the witnesses to disclose more information.¹⁴ Nevertheless, some witnesses

¹¹ André Vauchez considers the presence of the eremitical aspects of St. Nicholas's spirituality to have been a deterrent. In speaking of the cases of Giovanni Bono, Celestine V, and Nicholas of Tolentine, he notes that none were canonized in the medieval period properly speaking. He adds: "Ces échecs ne tiennent sans doute pas au hasard: l'ermite inquiète la hiérarchie ecclésiastique qui craint les excès d'ascétisme et les déviations toujours possibles." See "L'érémisme dans les sources hagiographiques médiévales," *Ermîtes de France et d'Italie (XI^e-XV^e Siècle)*, ed. by André Vauchez, Collection de l'École Française de Rome (Rome, 2003), 377.

¹² Domenico Gentili, OSA, *Un asceta e un apostolo: San Nicola da Tolentino*, 2nd ed. (Tolentino, 1978), 111-12: "A nostro avviso... i delegati pontifici si trovarono fra mano un documento, e precisamente la biografia di padre Pietro da Monterubbiano." Ibid., 149-50: "Ma data la possibilità di un posteriore codicillo aggiunto, ci paiono convincenti, per preporre la biografia al processo, il controllo accurato, da parte dei delegati, delle informazioni date dal Monterubbiano, etc."

¹³ BAV, Urb. Lat. 1376: "Explicit hystoria sancti Nicolay a Tholentino Ordinis Fratrum Heremitarum Sancti Augustini a Fratre Petro de Monterubbiano lectore composita, sub anno Domini Nostri MCCCXXVI, tempore Domini Johannis Papae XXII, die XII mensis Aprilis, none indictionis, completa. Amen." The copiest notes that he finished his work 4 July 1464.

¹⁴ Agostino Trape, "La figura e la santità di San Nicola come emergono nel processo," *San Nicola, Tolentino, le Marche: Contributi e ricerche sul Processo (a. 1325) per la Canonizzazione di San Nicola da Tolentino*, Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Tolentino, 4-7 Settembre 1985, 184-85. Domenico Gentili had made the same point earlier in *Un asceta*. 11. In the "Introduzione" to *Il Processo*, xvii, Gentili remarks: "Nel processo di S. Nicola alcune disposizioni e la metà o forse i due terzi di molte altre si riducono alla ratifica degli articoli del questionario."

gave more detailed information and were occasionally asked questions not in the *Articuli*. Within these limitations, then, the availability of the *Processo* provides the opportunity to assess the statements in the *Vita*.

An Incident of Reluctant Obedience

In the *Vita* of St. Nicholas, Pietro da Monterubbiano narrates that on one occasion the saint had weakened himself so much by fasting and other penances that the friars of the community feared for his survival. Setting aside Nicholas's objections, they decided to summon physicians. After examining Nicholas, the physicians recommended that he eat some meat in order to recover his strength. Nicholas steadfastly refused and resisted the urging of the local superior. Then the prior general of the Order, who happened to be present, commanded Nicholas to follow the directives of the physicians. Nicholas felt caught between two fears, either to disobey or, as he saw the matter, to commit the sin of gluttony.¹⁵ In the *Vita* Pietro has Nicholas say with resignation: "The general must be obeyed" in terms reminiscent of the formula of profession. His solution, however, was to eat only a tiny portion of the meat thereby fulfilling the letter of the prior general's command. Pietro da Monterubbiano justifies Nicholas by saying that he was following the advice of a better physician, namely, Jesus Christ.¹⁶

A comparison of the account in the *Vita* with the testimony of the witnesses for the process demonstrates that Pietro's narrative has a foundation in fact. The fourteenth article in the process called for testimony about the saint's fasts and specifically that "on one occasion during a period of illness, he was urged by the physicians and the brethren to eat meat, which he completely refused to do."¹⁷ Friar

¹⁵ The incident is described in the *Vita*, 649 # 16-19.

¹⁶ For the words of St. Nicholas see *Vita*, 649 # 18: "Vocat ergo Priorem et dicit: Generali parendum esse. Hoc est enim, inquit, quod promisi; hoc Salvatori meo, suaeque sanctissimae Genetrici et beato Augustino primum obtuli; hoc est, quod usque ad mortem servare concupivi." Cf. the formula for profession from the 1290 Constitutions: "Ego, Frater N. facio professionem, et promitto obedientiam Deo, et beatae Mariae, et tibi Fratri N. Generali Priori Fratrum Eremitarum Sancti Augustini et successoribus tuis, vivere sine proprio, et in castitate, secundum Regulam beati Augustini, usque ad mortem." Even when the prior general did not receive the vows reference was made to him. *Las Primitivas Constituciones de los Agustinos*, ed. by Ignacio Aramburu Cendoya, OSA, (Valladolid, 1966), 61 #117-18.

¹⁷ *Il Processo*, 19. Article 14 reads in part: "et dum quadam vice, tempore sue infirmitatis, invitatus esset a predictis medicis et fratribus ut carnes comederet, quod omnino facere denegavit."

Augustinus de Tolentino testified that he was present when the physicians, Johannes and his son Petrus, visited Nicholas in his illness and told him to eat meat. This Nicholas refused to do. Friar Ventura de Tolentino also repeats the story about the physician Johannes and the friars of the convent urging Nicholas to eat meat and his refusal. Ventura adds that he personally encouraged Nicholas along the same lines many times (*pluries*). The notary, Jacobus, who was another son of Johannes de Tolentino, also testified that on many occasions (*pluries*) he went with his brother Petrus, physician of the friars, to visit St. Nicholas in his cell with the same outcome of Nicholas's refusal to comply. Friar Natumbene, the prior during the last year of the saint's life, testified that at the request of the physicians, he had tried unsuccessfully many times (*pluries*) to persuade Nicholas to eat meat.¹⁸ Thus it is clear that the saint repeatedly rejected the advice of the physicians. The incident in the *Vita* can be viewed as one occasion among many or a summary of all of them. The special element in the story told by Pietro is the command of the prior general.

Berardus de Appillaterre, a notary at Tolentino, who knew St. Nicholas for the last twenty years of his life, relates a story similar to that in Pietro's *Vita*. He went on a certain occasion (*quadam vice*) with the physician Johannes to visit St. Nicholas. They urged the saint to eat some meat lest he be guilty of suicide. Nicholas dismissed their counsel saying that God had such power that He could cure him just as well with bread, leaves, and other foods as with meat.¹⁹ With that, Berardus rode to Monticulo to the prior provincial and obtained a letter from him commanding Nicholas to eat meat. When the letter was presented to St. Nicholas, he agreed to eat some meat. Berardus then had a partridge prepared and set it before Nicholas. The saint took only a small morsel from a wing with the remark: "There, Berardus, I have obeyed the letter." Then he sent the rest to friars who were sick.²⁰ This story also illustrates Nicholas's reluctant compliance with the command of his superior.

¹⁸ *Il Processo*, 563, Augustinus de Tolentino; *ibid.*, 401-02, Ventura de Tolentino; *ibid.*, 221, Magister Jacobus: "Nicolaus nullo modo acquiescere voluit dicto ipsius medici in comedendo carnes"; *ibid.*, 90, Natumbene de Sancto Severeno.

¹⁹ The incident occurs in *Il Processo*, 119-20. Nicholas's remark is: "Vade, simplex, non credas quod Deus habeat tantam virtutem in pane, foleis et aliis sicut in carnibus et quod me liberare <potest> sine comestione carniū? Certe sic potest!"

²⁰ *Il Processo*, 120. Nicholas knew about the letter even before Berardus gave it to him. Nicholas said: "De litteris quas detulisti a provinciale quod comedam carnes; et ego volo obedire. Invenias michi de carnibus." After eating the tiny portion, he remarked: "Obedivi litteris, O Berarde!"

Friar Natumbene de Sancto Severeno reports an incident in which Franciscus de Monte Rubbiano, whom he identifies as the prior general, commanded Nicholas to eat meat.²¹ As provincial of the province of Marchia Anconitana, Franciscus was familiar with Nicholas's situation before his election as prior general in 1300 at the Chapter of Naples. With confirmation in 1303 and 1306, he remained in office until 1307. Under the assumption that the reference to Franciscus as prior general is to his actual time in office and not used proleptically, the incident reported in the *Vita* would have had to occur after Pentecost of 1300. By its location in the *Vita*, however, Pietro da Monterubbiano gives the impression that the event occurred earlier.

According to Friar Natumbene's report, after complying with the prior general's command, St. Nicholas requested the prior general to revoke his command.²² On other occasions too, Nicholas was ordered to modify his fast and abstinence but managed to persuade the superior to withdraw the order. Friar Thadeus de Monticulo relates that once at table the provincial sent some meat to Nicholas to eat, but Nicholas sent the meat back with the request that he not be compelled to eat it.²³ Friar Thomas de Mathelica also testified that Nicholas consumed only bread and water during the entire period of Holy Week and persuaded the acting superior not to keep him from continuing his fast on Holy Thursday.²⁴ The superiors obviously had such respect for St. Nicholas that they did not want to force him even though they were concerned for his health.

The reluctant obedience given by St. Nicholas to the command to eat some meat presented a problem, because he fulfilled only the minimum of the superior's command. Such a minimalist approach did not accord with the image of the saint as a truly obedient religious. Thus we find an alternative version reported by the Augustinian author Jordan of Saxony in his *Vitasfratrum* completed in 1357. According to this version, the prior commanded St. Nicholas in his illness to eat a portion of a partridge. Reluctant to do so and yet unwilling to be disobedient, the saint prayed and made the sign of the

²¹ *Il Processo*, 90-91: "Frater Franciscus de Monte Robiano, generalis prior dicti ordinis."

²² *Il Processo*, 90-91: "Et postea supplicavit eidem generali quod absolveret eum a dicto mandato."

²³ *Il Processo*, 88-89. A note in the critical edition identifies the provincial as Franciscus de Monte Rubbiano.

²⁴ *Il Processo*, 545: "Ipse frater Nicolaus devote rogavit eundem vicarium ut non preciperet sibi, et quod dictus vicarius revocavit mandatum, et post revocationem dicti mandati dictus frater Nicolaus devote illa die Iovis sancta ieiunavit in pane et aqua."

cross over the bird, whereupon the partridge came to life and flew away.²⁵ This story avoided the problem of St. Nicholas's reluctant obedience by employing divine intervention. Similar stories about cooked food returning to life are found in other medieval writings. The Bollandists note a parallel from the *Life* of St. Guntherus.²⁶ St. Peter Damian also relates that a rooster, which had been cooked and cut into small pieces, came to life again to refute a blasphemous remark.²⁷ That the story was not the invention of Jordan of Saxony is clear from the testimony of Berardus bishop of Camerino that he heard a version of the story from several Augustinian friars some time before the process began.²⁸

Nicholas's Customary Abstinence and Fasting

In the *Vita* Pietro da Monterubbiano notes that St. Nicholas began his fasting and abstinence as well as other ascetical practices very early in his religious life as a means to preserve chastity.²⁹ Some time later, when Nicholas came to Tolentino where he would spend the last thirty years of his life, he undertook more severe penance. He abstained from meat, eggs, fish, fat, milk products, and fruit. He observed this penance, moreover, even in times of bad health.³⁰ It was this dietary regime that contributed to the decline of Nicholas's health. We can check the accuracy of Pietro's statement

²⁵ *Jordani de Saxonia, Ordinis Eremitarum S. Augustini Liber Vitasfratrum*, ed. by Rudolph Arbesmann, OSA, and Winfrid Hümpfner, OSA (New York, 1943), 88.

²⁶ The Bollandist discussion of the "miracle" is found in *Acta Sanctorum*, 43, 643-44.

²⁷ PL 145, 615-16, *De Divina Omnipotentia in Reparatione Corruptae et Factis Infectis Reddendis*, chap. 13: "Quo facto, alter protinus ait: 'Profecto compater, sic explicuisti gallum, ut ipse sanctus Petrus, etiamsi velit, reintegrare non possit.' Cui mox intulit ille: 'Plane non modo B. Petrus; sed et si ipse Christus imperet, gallus hic perpetuo non resurget.' Ad hanc vocem repente gallus vivus, et plumis undique coopertus exsiluit, alas percussit, et cecinit, plumas concussit."

²⁸ *Il Processo*, 616: "Dixit quod audivit dici etiam in vita sua a pluribus fratribus dicti ordinis sancti Augustini quod dictus frater Nicolaus non comedebat carnes, et quod erat homo magne abstinence; et dum quadam die fuissent sibi presentatae due pernice mortue ut comederet, et dictus Nicolaus habuit dicere: 'Eatis viam vestram,' et dicti pernice evolaverunt immediate."

²⁹ *Vita*, 645 # 9: "Mox enim ut novit, quae promiserat, violanda non esse, et castitas servari non posset nisi corpus castigatum in servitutem redigeret, coepit etiam prae fratribus caeteris vitam ducere arctiorem."

³⁰ *Vita*, 649 # 16: "Ibi namque quasi triginta annis degens nusquam carnes, ova, pisces, aut aliqua pinguia vel lactinia aut poma, sanitatis aut infirmitatis tempore compertus est comedisse."

by comparison with the reports of the witnesses for the canonical investigation.

The fourteenth article of the process of interrogation asked the witnesses to verify that during his stay at Tolentino for thirty years Nicholas abstained from meat, eggs, fish, any fat, milk products, and fruit even against the advice of physicians and the pleas of his fellow friars.³¹ In regard to this point, Friar Augustinus de Tolentino, who had served as a lay person in the monastery for some years before joining the Order, testified that "many, many times" (*multis vicibus et pluribus et pluribus vicibus*) he had brought Nicholas portions of meat, eggs, cheese, and other milk products which Nicholas refused and sent to other friars.³² Other friars also affirmed Nicholas's abstinence.³³

A remark made by Nicholas himself provides some additional information on his abstinence. In the *Processo*, Berardescha de Tolentino relates that during the two years before St. Nicholas's death when he was bedridden, her mother had her daughter carry specially prepared food to him every day. This food consisted of leaves, vegetables, and farina or gruel. On one occasion, the girl brought some gruel containing some animal fat. On recognizing the fat, St. Nicholas told the girl: "Your mother wants to make me lose my soul. Since I have not eaten any meat for forty-five years, forbid that I eat any now." He then sent the food to another sick friar.³⁴ As the saint is said to have lived around sixty years, his statement indicates that he began his abstinence while still in his teens after he entered the Order as indicated in the *Vita*.³⁵

The saint's remark about losing his soul gives support to Pietro's interpretation of the dilemma Nicholas faced when commanded by the prior general to eat meat.³⁶ In his discussion of the

³¹ *Il Processo*, 19: "XIV articulus. Item quod Tholentini quasi XXX annis existens, volens temptationes diabolicas evitare et vincere, a carnibus, ovis, piscibus et omni quacumque pinguedine, lacticineis, pomis se abstinuit nedum sanitatis sed etiam infirmitatis tempore, repulsis consiliis medicorum, precibus fratrum sui ordinis quibuscumque aliis importunita[n]tibus."

³² *Il Processo*, 563.

³³ See *Il Compendio*, 35-37.

³⁴ *Il Processo*, 235: "Vult mater tua facere me perdere animam: quia sunt XLV anni quod non comedi de carnibus, absit quod modo comedam."

³⁵ Domenico Gentili dates Nicholas's birth in 1245 in his biography *Un Asceta*, 16. In *Il Processo*, 484, Johannucius de Tolentino estimated his age at death to be fifty or sixty. Ibid. 560, Augustinus de Tolentino, himself age forty, said that Nicholas was sixty years old at the time of his death: "quod erat LX annorum."

³⁶ *Vita*, 649 # 18. Pietro expresses St. Nicholas's dilemma thus: "Inter igitur gulae et inobedientiae vitia, quasi inter duo pericula constitutus, praelia diversarum cogitationum vir sanctus in mente persentit."

incident involving the prior general, Pietro reports a conversation between the local prior and Nicholas in which Nicholas tells the prior: "My prior, why do you want to trouble me? Do you not know that this body of mine, once it has tasted meat with pleasure will quickly want to go back again? Spare me, I beg you, for it is better to put a bit on the flesh than to give rein to it so that by the snares of sins it overwhelms the soul to its condemnation."³⁷ The saint's reasons for making the connection between eating meat and being led into sin—an idea problematic for contemporary readers—will become clear after the discussion below concerning the tradition he received during his formation as a religious.

Another witness, Franciscus Domini Adinolfi de Burgiano, reports being told by friars and others that Nicholas observed total abstinence from meat and related products for more than forty years.³⁸ According to the notary Berardus Appillatterre, some friars told him that Nicholas had entered the Order when he was about ten or eleven and lived with the friars for five years as if he were a fully-grown man. In effect, Nicholas was accepted as an aspirant for a few years until he could reach the age required for entrance to the novitiate.³⁹ According to Berardus, he stopped eating meat, eggs, cheese, fish, or food with fat from the time of his living with the friars.⁴⁰ Berardus's testimony needs to be understood in accord with the period of time indicated in Nicholas's remark to Berardescha de Tolentino. Thus he must have begun his abstinence and other practices around the time of the onset of puberty rather than as a child of ten or eleven. In the *Vita* Pietro exaggerates even more in saying that St. Nicholas began to fast three days a week at age seven in imitation of St. Nicholas of Myra, who as an infant fasted from his mother's

³⁷ *Vita*, 649 #17: "Ut quid, Prior mi, molestus esse cupis? An ignoras quod corpus hoc, quod escam, quam semel gustavit delectandam, redire satagit festinanter? Parce, igitur, quaeso, mihi: melius est enim huic carni ponere fraenum, quam ei laxare habenas, ut ad peccatorum foveas animam obruat condemnandam."

³⁸ *Il Processo*, 107.

³⁹ The Constitutions of 1290 forbade receiving anyone for the Order younger than fourteen. *Las Primitivas*, 57, #103. This rule is subsequent to the reception of St. Nicholas, but it reflects the mentality that reception should occur after puberty had begun. If the witness is correct here, Nicholas would have been professed around age sixteen.

⁴⁰ *Il Processo*, 117: "Ipse testis audivit publice a fratribus dicti ordinis et per publicam famam, quod quando intravit dictum ordinem erat forsitan X vel XI annorum ad plus, quod V annos stetit cum ipsis fratribus non tanquam iuvenis, sed multum honeste et caste et cum bona conversatione tanquam homo perfecte et magne etatis, et ab inde in antea donec vixit non comedit carnes, ova, caseum, nec pisces vel comestiones cum pinguedine."

breast on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays according to medieval legends.⁴¹ It is possible, of course, that the example of St. Nicholas of Myra, to whose intercession Nicholas's birth was attributed by his parents, may have had some influence on Nicholas's practice as an adolescent.

In the incident witnessed by Berardescha de Tolentino, St. Nicholas was brought food specially prepared for him because he was sick in bed towards the end of his life. Earlier in his life, he ate at the common table in the refectory. Friar Thomas de Mathelica said that at times St. Nicholas ate vegetables that had been cooked with meat so that he would not become a burden to the other friars.⁴² Friar Natumbene reported that Nicholas used to wash the vegetables that had been cooked with fat. According to Friar Johannes de Monticulo, the "washing" consisted of diluting the food with cold water to take away the taste.⁴³ A further point to be noted about St. Nicholas's abstinence is his diluting the little wine that he took with water.⁴⁴ During Lent he ate only late in the day because he was occupied with hearing Confessions.⁴⁵

The fifteenth article asked the witnesses to testify whether Nicholas fasted with one meal of bread and water on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, the last day observed in honor of the Blessed Virgin.⁴⁶ Wednesday and Friday were well established as days of fast as

⁴¹ *Vita*, 650 #23: "Quid autem amplius de ejus abstinencia dicam, cum septimo anno suae aetatis, tribus diebus singula hebdomade jejunare coepit, in aliquo imitans sanctum Nicolaum, qui secunda, quarta, et sexta feria a matris ubere abstinebat.... Mirum, ergo non est, si sic jejunat proventus, ex quo sic abstinebat puerili aetate subvectus."

⁴² *Il Processo*, 546: "Et si coquebantur carnes cum oleribus praedictis, et de his comedebat: quandoque hoc faciebat non in delectationem suam, sed ne fieret tedium fratribus pro aliqua alia comestione facienda, pro eo quod corpus suum gastigaret." Given the saint's stand on eating meat, St. Nicholas must have eaten only the vegetables and not the meat cooked with them.

⁴³ *Il Processo*, 91, Natumbene de Santo Severeno: "Et dixit quod vidit eum pluries quando portabantur sibi olera cum pinguedine coquinata, et ipse ea abluibat cum aqua frigida et postmodum comedebat." Ibid., 86, Johannes de Monticulo: "Et quando ieiunabat sine aqua et dabantur sibi folee seu olera bene condita seu legumina, ponebat aquam frigidam in ferculis, et tragebat inde aquam ipsam conditam, et mittebat aquam frigidam ne ipsa olera seu legumina haberent saporem bonum."

⁴⁴ *Il Processo*, 549, Nuncius Rogerii: "Dixit quod potabat vinum bene linfatum [for lymphatum]... erat contentus tribus parvis cisis in die inter vinum et aquam."

⁴⁵ *Il Processo*, 95, Friar Angelus de Sancta Victoria: "Et ipse <tempore> quadragesime omni die erat tantum impeditus confessionibus et orationibus quod non comedebat usque sero."

⁴⁶ *Il Processo*, 19: "XV articulus. Item quod IV et VI feria et sabbato in honorem Virginis gloriose semel in die pane reficiebatur et aqua."

early as the fourth century: Wednesday because it was the day Judas betrayed Christ and Friday because it was the day Christ was crucified.⁴⁷ The wording of the article combining the number of days with the saint's "perfect fasting" on bread and water caused some inconsistency in the responses. Several friars, three of whom had been priors of the community, said that the saint fasted four and not three days a week, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, but some of them were not sure that the fast was always with only bread and water.⁴⁸ Other friars mentioned only three days of fasting. Matheus de Monte Ulmo said that he was certain that during the fifteen years he spent with him at Tolentino, Nicholas ate only bread and water once a day every Friday and Saturday in honor of God and the Blessed Virgin.⁴⁹ According to several witnesses, Nicholas had to abandon the bread and water diet after he became ill towards the end of his life. Nevertheless, he continued to abstain from meat.⁵⁰ In the *Vita* Pietro da Monterubbiano accepts the four day a week fast on bread and water.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Rufinus, *Historia Monachorum*, chap. 7, 155 (PL 21, 419): "Jejunia sane legitima id est quarta et sexta feria, monebat [Apollonius] non esse solvenda, nisi grandis aliqua necessitas fieret, quia quarta feria Judas de traditione Domini cogitaverat, et sexta feria crucifixus sit Salvator. Videbitur ergo qui his diebus sine aliqua necessitate solvit statuta jejunia, vel cum tradente Salvatorem, vel cum crucifigentibus crucifigere."

⁴⁸ *Il Processo*, 79, Galtherius de Sancto Servereno: "De duobus annis, quibus ipse testis usus fuit cum eo, vidit eum... ieiunare quater in ebdomada, sed si in pane et aqua non recordatur sed credit quod non illo tempore pro quo erat graviter infirmus." Ibid. 85, Iohannes de Monticulo: "ieiunando quater in septimana aliquando in pane et aqua et aliquando sine aqua." Ibid. 89, Thadeus de Monticulo: "Vidit eum ieiunare non tantum tribus vicibus, sed quater in ebdomada, sed in pane et aqua non illo tempore quo ipse viderit." Ibid. 90, Natumbene de Sancto Severeno: "Et dixit quod ieiunabat IV diebus in septimana, et ut plurimum VI feria et sabato in pane et aqua." Ibid. 98, Angelus de Sancta Victoria: "Dixit quod non tantum dictis diebus contentis in dicto articulo, sed etiam II feria, ultra dies contentos in articulo."

⁴⁹ *Il Processo*, 639-40: "Ipse certus est quod omni die veneris et omni die sabbati toto dicto tempore XV annorum, quibus conversatus fuit cum dicto fratre Nicolao, geiunavit pane et aqua semel comedendo in die in honorem Dei et Virginis Marie."

⁵⁰ *Il Processo*, 98, Angelus de Sancta Victoria: "Non vidit ipsum ieiunare in pane et aqua eo quod, illo tempore quo cognovit eum, erat infirmitate gravatus ita quod non poterat ieiunare in pane et aqua." Ibid. 100, Cambius de Monterobiano: "Erat ita infirmus dictus frater Nicolaus quod non poterat facere tantam abstinenciam quantum dicebant fratres quod consueverat, sed unum vidit ipse testis, scilicet, quod non comedit carnes ipse frater Nicolaus." To the contrary, Friar Iohannucius de Tolentino, who was the infirmarian for St. Nicholas for the last two or three years before his death, reported that Nicholas fasted on bread and water for four days a week. See *Il Processo* 480. His statement is probably best understood as meaning that when he began serving him, Nicholas was still observing his strict regime.

⁵¹ *Vita*, 649 # 19: "secunda, quarta, et sexta feria, et in honorem gloriosae Virginis sabbato, pane et aqua semel reficiebatur."

One of the friars who served as confessor to Nicholas, who confessed every day before Mass, was Matheus de Monte Ulmo.⁵² This friar testified that not only did St. Nicholas fast every Saturday in honor of God and the Blessed Virgin but also he persuaded the witness to undertake the same fasting.⁵³ The saint's encouragement to Matheus to follow his practice appears to have been an exception as no other friar mentions being encouraged to fast. In fact, Friar Natumbene de Sancto Severeno testified that St. Nicholas rejoiced when the friars were given extra food, especially on feasts. Nicholas even encouraged Natumbene when he was the prior to do this as well as to give visiting friars something more.⁵⁴

Physical Results of St. Nicholas's Abstinence and Fasting

We have seen how Nicholas gave up meat, fat, milk products, eggs, fish, and fruit. According to the witnesses, his diet was limited to various leaves, mallows, chickpeas and other vegetables, along with farina or gruel, and bread. His drink consisted of water and diluted wine.⁵⁵ While it is beyond the scope of this article to enter into a scientific medical analysis, some general observations can be made. In so severely restricting his nourishment, Nicholas eliminated some essential nutriment, such as calcium, iron, and certain vitamins.⁵⁶ For example, by eliminating all animal fat from his diet, St. Nicholas

⁵² Other friars who stated that they heard the saint's confession were Iohannes de Monticulo, *Il Processo*, 84, Natumbene de Sancto Severeno, *ibid.*, 90, and Iohannes Massarii de Civitanova, *ibid.*, 103.

⁵³ *Il Processo*, 639-40: "Et quod tam de geiuniis quam de gastigatione dicti corporis requirebat et inducebat dictum testem ad faciendum simili modo ad honorem Dei et Virginis Marie matris sue."

⁵⁴ *Il Processo*, 91. "Licet frater Nicholaus magne abstinence esset, tamen multum gaudebat quando prior consolabatur alios fratres in dando eis bene comedere quando fatigabantur in officiis, maxime in festivitibus....Pluries rogavit ipsum testem, quando erat prior dicti loci, tempore festivitatum quod haberet commendatos fratres, qui tantum laborant in officiis dicendis, in faciendo eis pictantias ut possent magis consolare vivere. Et quando veniebant forenses similiter rogabat eum ut honoraret eos et provideret in cibo et potu melius quam aliis."

⁵⁵ *Il Processo*, 235: "aliquando seu olera, aliquando cicera, aliquando farinam sine carnibus et sine oleo." *Ibid.*, 256: "communiter foleas vel brodum ciceris." *Ibid.*, 480: "malvas coctas." *Ibid.*, 546: "solum coquinam vel olera, que fiebant pro fratribus." *Ibid.*, 549: "comedeat herbas coctas cum oleo, et libenter comedeat boraginas;...potabat vinum bene linfatum."

⁵⁶ Although it is based on an earlier period and does not cover Italy or Spain, an analysis of the vitamin content of medieval diets is found in Kathy L. Pearson, "Nutrition and the Early-Medieval Diet," *Speculum* 72 (1997), 1-32.

deprived himself of the main food group for vitamin D thus exposing himself to rickets and osteomalacia. Lack of calcium also can result in rickets and osteoporosis.⁵⁷

Long-term effects of such deprivation may be seen, for example, in the results of the laboratory analysis of the human remains found during the excavations at the pre-union monastery of Santa Lucia di Rosia, Siena. The study concluded that individuals presumably suffered from osteomalacia, osteoporosis, osteosclerosis and deficiencies in vitamins D and C.⁵⁸ Another example is found in the following report. After World War I, at the Frankfurt Medical Clinic in 1919 twenty-six patients who had symptoms of spontaneous fractures, thinning of the bones, pain, tender bones, and difficulty in walking were examined. These patients had eaten only potatoes, turnips, watery soup, poor quality bread with little meat and no eggs, cheese, or butter. The disease was considered to be an osteoporosis resulting from a diet inadequate in protein, calcium, and phosphorus.⁵⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, to find that St. Nicholas was afflicted with problems in walking and wounds that failed to heal.⁶⁰ Since the bones of the saint are intact, it might be possible on the occasion of the next *recognitio* for experts to provide more exact information about his medical problems.⁶¹

During the last two or three years of his life, St. Nicholas became progressively worse. At first, he used a cane but was eventually confined to bed. He finally had to give up his fasting on bread and water.⁶² More difficult still, he could not celebrate Mass.⁶³ During this last period of his life, the community assigned a young boy of

⁵⁷ See Table 5 based on the National Academy of Sciences, *Recommended Daily Allowances* (Washington, 1980) in Massimo Livi-Bacci, *Population and Nutrition: An Essay on European Demographic History* (Cambridge, 1991), 28-29.

⁵⁸ Imre A. Legyel, M.D., "A Further Report of the Laboratory Examinations of the Skeletal Remains from the Excavations at Santa Lucia de Rosia 1969-1973," *Bulletin of Medieval Archaeology*, 1 (1975-76), 25.

⁵⁹ The study is cited in Ancel Keys et al., *The Biology of Human Starvation*, 2 vols. (Minnesota, 1950), vol. 1, 220-21.

⁶⁰ *Il Processo*, 563: Augustinus de Tolentino on the occasion of the physicians' visit: "occasione infirmitatis quam patiebatur in cruribus et aliis partibus sui corporis." Many others also testified about the saint's inability to walk and confinement to bed. On his wounds that did not heal see below.

⁶¹ On the *recognitio* conducted in September 1976, see G. Marinozzi and al., *Ricognizione sui resti mortali di S. Nicola da Tolentino (1245-1305)*, a separate volume in the series *Medicina legale e delle assicurazioni* 25 (1977), fascicolo 1-4.

⁶² *Il Processo*, 98 and 100.

⁶³ *Il Processo*, 102: Cambius de Monterobiano: "Dictus frater Nicolaus erat ita infirmus, tempore quod ipse testis fuit in dicto conventu, quod non poterat celebrare."

ten to twelve to care for his needs. This boy was later professed as Friar Johannucius de Tolentino, an important witness in the canonical process.⁶⁴ Another young man who served him was Friar Ventura de Tolentino.⁶⁵

Nicholas, however, never complained about his illness. The sixteenth article sought information whether he remained patient and kind during his physical illnesses even in the face of temptations and impediments from the devil.⁶⁶ Many witnesses who knew him personally testified to the saint's patience in suffering. Among these, Friar Angelus de Sancta Victoria said that though Nicholas was weighed down by many illnesses, he never heard him complain or even say "O me." Friar Cambius of Monterobiano testified that he never saw him become angry or grieve over his infirmity. A layman, named Mañcius de Castro Sancti Angeli, Nicholas's birthplace, who knew him for thirty years, never saw him become upset or complain about any sickness he had.⁶⁷ He also illustrated this point by relating an incident presented below.

Appeal to Divine Intervention and Modern Suspicions

We have seen above Pietro of Monterubbiano's explanation that Nicholas wanted to avoid the physicians, instead "putting his hope in his physician Jesus Christ."⁶⁸ In justifying Nicholas's resistance, Pietro says that Nicholas was following the advice of a better physician. He then adds: "The physician Jesus Christ, recognizing such constancy in his servant quickly healed him by his usual plain fare and without medicines."⁶⁹ Pietro's interpretation of St. Nicholas's motive

⁶⁴ *Il Processo*, 478: "Ante mortem dicti Nicolai in Tholentino praedicto per duos annos fuerat infirmarius dicti fratris Nicolai."

⁶⁵ *Il Processo*, 400: "Vidit eum per plures annos et conversatus fuit cum eo et servivit sibi multotiens in officio et in missa et in cella et extra cellam." His cell was also close to St. Nicholas's, *ibid.*, 403.

⁶⁶ *Il Processo*, 19: "XVI Articulus. Quod in infirmitatibus sui corporis patiens erat et benignus non obstantibus multis temptationibus et impedimentis diaboli."

⁶⁷ *Il Processo*, 98, Angelus de Sancta Victoria: "Numquam audivit conquerentem nec dicentem: O me!" *Ibid.*, 101, Cambius of Monterobiano: "Nec audivit umquam ipsum irasci nec condolere, sed semper patienter sustinebat infirmitatem." *Ibid.*, 257, Mancius de Castro Sancti Angeli: "Numquam vidit ipsum turbari nec conqueri de aliqua infirmitate."

⁶⁸ *Vita*, 649 # 16: "Spem suam ponens in medicum suum Jesum Christum."

⁶⁹ *Vita*, 649 # 19: "Inde melioris medici adhaesit consilio. Coelitus enim medicus Jesus Christus tantam in servulo suo agnoscens constantiam, assuetis sine pinguedine cibis et absque medicinae pigmentis ipsum celeriter sanat."

for rejecting the physicians' advice finds confirmation in the testimony of Mancinus de Castro Sancti Angeli. St. Nicholas was suffering from an ulcer on his leg and was urged by Mancinus to take a bath (in mineral waters) and to ask for the counsel of the physicians. St. Nicholas responded: "I do not wish to go to the bath nor to the physicians because of this illness. God, who sent me this trouble, will take it away when it pleases him. He will be my physician."⁷⁰ Nicholas made similar remarks about his wound to Nucius Rogerii on another occasion.⁷¹

The theme of the impotency of earthly physicians and medicines contrasted with the healing power of Christ or the intercession of the saint is found throughout the *Vita* especially in the stories of the miracles worked by St. Nicholas or through his intercession.⁷² For example, after working a miracle, Nicholas tells the woman who has been cured not to tell anyone but to praise Jesus Christ, "the Physician of the world."⁷³ When a girl suffers from loss of sight, her father has recourse to "the Supreme Physician" and implores the intercession of St. Nicholas.⁷⁴ Another man suffering an eye ailment seeks "the Almighty Physician."⁷⁵ Nicholas himself is even called "a singular physician" in one of the miracle stories.⁷⁶ Given the state of medicine at the time, the remedies proposed by physicians were often ineffective. Pietro obviously has little faith in them and portrays St. Nicholas as being of the same frame of mind. This attitude is similar to that found in the *vitae* of other eremitical saints.⁷⁷ The testimony found in the process supports Pietro's presentation in this regard. For example, Nicholas told Margarita, the wife of Berardus Appillaterre, to put her faith in St. Blaise rather than in physicians in seeking a cure

⁷⁰ *Il Processo*, 257: "Sed ille Deus, qui dedit michi istam plagam, auferet quando placebit sibi: et ipse erit medicus."

⁷¹ *Il Processo*, 550, Nucius Rogerii: "Audivit a sociis dicti fratris Nicolay, dicentibus quod dictus frater Nicolaus dum vivebat, portaverat unum magnum vulnus in clure destro, quod fecerat sibi diabolus. Et predictus testis viderat illud vulnus magnum et tediosum in dicto clure, et dixit sibi una die dum extraxeret sibi calzarium, quia calzarius multum tragebat et dilatabat illud vulnus: O quare non facis tibi sanari istud vulnus? Respondidit dictus frater Nicolaus cum magna patientia: Permittas, fili, permittas quia Deus sanabit."

⁷² *Vita*, 652 # 36; 653 # 40; 654 # 41, # 42, # 43; 656 # 53, # 54, # 55; 660 # 68 and # 74.

⁷³ *Vita*, 653 # 41: "Sed in te ipsa lauda Medicum mundi Jesum Christum."

⁷⁴ *Vita*, 656 # 53: "Quia nullius medicinae suffragio poterat filia liberari; ad supremum ergo recurrit Medicum et beati Nicolai auxilia implorare non cessans."

⁷⁵ *Vita*, 657 # 57: "Judicio medicorum naturaliter oculus ipse sanari non poterat; omnipotentem igitur Medicum quaerit."

⁷⁶ *Vita*, 657-58 # 60: "Medicorum itaque consilia inutilia esse conspiciens ad singularem medicum beatissimum Nicolaum cum devotione accurrit."

for her daughter, "because Blessed Blaise is a better physician than they are."⁷⁸

The appeal to higher wisdom and supernatural power may have satisfied people of Pietro's day, but modern readers are suspicious of saints who fasted to the point of injuring their health. Not a few studies have been conducted on this matter especially in the case of female saints. In 1985 Rudolph Bell published his book entitled *Holy Anorexia* in which he studied the 261 holy women who lived in Italy from 1200 onward as listed in the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*. Bell examined 170 cases, for which the historical records are more ample. He determined that about half of them showed clear signs of an anorexic frame of mind. He parallels these signs of "holy anorexia" with those of anorexia nervosa, the disease that afflicts some contemporary young women, who starve themselves in a quest to become or to remain thin. In the case of the female saints, the goal was holiness to be achieved through severe penitential practices. His theory has found acceptance among many historians of anorexia nervosa but has been criticized by other historians.⁷⁹ Although this disease is most frequently found among females, it is not entirely unknown among males.⁸⁰

Applying the modern concept of this disease to medieval women (and/or men) is not without peril. Diagnosing psychological problems of long-deceased people of whom we have only limited knowledge can provide at best an educated conjecture.⁸¹ Moreover, there is the problem of an entirely different cultural context than that of the modern world. Medieval people were quite capable of distinguishing between

⁷⁷ Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 331-32.

⁷⁸ *Il Processo*, 237, Margarita's daughter Berardescha reports the incident.

⁷⁹ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, passim. Bell offers a sociological explanation that medieval women became anorexic because they were living in a society and church dominated by males which left them no opportunity to assert themselves. Bell's work has been translated into French: *L'anorexie sainte: Jeûne et mysticisme du Moyen Age à nos jours* (Paris, 1994) and Italian: *La santa anoressia: digiuno e misticismo dal medioevo a oggi* (Rome, 1987). Among those who accept Bell's comparison between the anorexia nervosa and holy anorexia are Walter Vandereycken and Ron Van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: the History of Self-Starvation*, English version (New York, 1994). The disease has been studied from many perspectives with an extensive literature. For criticism of Bell's work see Ann Carmichael, "Past Fasts: Medieval Saints with the Will to Starve," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 19, 4 (Spring, 1989), 635-44.

⁸⁰ Bell, 2, notes the ratio between females and males is ten or twenty to one.

⁸¹ Bell himself admits, 6: "The specific application of intrapersonal psychological theory in a historical context is fraught with difficulties.... Psychoanalytic theory, applied to a historical problem, easily becomes purely descriptive or reductionist; and even when it purports to be explanatory, proof is not possible."

voluntarily choosing not to eat and being caught in an unhealthy pattern of behavior.⁸²

While we can rule out "holy anorexia," in the case of St. Nicholas, we still have to admit that his stubborn adherence to a diet that gravely harmed his health appears to be unreasonable in our eyes.⁸³ To understand St. Nicholas's attitude toward fasting, we need to look to the spirituality he inherited rather than to psychological analysis. An examination of the historical circumstances of the type of religious life he embraced as a young man will help to clarify the matter.

The Inheritance of the New Order of Augustinian Hermits

Augustinian writers have been eager to portray St. Nicholas as the model friar, a faithful follower of St. Augustine. Pietro da Monterubbiano says that he was a "most complete observer of the *Rule* of his most holy Father Augustine."⁸⁴ In regard to fasting, St. Augustine does not give many specific directions. His *Rule* gives only a few general principles such as: "Subdue your flesh by fasts and abstinence from food and drink insofar as your health permits," and not to eat outside the time assigned for meals.⁸⁵ Clearly, St. Augustine does not recommend the kind of fasting that results in damage to one's physical well-being. So in this matter Nicholas has gone far beyond the *Rule of St. Augustine*. Other writings on fasting by Augustine have not been considered for the reason that the Hermits of Brettino and the friars of the new province in Le Marche were most probably not acquainted with them as will be seen below.⁸⁶

⁸² Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 194-207. She discusses Bell's theory and accepts it as a possibility for some cases. Her own theories are discussed with some criticism by Carmichael, "Past Fasts," cited above.

⁸³ In his commentary on Bell's thesis, William N. Davis, whose expertise is in the field of clinical psychotherapy, notes: "Modern-day anorectics are peculiarly unable to make connections with other people....Anorectics are involved in a deeply connected relationship, not with people, but with their diet." See Bell, 183. Both the *Vita* and the *Processo* give ample evidence of St. Nicholas's involvement with and concern for others.

⁸⁴ *Vita*, 652 # 29: "sui sanctissimi patris Augustini Regulae esset plenissimus observator."

⁸⁵ For the critical edition of the *Rule*, see Luc Verheijen, *La Règle de saint Augustin*, vol. 1 Tradition manuscrite (Paris, 1967), 417-37. The text in question reads: "Carnem uestram domate ieiuniis et abstinencia escae et potus, quantum uale-tudo permittit. Quando autem aliquis non potest ieiunare, non tamen extra horam prandii aliquid alimentorum sumat, nisi cum aegrotat."

⁸⁶ Not even the learned Jordan of Saxony cites Augustine's *De utilitate jejunii* in his *Vitasfratrum*.

The Augustinian Order which St. Nicholas joined as a very young man was formed by the action of the Holy See in 1256 when several groups of hermits and some individual monasteries were combined into the new Order, known as the Hermits of St. Augustine. Earlier in 1244, the Holy See had joined together eremitical monasteries in Tuscany, some of which originated before 1200, to form the Hermits of St. Augustine of Tuscany. Other eremitical groups, some of which were of earlier origin as corporate bodies than the Tuscans, were then joined with the Tuscan hermits in 1256.⁸⁷ Especially important were the Hermits of Giovanni Bono and the Hermits of Brettino, both of whom already followed the *Rule of St. Augustine*.⁸⁸

When the "Grand Union" took place in 1256, the several groups of hermits brought their own ideas and practices to the union. It must have taken some time for the Order to develop a common spirituality with uniform observances in every province. In 1261, Urban IV had to issue a bull to dispense all the friars of the new Order from their previous professions and observances, an indication that many were not completely at ease in their consciences about the changes.⁸⁹ The Hermits of Brettino, in particular, obtained papal bulls to maintain a house in which the eremitical lifestyle would be maintained indefinitely.⁹⁰

The greater part of the friars who initially formed the Province of Marchia Anconitana, to which St. Nicholas was affiliated, had

⁸⁷ David Gutierrez, OSA, *The Augustinians in the Middle Ages 1256-1356*, translated by Arthur J. Ennis, OSA, Vol. 1, Part 1 of the *History of the Order of St. Augustine* (Villanova, 1984), 23-41. See also Balbino Rano, OSA, *Augustinian Origins, Charism, and Spirituality*, ed. by John Rotelle, OSA (Villanova, 1994), especially 13-58 and 309-52.

⁸⁸ See Kaspar Elm, "Italiensche Eremitengemeinschaften des 12 und 13 Jarhhunderts," in *L'Eremitismo in Occidente nei Secoli XI e XII: Atti della seconda Settimana internazionale di studio, Mendola, 30 agosto-6 settembre 1962* (Milano, 1965), 491-559. See also Balbino Rano, "Brettino, Eremiti di" in *Dizionario degli istituti di perfezione* [hereafter *DIP*] (Rome, 1974 ff.), vol. 1, 1566-69 and "Eremiti, di Giovanni Bono," *DIP*, vol. 4, 1161-65. For English, see Gutierrez, *Augustinians 1256-1356*, 23-41.

⁸⁹ *Bullarium Ordinis Sancti Augustini Regesta I 1256-1262*, edited by Carlos Alonso, OSA (Rome, 1997), 25, # 75, Urban IV, 9 December 1261, "Desideriis vestris."

⁹⁰ *Bullarium* (Alonso), 20, #65, Alexander IV, 7 July 1260, "Solet annuere Sedes"; *ibid.*, 26-27, #81, Urban IV, 7 May 1262, "Solet annuere Sedes." The bull of Alexander IV describes the house: "domus vestra et quia est ab hominum semota frequentia, et ex sui situs aptitudine, locus Religioni conveniens est et aptus, unde cum in ipsa sub commodo pacis et quietis silentio, devotum impendatis et perpetuo desideretis impendere Domino famulatum." *Bullarium Ordinis Eremitarum S. Augustini*... a Rev. P. Magistro Fr. Laurentio Empoli (Rome, 1628), 32-33.

belonged to the Hermits of Brettino. They were joined by some of the Hermits of Giovanni Bono. Thus St. Nicholas received his formation as a religious in an atmosphere still very much under the influence of the ideals of the Hermits of Brettino.⁹¹ Unfortunately, we know very little about them other than what can be gleaned from the papal bulls that have been preserved. David Gutierrez, OSA, observes that the life of St. Nicholas offers some information of the way of life led by the Brettino hermits.⁹² The papal bulls, moreover, give ample evidence of their emphasis on fasting and abstinence. With the exception of Sundays, the Hermits of Brettino fasted from the Feast of the Holy Cross (September 14) until Easter. During the rest of the year they had two meals a day except on Wednesdays, Fridays, and days of fast of the Church. They abstained from meat, but could eat cheese and eggs three times a week except for the Lent of St. Martin (November 11 to Christmas), the regular Lenten period beginning with Septuagesima, and days of fast of the Church.⁹³

These practices were mitigated after the Grand Union of 1256, as may be seen in the first extant *Constitutions*, which date from 1290. The twenty-second chapter deals with fasting and abstinence. The friars must abstain from meat unless they are sick and in the judgment of physicians cannot do so without harm to themselves. The prior may grant a dispensation allowing the use of meat for the weak and infirm; those who have undergone bloodletting, and those occupied with daily work. The friars are to fast and abstain with only one meal a day from November 1 until Christmas. From Christmas until Quinquagesima, when the Lenten fast begins, the prior may dispense the friars from fasting. During the time from Easter until November 1 and from Christmas until Quinquagesima the food may be flavored with animal fat except for Fridays, Saturdays, fast days of the Church, and the vigils of Ascension and the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin.

⁹¹ See Pietro Bellini, OSA, "Il Movimento Agostiniano nelle Marche nel Secolo XIII," *San Nicola, Tolentino, le Marche*, 161-79.

⁹² Gutierrez, *Augustinians 1256-1356*, 38: "Very likely the life of St. Nicholas of Tolentine offers some information about their form of life, at least in some of its aspects, because although he lived in the second half of the thirteenth century he certainly knew some of the older hermits who had been trained before 1250 and who preserved the early traditions."

⁹³ See the bull of Gregory IX, 13 March 1235, "Quae omnium Conditoris," in *Bullarium Ordinis Eremitarum S. Augustini: Periodis Formationis 1187-1256*, ed by Begnius Van Luijk, OSA, Cassiciacum Series 18 (Würzburg, 1964), 20-21. These provisions were repeated in the bull of Innocent IV, 17 September 1250, "Quae omnium Conditoris," in *Bullarium* (Van Luijk), 67. See also the works of Elm, Rano, and Gutierrez cited above.

Except for Fridays the friars may use eggs, cheese, butter, milk, and the like from Easter until November 1 and from Christmas until Quinquagesma even on Saturdays. The friars are not obliged to fast from Easter until November 1 except on Fridays, solemn fasts, and the vigils of the Ascension and the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin. During this period two meals a day are served. On Good Friday, the friars will take only bread and water. Later the vigil of St. Augustine was added as a fast day. The regulations, complicated as they are, probably are the result of a compromise between the various groups that formed the Order in 1256.⁹⁴

St. Nicholas, then, lived in a community which already observed a good deal of fasting, but he went beyond the common norm by observing a four day fast during the entire year along with the other dietary restrictions he placed on himself. St. Nicholas shows that he had well absorbed the lessons presented to him by his directors, who had themselves been formed in the spirituality of the Hermits of Brettino. In fact, his fasting and abstinence even surpassed theirs.

The Hermits of Brettino, who came into existence around the beginning of the thirteenth century, were latecomers to the medieval eremitical movement. In Italy the eremitical inspiration first took root at the end of the tenth century. This development has often been seen as a response to the decline of religious life in the large monasteries. More recent scholarship emphasizes the movement as new vision of religious life with emphasis on poverty and simplicity. Paradoxically, the eremitical style of life was based on the realization that, even though they desired separation from the world, the religious had an obligation to seek the sanctification of others as well.⁹⁵ Thus, for example, some religious of St. Romuald were sent as missionaries.⁹⁶ The movement was favored by the popes, beginning with Gregory VII (1073-85) as a means of promoting reform in the Church.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ *Las Primitivas Constitutiones de los Agustinos*, 70-73.

⁹⁵ See John Van Engen, "The 'Crisis of Cenobitism' Reconsidered: Benedictine Monasticism in the Years 1050-1150," *Speculum* 61, no. 2 (1986), 269-304. Phyllis G. Jestice, *Wayward Monks and the Religious Revolution of the Eleventh Century* (Leiden, 1997).

⁹⁶ Jestice, 75-89. See also the essays by Paolo Tomea and Joseph Wong in *San Romualdo: Storia, agiografia e spiritualità*, Atti del XXIII Convegno del Centro Studi Avellaniti, Fonte Avellana, 23-26 agosto 2000 (San Pietro in Cariano, VR, 2002).

⁹⁷ H.E.J. Cowdrey, "The Gregorian Papacy and Eremitical Monasticism," originally published in *San Bruno e la Certosa di Calabria* (Mannelli, 1995), 33-54 and reprinted in *Popes and Church Reform in the 11th Century* (Burlington, Vermont, 2000).

The eleventh century was the age of innovating saints, such as Romuald (†1027), founder of the Camaldolese, Peter Damian (†1072) reformer of Fonte Avellana, Giovanni Gaulberto (†1073), founder of the Vallombrosans, and Bruno (†1101), founder of the Carthusians, as well as many other less well-known personages.⁹⁸ These men were not solitary hermits but attracted others around them in leading an adaptation of both the eremitical and coenobitic styles of life at the same time.⁹⁹ They selected remote sites and emphasized manual labor, mortification, contemplation, and a simple liturgical style.¹⁰⁰ Frequently, the *Rule of St. Benedict* served as the basis of their way of life, but it was often modified in the light of the practices of the Egyptian ascetics of the fourth century.¹⁰¹ They sought inspiration from the traditional monastic literature describing the lives and practices of the desert fathers, such as the *Life of St. Anthony* by St. Athanasius,¹⁰² the *Vitae Patrum*, especially the part known as the *Verba Seniorum*, the *Historia Monachorum in Egypto* of Rufinus, and the *Instituta* and *Conlationes* of Cassian.¹⁰³

Doubtlessly, the earlier eremitical groups that came together to form the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine derived inspiration from the same tradition either directly through contact with the literary sources or indirectly by imitating the way of life practiced by existing eremitical groups. Even though three of the four principal groups that

⁹⁸ Bruno did not begin his monastic foundation in Italy but was summoned there and established a hermitage in Calabria in 1084.

⁹⁹ See Cécile Caby, "Finis Eremitarum? Les formes régulières et communautaires de l'érémisme médiéval," *Ermîtes de France*, 47-80.

¹⁰⁰ See Ph. Rouillard "Eremitismo," in *DIP*, vol. 12, 131-32.

¹⁰¹ See Benedicta Ward, "The Desert Myth: Reflections on the Desert Ideal in Early Cistercian Monasticism," first published in *One Yet Two: Monastic Tradition East and West (Orthodox-Cistercian Symposium, Oxford 1973)*, edited by M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo, 1976), 183-94, and reprinted in *Signs and Wonders*, (Brookfield, Vermont, 1992) 192. "There were other new Orders at the beginning of the twelfth century that also claimed the Desert Fathers as their predecessors. St. John Gualbert and St. Romuald saw their hermit foundations in this light, and St. Romuald, says Peter Damian, deliberately modelled his practices in fasting and vigils on what he read in the *Vitae Patrum*. St. Bruno's biographer also says that he took the Desert Fathers as his example in very practical ways."

¹⁰² On the question of St. Athanasius's authorship, see the introduction in *Vie d'Antoine: Athanase d'Alexandrie*, ed. by G.J.M. Bartelink, Sources Chrétiennes, 400 (Paris, 1994).

¹⁰³ Ward, "Myth," 190-91: "It seems, therefore, that the connection of Early Cîteaux with the ideals of the desert was a myth which grew up in the second and third generations of the life of the Order. What connection there was came through the Rule of St. Benedict and literary sources such as the *Vitae Patrum* and the *Conferences* and *Institutes* of Cassian."

were merged to form the Order in 1256 previously followed the *Rule of St. Augustine*, they did not begin by basing their religious lives on Augustine, but by imitating the current eremitical movements found in Italy. They accepted or chose the *Rule* because it was necessary to accept an approved *Rule*.¹⁰⁴ In the case of the Hermits of Giovanni Bono, for example, the *Rule* did not have much influence in the Order, but rather the example of their founder Blessed Giovanni Bono, who led the austere and penitential life of a hermit.¹⁰⁵

In many ways the Benedictine *Rule* was more suited as a basis for the eremitical style of life because it incorporates more of the tradition of the *Vitae Patrum* and the works of Cassian and focuses upon the perfection of the individual monk. On the contrary, the *Rule of St. Augustine* is not much indebted to those traditions and places much emphasis on the notion of life in community. When the Holy See formed the Augustinian Order in 1256, among the groups incorporated were the Hermits of St. William of Malvalle who followed the Benedictine *Rule*. Within a short time these Hermits successfully petitioned the Holy See in to withdraw from the Order and return to their original observance under the Benedictine *Rule* in 1266.¹⁰⁶

After 1256 the members of the new Order treasured the relationship they believed that they had with the hermits of earlier times as may be seen the 1357 *Vitasfratrum* of Jordan of Saxony. He illustrates the topics he treats by *exempla* from the early monastic writings as well from the lives of friars such as St. Nicholas.¹⁰⁷ By juxtaposing the two kinds of *exempla*, he seeks to demonstrate the continuity of the eremitical lifestyle between the early desert ascetics and the Augustinian Hermits. Moreover, to show that the Augustinian *Rule* was suited to the eremitical style, pseudo-Augustinian *Sermones ad*

¹⁰⁴ B. Rano, OSA, "Brettino, Eremiti di," *DIP*, vol. 1, 1566: "All'inizio gli Eremiti non seguivano la Regola di s. Agostino, ma s'erano creata da sé una propria forma di vita religiosa (*ordo*). Non figurando questa tra le forme di vita approvate, l'abbandonarono, assumendo la Regola di S. Agostino." In this regard Rano cites the Bull "Cum olim" of Gregory XI, 12 August 1228.

¹⁰⁵ See B. Rano, "Eremiti, di Giovanni Bono," *DIP*, vol. 3, 1165: "L'esempio del fondatore Giovanni Bono costituiva il maggior elemento d'influsso nella formazione dei frati.... S. Agostino aveva per loro un'importanza molto minore."

¹⁰⁶ L. Novelli, "Guglielmiti," *DIP*, vol. 4, 1479-81. See also Odile Redon, "À la Recherche en Maremme du Saint Ermite Guillaume," *Ermîtes de France*, 299-314.

¹⁰⁷ See the listing "Scriptores Ecclesiastici Aevi Patrum" in *Liber Vitasfratrum* of Arbesmann and Hümpfner, cited above, where the editors point out Jordan's use of Evagrius of Antioch's translation of the *Vita Sancti Antonii*, St. Jerome's *Vita Pauli*, the *Vitae Patrum*, and the *Instituta* and *Conlationes* of Cassian as well as other writers on monastic life such as Pachomius, Palladius, Rufinus, Sulpicius Severus, and Gregory the Great.

fratres in eremo were produced that presented St. Augustine himself as a hermit, who followed the coenobitic style.¹⁰⁸ Jordan of Saxony accepted these works as authentic and quoted from them extensively in his *Vitasfratrum*.

The Examples and Teaching Found in Late Antiquity

To understand the spiritual tradition inherited by St. Nicholas, some brief examination of the sources from the Patristic period is needed. In them one can see the importance given to fasting and abstinence. Within the limits of the present study, only a few examples representative of the tradition can be taken into account. The *Verba Seniorum* presents many sayings of the Egyptian Fathers but leaves them as isolated incidents. The *Historia Monachorum* offers longer descriptions of individual ascetics and their teaching but without attempting to set forth a methodical treatise on asceticism. In both of these works, instances of extremes in fasting are cited. Some of these can be described as "tall tales," as the account of John who stood under a rock for three years living only on Holy Communion brought to him on Sundays. In these works extreme fasting is not recommended, however, but rather eating one sparse meal a day. The kind of food to eaten by these early hermits is also a concern.¹⁰⁹

In his *Institutes*, Cassian presented to the monks in Gaul his more organized synthesis of the spirituality of the Egyptian ascetics. To do this he drew on his own experience as well as the writings of

¹⁰⁸ The collection of 76 sermons that appears in the *Patrologia Latina*, 40, 1233-1358, reprints the Maurist edition. Most of this fuller collection first appeared in the 1494-95 edition of the sermons of St. Augustine published by Johann Amerbach at Basel. An earlier shorter collection under the title *Sermones ad heremitas* had appeared in an edition of Modena in 1477. As Kaspar Elm has pointed out, the sermons were not composed by one author. Some come from different time periods. See his "Sermones ad fratres in eremo: Psuedoaugustinische Lebensregeln für Eremiten und Kanoniker" in *Regula Sancti Augustini. Normative Grundlage differenter Verbände im Mittelalter. Tagung der Akademie der Augustiner-Chorherren von Windesheim und des Sonderforschungsbereichs*, 537, Projekt C "Institutionelle Strukturen religiöser Orden im Mittelalter" vom 14. bis zum 16. Dezember 2000 in Dresden, ed. Gert Melville und Anne Müller (Paring, 2002), 515-537. Professor Eric Saak of Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis kindly supplied this reference.

¹⁰⁹ Benedicta Ward, in the introduction to *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: the Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (London & Oxford, 1980), 23-25. The story of John is found in chapter 15 of Rufinus's Latin version, PL 21, 433-34.

Evagrius Ponticus though without ever mentioning him.¹¹⁰ After setting forth some basic ideas about monasticism in the first four books, Cassian adopts as an organizational principle the eight capital sins, treated by Evagrius, namely, gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory, and pride. One book is devoted to each of these topics. In the *Conferences*, Cassian develops his teaching on various topics in the form of conversations held with different *abbas*. Some of the topics treated earlier in the *Institutes* are revisited and amplified. In the following paragraphs both of these sources will be used to highlight some important points of his teaching on fasting and abstinence. As will become evident, not a few of the ideas found in Cassian were cited again and again by later authors.

Cassian notes that the first six capital sins are so linked together that one leads to another beginning with gluttony and lust. Thus to overcome the vice of lust, gluttony must first be overcome.¹¹¹ The vices of gluttony and lust are especially linked together because they are in us by nature and require the action of the body. To overcome them, the action of the spirit is not sufficient and the body needs to be disciplined.¹¹²

The first battle is against gluttony. The Egyptian monks have developed traditions and rules to govern the practice of fasting.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Recent works on Cassian are Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (Oxford, 1998) and Steven Driver, *John Cassian and the Reading of Egyptian Monastic Culture* (New York, 2002). Driver provides a survey of recent scholarship on Cassian. Scholars argue that Cassian did not actually hold the conversations he reports but used them as literary devices to convey his ideas. For the texts from Cassian see *Iohannis Cassiani de Institutis Coenobiorum et de Octo Principalium Vitiorum Remediis Libri XII*, ed. by Michael Petschenig, CSEL, vol. 17 (Vienna, 1888); *Iohannis Cassiani Conlationes XXIII*, ed. by Michael Petschenig, CSEL, vol. 13 (Vienna, 1886). Modern English translations by Boniface Ramsey, are found in vols 57 and 58 of the Ancient Christian Writers series: *John Cassian: the Conferences* and *John Cassian: the Institutes*.

¹¹¹ *Conlationes* 5, 10: "Sex tamen priora... quadam inter se cognatione et ut ita dixerim concatenatione conexas sunt, ita ut prioris exuberantia sequenti efficiatur exordium. nam de abundantia gastrimargiae fornicationem.... Ut fornicatio subruatur, gastrimargiae est vitium castigandum."

¹¹² *Conlationes* 5, 4: "Gastrimargia et fornicatio, cum naturaliter nobis insint... materia tamen ut consummentur egent extrinsecus et ita in effectum corporali actione perueniunt.... ad retundendos horum stimulos non sufficiat sola mentis intentio... nisi castigatio corporalis accesserit, quae ieiuniis, uigiliis et operis contritione perficitur."

¹¹³ *Instituta* 5, 3: "Itaque primum nobis ineundum certamen est aduersus gastrimargiam, quam diximus gulae esse concupiscentiam, et in primis de ieiuniorum modo et escarum qualitate dicturi rursus ad Aegyptiorum traditiones ac statuta recurrimus."

Cassian describes the practices of the Egyptians but without making them into a matter of precept.¹¹⁴ Both the quality and the quantity of food are important because when satiety is reached the fire of vice is enkindled.¹¹⁵ Besides avoiding foods that inflame concupiscence, monks should eat food which is easy to prepare, inexpensive, and common to all. Aspects of gluttony include eating before the appointed time, eating too much, and desiring exquisite foods.¹¹⁶

Excess of food as well as of wine weakens the mind and robs it of purity and contemplation. The people living in Sodom fell because of their indulging in too much food.¹¹⁷ One needs to impose as much fasting on himself as the battle for chastity demands, for integrity of mind is linked to fasting. Unless one maintains a balanced temperance, he cannot preserve lasting purity.¹¹⁸ Whoever is unable to restrain his appetite for food will be incapable of resisting lustful desires, because one cannot overcome greater enemies if he is beaten by smaller ones.¹¹⁹

Acquiring mastery over one's appetite constitutes the first trial in the Olympic Games as it were. To achieve victory one must not only restrain his appetite for excessive food, but even the amount needed to sustain life must be eaten with concern, because it is, as it were, contrary to chastity. One's whole life should be taken up with the spiritual so that care of the body is limited to bare necessity.¹²⁰

Further motivation is given by Cassian in keeping with the Olympic Games imagery. Unless the vice of gluttony has been overcome, the monk will not be capable of contending against the evil spirits, for they deign to struggle only with those victorious over the flesh and worthy to fight in the spiritual combat. The first thing to be

¹¹⁴ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 116-23.

¹¹⁵ *Instituta* 5, 5.

¹¹⁶ *Instituta* 5, 23.

¹¹⁷ *Instituta* 5, 6. Cassian cites Ezechiel 16:49 in reference to the people of Sodom: "Quid enim peccauit soror tua Sodoma, nisi quia panem suam in saturitate et abundantia comedebat?"

¹¹⁸ *Instituta* 5, 9.

¹¹⁹ *Instituta* 5, 11: "Numquam igitur poterit ardentis concupiscentiae stimulus inhibere, quisque desideria gulae refrenare non quierit. Interioris hominis castitas uirtutis huius consummatione discernitur. Numquam enim robustioribus aemulis conluctari posse confides eum, quem in leuiori conflictu conspexeris ab infirmioribus paruisque superari."

¹²⁰ *Instituta* 5, 14: "Haec est igitur nobis prima contentio, haec nostra uelut in Olympiacis certaminis prima probatio, gulae uentrisque concupiscentiam desiderio perfectionis extinguere. ob quod ciborum non solum superfluous adpetitus uirtutum contemplatione calcandus, sed etiam ipsi naturae necessarius, tamquam castitati contrarius, non sine cordis anxietate sumendus est."

done in every struggle is to overcome the impulses of fleshly desires. If the ascetic has not been able to subject the frail and resistant flesh to the spirit he will not be in a position to undertake more serious struggles with the evil beings of the air.¹²¹ It is only the perfected monk who is able to leave the coenobium and enter the desert alone to do battle with the demons.¹²²

In his twelfth and twenty-second Conferences, Cassian discusses the special problem of nocturnal emissions accompanied by erotic dreams. He had already considered this topic in the *Instituta*, but he returns to it in the *Conlationes* because these events troubled the consciences of the monks in approaching Holy Communion.¹²³ Cassian offers guidance in this delicate matter. In both works Cassian tries to balance what he admits to be an unavoidable natural event and the ideal wherein such disturbances make little or no impact on the mind.¹²⁴ While it is beyond man's nature to remove this problem entirely in most cases, it is a matter of the highest virtue to limit such events to rare occasions.¹²⁵ Such events can be caused by excess in eating, carelessness in guarding one's thoughts, or the promptings of

¹²¹ *Instituta* 5, 16: "Itaque uentris et gulae concupiscentia hoc intuitu superata nec serui carnis nec infames uitiorum nota pronuntiati uelut in Olympiacis disciplinis iudicabimur superiorum quoque certaminum digni esse conflictu, praemissisque huiusmodi documentis spiritalibus quoque nequitiiis congredi posse credemur, quae non nisi uictoribus tantum et his, qui merentur in spiritali agone contendere, concertare dignantur. Illud enim est cunctorum luctaminum uelut quoddam solidissimum fundamentum, ut primitus carnalium desideriorum incentiua perimantur.... Non enim merebimur mentis robore non quaesito grauiiores pugnas nequitiarum caelestium experiri, qui carnem fragilem resistentem spiritui nostro subiugare non quiuimus."

¹²² *Instituta* 5, 36: "Hi namque in coenobiis primum diutissime commorantes, omnem patientiae ac discretionis regulam diligenter edocti et humilitatis pariter ac nuditatis uirtute possessa atque ad purum uitiorum uniuersitate consumpta, dirissimis daemonum proeliis congressuri penetrant heremi profunda secreta."

¹²³ Steward, *Cassian the Monk*, 64: "This 'problem' was both a practical issue that disturbed monastic consciences and a demonstration that the ascetical struggle extended into the realm of sleep and the unconscious, where only God could bring peace."

¹²⁴ *Instituta* 6, 10: "Cuius puritatis hoc erit euidens indicium ac plena probatio, si uel nulla imago inciciens quietis nobis et in soporem laxatis occurrat, uel certe interpellans nullos concupiscentiae motus ualeat excitare. licet enim ad plenam peccati noxam talis commotio minime reputetur, tamen necdum perfectae mentis indicium est nec ad purum excocti uitii manifestatio, cum per fallaces imagines huiusmodi operatur inlusio." See also *Conlationes* 12, 12 and 22, 6.

¹²⁵ *Instituta* 6, 20: "Itaque hic est integritatis finis ac perfecta probatio, si quiescentibus nobis titillatio uoluptatis nulla subreperit ac pro necessitate naturae nobis inconsciis concretae egerantur obscenae. quas sicut abscindere per omnia et in perpetuum amputare supra naturam est, ita reuocare ad ineuitabilem rarissimamque naturae necessitatem summae uirtutis est, quae pulsare monachum duobus interpositis mensibus solet."

the evil spirits.¹²⁶ Basing himself on the understanding of the body found in ancient medical writers such as Galen, Cassian provides an explanation on how excess in eating leads to such problems for the monk.¹²⁷ As a remedy he recommends constantly maintaining a moderate and regular fast.¹²⁸ Cassian, of course, recognized that one had to employ other means besides fasting to maintain chastity, such as the practice of humility and physical work.¹²⁹ In his twelfth Conference, Cassian completes his teaching by reminding his readers that ultimately only God can preserve the monk from such disquieting physical disturbances.¹³⁰

Cassian recommends a diet for the monks of Gaul in his work. He bases this on the Egyptian practice but with some modification. Cassian notes that the Egyptians fasted from Monday to Friday each week. According to Teresa Shaw, the daily recommended fast meal consisted of two small loaves of bread with a briny mixture of salt and water. Legumes and vegetables soaked in water or brine or made into a porridge were part of the diet. Leaves of leeks, olives, and small salted fish were also eaten with a small amount of olive oil. Occasionally some fruits such as figs or prunes were eaten. Such foods were thought to dry the body thereby reducing the sexual drive according to ancient medical theory.¹³¹

The diet of the Egyptian ascetics as described in the *Vitae Patrum* and Cassian had also previously been studied by Aline Rousselle. She calculates that a celebratory meal described by Cassian would have amounted to about 1,000 calories for each person. Citing the intake of black Africans and poor Indians, she estimates that most poor Egyptian peasants at the time lived on less than 1,500 calories a day, which was the maximum level attained by the

¹²⁶ *Conlationes* 22, 3.

¹²⁷ The ancient Greek medical theory underpinning the discussion of Cassian and other ancient authors on this topic has been studied in Aline Rousselle, *Porneia*, 5-23, and on the effects of fasting 160-77. See also Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 27-78.

¹²⁸ *Instituta* 6, 23: "Igitur ut inlusiones hae ne dormientibus quidem subrepere ualeant, aequale moderatumque est semper tenendum ieiunium."

¹²⁹ *Instituta* 5, 10: "Ad integritatem mentis et corporis conseruandam abstinencia ciborum sola non sufficit, nisi fuerit ceterae quoque uirtutes animae coniugatae. humilitas igitur primitus oboedientiae uirtute et operis contritione corporisque fatigatione discenda est." See also 5, 13 and 5, 21.

¹³⁰ *Conlationes* 12, 4 specifically in relation to the cessation of nocturnal emissions: "Et ita unusquisque cotidie integritatis suae matutinus explorator effectus de conlata sibi purificatione congaudeat eamque se non suo studio nec uigilantia, sed protectione domini sentiat consecutum, ac tamdiu illius perseuerantiam suo corpori intellegat cohaesuram, quamdiu eam dominus sua fuerit miseratione largitus."

¹³¹ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 117-23.

Egyptian ascetics.¹³² Allowing for the smaller body mass of pre-modern people and the greater physical effort required of them, Massimo Livi-Bacci estimates that an adequately fed population in the past would have needed about 2,000 calories.¹³³ Thus the limited intake of food available to poor Egyptians, lay and monastic, provided minimum sustenance at best and semi-starvation at worst.

The effects of fasting on weakening sexual impulses, both mental and physical, which is attested to by Cassian and other writers, has been verified in a study performed at the University of Minnesota in 1944 and 1945. Because many people were suffering from the effects of starvation and malnutrition at the end of the Second World War, the study was undertaken to gain data on which "to base an efficacious relief program."¹³⁴ A group of thirty-two volunteer conscientious objectors had their food intake limited for forty-eight weeks to study the changes brought about by semi-starvation. The experiment consisted of twelve weeks of initial reduction, followed by twenty-four weeks of severe reduction and another twelve weeks of gradual return to a more normal range. The subjects were fed a diet of whole-wheat bread, potatoes, cereals, and considerable amounts of turnips and cabbage with only token amounts of meat and dairy products—a diet probably not too unlike that of a medieval monastery. The goal was to obtain a group average of a loss of twenty-four percent of normal body weight.¹³⁵ Among the effects observed was that "sexual feelings and expression declined until by the end of the semi-starvation period they were virtually extinguished in all but a few subjects."¹³⁶ One of the effects noticed in the experiment was that thoughts about food and desire for it replaced those concerning sexual matters.¹³⁷ A similar effect of fasting is described in the *Verba Seniorum* where an older monk tells a younger ascetic that

¹³² Rousselle, *Porneia*, 175-76,

¹³³ Livi-Bacci, *Population and Nutrition*, 27: "A population which could rely on a normal consumption of 2,000 calories per head would have been in centuries past, an adequately fed population."

¹³⁴ Keys, vol. 1, 63.

¹³⁵ Keys, vol. 1, 74.

¹³⁶ Keys, vol. 2, 839-40: "Nocturnal emissions ceased or were greatly reduced in frequency. Sex fantasies and sex dreams were reported to have decreased in number and when present they were much attenuated."

¹³⁷ Keys, vol. 2, 833: "Preoccupation with thoughts of food is mentioned repeatedly in the field reports from semi-starvation areas.... Food in all its ramifications became the principal topic of conversation, reading and daydreams for almost all Minnesota subjects."

he is not troubled by impure thoughts because his mind is occupied by thoughts of the food and sleep he gives up.¹³⁸

The attempt to import such severe fasting into the West proved problematic right from the start. In the *Dialogues* of Sulpicius Severus, when Sulpicius teases one of the interlocutors, Gallus, about a meager meal served by an Egyptian ascetic to his visitors, Gallus protests against such severity: "You act inhumanly when you force us Gauls to live like angels.... We are far from the sea, and as I have often told you, we are Gauls."¹³⁹ The remark about the distance from the sea may indicate that the climate is different and/or that fish is not readily available. Later Gallus speaks of the anger St. Jerome evoked by his writings in which he reviled monks who ate to the point of making themselves sick.¹⁴⁰ Gallus gives an ironical interpretation to Jerome by saying that he must have had in mind the Oriental monks and not the Western ones. "For indulging in food is gluttony for the Greeks, for Gauls it is their nature."¹⁴¹

In turn, the Benedictine Rule incorporated aspects of the teaching of Cassian. The CSEL edition lists forty-eight parallels between *Rule* and the *Conlationes* and fifty-nine for the *Instituta*.¹⁴² Moreover, the *Conferences* and *Institutes* and *Lives of the Fathers* as well as the *Rule of St. Basil* are recommended for the monks.¹⁴³ Benedict's recommendation insured that Cassian would continue to be read and studied by monastics throughout the Middle Ages.

Like Augustine, Benedict does not impose severe fasts on his monks except as a punishment.¹⁴⁴ Outside of times of illness, the

¹³⁸ *Vitae Patrum* 3, 62 (PL 73, 770): "Dixit ei senex: Ex quo factus sum monachus, non sum satiatu neque pane, neque aqua, neque somno, et horum omnium cogitatio non me permisit habere pugnam quam tu dixisti."

¹³⁹ *Sulpicii Severus Libri Qui Supersunt*, ed. Carolus Halm, CSEL 1 (Vienna, 1866), 156: *Dialogus Primus*, chap. 4: "Facis inhumane, qui nos Gallos homines cogis exemplo angelorum uiuere.... Nos procul a mari absumus, et quod tibi saepe testatus sum, Galli sumus."

¹⁴⁰ Jerome, Epistle 22 ad Eustochium, chap. 4.

¹⁴¹ *Dialogus Primus*, chap. 8 (CSEL 1, 160): "Nam edacitas in Graecis gula est, in Gallis natura."

¹⁴² *Benedicti Regula*, ed. Rudolphus Hanslik, CSEL 75 (Vienna, 1977), 187-88. In contrast only seven parallels are given for the *Verba Seniorum* in the *Vitae Patrum*. For the purposes of this article, St. Benedict will be considered to be the author of the Rule bearing his name.

¹⁴³ *Benedicti Regula*, chap. 73, 5: "Necnon et collationes patrum et instituta et uitae eorum, sed et regula sancti patris nostri Basilii."

¹⁴⁴ *Benedicti Regula*, chap. 4, 13, "ieiunium amare" is listed among the "instrumenta bonorum operum." Ibid. 3, 3, young boys are to be punished "ieiuniis nimis." Ibid. 43, 16-17, a monk who has been excommunicated from the common table is to eat alone and not receive his portion of wine: "sequestratus a consortio

monks are forbidden to eat the meat of four-footed animals.¹⁴⁵ In regard to quantity, the *Rule* divides the year into seasons. From September 13 to the beginning of Lent only one meal is allowed. Lent should be a time of special abstinence from food and drink.¹⁴⁶ From Easter to Pentecost a second light meal is permitted and this arrangement continues from Pentecost to until September 13 except for Wednesdays and Fridays.¹⁴⁷ Benedict makes many accommodations in the *Rule*. Two dishes are to be served so that if someone cannot eat one, he can eat the other.¹⁴⁸ While he spells out the amount of bread and wine allotted to each monk, he allows for adjustments to circumstances.¹⁴⁹ The abbot may set aside his fast for the sake of guests.¹⁵⁰ All these provisions are in accord with Benedict's intention, expressed in the final chapter, that the *Rule* serve as a primer for those wishing to follow Christ so that they will be prepared to make greater progress later.¹⁵¹

Over the centuries, however, fasting and abstinence by monks outside of Lent declined. Various causes, such as the introduction of new feast days into the calendar and various kinds of dispensations, gradually weakened the rigor of earlier times to the point that monastic fasting almost disappeared in the central medieval period.¹⁵² Many examples abound of the ways later monks sought to evade the prescriptions of the Benedictine and other Rules.¹⁵³

omnium reficiat solus sublata ei portione sua uinum usque ad satisfactionem et emendationem."

¹⁴⁵ *Benedicti Regula*, chap. 39, 11: "Carnium uero quadripedum omnimodo ab omnibus abstinenceat comestio praeter omnino deiles egrotos."

¹⁴⁶ *Benedicti Regula*, chap. 49, 5: "Ergo his diebus augeamus nobis aliquid solito pensu seruitatis nostrae, orationes peculiares, ciborum et potus abstinentiam."

¹⁴⁷ The summary of times is taken from Dom David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England* (Cambridge, 1941) 456-57. See *Benedicti Regula*, chap. 41.

¹⁴⁸ *Benedicti Regula*, chap. 39, 1-2.

¹⁴⁹ *Benedicti Regula*, chaps. 39 and 40.

¹⁵⁰ *Benedicti Regula*, chap. 53, 10.

¹⁵¹ *Benedicti Regula*, chap. 73, 1: "Regulam autem hanc descripsimus, ut hanc obseruantes in monasteriis aliquatenus uel honestatem morum aut initium conuersationis nos demonstremus habere." Ibid. 8-9: "Quisquis ergo ad patriam caelestem festinas, hanc minimam inchoationis regulam descriptam adiuuante Christo perface, et tunc demum ad maiora, quae supra commemorauimus, doctrinae uirtutumque culmina deo protegente peruenias."

¹⁵² Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 40-42.

¹⁵³ See Bridget Ann Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1976), 42-47. Also see Knowles, *Monastic Order*, 456-65, for practices introduced in English abbeys.

The Eleventh and Twelfth-Century Revival

Inasmuch as it was a return to the origins of monasticism, the eremitical movement beginning towards the end of the tenth century placed much importance on fasting. The groups that arose not only imitated the practices of the early monks but defined themselves in part by their particular rules of abstinence.¹⁵⁴ The spirituality of these hermits can be seen in the writings of St. Peter Damian (†1072), who gave the eremitical movement prestige and direction much as St. Bernard (†1163) was to do for the Cistercians.¹⁵⁵ St. Peter had joined a congregation of hermits at Fonte Avellana in 1035 and was elected prior eight years later. He then reorganized the life of the monks after the example of St. Romuald by combining the *Rule of St. Benedict* with the ideals found in the descriptions of the Egyptian hermits, thereby producing a eremitical-coenobitical amalgam. While some monks lived together in the monastery, others dwelt apart in separate cells. This practice was in itself an imitation of the style of life described in the works on the desert fathers.

Peter Damian found it necessary to justify the innovations he introduced. In a rather figurative passage, he cites the last chapter of the *Rule* to indicate that the person who is content merely to follow the *Rule of St. Benedict* hems himself in, while Benedict himself urges further progress along the lines suggested by Cassian and the *Lives of the Fathers*.¹⁵⁶

Peter Damian composed a *Life of St. Romuald*, whom he delineates as a model of eremitical perfection.¹⁵⁷ In regard to fasting, he notes that when Romuald read in the *Vitae Patrum* that some Egyptian ascetics had fasted every day except for Saturdays and Sundays, he immediately decided to follow the same rule and held to it for

¹⁵⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 42.

¹⁵⁵ St. Peter Damian, *Selected Writings on the Spiritual Life* translated with an introduction by Patricia McNulty (New York, 1959), 40-41.

¹⁵⁶ *De Perfectione Monachorum*, chap. 3 (PL 145, 295): "In angusta se montis Ephraim possessione cohibuit, qui sola B. Benedicti regula contentus esse decrevit. Sed audi, quomodo te ad montem Josue novus impellat, et ad latiora possessionum spatia festinare praecipiat: 'Regulam, inquit, hanc descripsimus, ut hanc observantes aliquatenus, vel honestatem morum, vel initium conversationis nos demonstremus habere.' Ecce mons Ephraim. Sed quoniam angustam hic possessionem esse perpendit, mox ad altiora, simul et latiora transmittit: 'Ceterum qui festinant, inquit, ad perfectionem... sunt doctrinae sanctorum sive collationes et instituta Patrum' etc."

¹⁵⁷ Peter Damian Belisle, "Sguardo panoramico sulla storia e sulla spiritualità Camaldolese," *San Romualdo*, 32.

more than fifteen years.¹⁵⁸ Later Romuald modified the days so that Saturday was observed as a day of fast and Thursday was not. This was also to give some relief to his followers. Moreover, although Romuald often did not eat at all on fast days, he forbade his disciples to do so saying that it was fitting for one tending to perfection to eat every day and always be hungry.¹⁵⁹

In his *De Suae Congregationis Institutis*, St. Peter Damian places fasting as one of the three duties of a hermit along with quiet and silence and repeats the dictum found in the *Vitae Patrum*: "Sit in your cell, restrain your tongue and belly and you will be saved." The stomach must be restrained lest, when it is too full, it infect the other members with vices.¹⁶⁰ Gluttony is the first vice to attack the monk. For his part, the monk should never arrive at satiety nor seek more delicious foods. The stomach does not know the difference. Too much food only does harm by weighing down the body, dulling the mind, and making one sleepy.¹⁶¹ In *De Perfectione Monachorum*, he follows Cassian in telling the novices that the first battle is against the vice of gluttony, because when the belly is subject to temperance, lust is restrained in the parts of the body below it.¹⁶² Not even old men should not take advantage of concessions made to them as if they were already safe.¹⁶³

In two of his treatises *De Ordine Eremitarum et Facultatibus Eremi Fontis Avellani* and *De Suae Congregationis Institutis*, he describes the regime of fasting followed at Fonte Avellana. The monks fasted four days a week from June 24 until September 13 and thereafter five days a week until Easter with the exception of some feast days. There was no fast during the octaves of Christmas, Easter,

¹⁵⁸ *Vita S. Romualdi Abbatis et Confessoris*, chap. 8 (PL 144, 962-63).

¹⁵⁹ *Vita S. Romualdi*, chap. 9 (PL 144, 964).

¹⁶⁰ *De Perfectione Monachorum*, chap. 5 (PL 145, 339-40): "Eremitae officium est in jejunio, silentioque quiescere. Unde non frustra reperitur ab antiquis vitae hujus institutoribus dictum: 'Sede in cella tua, et retine linguam tuam et ventrem, et salvus eris.' Venter siquidem reprimendus est, ne dum immoderate repletur cibis, caetera quaeque membra inficiat vitiis." The dictum does not seem to be a direct quote but derived from numerous places in the *Verba Seniorum*.

¹⁶¹ *De Suae Congregationis Institutis*, chap. 20 (PL 145, 352): "Et quia prima omnium gula adversus insipientes illecebrarum suarum consuevit arma vibrare, adversus hanc bestiam et ipse fervidus irrue, continentiae te telis accinge. Suadet illa ut modum refectionis excedas; tu tui corporis frenum tenens ad satietatem nunquam pervenias" etc.

¹⁶² *De Perfectione*, chap. 22 (PL 145, 321): "Admonendi sunt ut primum contra gulam bella suscipiant, ut dum sobrietatis legibus venter parere compellitur, consequenter etiam in his, quae sub ventre sunt, flamma libidinis temperetur."

¹⁶³ *De Perfectione*, chap. 23 (PL 145, 324).

and Pentecost. From Easter until Pentecost four days of fast were observed, and then, after the octave of Pentecost, five days (later reduced to four days) a week until June 24. During some periods two meals were allowed two days a week. The hermits of Fonte Avellana took no meat. Bread and vegetables formed the staple of their diet, but fish, cheese, and eggs were allowed. Wine was only for use at the altar with exceptions for the sick and some others.¹⁶⁴ For those hermits who lived in separate cells, Damian recommended a program of still more austere fasting.¹⁶⁵ Some individual hermits even surpassed his recommendations. He cites those who gave up eggs, cheese, and fruit as St. Nicholas was to do.¹⁶⁶

To further promote fasting, St. Peter composed a treatise urging fasting on Saturday in honor of the Lord's burial. The community to whom he addressed this treatise fasted only three days a week. He appeals to the monks to continue the tradition handed down from the fathers and to pass it down without change. If the eremitical life is to be weakened, let it be laid to the fault of others.¹⁶⁷

The monastery of Fonte Avellana soon acquired dependencies, partly because Damian founded other small communities. Four years after his death in 1072, Gregory VII gave formal recognition to the "Congregation of the Holy Cross of Fonte Avellana."¹⁶⁸ Other groups also adopted Damian's observances including the hermitage of Morimundum where the hermits followed the *Rule of St. Augustine*. In 1213, they obtained papal permission to use the surplice after the style of the canons regular and to follow the observances of Peter Damian in other matters.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps as a result of this modification, a dispute broke out after the Grand Union of the Augustinians between the abbot of Fonte Avellana and the Augustinian hermit-friars over

¹⁶⁴ The treatises are found in PL 145, 327-64. The practices are summarized by Ovidio Capitani, "San Pier Damiani e L'instituto eremitico" in *L'Eremitismo in Occidente*, 122-62. See also St. Peter Damian, *Selected Writings*, 37.

¹⁶⁵ *De Suae Congregationis Institutis*, chap. 15 (PL 145, 347-48).

¹⁶⁶ *De Vita Eremitica et Probatas Eremis*, chap. 4 (PL 145, 753): "Alii etiam uvis et aceto se nihilominus privant; plerique autem saginis, ovis, et caseo tanquam carnibus abstinent." Also *De Suae Congregationis Institutis*, chap. 15 (PL 145, 346): "Est etiam qui continentiae et sobrietatis amore non modo pomis, sed et caepis et porris, cunctis videlicet herbarum acuminibus se decreverit abstinere."

¹⁶⁷ *De Jejuniis Sabbati* (PL 145, 799): "Quamobrem, dilectissimi, hoc ab aetate nostra praecidamus opprobrium; et virtutis insigne, quod a patribus nostris accepimus, illibatum et integrum fideliter in filios transfundamus. Si vita eremitica minuenda est, per alios incipiat minui."

¹⁶⁸ Belisle, "Sguardo," 43.

¹⁶⁹ *Bullarium Ordinis Periodus Formationis* (Van Luijk), 11-12, Innocent III, 25 September 1213, "Quanto callidius."

the possession of the house, which was definitively assigned to the Augustinians in 1261.¹⁷⁰

How deeply the teaching on fasting and abstinence seen in Cassian was embedded in the monastic tradition even among those canons who followed the *Rule of St. Augustine* can be seen in the *Commentary on the Rule* traditionally ascribed to Hugh of St. Victor (†1141).¹⁷¹ Hugh adapts St. Paul's statement that the flesh and spirit are opposed (Rm 8:5-8). To prevent the flesh from prevailing, spiritual men ought to bring concupiscence under control, because when the flesh is in subjection, the spirit grows strong.¹⁷² The first one of the principal vices, now listed as the familiar seven, to overcome is gluttony. Hugh cites the three aspects of this vice, which are found in Cassian, namely, the immoderate use of food and drink, seeking exquisite foods or drink, and eating outside the prescribed time.¹⁷³

Hugh expands Augustine's exhortation in the *Rule* in the light of the traditional monastic teaching on fasting. Thus after recovering from a sickness which necessitated more food, caring for the flesh needs to be restricted lest the servants of God be held by the pleasure of eating, and they who should serve the spirit serve gluttony instead. The enjoyment of food should not hold sway over them lest the vice of gluttony take away the virtues of the soul. No one gains victory in the struggle of the spirit who has not first overcome the incentives of the flesh by afflicting the stomach's desires. Nor can one rise to the

¹⁷⁰ *Bullarium Ordinis* (Alonso), 5, #14, Alexander IV, 22 June 1256, "Dilecti filii prior." The papal decree of Alexander IV assigns the bishop of Perugia the task of summoning the abbot of Fonte Avellana to appear before the Holy See. The document refers to Morimundo, which is assumed in this article to be the same location as the site designated Morimundo elsewhere. In his *Dissertatio Historica de Ducentis Celeberrimis Augustinianis Scriptoribus* (Rome, 1704), 9-10, Dominco Gandolfo, OSA, reports the existence of a decree of Cardinal Annibaldi in 1261 authorizing two Augustinian friars to recover the monastery "de Morimundo" from the prior and hermitage of Fonte Avellana. The site may have been abandoned in the meantime and the dispute would have been over the property.

¹⁷¹ The authenticity of this document is uncertain. See *DIP*, vol. 2, 128 and Roger Baron, "Huges de Saint-Victor est-il l'auteur d'un Commentaire de la Règle de Saint-Augustin," *Recherche de science religieuse* 43 (1955), 342-60.

¹⁷² Hugo de S. Victore, *Expositio in Regulam Beati Augustini* (PL 176, 892-93): "Caro quidem concupiscit adversus spiritum, et spiritus adversus carnem; sed, ne caro possit praevalere, spirituales viri per virtutem spiritus eandem concupiscentiam debent reprimere, quia quando caro domatur, spiritus robatur."

¹⁷³ *Expositio in Regulam* (PL 176, 893): "Primum vitium ex septem principalibus vitiis est gula.... Sunt autem hujus vitii tria genera. Unum genus est quando cibo vel potu quis immoderate utitur. Alterum genus est quando nimis delicatum cibum vel potum quis desiderat. Tertium genus quando extra horam cibum vel potum vult quis sumere."

conflict of the spiritual struggle unless the enemy within, namely the appetite, be dominated. Many ignore this rule and fail. When gluttony rules, they lose all they have gained through the enticement of the flesh, and when the stomach is not held in check, all the virtues collapse through the concupiscence of the flesh.¹⁷⁴

Teaching of Thomas Aquinas and the Medieval Social Setting

The *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), an older contemporary of St. Nicholas, provides a convenient optic to view thirteenth-century theological teaching concerning fasting. In responding to the question whether fasting is a virtuous act, St. Thomas cites three purposes of fasting, namely, to restrain the concupiscence of the flesh, to allow the soul to arise to contemplation, and to make satisfaction for sin.¹⁷⁵ Elsewhere, Thomas refers to the Lenten fast as an imitation of Christ's fast in the desert.¹⁷⁶

The purposes cited by Thomas, though not the proofs he offers, are found in the early monastic writings cited above.¹⁷⁷ Thomas, however, does not mention the notion of fasting as a part of the ascetic's preparation for combat with the devils, a motive found in the earlier monastic writings.¹⁷⁸ St. Thomas also departs from the

¹⁷⁴ *Expositio in Regulam* (PL 176. 896): "Nullus palmam spiritualis certaminis apprehendit, qui non in semetipso prius per afflictam ventris concupiscentiam carnis incentiva devicerit. Neque enim ad conflictum spiritualis certaminis assurgitur, si non prius intra nosmetipsos hostis positus gulae videlicet appetitus edomatur, quia si non prius ea quae nobis viciniore sunt, prosternimus, inaniter ad ea quae longe sunt impugnanda transimus."

¹⁷⁵ *Summa Theologiae* 2^a 2^{ae}, 147, art. 1 "Assumitur enim jejunium principaliter ad tria. Primo quidem ad concupiscentias carnis reprimendas.... Secundo assumitur ad hoc quod mens liberius elevetur ad sublimia contemplanda.... Tertio ad satisfaciendum pro peccatis." Thomas refers back to this passage in 147, art. 3: "Dictum est autem quod jejunium utile est ad deletionem et cohibitionem culpae et ad elevationem mentis in spiritualia."

¹⁷⁶ *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum*, 4, dist. 15, quest. 3, art. 4b, resp. 4: "Quadragesimale jejunium arctius observatur quam alia jejunia, quia eo Christi jejunium secundum modum nostrum imitatur."

¹⁷⁷ The notion of satisfaction for sin does not seem to be as well developed in the earlier monastic writings, but it is found in Cassian, *Conlationes* 20, 9: "Quisquis igitur ad indulgentiam suorum criminum desiderat pervenire, istis semetipsum aptare studeat instrumentis.... Ad hunc igitur quem praediximus statum quisque contenderit, satisfactionis gratiam cotidianis ieiuniis et mortificatione cordis et corporis adsequetur."

¹⁷⁸ See Cassian, *Instituta* 5, 16: "gravioribus pugnas nequitiarum caelestium experiri" and 36: "dirissimis daemonum proeliis congressuri." Both texts are cited in full above in the footnotes 121 and 122.

monastic tradition to some extent by making a distinction in regard to gluttony as the cause of other sins. He notes that it has a certain gravity because of its effects in serving as the occasion rather than the cause of diverse sins.¹⁷⁹

Although most of his discussion concerns fasts instituted by the Church, Thomas also speaks of "the fasting of joy" which is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Fasting of this kind pertains to those perfect souls whose minds are taken up with spiritual matters.¹⁸⁰

St. Thomas also answers objections concerning whether those who fast should abstain from meat, eggs, and milk products. He answers affirmatively saying that the Church instituted fasting to control carnal concupiscence. Food and sex provide delights that come from the sense of touch. Thomas thus maintains the link between gluttony and lust seen above although he approaches the problem from a Scholastic perspective.¹⁸¹ Elsewhere he remarks that abstinence corrects the attraction of lasciviousness as well as gluttony, which become stronger the more a person gives in to them.¹⁸² The Church forbids those who are fasting to eat those foods that have the greatest delight and give the greatest provocation to venereal pleasures. These foods are the flesh of animals that live on earth and the products they produce. Because their flesh is most like human flesh, it contributes more to human nourishment and to the increase of semen, which inflames sexual desire.¹⁸³ In his *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum* Thomas notes that because fish is colder than flesh meat, it provides less nourishment and thus need not be prohibited. Wine too and legumes that cause flatulence stimulate concupiscence

¹⁷⁹ *Summa Theologiae* 2^a 2^{ae}, 148, art 3 regarding the gravity of gluttony: "Vitium gulae habet quamdam magnitudinem, in quantum ex ea occasionantur diversa peccata." Ibid. ad 2: "Gula autem non est causa aliorum vitiorum per se, sed quasi per accidens et per occasionem."

¹⁸⁰ *Summa Theologiae* 2^a 2^{ae}, 146, art. 6, ad 3: "Jejunium exultationis ex instinctu Spiritus Sancti procedit, qui est spiritus libertatis" and 147, art. 4, ad 5: "Aliud autem est quod pertinet ad gaudium mentis in spiritualia suspensae, et tale jejunium convenit perfectis."

¹⁸¹ *Summa Theologiae* 2^a 2^{ae}, 147, 8: "Ad reprimendas concupiscentias carnis, quae quidem sunt delectabilia secundum tactum quae consistunt in cibis et veneris."

¹⁸² *Summa Theologiae* 2^a 2^{ae}, 146, 2. resp. 2: "Per abstinenciam corpus castigatur, non solum contra illecebras luxuriae, sed etiam contra illecebras gulae."

¹⁸³ *Summa Theologiae* 2^a 2^{ae}, 147, 8: "Quia hujusmodi magis conformantur humano corpori plus delectant et magis conferunt ad humani corporis nutrimentum; et sic ex eorum comestione plus superfluit, ut vertatur in materiam seminis cujus multiplicatio est maximum incitamentum luxuriae."

but only in a passing manner.¹⁸⁴ Thomas's remarks here reflect the persistence of ancient medical theory.¹⁸⁵

The religious precedents and theories regarding abstinence from meat were reinforced by the social setting of the Middle Ages. In many ways the diet of monastics was like that of the people of the peasant classes, which consisted mostly of bread, vegetables, fruits and nuts. For the peasants eating meat, usually mutton, was a rare event while the estate owners could dine frequently on sausage and fowl.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, in the earlier centuries the extensive consumption of meat and beer by the Germanic peoples stood in contrast to the Mediterranean diet of grain, wine, and olive oil. Over time, meat, especially roasted meat, became the hallmark of the fare of the aristocracy. Meat gave physical strength to the warrior class. In contrast, abstinence from meat was viewed as a mark of humility and holiness befitting monastics.¹⁸⁷ For them consumption of meat was a matter of exception and dispensation.

St. Nicholas in the Light of the Tradition

From all the above, one can understand that St. Nicholas was following well-established lines in undertaking and persevering in severe fasting and abstinence. To these penances he added other harsh ones, which have not been considered here, such as nightly vigils, scourging himself and sleeping on a stone headrest. In many ways, St. Nicholas conducted himself in a manner similar to the hermits of Monte Avellana described by Peter Damian. One should note, moreover, that Blessed Giovanni Bono, the founder of the group of hermits named after him, also followed a regime of great penance and fasting. Like St. Nicholas, Giovanni Bono ate meat only during periods of grave illness and under duress from his brethren. He also rejected the assistance of physicians and affirmed that Christ was his medicine.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum*, 4, dist. 15, quest. 3, art. 4b, resp. 2 and 3.

¹⁸⁵ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 57, in speaking of Galen and 59, n.115, in discussing the theories of Rufus of Ephesus.

¹⁸⁶ Gabriella Piccinni, "Note sull'alimentazione medievale," *Studi Storici*, 23, n. 3 (1982), 612.

¹⁸⁷ Massimo Montanari, *The Culture of Food*, translated by Carl Ipsen (Oxford, 1994), 6-24; idem, *Alimentazione e cultura nel Medioevo* (Bari, 1988), 47-50.

¹⁸⁸ Mario Mattei, OSA, *Il processo di canonizzazione di Fra Giovanni Bono (1251-1253/54) fondatore dell'Ordine degli Eremiti*, *Fontes Historiae Ordinis Sancti Augustini*, Series Altera 4 (Rome, 2002), 40, where the testimonies of the processes on these points are cited and summarized.

In his attitude towards fasting Nicholas was not, then, so singular and individualistic as to be considered out of order. In the *Vitas-fratrum*, Jordan of Saxony discusses the saint's fasting and abstinence in a chapter entitled: "De bona et sancta singularitate fratrum"—"On exceptional behavior that is good and holy."¹⁸⁹ Rather, his spirituality was rooted in a long tradition that traced its origins to the hermits of the Egyptian desert. As André Vauchez points out, however, not all his confreres necessarily appreciated his holiness while he lived with them.¹⁹⁰ Because of his ascetical practices, St. Nicholas was given a cell somewhat apart from the others.¹⁹¹ Some of his practices, especially during his nightly vigils, appear to have disturbed other friars. Friar Ventura de Tolentino recounts hearing Nicholas beating himself with his iron chain in the cell next to him.¹⁹² His declining health was also a constant concern to his superiors, confreres, and friends.

St. Nicholas's Personal Motivation

Since St. Nicholas's practices have been examined in the light of the monastic tradition he inherited, we now turn to the personal motivation ascribed to him in the sources. It is clear that in those *Articuli* germane to our subject the authors have assumed certain motivations on the part of St. Nicholas for his fasting and penances. The theme of combating temptations through fasting and other penances is attributed to him in several of the articles: "wanting to avoid evil desires and temptations" (art. 11); "wanting to avoid and overcome temptations from the devil" (art. 14); and "notwithstanding many temptations and obstacles from the devil" (art. 16). Other motivations are also mentioned in the *Articuli*: "he brought his body

¹⁸⁹ *Liber Vitasfratrum*, 420.

¹⁹⁰ André Vauchez, "Il Processo di Canonizzazione de San Nicola da Tolentino quale fonte storica (Marche 1325)," *San Nicola, Tolentino, le Marche*, 47: "Si vede benissimo che è proprio la fama sanctitatis di S. Nicola che ha indotto certi religiosi del suo Ordine a rileggere in una prospettiva nuova la vita d'un confratello del quale essi non necessariamente avevano colto la santità mentre viveva con loro." The other friars apparently ate meat on occasion. See *Il Processo*, 406.

¹⁹¹ *Il Processo*, 101, Friar Cambius de Monterobiano: "Ipse testis vidit ipsum fratrem Nicolaum stare separatim a fratribus in quadam cella propter artam vitam quam faciebat."

¹⁹² *Il Processo*, 401: "Pluries et multotiens vidit et audivit ipsum crucifigentem et castigantem non tantum cum aliis virgulis, sed etiam cum catenula ferrea, quia cella ipsius testis erat prope et iuxta cellam ipsius fratris Nicolay et inter utramque cellam non erat alia paries seu clusimen nisi una locca seu stora." Ibid., 403, several friars hear Nicholas groaning after an attack of the devil.

into subjection to his soul for love of the Lord Jesus Christ" (art. 17); "he bore humbly, patiently, and gladly [with the beatings inflicted by the devil] in honor of the Lord Jesus Christ" (art. 20). Finally, "he prayed, fasted, celebrated [Mass], and wept on behalf of many sinners who confessed to him" (art. 22). Since the author or authors of the *Articuli* have attributed these motives to him, one may rightly ask whether this information was derived from Nicholas himself.

Abundant evidence is found for ascribing to him the motive of avoiding and overcoming temptations. The strong negative reaction of St. Nicholas to eating meat as well as his association of sin with this act were noted above. His attitude in this matter becomes more understandable in the light of the patristic tradition linking gluttony with other vices and the medieval understanding connecting the sexual drive with the eating of animal flesh and products.¹⁹³ He appears to have believed that if he ate meat, he would inevitably experience temptations to indulge gluttony, which would be the prelude to sexual temptations. This frame of mind is reflected in his statement to the prior in the *Vita* about his need not to eat meat at all lest he start the process.¹⁹⁴ No price was too high for him to pay in order to preserve chastity and purity. It is not without good reason that one of the symbols used in his iconography is the lily symbolizing his complete dedication to the virtue of chastity.

The fourteenth and sixteenth articles make mention of the devil. As may be seen from the reports of the friars who knew him, Nicholas attributed many of his temptations and difficulties to the intervention of Satan and spoke of them to others in these terms. Friar Johannes de Monticulo said that he heard of them often (*pluries*) from St. Nicholas. The "temptations" in this case would appear to refer to external vexations or physical attacks from the devil.¹⁹⁵ Friar Johannucius de Tolentino, who had attended Nicholas in his illness, relates an incident in which Nicholas was found to have so many bruises that he had to stay in bed for twenty days. Johannucius believed as did the other friars that St. Nicholas had been assaulted by the devil.¹⁹⁶ He

¹⁹³ See the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas cited above, especially notes 181-183.

¹⁹⁴ *Vita*, 649 #17 cited in note 37.

¹⁹⁵ *Il Processo*, 86 (in response to article 16): "Dixit tamen quod temptationes dyabolicas non vidit, sed audivit pluries dici ab eodem fratre Nicolao," and *ibid.*, 87, (in response to article 20): "Audivit dici a dicto fratre Nicolao quod diabolus pluries verberat eum."

¹⁹⁶ *Il Processo*, 483: "Quod ipse de se tenebat, quia alii fratres tenebant quod dictus frater Nicolaus verberatus esset a dyabolo."

also reported Nicholas asking for his help, "because I have been severely beaten. The devil, however, will not overcome me through the grace of the Blessed Mary."¹⁹⁷ Other witnesses stated that the friars at Tolentino believed that Nicholas had suffered many assaults, physical as well as spiritual, from the devil.¹⁹⁸ Pietro of Monterubbiano includes episodes of this nature in the *Vita*.

One witness who spoke about St. Nicholas's motivation in regard to the penances he performed was Friar Matheus de Monte Ulmi, who served as one of the saint's confessors. When asked if Nicholas undertook his penances to avoid temptations and carnal disturbances, Matheus replied that in his judgment Nicholas practiced penance so that he could wholly and completely serve the Lord Jesus Christ. He added that Nicholas continuously fasted and performed good works in offering service to God.¹⁹⁹

In discussing the sanctity of St. Nicholas, Agostino Trape, OSA, cites the statement by Nicholas's confessor to develop the idea that the saint's personal asceticism was based on his desire to imitate Christ. His penitential practices were motivated not only by the desire to subjugate his body to the spirit, but above all to participate in the passion of Christ and to serve him wholeheartedly and completely.²⁰⁰ As evidence for his position, Trape cites St. Nicholas's special devotion to the Cross, which is seen in his daily recitation of the *Office of the Holy Cross*, his hours of prayer before the cross, and his making a silver cross that he asked for when he was dying.²⁰¹

Father Trape's interpretation brings into consideration a development of medieval spirituality, found in St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who cultivated the humanity of Christ with an affective piety.²⁰² This

¹⁹⁷ *Il Processo*, 483: "Fili mi, iuva me, quia multum sum verberatus; dyabolus tamen non vincet me cum gratia beatae Marie."

¹⁹⁸ *Il Processo*, 102, Cambius de Monterobbiano: "Semel audivit dici a fratribus de Tholentino quod ipse frater Nicolaus multas temptationes recipiebat a diabolo." Ibid., 378, Massarellus de Monte Sancte Marie: "Audivit dici a fratribus dicti loci quod dictus frater Nicolaus fuit pluries verberatus a dyabolo."

¹⁹⁹ *Il Processo*, 639: "Dixit quod, secundum iudicium dicti testis, ipse faciebat ut integraliter et mere posset servire domino nostro Iesu Christo." and "Idem in ieiuniis et aliis bonis operationibus continue se habebat in exhibendo servitia Deo."

²⁰⁰ A. Trape, "La figura" 187-88: "Del resto l'ascetismo di Nicola nasceva dal desiderio di imitare Cristo: le sue penitenze avevano, sì, lo scopo di assoggettare il corpo allo spirito, ma anche e soprattutto quello di partecipare alla passione di Cristo, per servire integremente e pienamente Cristo."

²⁰¹ Trape, 188, cites *Il Processo*, 481, 95, 489 for the three signs of St. Nicholas devotion to the Holy Cross.

²⁰² Jacques Hourlier, "Humanité du Christ: Chez les spirituels médiévaux," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 7, part 2, 1054-63.

devotion was marked by a sense of compassion for the suffering Christ and a desire to be united with him in a personal way in the physical and psychological aspects of his sufferings. St. Francis of Assisi practiced this kind of devotion and exemplified it to the point of bearing the marks of the wounds of Christ in his body. The Franciscans, in particular, followed Francis in promoting devotion to the Crucified Lord.²⁰³

An example of an ardent desire to share in Christ's passion and the sufferings of his Mother beneath the cross is found in the following verses of the *Stabat Mater*, traditionally assigned to the Franciscan author, Jacopone da Todi († c.1306).

Eia, mater, fons amoris
me sentire vim doloris
fac, ut tecum lugeam.

Fac ut portem Christi mortem
passionis fac me sortem
et plagas recolare.

Fac me plagis vulnerari,
Cruce hac inebriari
et cruore Filii.

From the twelfth century onward many nuns, including St. Clare of Montefalco (†1308) among the followers of St. Augustine, were attracted to a spirituality that focused upon a physical participation in Christ's sufferings in their own bodies. Since the use of food was available to them as a means of expression, many of these women undertook severe fasts.²⁰⁴ St. Francis, for example, had to moderate fasting in his follower, St. Clare of Assisi.²⁰⁵ In late medieval canonizations fasting was important for males only in the case of hermits, while it was a crucial component in the reputation for holiness of female saints.²⁰⁶

Consequent upon the medieval development of devotion to Christ in his humanity was a growth in devotion to his Mother, Mary. Both the *Vita* and the testimonies in the *Processo* indicate that St.

²⁰³ Michel-Jean Picard, "Croix (Chemin de)," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 2, part 2, 2578-79. See also Flavio Di Bernardo, "Passion (Mystique de la)," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 12, 326-29.

²⁰⁴ Bynum analyzes this type of piety in *Holy Feast*. See especially 255-59.

²⁰⁵ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 99-102.

²⁰⁶ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 76, citing Vauchez, *La sainteté* in the original version.

²⁰⁷ *Il Processo*, 481, Iohannes de Tolentino: "Dulciter vocabat dictus frater Nicholaus in infirmitatibus suis dicendo: Beata Maria, adiuva me."

Nicholas fasted on Saturdays specifically to honor the Virgin Mary. This motive is different from that proposed by Peter Damian, namely, to honor the Lord's burial. The *Vita* furnishes ample testimony that St. Nicholas cherished a devotion to the Virgin Mary. The witnesses in the *Processo* also tell of occasions on which he called on Mary.²⁰⁷ The particular forms of his Marian piety exemplify later medieval practices, such as kneeling while saying the *Ave*.²⁰⁸

Finally, Nicholas's fasting for his penitents, a motive mentioned in both the twentieth article and the *Vita*, appears to be more than a literary convention.²⁰⁹ St. Nicholas had a reputation for great kindness towards sinners and was much sought out as a confessor by sick people.²¹⁰ In order to encourage penitents reluctant to confess, he promised to perform the penance in their stead.²¹¹ Fasting and abstinence were among penances prescribed for certain more serious sins at the time although there was an increasing tendency to lighter penances.²¹²

Development in the *Vita*

In the *Processo*, articles eleven through thirteen focused upon Nicholas's beginning to crucify his flesh by fasts and other practices "in order to preserve chastity and avoid evil desires and temptations" before he was ordained.²¹³ In the *Vita*, Pietro da Monterubbiano has

²⁰⁸ *Il Processo*, 86, Friar Iohannes de Monticulo: "Quod continue dicebat... multas salutationes beate virginis Marie semper genuflectendo." H. Thurston, "Ave Maria," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 1, 1161: "Au moyen âge sa récitation était très fréquemment accompagnée d'une inclination, d'une génuflexion ou d'une prostration."

²⁰⁹ *Vita*, 652 #28: "Compatiebatur specialiter infirmis, ita ut pro multis peccatoribus sibi confitentibus oraret, jejunaret, celebraret, et lachrymas fundaret coram Deo ut a peccatorum vinculis solverentur."

²¹⁰ *Il Processo*, 232, Pucius Iohannis de Tolentino: "Gentes communiter habebant tantam devotionem in eo, quod statim, cum infirmabantur, petebant dictum fratrem Nicolaum pro confessione."

²¹¹ *Il Processo*, 345, A noble soldier, Radolphus Iacobucii de Camereno: "Audiuit dici in terris predictis quod dictus frater Nicholaus erat ita misericors peccatoribus quod quando poterat aliquem peccatorem inducere ad penitentiam qui peccator non libenter confiteretur, ipse frater Nicholaus promictebat facere penitentiam pro ipso peccatore et faciebat."

²¹² Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, 1977), 9-17.

²¹³ *Il Processo*, 19: "XI articulus. Item quod castitatis munditiam diligens, concupiscentias temptationesque malas evitare volens, carnem propriam crucifixit.... XII articulus. Item, quod, castigando corpus suum, in servitutem se redegit prae ceteris

combined the content of the three articles in the following description. "As soon as he realized that he must not violate his vows and that chastity could not be preserved unless he castigated his body and brought it into subjection, he began to lead a stricter life than the other friars. For intent upon fasts, vigils, prayers, and hard mortifications, he passed his whole life chastely and cleanly amid the prickly temptations of the world."²¹⁴ Pietro thus presents the need to preserve chastity as the main motive for St. Nicholas's program at this earlier stage of his religious life.

Pietro then supplies additional information not found in the *Articuli*. When the saint was questioned how he could resist temptations and the provocation of the flesh, he gave no answer. For "he knew how subtly the ancient enemy was accustomed to act against man, so that he overcomes by the weapon of vainglory the one he could not defeat by the vice of lust." Pietro's explanation exemplifies a principle enunciated in the teachings of Cassian who devoted the eleventh book of his *Institutes* to the subject of vain-glory (*cenodoxia*). Cassian remarks that those who could not be deceived by the vices of the flesh are more grievously wounded by their own spiritual successes.²¹⁵ In his *Rule* in a different context Augustine too warns about pride lurking in good works so as to destroy them.²¹⁶

With Nicholas's assignment to Tolentino a new and more intense phase of his fasting sets in according to both the *Vita* and the *Processo*. In the *Vita* Pietro da Monterubbiano introduces this new development of increased fasting and penance by a lengthy reflection on the devil's attempt to overthrow Nicholas.

fratribus dicti ordinis sui; cepit vitam ducere artiozem: ieuniis, namque, vigiliis, orationibus, castigationibusque duris semper intemptus, totam suam vitam mundam et castam inter huiusmodi seculi asperam transduxit." Ibid., 19: "XIII articulus. Quod in predictis vitam predictam duxit prefatus Nicolaus ante gradum sui sacerdotii absumptum."

²¹⁴ *Vita*, 645 # 9: "Mox enim ut novit, quae promiserat, violanda non esse, et castitas servari non posset nisi corpus castigatum in servitutem redigeret, coepit etiam prae Fratribus caeteris vitam ducere arctiorem. Jejuniis namque, vigiliis, orationibus, castigationibusque duris semper intentus, totam suam vitam mundam et castam inter hujus seculi temptationum vepres traduxit." The *Acta Sanctorum* reads: temptationem.

²¹⁵ Cassian, *Instituta* 11, 2: "Qui non potuerunt carnalibus uitiis decipi, spiritualibus successibus acrius saucientur."

²¹⁶ Augustine's admonition is directed to those religious who came from affluent circumstances and brought more to the community than others. *Regula* 1: "Alia quippe quaecumque iniquitas in malis operibus exercetur ut fiant, superbia vero etiam bonis operibus insidiatur ut pereant."

The enemy of the human race sought then to violate his holy desire, for with the help of our Lord and Savior [Nicholas] had made wonderful progress. For if the Lord puts his elect to the test as gold in the furnace, the devil's attempt against him through temptation began the building of the furnace, because the most blessed Nicholas had to be proven as choice gold. But where the ancient malice of the devil erected more potent devices of temptation, there Divine Clemency set forth more ample virtues so that the holy man might be endowed, defended, and fortified more and more as he was more and more tempted.²¹⁷

Here Pietro presents the motivation for Nicholas's increasing his fasting and abstinence as his response to the devil's more intense campaign against him. In the fourteenth article submitted to the witnesses, such motivation is assumed in the phrase: "wishing to avoid and overcome temptations from the devil."

In the *Vita* Pietro then goes on to present the facts as follows: "When Nicholas returned to Tolentino, as had been told him by the divine oracle, he was wonderfully changed into another man. For during his residence there for almost thirty years he was never found to eat meat, eggs, fish, anything with fat, milk products, and fruits either in health or in sickness."²¹⁸

Pietro's use of the phrase "in virum alterum mirabiliter mutatus"—"wonderfully changed into another man" has its roots in the passage from 1 Samuel 10 where Samuel tells Saul, whom he has just anointed, that he will receive a sign of confirmation. He will meet a band of prophets and the Spirit of the Lord will come upon him and he will experience a prophetic state and be changed into another man—"et mutaberis in virum alium."²¹⁹

In Pietro's use of *alterum* in place of *alium*, we see one of the changes found in medieval Latin and the development of the

²¹⁷ *Vita*, 649 #16: "Quaerit igitur hostis humani generis sanctum violare affectum, qui, Domino et Salvatore nostro iuvante, transiit mirabiliter ad profectum. Nam si tamquam aurum in fornace probat electos Dominus, diabolica illa cognatio mediante suggestionem fornacis aedificii fuit initium, quia velut aurum electum probari debuit beatissimus Nicolaus. Sed quia ubi diaboli antiqua malitia tentationis machinas erigit fortiores, ibi divina Clementia virtutes ponit ampliores, quo magis ac magis praefatus Vir sanctus a Domino virtutibus praeornatur, defensatur et fortificatur, eo magis ac magis diabolica percipit tentamenta." There may be some textual problems with this passage. The above translation presents the main ideas.

²¹⁸ *Vita*, 649 # 16: "Rediens namque Tolentinum... in virum alterum mirabiliter est mutatus. Ibi namque quasi triginta annis degens nusquam carnes, ova, pisces, aut aliqua pinguia vel lacticinia aut poma, sanitatis aut infirmitatis tempore compertus est comedisse."

²¹⁹ 1 Sam 10, 6: "Et insiliet in te Spiritus Domini et prophetabis cum eis, et mutaberis in virum alium."

vernacular, in which *altro* is used for "other" and not just for "the other of two" as *alter* in classical Latin. Thomas of Celano also applies this phrase to St. Francis of Assisi in several writings using the medieval Latin form found in the *Vita* of St. Nicholas: "mutatus in virum alterum videbatur," and "in virum alterum mutabatur."²²⁰ St. Bonaventure also speaks of St. Francis with the same phraseology.²²¹ As applied to St. Francis these phrases refer to a change in the saint after a period of intense prayer. Given the widespread influence of the Franciscans in central Italy, especially in the area of Le Marche, it may well be that Pietro was acquainted with one of these writings.²²²

Clearly, then, by his use of the phrase "changed into another man" Pietro wishes to indicate a turning point in the life of St. Nicholas, who has now risen to a higher level of perfection. He sets this change in the context of the saint's struggle with the devil. By doing this he follows the lines of the early monastic writings, for, as noted above, Cassian remarks that the demons only deign to do battle with the more advanced.

Hagiographical Patterns

In his biography of the saint, Domenico Gentili devotes a chapter to the devil's physical attacks on St. Nicholas. He believes that the pontifical commissioners had "wise and prudent doubts" about the veracity of these events. Thus in the articles they specified five particular occasions in the twentieth article to gather more evidence. Gentili carefully reviews the testimony of the witnesses and, to a large extent, sets it aside, obviously uncomfortable with these features of St. Nicholas's life.²²³

Medieval hagiographical texts were composed in the light of a certain mentality that differs from the modern one. People of past times often made sense of things by explaining events as the results of supernatural causes. Belief in the devil's interference in human life

²²⁰ Thomas of Celano, *Vita Prima* 1, 26; *Vita Secunda*, 2, 99.

²²¹ St. Bonaventura, *Legenda Major S. Francisci*, chap. 10, 4: "Quando a privatis redibat orationibus quibus pene in virum alterum mutabatur, summopere studebat conformare se ceteris ne forte quod foris ostenderet aura favoris intus a mercede vacuaret."

²²² See Réginald Grégoire, "Movimento spirituale nelle Marche nei secoli XIII-XIV," in *San Nicola, Tolentino, le Marche*, 83-94.

²²³ Dominico Gentili, *Un asceta*, chap. 11, 111-24.

was commonly accepted at the time. In contrast, many moderns eliminate the supernatural as a viable explanation of causality since it cannot be verified empirically. Instead they seek explanations that employ categories of thought with which they are acquainted.²²⁴ For the most part, even people with a religious background are more inclined to resort to natural explanations than to seek causes beyond those in the familiar everyday world. The Catholic Church today submits claims of miracles and other supernatural phenomena to rigorous examination. This is not to say that one cannot explain elements of a story found in a text. But the solution appears to lie in situating the text itself in the intellectual and social milieu in which it was composed as well as in the literary conventions that shaped it. Medieval lives of the saints, in particular, were composed in a manner that conformed to certain goals and expectations.²²⁵

In treating two phases of the saint's mortification and the motivation behind them as well as later recounting the devil's beating of St. Nicholas, Pietro is following the pattern laid down in the *Life of St. Anthony* by St. Athanasius. This seminal work, available in the Latin translation of Evagrius of Antioch, influenced much subsequent hagiography. St. Anthony was the prototype for all religious, especially those in the eremitical tradition. St. Athanasius presents St. Anthony's battles with the devil in stages similar to those found in the *Vita* of St. Nicholas. Thus Athanasius presents the first temptations of Anthony as against chastity. Anthony successfully overcomes these temptations by praying at night and fasting.²²⁶ Anthony too is very modest about his preserving chastity, knowing as he does that it was through grace that he overcomes temptation.²²⁷ Anthony is aware that Satan has many traps and can raise with greater intensity "devices of

²²⁴ Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Suplicius Severus* (Oxford, 1983), 205-61, devotes a section of her work to discussing the "Thought World" of the times. She does, however, try to explain the miracles attributed to St. Martin as having natural causes.

²²⁵ See Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1988), chap. 1, "From *Logos* to Canon: the Making of a Saint's Life," 3-37. The matter has, of course, been discussed by others before. See, e.g., Réginald Grégoire, *Manuale di agiologia: Introduzione alla letteratura agiografica*, 2nd edition (Fabriano, 1966).

²²⁶ PL 73, 129-30 in the Latin translation of Evagrius, *Vita Beati Antonii Abbatis*, chap. 4: "Ille [diabolus] titillabat sensus naturali carnis ardore; hic [Antonius] fide, vigiliis et jejuniis corpus omne vallabat."

²²⁷ PL 73, 130, *Vita Beati Antonii*, chap. 5: "Haec autem Antonii contra diabolum fuit prima victoria... sed neque Antonio securitatem dedit hic unus triumphus, nec diabolo semel fractae defecere vires."

new wiles" against him.²²⁸ Anthony then undertakes a rigorous program of subduing his body with almost incredible fasting and abstinence.²²⁹ The devil then attacks Anthony and beats him so severely that he falls wounded.²³⁰ Later the devils make dreadful animal noises to frighten Anthony just as happens in an episode in the *Vita* of St. Nicholas.²³¹

This pattern of temptation and assaults and the parallels between the *Life of St. Anthony* and the *Vita* were readily recognizable to readers familiar with the traditional fare of monastic reading. For example, the Carmelite poet, Baptista Mantuanus, who published a Latin hexameter epic poem on St. Nicholas in 1509, makes the relationship between the lives of the two saints even clearer in his poem. He elaborates the scenes of conflict between Nicholas and the devil by employing some of the details found in parallel scenes in Athanasius's work.²³²

In St. Athanasius's work, after his fierce battle with the devil Anthony is consoled with a vision of the Lord who heals all of his wounds.²³³ In the *Vita* after submitting to the prior general's command,

²²⁸ PL 73, 130, *Vita Beati Antonii*, chap. 5: "Et ille Scripturarum doctus eloquio multas esse daemonum captiones, solerti propositum labore servabat; considerans quia posset Satanias in carnis colluctatione superatus, novarum adversum se artium machinas acrius commovere." Notice the similarity of language to Pietro's "ubi diaboli antiqua malitia tentationis machinas erigit fortiores" in *Vita*, 649 #16.

²²⁹ PL 73, 130, *Vita Beati Antonii*, chap. 5-6: "Idcirco magis ac magis subjugabat corpus suum.... Disponens igitur duriori se vitae lege constringere... Inediae autem et vigiliarum in tantum patiens erat, ut incredulitatem viribus vinceret. Pernoctabat in oratione saepissime, edebat semel in die post solis occasum, nonnumquam biduo triduoque sic permanens, quarta demum die reficiebatur. Sumebat vero panem et sal, potumque aquae perparvum."

²³⁰ PL 73, 131-32, *Vita Beati Antonii*, chap. 7: "Ita eum, aggregatis satellitibus suis, varia caede laceravit, ut doloris magnitudo et motum auferret et vocem. Nam et ipse postea saepe referebat, vulnera fuisse tam gravia, ut universa hominum tormenta superarent."

²³¹ PL 73, 132, *Vita Beati Antonii*, chap. 8: "Sonitus igitur repentinus increpuit... mutifaria demonum exinde turba se effunderet; nam et bestiarum et serpentium formas induentes, omnem locum replevere phantasiis leonum, taurorum, etc. *Vita*, 650 #25: "Super autem oratorii tecto stans, voces diversarum ferarum formabat, imbrices revolvens, tectum subvertere videbatur."

²³² Karl Gersbach, "Il poema epico di fra Battista Mantovano in onore di San Nicola da Tolentino." in *Santità e società civile nel Medioevo: Esperienze storiche della santità agostiniana*, Atti del Convegno di Tolentino, 27-29 ottobre 2004 (Tolentino 2005), 165-173.

²³³ PL 73, 132, *Vita Beati Antonii*, chap. 9: "Non oblitus Jesus colluctationis servi sui, eidem protector factus est. Denique cum elevaret oculos, vidit desuper culmen aperiri, et deductis tenebris, radium ad se lucis influere. Post cujus splendoris adventum nec daemonum aliquis apparuit, et corporis dolor extemplo deletus est."

Nicholas begins to doubt whether his fasting is really pleasing to Christ because of the many temptations he continues to suffer, but he is reassured by Christ in a dream. Then he practices even more fasting. Another bout of serious illness ensues. Nicholas implores the help of the Virgin Mary and St. Augustine. Mary and Augustine then appear to him in a dream and St. Nicholas is directed to soak a little bread in water to regain his health. The saint follows this counsel and recovers.²³⁴ From this incident there developed the custom of blessing small pieces of bread or crackers on September 10, the saint's feast.

Concluding Thoughts

In composing the *Vita* of St. Nicholas, Pietro da Monterubiano used certain information that had a basis in fact in describing St. Nicholas's fasting and abstinence. At the same time, he was influenced by the existing paradigms derived from hagiographical writings, especially the one found in the *Life of St. Anthony*. He interpreted the facts according to this framework in emphasizing the role of the devil in opposing St. Nicholas. In presenting the saint as an ascetic hero, Pietro stressed the traditional eremitical aspects of his life. Perhaps this is the way Nicholas was most remembered by his fellow friars.²³⁵

Most of the lay people that St. Nicholas served knew of his asceticism only from reports of the friars, but they directly experienced his holiness in the works of his apostolate. It is regrettable that the *Articuli* were so limited in their scope and focus, as their limitations preclude us from knowing more about many facets of the saint's life, such as his preaching.²³⁶ We are fortunate that the witnesses incidentally provided us with additional valuable information about the saint.

In this article, we have focused only on the saint's fasting and abstinence, which were the principal components of his asceticism. While they are understandable in the light of the historical circumstances of the Order and the weight of the monastic tradition, such apparently extreme practices do not exert much, if any, attraction for the contemporary reader. Today's Christians, for the most part, have a different understanding of the interface of the natural and the super-

²³⁴ *Vita*, 649-50 # 20-23.

²³⁵ In the *Compendium*, most of the responses concerning the ascetical life of St. Nicholas are excerpted from the testimony of his fellow Augustinians.

²³⁶ Agostino Trape, "La figura," especially, 184-85.

natural. They also are far better informed about the dietary components necessary for proper nourishment than medieval people were.

Without doubt the other parts of St. Nicholas's life, such as his charity toward the poor, his constant prayer, and his patience in suffering, have a more timeless appeal. Still, one cannot but note that although he was most strict with himself, St. Nicholas was most loving and kind towards others. St. Nicholas's combining of asceticism with an active apostolate is truly impressive.²³⁷ His asceticism served as a *kenosis* which freed him from all egoism to give himself completely to the service of God and his fellows. In this regard, he embodies in a striking way the second half of the Augustinian dichotomy between the love of self to the contempt of God and the love of God to the contempt of self.²³⁸

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²³⁷ See Vauchez's comment in note 1 above and in the "Prefazione" of *Il Processo*, vi: "Vicino a S. Romualdo e a S. Pier Damiani per molti aspetti, è anche vincto al Curato d'Ars per alcuni altri e la complessità stessa di questo personaggio, che s'inserisce in una tipologia tradizionale e insieme se ne allontana, contribuisce a renderlo veramente avvincente."

²³⁸ St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 14, 28: "Fecerunt itaque civitates duas amores duo, terrenam scilicet amor sui usque ad contemptum Dei, caelestem vero amor Dei usque ad contemptum sui."